

Commodification and Institution in Group-Oriented and Individualizing Societies

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THE SAPIENT PARADOX AND THE EMERGENCE OF MIND

IN THIS CHAPTER I HOPE TO touch on some problems and questions which I feel set the question of the emergence of 'mind' in a rather different light from that at present widely accepted. It seems a paradox (Renfrew 1996) that while the most significant steps in human evolution in the physical sense occurred more than 40,000 years ago, with the emergence of our species *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the salient aspects of human behaviour which distinguish our species so markedly from that of the other mammals emerged in many cases very much later. 'By their works ye shall know them' seems a good motto for the archaeologist, and the most prominent of those works post-date the Upper Palaeolithic period. Yet there seems little doubt that the 'hardware', the human body and the brain, had attained its definite structure by that early date. Recent DNA studies do suggest that the 'out of Africa' view for the origins of our own species is likely to be correct, and that the African origin took place more than 100,000 years ago. So far as Europe is concerned, our species made its appearance some 40,000 years ago. It is becoming increasingly clear that, while there were probably many migratory episodes involved, the genetic differences within our species were and are quite limited. That genetic variability among humans at the present time has been well studied, and the differences do not seem very great.

When I have suggested in lectures to academic audiences that in the 30,000 years following the *sapiens* entry into Europe nothing very much of interest happened, Palaeolithic archaeologists have very rightly indicated that this is an exaggeration. They have pointed to a number of technical advances which took place during the Upper Palaeolithic period. One of the most notable was the development of figurative painting in the caves of southern France and northern Spain, along with the carving on bone and stone — the mobiliary art

— found in much the same region. The enormous impact of Palaeolithic art upon our view of its creators cannot be doubted. But at the same time the Franco-Cantabrian style has a limited extent in space. And while the simpler forms of rock shelter art may be virtually a worldwide phenomenon during this time, that is certainly not true of images with the sweep and coherence of those from Lascaux or Altamira or from the Grotte Chauvet which so much impress us today. As Mellars (1991: 63) has shown, there are plenty of other significant innovations associated specifically with *Homo sapiens*, including a shift in lithic production from 'flake' to 'blade' technology, the use of carefully shaped bone, antler, and ivory artefacts, the increased tempo of technological change, the greater degree of regional diversification, the appearance of a wide range of personal adornments including beads and pendants (White 1989, 1993), and the development of customs of deliberate burial. Greater mobility is indicated by the greater distances from which raw materials, such as specially selected flint, were obtained.

But against these undoubted innovations, and others that can be indicated in different parts of the world, it remains the case that (apart from the Franco-Cantabrian cave art) the differences are not such as would greatly interest either untutored laymen (among whom I would situate myself, so far as Palaeolithic archaeology is concerned) or the perceptive extra-terrestrial observer casually visiting our planet.

If, on the other hand, one surveys the products of the past six or seven thousand years in different parts of the world, one is impressed by a whole range of notable achievements which evidently place our species in a different class from the rest of the animal kingdom: by temples and pyramids in Egypt, early cities and ziggurats in the Near East, great cities of the Indus, and the complex societies and technologies documented in China already from the Shang period of about 1600 BC. In the Americas we may draw attention to the spectacular accomplishments of the Incas of Peru and the Aztecs of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest and to the wide range of products of their predecessors. These seem, at least at first sight, advances of quite a different and more remarkable order.

It would seem then that the arrival of our species over much of the surface of the globe did not produce any very remarkable consequences for several tens of millennia. This then is the paradox. If human societies of the early Upper Palaeolithic period had this new capacity for innovation and creativity which notionally accompanies our species, why do we not hear more about them?

Put so baldly the questions underlying the generalization may be a little oversimplified. But it does seem to be the case that in many parts of the world there is indeed a hiatus accompanying what has sometimes been termed, following Gordon Childe, the 'Neolithic Revolution' (Childe 1936). On closer inspection, however, as Ofer Bar-Yosef effectively demonstrates in his chapter

in this volume, many of the key steps in the development of sedentism are seen before the domestication of plants and animals was effected. Moreover among just a few hunter-gatherer communities in more recent days, such as the Native Americans of the north-west of America, an abundant food supply has permitted the development of sedentism and of a more complex social order of the kind which one more readily associates with the life of farming communities. It may be suggested therefore that it is sedentism rather than agriculture which marks the more significant change.

The more complex behaviour which we see rather widely in such circumstances may thus have the presence of our species, *Homo sapiens*, as a necessary condition. But evidently that presence is not a sufficient condition for the development of more complex behaviours.

If, by the notion of 'the human revolution' we do indeed intend an evident, obvious, and significant change in society and in material culture, this is therefore not a feature which can be ascribed simply to the appearance of our species. Many of the concepts which we associate with the notion of 'mind' — the more complex range of behaviours, the use of a wide range of symbols, the development of complex notations such as writing, permitting the emergence of a collective memory and the whole phenomenon of what Merlin Donald (1991) has termed 'External Symbolic Storage' — are later developments.

This leads me to suggest that we should regard this supposed human revolution and probably the emergence of 'mind' itself, as a process which, while it may have begun (at least in some respects) with the emergence of our species, has in fact to be regarded as a more gradual one, operating in several phases and stages, and perhaps independently in different parts of the world. For does it make sense to speak of the full development of 'mind' if we are not yet in the presence of complex notations, and the sort of argumentation, for instance in the field of mathematics and astronomy, which only writing permits?

I would further say that it would be a mistake to over-privilege writing in these matters. Between the origins of sedentism and of writing there were at least 5,000 years of development in which material culture was used for a number of symbolic purposes in western Asia, and a comparable span of time (although later in calendar years) separates the onset of sedentism in Europe from the inception of literacy. Indeed, one of the purposes of this chapter is to draw attention to the early developments in the use of material culture in developing concepts of prestige and commodity, and to the social interactions and institutions which accompany the construction of monuments in pre-literate societies.

The assertion that 'mind' is a feature which, in the broad span of human history, develops more fully only with the onset of sedentism should not be taken as a disparagement of the status of recent and contemporary mobile hunter-gatherer groups. In the first place, these have as long an evolutionary history as do more complex societies. Fifty centuries are fifty centuries whether

among mobile or sedentary societies. But the crucial reality is that the ontogenesis of mind within our own society is relived again as every child learns to see and understand, to speak and to learn more complex concepts and behaviours. As Edwin Muir put it:

Yet still from Eden springs the root
As clean as on the starting day.

Every normal child has these potential capacities, although among the underprivileged not all are fulfilled. I realize that the proposition that 'mind' is in some senses less fully developed among the illiterate and innumerate in our own time is a potentially controversial one, open to misinterpretation. But it does seem a conclusion which in a sense is the consequence of the view that the 'hardware' of the entire human species has changed little in the past 40,000 years. In that sense we are all, and were all, born equal. What varies is the 'software', the learned patterns of thought and behaviour whose nature depends crucially upon the society and the specific circumstances into which we are born.

The true human revolution came only much later than the emergence of the species, with the development of a way of life which permitted a much greater engagement between the human animal and the world in which we live. Human culture became more substantive, more material. We came to use the world in new ways, and became involved with it in new ways. The trigger for this new embodiment, this new materialization, may have been sedentism.

ENGAGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTS

The engagement of which we speak implies the development of new interrelationships between humans and the material world. Most animal species may be thought of as browsers and collectors, dependent mainly upon plant food, or as hunters who in many cases need to catch the highly mobile prey upon which they depend. The same is true of most hunter-gatherers, although they have indeed their own culturally mediated forms of engagement. The development of stone and wooden tools and of the important device of fire already in earlier phases of hominid existence are important early steps in the engagement process. The development of new hunting strategies and of new tool kits in the Upper Palaeolithic are further such steps. The use of the bow and arrow, utilizing the elastic properties of the string of the bow in order to make a more effective projectile, is a beautiful example. The increasing distances over which raw materials were sought is another feature of the process of increasing engagement. Nor should one overlook the efficacy of social developments, such as the use of larger and more specialized hunting parties to catch and kill big

game. These no doubt depended upon a number of technical advances, but it was the skill and effectiveness in communication involved which allowed the more productive functioning of the social unit, without which the hunting strategy would not have worked.

I shall argue, however, that it was not until the development of sedentism that a much wider range of processes involving new kinds of engagement came into play. The exploitation of domestic plants and animals is clearly prominent among these. But so is the development of new technologies beyond the novel biotechnologies of domestication. The most obvious of these are the pyrotechnologies. Already before the inception of food production we see occasional instances of the use of fire to modify raw materials, to produce pottery and baked clay figurines. Significantly, with the Jomon pottery of Japan, just as in the terracotta figures of Gravettian Pavlov and Dolni Vestonice, we are speaking of what may have been partly sedentary communities. It was from the skills of the potter that those of the smith are likely to have emerged. All of these represent processes of more elaborate and developed engagement.

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate the technological dimension without taking sufficient note of the fact that nearly every such technological innovation is also a social one. It is its use as much as the technique of production which characterizes a new innovation, as the history of metallurgy clearly shows. It is not uncommon for technological advances of great potential value to lie unexploited for centuries. The celebrated example of the wheeled toys in Mesoamerica is a case in point. The wheel was not used in the Americas until the time of the European invasions. (But there of course there may have been limitations of traction. The wheel was not much used in the Old World either unless accompanied by the ox or the horse.)

The key point, however, is that the social context, the necessary matrix for the development of technological innovations during the increasing engagement with the material world, is dependent upon social relationships which in many cases are based upon cognitive advances. They depend upon values, ordered values, and upon rules of conduct and behaviour. These in turn are regulated by social roles and by distinctions of status. Many of these social realities depend upon what may be termed 'institutional facts'. This is an important nub in the argument. For when analysed in detail, most new forms of engagement between humans and the material world prove to involve also a cognitive basis. They are dependent upon shared understandings among humans within a community, understandings which are at once social and cognitive. They depend in many cases upon the use of symbols. Many of these are abstract concepts which may readily be given verbal expression. Marriage could be one of these; property, debt, obligation would be others. And, although in a sense abstract, most of these also have a very real and physical reality. As we shall

see, there are some cases where there is an inherent link between the physical and material and the symbolic. The concept of weight would be one such. Units of weight are indeed conceptual, but they would be unthinkable without the experience of the physical reality of weight, and the experience that 'more heavy' and 'less heavy' are repeatable observations which may be compared, balanced and quantified. I would like provisionally to suggest the notion of *constitutive* symbol (Renfrew 2001) where the symbolic or cognitive element and the material element co-exist, are in a sense immanent, and where the one does not make sense without the other.

The philosopher John Searle (1995: 31ff) in *The Construction of Social Reality* has drawn attention to the key role of what he terms *institutional facts* which are realities by which society is governed. As he puts it (Searle 1995: 27)

Some rules regulate antecedently existing activities . . . However some rules do not merely regulate: they also create the very possibility of certain activities. Thus the rules of chess do not regulate an antecedently existing activity . . . Rather the rules of chess create the very possibility of playing chess. The rules are *constitutive* of chess in the sense that playing chess is constituted in part by acting in accord with the rules.

The institutional facts to which Searle refers and which are the building blocks of society include such social realities as marriage, kinship, property value, law, and so forth. Most of these are concepts which are formulated in words and which are best expressed by words — that is how Searle sees it. He draws attention to what he terms the self-referentiality of many social concepts, and he takes 'money' as a prime example. But the point which I want to stress is that in some cases — and money is a very good example — the material reality, the material symbol, takes precedence. The concept is meaningless without the actual substance (or at least it was in the case of money for many centuries, until further systems of rules allowed promissory notes to become formalized as paper money, then as equities and bank cheques, and now as electronic transactions). In early society you could not have money unless you had valuables to serve as money (Powell 1996), and the valuables (the material) preceded the concept (money).

Institutional facts as material reality

Some material symbols, then, are constitutive in their material reality. They are not disembodied verbal concepts, or not initially. They have an indissoluble reality of substance. They are substantive. The symbol (in its real, actual substance) actually precedes the concept. Or, if that is almost claiming too much, they are self-referential. The symbol cannot exist without the substance,

and the material reality of the substance precedes the symbolic role which is ascribed to it when it comes to embody such an institutional fact.

Most workers privilege the functioning of language in the emergence (i.e. coming into being) of institutional facts, and Searle himself, as a philosopher, is perhaps preoccupied with the operation of words. The same criticism may be levelled against Merlin Donald (1991), whose useful concept of 'External Symbolic Storage' is too readily equated with the use of writing (Renfrew: 1998), although it cannot of course be doubted that writing is indeed ultimately the most efficient form of External Symbolic Storage, at any rate until electronic means became available. Indeed the role of artefacts as central players in the story of human symbolic evolution is often undervalued (e.g. Lock & Peters: 1999). However, it is the case that in many instances it is the engagement process itself (between cognizant human individuals and groups, and material culture) which brings about the emergence of a new cognitive dimension. As noted above and further discussed below the very notion of 'weight' does not emerge as a word or a pre-existing concept imbued with 'meaning'. Weight is not conceivable without the experience of heavy matter. The notion of equivalent lumps of matter which may be equated in terms of some inherent property (which we term 'weight' or 'mass') comes about through sentient and cognizant human experience. The experience is not preceded by the concept, and for that reason I find the term 'materialization' (De Marrais *et al.* 1996), which might be regarded as the process of translating concept into matter, less satisfactory than 'engagement'. There are many features of the real, material world which can easily lead, in interaction with the human mind, to the development of new relationships of engagement which involve a conceptual as well as a material dimension. 'Value' is another such: it is difficult to conceive of value without first having some experience of valuables — that is to say of things to which value may be ascribed. It may similarly be argued that the human capacity for categorization is in part the product of experience of the natural world, where plant and animal species present the obvious lesson that living things present themselves already in what are effectively categories.

To some extent to make such an observation may be described as taking a phenomenological approach. But, if so, it is a phenomenological approach which is concerned primarily with the time dimension. It is one which seeks to understand why some societies develop such concepts and why others do not. That is very much a social question, and is not simply a matter of the human individual as a timeless being standing alone in the face of the universe.

It should be noted that this approach, which emphasizes the material reality of many institutional facts and the relationship between the conceptual and the material often involved in the process of engagement, has the potentiality of transcending the traditional mind/matter dualism, which remains very

much a feature of contemporary archaeological thinking. For the early New Archaeology shared with traditional Marxist approaches a preoccupation with subsistence and production. It developed a standpoint which might reasonably be termed 'materialist'. In that sense it was functionalist and developed a position which has been described as 'functional-processual' (Renfrew & Bahn 2000: 491–5). The so-called 'post-processual' critique of the New Archaeology made precisely that observation, and developed an alternative 'interpretive' approach, in which the key concept and desideratum was 'meaning'. In many ways this 'interpretive' approach, which could certainly be described as 'idealist' in the sense which Marx attacked in *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels 1977), has at times failed to follow the insights into the human interactions with the material world which were analysed in the functional-processual tradition. It should be noted that, when appropriately applied, the approach advocated here privileges neither the materialist nor the idealist, neither matter nor mind. It works within a cognitive framework but not simply a mentalist one. In the course of the engagement process new relationships between humans and the material world emerge. They are at the same time social relationships and therefore operate between human and human, and they are also cognitive.

The process is sometimes a progressive one, for within it matter comes to be seen as possessing new properties. Indeed among the first of these is the notion of 'property' itself (which is further discussed later in this chapter). What at first sight seems a trivial play on words — that things have or suggest properties (i.e. aspects or features), amongst which is the capacity to be owned (to become 'property') — is more interesting than that. For this is a duality of meaning shared also in Greek: *ousia* has both senses, and this is so in other languages also (cf. German *Eigenschaft/Eigentum*). These properties can be at once material and conceptual. And part of the process of the human exploration of the material world is indeed the discovery of new properties which permit the development not only of new technologies (ceramics, weaving, metallurgy, electrical engineering, transport, radio) but of new social relations also.

It is my argument that this process of engagement lies at the nub of the development of human societies. Moreover in non-literate societies it is material symbols which play a central role by allowing the emergence and development of institutional facts. Some classes of institutional fact may well be a feature of all human societies including hunter-gatherer societies. Affinal kinship relations — including the institution of marriage or of something like it — seem to be a feature of all human societies. But I shall argue that many kinds of material symbol are not generally a feature of mobile hunter-gatherer societies. It is not until the emergence of sedentary societies (usually in conjunction with food production) that the process of the human engagement

with the material world takes on a new form and permits the development of new modes of interaction with the material world, allowing the ascription of (symbolic) meaning to material objects.

This, I would argue, is the solution of the Sapient Paradox — why so little that was truly and radically novel initially accompanied the emergence of our own species *Homo sapiens*, despite what we can now recognize as its enormous inherent potential to undergo and initiate radical change.

MATERIAL AND COGNITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SEDENTISM

What seems a simple shift, from the mobile life pattern of most hunter-gatherer communities to one of sedentism, is in reality one with very significant consequences. Sedentism implies, of course, living in one place on a permanent basis — or at least for several years at a time. It therefore implies a permanent place of residence. Usually that place will be a house — a deliberate residential construction, requiring input of both labour and materials. The way is open now for the development of permanent installations — storage facilities, preparation facilities requiring heavy equipment, locations (such as ovens) for the application of special techniques, and so forth. The way is open also for the storage of property, and hence for the emergence of commodities.

Of course there exist partially mobile economies, for instance those relying upon transhumance, where some of these things are possible. And there are other adaptations, such as those of nomadic pastoralists, which show some of the features of sedentary societies.

Most obviously, sedentism requires the availability of a mix of food resources permitting year-round occupancy. In most cases this implies food production (although as noted above marine and aquatic resources can sometimes support sedentism without food production). It also implies storage, for instance of hazelnuts in Mesolithic northern Europe and of cereals in the Near East.

Sedentism favours the development of 'property'. The stored foodstuffs are critical to survival. The house constructed by one group continues to be occupied by that group which has preferential access to it. The domestic animals reared by one group will usually be theirs to exploit and slaughter — their property. Access to the land cultivated by the group and to its products may well be restricted — who sows may reap. It is easy to see how the 'institutional fact' of 'property' emerges through a substantive material reality before it becomes a legal concept. Property is one of those special concepts discussed further below which are at once symbolic and material and may be described as constitutive symbols.

Ian Hodder in *The Domestication of Europe* (Hodder 1990) has emphasized very effectively the profound change in lifestyle that accompanies the spread of the *domus*, the home of a sedentary population. But as already noted, while food production is a concomitant of much sedentary life, it is not so much food production as sedentism on a stable and enduring basis which is the revolutionary component of the 'Neolithic Revolution'.

The process of engagement or substantivization continues with the development of the new technologies involved. The use of heavy stone querns for grinding is difficult in a mobile economy (since the querns are too heavy to be transported). The use of dried mud (*tauf* or *pisé*) becomes feasible as a building material, laying open the possibility of large constructional complexes such as that seen at Çatalhöyük. Extensive stone construction is no longer unduly labour-intensive, if it is to be used over a long time period. Not only do such factors make possible, but the scale of investment makes desirable, the development of defensive facilities, such as the very early walls at Jericho.

Sedentism is also associated with what Jacques Cauvin has termed 'the birth of the divinities' (Cauvin 1987, 1994), and it is to be noted that these occur in the Near East in settlements prior to the development of domesticated plants and animals. Indeed Cauvin has suggested that there may be a causal relationship. It should be noted that to be altogether effective these divinities need to take material form — this is the 'materialization' process noted by De Marrais *et al.* (1996). A related point is made by Mithen (1998) in relation to the long-term persistence of religious beliefs, which is facilitated by their permanent embodiment in material form.

The reference above to the use of installations in sedentary societies leads on to what was one of the most significant of these, the oven. The oven represents a new development in pyrotechnology, which was already significant in hunter-gatherer communities for cooking, for the heat pre-treatment of flint, and in other ways. But while the oven may have been an extension of the open fire in the field of food preparation and cooking (for parching grain and baking bread), these new enterprises led on to the development of new materials. Pottery manufacture is seen in most sedentary societies but few mobile ones, ceramic containers being too heavy and breakable for transportation, while those of string, bark, wood, or leather were more practical. And in Europe as in the Near East it is clear that the pyrotechnology required for ceramic production soon offered the technical means needed for metallurgy. With the development of ceramics and of metallurgy came the production of the first artificially produced materials. In the case of copper and gold (and later of silver, and of bronze) these led on to the crucial nexus surrounding prestige goods — value, measure, and exchange — as further discussed below.

GROUP-ORIENTED AND INDIVIDUALIZING SOCIETIES

In early food-producing societies, and indeed in more complex prehistoric societies, it is possible to make a rather basic distinction which, while not of universal validity, does reflect a difference which is widely seen (Renfrew 1974) and which has conveniently obvious archaeological correlates.

Some early societies appear to assign very little personal importance to prominent individuals. There is no evidence of salient ranking. On the contrary, so far as personal equipment and adornment go, they might at first sight be described by the anthropologist as 'egalitarian' societies. But at the same time such societies perhaps had what must have been a pronounced social structure. They are often more than simple dispersed farmsteads without any overarching social articulation. Instead they are in some cases capable of significant collective action. In practice such group action is often most evident to the archaeologist in the form of collective works. As Edmund Leach (1954) has indicated, in traditional Burma there were irrigation projects which required collective endeavour on a considerable scale, far exceeding the resources of the single farmstead or even the single village. In the prehistoric record of north-western Europe there are substantial stone structures, frequently termed 'megalithic', whose construction required significant group endeavour. The chambered cairns of north-western Europe, dating to the Neolithic period, at the more modest end of the scale, must have required a labour input of some 10,000 work hours. The larger henge monuments of southern Britain may have needed as many as one million work hours. And it has been calculated that the largest monuments of the time, such as Silbury Hill and Stonehenge, would have needed tens of millions of work hours when the transportation of raw materials as well as the construction is taken into account (Renfrew 1973: 548).

Yet these societies in general do not give us very much trace of the individuals involved. These were certainly not state societies. They are not accompanied by rich burials nor by any kind of finery. Prestige goods, such as polished stone axes of attractive materials, are not in general found associated with burials. Whether or not it is appropriate to designate societies whose achievements imply considerable managerial resources as 'chiefdoms' is a matter for discussion. Certainly one does not see any archaeological record of the presence of the chief in person. But the group achievement is evident. For that reason the term 'group-oriented' is appropriate. Among examples to be quoted are the henge monuments of southern Britain, including Avebury and Stonehenge. At the northern extreme there is the impressive complex on Orkney which includes the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness (both henge monuments) and the impressive passage grave of Maes Howe. The so-called 'Temples' of prehistoric Malta would be a further case in point. But the observation holds more widely. In the American south-west the great structures of

Chaco Canyon, dating from the early second millennium AD are the evident result of concerted group activity. But, with a few exceptions, they betray very little sign of prominent individuals of high status. That there was a managerial capacity no one can doubt, but it was not centred upon the person of an individual who was accorded prominent high status, celebrated by conspicuous symbolic artefacts.

At the other end of the scale we do find, in many early societies of a rather different character, that there were prominent individuals whose high status was celebrated by the possession of a finery of rich artefacts made of exotic materials and fashioned into shapes of evidently symbolic significance. These we may term individualizing societies. In the Early Bronze Age of north-west Europe, to begin with a period succeeding that of the megalithic monuments discussed above, we find individual burials under round mounds accompanied by bronze weapons indicative of high status, and sometimes accompanied also by gold ornaments reinforcing that impression. Even earlier, in the Copper Age cemetery of Varna in Bulgaria, where gold makes its first major appearance in human history, there are burials which today seem dazzling in their wealth. The shaft graves at Mycenae, at a rather later date, give a comparable impression that the high-status individuals buried there were keen to enhance their personal prestige by processes of conspicuous display and consumption. In the New World there are many cases of the conspicuous burial of high-status individuals. The civilizations of Mesoamerica give many examples, of which the burial of Pacal at Palenque is perhaps the most celebrated. Of course we are dealing here with a very complex society, a state society. It distinguished the importance of such high-prestige individuals not only by rich burial but by monuments of considerable grandeur, and indeed in the Maya case by the erection of stelae bearing inscriptions celebrating significant events in the lives of these rulers.

There is the risk, when the archaeologist discusses what one may term 'individualizing' societies, that we are inclined to place rather too much reliance upon burial data. Clearly one cannot have grave goods involving high-prestige objects unless there is a burial containing grave goods in the first place. There is the risk therefore that the archaeologist may make generalizations about social status and 'individualizing' tendencies on the basis of data which are, in reality, governed to a considerable degree by customs in burial practice. Aspects of such a criticism are valid. If one is dealing with a society, and there are many such, where the remains of the deceased are not ultimately placed below ground, then they are not likely to be recovered. On the other hand the nature of the burial custom is not itself an independent variable, and the development of individual burials, with or without prestige goods, does in itself imply an outlook where it is appropriate to distinguish the individual from the group. So while this factor should be borne in mind, it does not in itself invalidate the argument.

THE PRESTIGE NEXUS: VALUE AND COMMODITY IN INDIVIDUALIZING SOCIETIES

It is a feature of hunter-gatherer societies that, while there were certainly materials of value, such as workable flint, whose procurement was worth a good deal of effort, the expression of personal prestige through exotic materials was limited in its range. Certainly marine shells were prized and were traded over considerable distances, and ornaments and pendants using them are found, sometimes in burials (White 1989, 1993). The individuality of the person thus found expression by this means. If we are talking of 'individualizing' through the use of material culture, this certainly began in the Palaeolithic period. It is, however, fair to say that in Europe and in western Asia it is not until the early development of metallurgy that we find a range of burials with accumulations of grave goods in a diversity of materials which could in that sense be considered 'rich'. Susan Shennan (1975; see also Lesure 1999) has analysed cemeteries of the Neolithic period as well as of the Early Bronze Age, and differentiation among the graves is evident already in the Neolithic. But there are few if any cases where one could speak of burials of high prestige or conspicuous wealth.

Such features make their appearance, so far as European prehistory is concerned, in the late Neolithic (or 'Chalcolithic') cemetery of Varna in Bulgaria in the fifth millennium BC. There are graves which have a range of impressive grave goods, even before the objects of copper and gold are taken into account (Renfrew 1986). These include quantities of marine shell and exceptionally long blades of flint which must have been the product of very considerable craft skill. However, it is the quantities of gold found at Varna which bring it first to more general attention. It is notable also that it is in this context that we see a range of copper artefacts. Their use seems here to be as indicators of high prestige. It was perhaps only later that copper became a really useful material, and not until its alloying with tin that it was significantly more useful than stone. In a recent paper (Renfrew 2001) I have drawn attention to the interrelationship of four concepts which may have emerged together at that time, although some of them will have had earlier antecedents (see Figure 1).

The Varna cemetery shows very clearly the emergence of a new material which henceforth in Europe would be considered to be of high value: gold. Its ownership and conspicuous display, for instance in the form of such artefacts as are seen at Varna, reflect and confer prestige. Of course it has to be demonstrated that gold was indeed valued highly at the time in question: there is no need to assume that just because we value it highly there was a similar evaluation six thousand years ago. However there are plausible arguments (Renfrew 1986) for arguing this without making any *a priori* assumptions. In Europe there is an interesting link between objects of high prestige, including such new

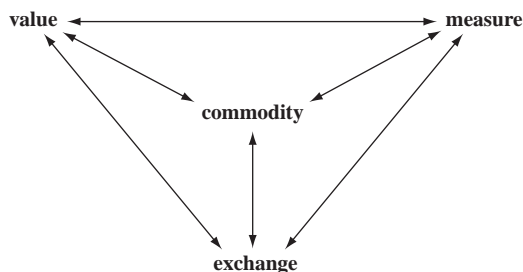


Figure 1. The crucial nexus surrounding the concept of commodity.

weapons of war as daggers and swords, and the development of the new metallurgical industry. So obvious does it appear to us today that gold is valuable that we speak of its ‘intrinsic’ value. But in reality all values are ascribed — they are indeed institutional facts for the communities in question. At the suggestion of Arjun Appadurai (Renfrew 1986) it is perhaps preferable to speak of ‘prime value’ rather than of intrinsic value. The association of value and prestige becomes a crucial one in many societies (e.g. Voutsaki 1997).

As noted earlier, the very notion of weight is a conceptual formulation which arises both from the properties of the material world in which we live and from the human initiative in devising cognitive categories for that world. A metal or stone weight, such as are found in the Indus Valley civilization (Renfrew 1982), has a symbolic role as part of a measurement system used for imposing order upon the world. But its origin is not in some abstract verbal formulation: it comes from the properties of the world itself. This is a case of what was earlier termed a constitutive symbol.

There is little point in having a process of ‘weighing’, or in creating ‘weights’, unless there is something to be weighed. In many cases the purpose of weighing is to establish an equivalence between different materials in terms of this measurable parameter, weight. In such instances the equivalence is part of a conceptual structure where an exchange between two materials is organized in such a way that quantity X of material A is regarded as of equivalent value with quantity Y of material B. We are on the brink here of an exchange system which goes beyond unique barter events where bundle P is agreed to be worth bartering for bundle Q, without any more specific analysis or measure of the content of the bundles. However, it is not difficult for us to see the functional relationships between exchange, value, and measure (in this case weight). It is in such structured systems of exchange that different materials lose their uniqueness — in the sense of this particular piece of gold, or that particular bag of grain — and become commodities. We have reached the point where a particular amount of gold (any good-quality gold, not this particular piece of gold) may be equated with that much good-quality grain (defined by quantity

rather than as a specific and unique bundle). Gold and grain have now become commodities. In many complex societies the emergence of commodities, of raw materials widely traded and exchanged, is a significant development (e.g. Gregory 1982; Sherratt & Sherratt 1991).

This is a crucial nexus for the development of any economic system (see also Michailidou 1999). And it is a good example of the sort of engagement process discussed earlier, where concepts formulated by humans in the light of their experience of the world are used to modulate the way those humans deal with the material world. The notion of commodity — that we can speak of wheat in the general sense rather than as a series of unique bundles of the material — is a conceptual advance. The way the society chooses to deal with that — by weight, or by solid volume measure — and the units used, are specific institutional facts. The notion of cumulative value — that ten kilos of wheat are worth ten times more than one kilo of wheat — although intuitively obvious to us, is again an institutional fact, albeit one that is based on underlying general mathematical concepts. And of course the concept of exchange, the notion that in a well-ordered world quantity X of material A is worth quantity Y of material B, is again an institutional fact.

These are the basic underlying structural features of human societies. Some of them may be near-universals. But many of them are no doubt specific to specific societies, or rather to regionally specific trajectories of development, since such conventions, such institutional facts, show great temporal stability. Nor need they be prosaic and material, as in the example given. In Mesoamerica, in different civilizations, there is considerable conformity among views of how the cosmos is ordered, about the nature of the four quarters, that there is an afterworld which is an underworld and so forth. If these became enduring realities, albeit cognitive realities, for the societies in question, then they were institutional facts. In our own society there are sixty seconds in a minute and sixty minutes in an hour, yet few of us bother to remember that these were arbitrary decisions made by astronomers in ancient Babylon. They are among the institutional facts of our own society. This last point may be dependent upon notational systems, but the other examples given here are not in any way dependent upon writing. All of them emerged, in many different trajectories of development, in prehistoric times.

These then are instances of the way human development comes about through increasing engagement with the material world, mediated by institutional facts. And I would go so far as to claim that the development of such notions as measurement (and of units of measure) and as equivalence in an exchange transaction are important components of 'mind', seen as something which develops with the human story rather than emerging full-grown with the formation of our species.

THE ACTIVE SOCIAL ROLE OF MONUMENTS

Among the group-oriented prehistoric societies of north-western Europe, as noted earlier, stone monuments play a conspicuous role. They vary in scale from the earthen long barrows of southern England and the stone chambered cairns of Scotland to the very much larger henge monuments, some of which, like Stonehenge and Avebury, contain circles of standing stones. In earlier generations these were seen as the result of the migrations of peoples or the diffusion of ideas from more civilized lands. Now, on the contrary, they are seen as local products. One view of the long barrows and chambered cairns, which evidently served as tombs, is that they were 'territorial markers of segmentary societies'. Such a view uses the apparent regularities in their spatial distribution to suggest that each is associated with the habitual territory of a resident population. The notion of 'segmentary' society implies little more than that these were small, autonomous social units of comparable size to their neighbours. Often the larger monuments have been seen in similar terms, reflecting the growth of larger social units in the later Neolithic period, while the chambered cairns date back to the earlier Neolithic.

Such a view does not seriously conflict with the available evidence. But it might none the less be criticized as somewhat 'reflective', in the sense that it interprets the monuments as *reflecting* the existing social structure. Segmentary societies, it is argued, often need a ritual and ceremonial focus, and this need was met by these local centres. In the same way, group-oriented 'chiefdoms' (if that term is felt appropriate) need a centre, and the great henges served as ceremonial centres and perhaps as pilgrimage centres also for their parent communities. Thus they too would reflect aspects of the social order. It was, however, Ian Hodder who many years ago (Hodder 1986) emphasized the active role of material culture. Culture is not seen as something which merely reflects the social reality: it is part of the process by which that reality is constituted. The general position adopted here is very much in harmony with such a view. The development of social institutions is here seen as part of the process of the increasing engagement of humans with the material world. It is in the course of this engagement that new institutional facts are called into being, and new social institutions initiated.

We can apply this line of thought to Neolithic Britain. In the case of the chambered cairns and long barrows we can suggest that, rather than reflecting a pre-existing social order, they helped to call that order into being. At the time of its first inception the long barrow or the cairn will have initiated a project, and one which would in due course involve some 10,000 work hours. In order to bring this about, the occupants of the territory in question would need to invest a great deal of their time. They might need also to invoke the aid of neighbours in adjoining territories, encouraged no doubt by feasting and a

local celebration. One may imagine that when the monument was completed it might itself have been the locus for further, annual celebrations and feast days. It served as a burying place and as a social focus for the territory. The suggestion here is that it was as a result of these ongoing social activities, along with other activities of a ritual or religious nature, that the cairn or barrow came to be the centre of what soon emerged as a community. Yet it is reasonable to suggest that this community would not have come into being had it not been for the ongoing activities centred upon the cairn. Such a view is not far from the 'structuration' approach advocated by Barrett (1994). In the present context it suggests how a particular form of engagement with the material world — the construction and varied use of a burial cairn — could help promote the emergence of a coherent new social unit. The same point applies with even greater weight, on a larger scale, where the henge monuments are concerned. Their construction certainly implies some pooling together of labour of a number of the smaller, earlier territories. But once the henge was built it could serve as a focal point for those territories. This too would be an example of the active role of material culture. It would reflect too a new kind of engagement, where a larger group of people would use this constructed monument for ritual, social, and perhaps religious purposes. The end product could be the emergence of a coherent larger community where none was before.

In considering the possible emergence of group-oriented societies in this way, centring upon the construction of a regional or territorial monument, it is worth asking further about what precisely it is that is so attractive about a circle of stones that it should act as the centre for important rituals (as we are suggesting) and eventually become the central focus for an emergent new social unit.

One answer must come from the affective power of a monumental construction to impress us with its material presence. Such a construction, as a number of authors have recently stressed (e.g. Bradley 1990), brings with it, or rather markedly enhances, a sense of place. It is a tenet of much current archaeological thinking (e.g. Tilley 1994) that the landscape in which we live and work is not a given; it is a constructed environment, rich with the memories of earlier people and earlier events. Even without man-made constructions, the accretion of these spatially specific memories makes the landscape as much a social as a physical reality. The insertion into this landscape of the memory of a monumental construction reinforces that process. It might be an exaggeration to suggest that the emergence into nationhood of the state now called Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia) was a product of the earlier construction of the monument known as Great Zimbabwe. Yet at the same time the achievements of the indigenous ancestors of the area will certainly have played some role in the self-recognition, the ethnicity, of the population concerned.

There is in the construction of even the simplest of monuments, as the recent work of the sculptor Richard Long has shown (Renfrew 1997: 10), something which attracts our interest and engages our emotions. This too is a kind of engagement with the natural and material world. It is an action which is more symbolic than practical. And again one may think of constitutive or immanent symbolism, for it is not initially clear just what the constructed feature symbolizes. It just is. And it serves as a marker for the actions of its maker and of what that maker wished to remember — which is precisely what a monument is. Later it can take on a more explicit meaning, serving to represent and indeed ‘symbolize’ the community whose emergence it has facilitated.

Here I am reminded of that rather mystical quality of material things, in some cases specific material things, which Marx (1886) discussed when he wrote of ‘the fetishism of commodities’. This could well have been spoken of in the previous section when discussing the value and prestige inherent in artefacts made of precious materials. But it is interesting, and I hope not too frivolous, to think of an analogous, almost mystical quality possessed by monuments.

In the passage which follows, taken directly from *Das Kapital*, I have substituted the word ‘monument’, highlighted in italics, for the word ‘commodity’ as employed by Marx (1886: 76–7):

THE FETISHISM OF *MONUMENTS* AND THE SECRET THEREOF

Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes *monumental* form? Clearly from this form itself. The equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally valued; the measure of the expenditure of labour-power by the duration of that expenditure, takes the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour; and finally, the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, take the form of a social relation between the products.

A *monument* is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become *monuments*, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself . . .

There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In

that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of *monuments* with the products of men's hands. This I shall call Fetishism which attracts itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as *monuments*, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of *monuments*.

This Fetishism of *monuments* has its origin, as the foregoing analysis has already shown, in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them.

I find this juxtaposition suggestive. Marx, of course, emphasizes labour in his discussion. But if we broaden that concept very slightly to think instead of human endeavour, we see then what, in the context of this chapter, I would suggest we might read as a meditation upon the power of constitutive symbols. In the case of a monument like Stonehenge or the Ring of Brodgar, it is the concentration of human endeavour and labour which finds expressive form in a massive artefact of material culture. This is a highly conspicuous instance of the engagement of humans with the material world. The visitor even today finds it prodigiously impressive. How much more so must it have been when it commemorated people whose histories were recorded by oral tradition, and when those viewing it felt it to be the historic centre of the community to which they themselves still belonged.

Although this discussion is a very incomplete one, I feel that this passage of Marx, which has long been recognized as a seminal one in relation to material goods (commodities), does offer insight when transposed in this somewhat Procrustean way to apply to monuments. It is not too much to say that the role of monuments in group-oriented societies is to some extent replaced, or at least superseded, in individualizing societies by that of high-prestige goods. Of course monuments continued to be built, but in individualizing societies monuments tend to be explicitly directed towards the glory of the ruling individual and they work alongside the princely goods which are now part of the accoutrement of that individual. Thus the pyramids of Egypt worked in the way I have described and in the way that the restructuring of Marx indicates, but they worked now in a society where the individual was at the centre, even if that individual himself, as in the case of the Pharaoh, also represented the social group: *L'état, c'est moi!*

THE EMERGENCE OF PROPERTY

A critical knowledge of the evolution of the idea of property would embody in some respects, the most remarkable portion of the mental history of mankind. (Morgan 1877: 6)

I should like to conclude this paper with a preliminary treatment of the notion of one of the most obvious of institutional facts, and one which relates closely

to the engagement between humans and the material world: property. It is one which was considered in a pioneering treatment by Lewis Henry Morgan, to the extent that the observation at the head of this section anticipates a number of the points which I have been seeking to make in this paper.

It seems strange that 'property' as a feature of society is today rarely given much consideration in the archaeological literature. Even in Britain, where there has been so much analysis of the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods, the word is not in frequent usage.

Neither 'property' nor 'ownership' is to be found in the indexes of such influential and thoughtful works as *The Domestication of Europe* (Hodder 1990), *Rethinking the Neolithic* (Thomas 1991), *Altering the Earth* (Bradley 1993), *Fragments from Antiquity: an Archaeology of Social Life in Britain 2900–1200 BC* (Barrett 1994), *Social Being and Time* (Gosden 1994), *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Tilley 1994), *Europe in the Neolithic: the Creation of New Worlds* (Whittle 1996) or *Archaeological Theory: an Introduction* (Johnson 1999), while 'property transfer' has a single mention, inspired by Jack Goody, in *Economy and Society in Prehistoric Europe* (Sherratt 1997: 195–6). Nor does 'land tenure' or 'tenure' fare very much better.

This, I suspect, is simply because the notion of ownership has been insufficiently problematized. It is to be seen as an 'institutional fact' — it depends upon the customs and beliefs of the community. It is in some senses conceptual, and archaeologists have traditionally been nervous about ascending the Hawkesian ladder up from technology and subsistence to social aspects and then as far as the conceptual rung.

The broader conceptual significance of the role of material objects in Neolithic Britain has certainly not been neglected. Thomas has written of 'an economy of substances', where 'the circulation of people and artifacts from place to place allowed significations that had been established in one context to be transferred to another' (Thomas 1999: 81). He emphasizes the notion of context-specificity and argues that 'the term *economy of substances* should not be taken to infer an overarching structure, so much as a system of signification that might allow the production of meaning in a specific and localized context' (ibid.). Indeed his position in some ways anticipates that taken here: 'The core of the argument will be found in the observation that artefacts are not a mere reflection or product of society, but are integral to social relationships' (Thomas 1996: 141). Bradley & Edmonds (1993) have discussed production and exchange in an original study of the axe trade in Neolithic Britain and Bradley himself has broken new ground with his illuminating analysis of Bronze Age hoards and votive deposits (Bradley 1990). At times, however, the very emphasis upon context-specificity can militate against a diachronic approach, which has inevitably also to be to some extent a comparative approach.

This apparent indifference to the concept of property may, however, also be an enduring reaction against what has long been seen, at least among western archaeologists, as the over-simplifying generalizations of Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) and of Friedrich Engels (1884), both of whom laid considerable emphasis upon the notion of property. Morgan's work was divided into four parts (of which the first remains relevant to any attempt at a 'cognitive' archaeology) in which property played a prominent role:

- I. Growth of Intelligence through Inventions and Discoveries
- II. Growth of the Idea of Government
- III. Growth of the Idea of the Family
- IV. Growth of the Idea of Property.

His account was, naturally, based upon a very sketchy knowledge of archaeology, since our discipline was then very new. It relied heavily upon his notion of three 'ethnic' periods — savagery, barbarism, and civilization. These, of course, thinly disguised, reappear in many neo-evolutionary treatments as band (or 'hunter-gatherer'), tribe (or egalitarian society), and state (or stratified society).

Property without domestication

No doubt there is much variety among hunter-gatherer societies in relation to concepts of ownership and property. It is clear that in a mobile community, the individual cannot in general effectively 'own' more than he or she can carry, unless concepts of ownership are developed that allow absenteeism in relation to property.

If one's notion of property is based upon that of enduring and exclusive association, then it should not be overlooked that the first such association is that of pair bonding, which underlies the institutional fact of marriage. Both Morgan and Engels saw that the family patriarch could have a dominant relationship within the family. But Engels, influenced by Bachofen, saw *Das Mutterrecht* as an antecedent stage, in a prescriptive rule which does not make anthropological sense today.

It is sometimes alleged that among some hunter-gatherer communities egalitarian principles militate against an individual being too possessive about any particular artefact. The archaeological record does, however, as noted earlier, document personal adornments from the Upper Palaeolithic period, some of them of a high degree of elaboration. It seems indeed plausible that 'wear' and 'gear' may have constituted the earliest forms of personal property, again arising from enduring association with the individual in question. Wear implies clothing and adornment. Gear implies the kit which one uses on a daily basis and which accompanies one when travelling.

The emphasis here upon domestication (see further below) does suggest for consideration the special case of the dog. The dog is often held to have been the

first domesticated animal. What is particularly interesting here is that canine behaviour patterns seem to orient them towards a single dominant human. The relation between human and dog may thus be one of the earliest instances of clear ownership, where one person has an enduring and exclusive association with a special material object.

Property and domestication

It is presumably a fair assumption, when dealing with fields of domesticated crops which have been deliberately sown, or with domestic animals in captivity, that if it is domesticated it must be owned. If we note that this would hardly apply for feral plants or animals, this would otherwise seem a safe generalization. Indeed on this basis the farming revolution must have transformed all previous concepts of ownership, since nearly all the essentials of diet would henceforth have a well-identified owner. Rights of access to wild plants and animals may well be regulated among hunter-gatherer societies, where the notion of territoriality is sometimes well developed, but it would be difficult to discover a methodology to investigate this question archaeologically for early hunter-gatherers.

Sedentism favours ownership. Long association between the human individual or group and a house and a field is one of the most obvious features of ownership, not far removed from the notion that 'possession is nine-tenths of the law'. Another feature is associated with work. There is a natural association between labour and ownership. If I build this house, it is mine. If I make this spear, it is mine. That at once brings us to the practice of agriculture. As noted earlier, the use of arable land in practice involves land tenure, and land tenure inevitably raises questions of property.

In the case of domesticated animals, they involve work. They cannot be allowed to wander freely. To constrain them, to herd or corral them, and indeed to care for them involves in some senses their immediate possession. Once again, unless more sophisticated concepts of property are devised, possession may imply ownership.

These considerations open inviting fields for speculation, and I have the sense that these are areas where much further work remains to be done. Of course, as Fleming (1988) has recognized, the dykes and field boundaries found, for instance, in Britain from the Bronze Age, some of which may go back as far as the Neolithic period, offer the possibility for further consideration of early systems of land tenure.

Recognizing property in the archaeological record

The archaeological record does not often permit the recognition of the human individual, other than in the context of the 'single' burial. There are, however,

other rare contexts of the human individual surviving with material goods which one might regard as possessions. The artefacts accompanying the Ice Man found in the Austrian Alps (Fleckinger & Steiner 1998; Spindler 1994) may be considered in that way.

As far as burials are concerned, it is now widely recognized that the goods accompanying the deceased are found in the grave as a result of the actions of the persons or community which buried the body (Bradley 1990: 39). They reflect the burial actions and rituals of the living as much as they pertain to the dead. That being said, however, there is no difficulty for the archaeologist in recognizing what one might describe as a 'rich' or 'prominent' burial. The goods associated with the deceased may not necessarily have been the property of the deceased during life, but the association is none the less there, and it has to be explained effectively in terms of the actions surrounding the burial process. One of the most obvious of these may indeed be the choice of a number of the possessions in the property of the deceased to accompany the corpse at burial. Among these one would certainly expect the 'wear' mentioned above — the dress and adornments — and sometimes also the gear, for instance the weapons of the warrior. It seems likely also that other elements of kit frequently found in the richer burials of European prehistory, for instance the equipment associated with the 'Symposium' accompanying graves of the classical period, may indeed have formed part of the worldly goods habitually used by the deceased individual.

CONCLUSION

This brief aside on property as an institutional fact is incomplete, but it may indicate avenues for further exploration. The central point in relation to this chapter is that property is itself an institutional fact whenever an artefact or a piece of land or indeed anything else has a socially recognized owner. The relationship between ownership and property is a good example of the engagement process between humans and the material world. It operates at the conceptual level: it is a conceptual reality. In order to understand more about the origins of human social institutions we need to analyse further this process of engagement and the working of such institutional facts.

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