All People Are [Not] Good

Bruce G. Trigger   *McGill University*

Abstract: Richard Lee's analysis of the role played by gossip and ridicule in maintaining political and economic equality in small-scale societies is reviewed from an evolutionary perspective. Comparative research on early civilizations suggests that, whenever the scale of society increases, these mechanisms eventually fail to be effective and force is used to protect political and economic privileges. While high-level decision making is required to manage complex political systems, this does not explain why managerial elites invariably appropriate disproportionate surpluses for their own use. Such behaviour questions the view that human beings are inherently altruistic, although sometimes corrupted by reactionary or unjust societies. While social engineering was able to curb inegalitarian behaviour in small-scale societies, industrial societies have yet to discover how to produce an analogous result.

Keywords: hierarchy, human nature, inequality, Marxism, sociocultural evolution

Résumé : L'analyse faite par Richard Lee du rôle joué par les commérages et le ridicule pour maintenir l'égalité politique et économique des société à échelle réduite est envisagée dans une perspective évolutionniste. La recherche comparative sur les premières civilisations suggère l'hypothèse que chaque fois que la dimension de la société augmente, ces mécanismes finissent par ne plus être efficaces et on utilise la force pour protéger les privilèges politiques et économiques. Même si on doit prendre des décisions à un niveau global pour diriger des systèmes politiques complexes, cela n'explique pas pourquoi les élites dirigeantes s'approprient toujours des surplus disproportionnés. Un tel comportement met en question l'idée que les être humains sont fondamentalement altruistes, malgré qu'ils soient parfois corrompus par des sociétés réactionnaires ou injustes. Alors que l'intervention sociale a pu prévenir le comportement inégal dans les sociétés à échelle réduite, les sociétés industrielles n'ont pas encore découvert comment produire de tels résultats.

Mots-clés : hiérarchie, nature humaine, inégalité, marxisme, évolution socio-culturelle

As a result of his early studies of the !Kung San, Richard Lee (1979) reached some very important conclusions about the nature of human behaviour in small-scale societies. In this paper, I will consider the implications of these findings for understanding socio-cultural evolution and charting the future development of anthropology.

The San Tzu Ching, or Three Character Classic, which was composed by the Confucian scholar Wang Yinglin in the late Sung dynasty and served for almost 700 years as a primer for Chinese youngsters learning to read, began as follows:

Jen chih chu	At the beginning of people's lives
hsing pen shan	their human nature is basically good
Hsing hsiang chin	Human natures are close to one another
hsi hsiang yuän	it is their cultural environment that causes them to grow far apart from each other

This summation of Confucian, and Chinese, views about human nature reflects an understanding that is more optimistic and hopeful than the Christian belief that all humans are inherently sinful. The paramount, original sin identified in the Bible was disobedience to God, but, in the patriarchal and hierarchical societies in which the Judaeo-Christian tradition emerged and flourished, this form of sinfulness was effortlessly extended to include disobeying kings, officials, fathers, husbands, elders, teachers and employers. This interpretation survived intact through the European Middle Ages. Following the growth of capitalism, however, many people came to regard greed as the gravest moral vice.

As part of their rejection of religious orthodoxy, 18th-century Enlightenment philosophers adopted the contrary view that human beings were fundamentally

rational and good. This idea may have been encouraged by Jesuit missionaries' accounts of Confucian beliefs, but it was also inherent in the continuing influence of Pelagianism, a minority tradition in Christian theology that stressed God-given reason and free will, rather than divine grace, as a major element in human salvation. In the 18th century, these heterodox beliefs took on new life in the context of Deism. In Enlightenment circles, belief in human goodness and rationality powered the conviction that human beings had the ability to build a better future for all humankind. While humanity's innate goodness was thought to become corrupted in rigidly hierarchical and despotic societies, it was assumed that general moral improvement could be brought about by creating progressive societies that were more in line with human nature. It was believed that such societies would liberate the human spirit, progressively eliminate ignorance, curb uncontrolled passions, free human beings from superstition, and unleash human creativity and progressive change (Toulmin and Goodfield, 1966: 115-123).

Karl Marx's ideas about human nature were based on, yet departed from, those of the Enlightenment. He regarded individuals as passionate creatures whose needs and general aspirations were innate and cross-culturally uniform. Yet he rejected the concept of an autonomous human nature. He described human nature as a social construct that altered as social formations were transformed. This view accorded with Marx's burning desire to radically transform Western society. In practice, conservatives generally prefer to regard human nature as biologically grounded and inflexible, while radicals hope that it is situationally determined and therefore capable of swift and radical change. Yet Marx and Engels, in conformity with Enlightenment views, also believed that hunter-gather societies were characterized by equality and sharing and regarded socialism as the return, at a more advanced level of economic productivity, to a situation that accorded with the original goodness of human beings; a view that Lewis Henry Morgan also held to be true of American republican democracy (Fuller, 1980: 230-264; Geras, 1983).

Lee's ethnographic observations among the !Kung would have pleased Marx. Here was evidence of what Marx had regarded as a "primitive" social formation exhibiting economic and political equality that was not merely the product of an ideologue's or philosopher's imagination. Yet Lee in turn entered new territory when he presented evidence that economic and political equality in small-scale societies did not simply reflect human nature. Self-assertion and greed were kept in line by complex patterns of ridicule and gossip, and by fears of falling victim to witchcraft (Lee, 1979: 458-461; 1990; Trigger, 1990). If the state protects power and privilege in complex societies, ridicule, gossip and fears of witchcraft protected social and economic equality in hunter-gatherer societies. About the same time Pierre Clastres (1977) argued that people who lived in small-scale societies actively resisted the development of the state. Lee's findings made it clear that groups such as the !Kung were fighting to maintain social and economic equality among themselves. Rather than simply being without a state form of organization and hence lacking something, hunter-gatherer societies possessed their own instruments of political control, of which the state would eventually become the antithesis. The "anti-state," with its use of ridicule, gossip and witchcraft as equalizing mechanisms, appears to have functioned well so long as societies remained small and all the people who lived in them knew each other personally.

An unanswered question remained: how large could societies be in which anti-state principles were still effective? My Huron ethnohistorical research, conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, had demonstrated that these techniques remained operative in Iroquoian towns that had over 1 500 inhabitants and in multicommunity societies that were several times larger still. These remained societies in which, despite elaborate consultative structures and formal political offices, each individual had to personally agree with public policies in order to be bound by them. No individual could tell another what to do, and no localized clan group could be dominated by another. Families and clans that felt pressured by other groups in the community could leave and try to set up on their own or join a more congenial group (Trigger, 1969; 1990). Similar arrangements existed among the Tupinamba in Brazil (Clastres, 1977) and the Kachin in Burma (Leach, 1954). These observations initially caused me to believe that gossip, ridicule and witchcraft must result in public opinion being an effective curb on individual behaviour not only in small-scale, but also in middle-range, societies. Yet many middle-range societies around the world exhibit marked social stratification and economic inequality, as Jérôme Rousseau (2001) has clearly demonstated. Pastoral societies also display varying degrees of egalitarianism and social hierarchy (Salzman, 1999; 2001). Eventually I became aware that as sedentary and semisedentary societies grew larger egalitarianism tended to survive mainly among swidden agriculturalists, especially ones with overall population densities that were low enough that dissidents could easily move away, thereby frustrating the development of chiefdoms and other forms of social stratification.

Some anthropologists who oppose unilinear views of sociocultural evolution have posited that resistance to the development of inequality has been successful at much larger scales, in the form of heterarchical preindustrial civilizations. This would make states an optional, rather than an inevitable, consequence of increasing social complexity and leave open the possibility that states and economic inequality are only accidental features of modern industrial societies. Some archaeologists propose that Teotihuacan, in Mexico, may have been a kingless complex society (Cowgill, 1997) and the Indus Valley civilization a potentially stateless one (Kenoyer, 1997; Maisels, 1999: 186-259; Possehl, 1998). Yet the little that is certain concerning such societies resembles what was known about the Classic Maya prior to the decipherment of their writing system. John Eric Thompson (1954) imagined the Maya to have been a unique society of dispersed farmers, peacefully governed by priests who lived in elaborate but largely empty ceremonial centres. Since the decipherment of their script, Maya society has turned out to be more like that of other early civilizations than Thompson thought possible (Coe, 1993).

Moreover, well-documented, heterarchically structured early civilizations, such as those of Mesopotamia and the Yoruba, were not characterized by the absence of hierarchy and economic inequality, but presented hierarchy and economic inequality in another form (Stone, 1997). My comparative study of early civilizations has produced no evidence of early complex societies in which social stratification did not exist and was not accompanied by massive economic and political inequality (Trigger, 1993). Likewise, there is no evidence of any large-scale societies in which the authority and privileges of the dominant upper classes were not protected by coercive powers. Once a ruling group controls society-wide communication networks, gossip and ridicule can be countered by the administrative interventions of the state. The coercive powers of the state can also be deployed to punish individuals who are suspected of practising witchcraft against the upper classes (Trigger, 1985).

Where matters of social and political equality are involved, complexity does not produce a wide variety of responses. Early civilizations came in various sizes and differed in their organization. But in all early civilizations, those who managed society as a whole invariably used their coercive powers to accumulate and protect wealth. Even the nuclear family became more hierarchical and authoritarian, as it transformed itself to accord with the image of the state (Trigger, 1985). Such cross-cultural uniformity would be unexpected if the principal human wants and the goals of human life were culturally defined, either wholly or in large part.

All early civilizations, because of their large size and complexity, may have required centralized controls in order to function adequately and this in turn would have necessitated the concentration of wealth to cover administrative costs and ensure effective government (Trigger, 1976). Yet why, in addition, would ruling elites invariably have opted to accumulate private wealth and indulge in conspicuous consumption on such a massive scale? Why, moreover, would such behaviour have been universally respected and have enhanced a ruler's powers, even among subjects who may have resented their monarch's exactions? Something must have encouraged rulers and subjects alike to accept as normal the congruence of political power, social status and wealth. While I accept that all human behaviour is symbolically mediated, cross-cultural uniformity of this sort pushes the understanding of these aspects of human behaviour toward a materialist, and possibly even towards a more biologically grounded, view.

Throughout the 20th century, Marxists and other progressives have treated human behaviour as shaped exclusively by social forces and therefore maximally changeable and improveable. Ironically, as Marx and Engels also did, they further hedged their bets by assuming that human beings are basically inclined to be good, thereby following in the tradition of Confucian Chinese and Western Enlightenment philosophers. In operational terms, "good" may be glossed as meaning "socially cooperative" or "altruistic." They have generally ignored evidence that our closest primate relatives, and therefore probably our primate ancestors as well, were not only extremely sociable but also intensely hierarchical (Conroy, 1990). While sociability and competitiveness have been defined and controlled differently in different human societies (Hardin, 1968), their universal importance makes it clear that they are species-specific tendencies that every society has to channel, rather than purely cultural creations. Christian theologians may have evaluated human nature more accurately than did Enlightenment philosophers.

Viewed from this perspective, Lee's findings suggest that social and political equality in hunter-gatherer societies was not a direct expression of human nature. His evidence indicates that hierarchical behaviour was actively suppressed in hunter-gatherer societies, where economic and political egalitarianism had great adaptive advantages, as well as in some of the more mobile middle-range societies. Contrariwise, in more complex soci-

eties competitive behaviour was supported and reinforced by the state. While culturally specific values that channel these tendencies in different ways are built into all societies, support for, or opposition to, these tendencies appears to be controlled primarily by the general sorts of socioregulatory mechanisms that are able to function at different levels of social complexity.

Today we live in a transnational world that is guided by the ideas of 19th-century Liberalism that have been disinterred from the intellectual graveyard. These ideas constituted a doctrine that was discredited as a result of the economic collapse of the 1930s. If they have been altered in any way, it is in the direction of being even less socially responsible than they were in the past, at least partly as a result of the weakened constraints of traditional religious social ethics in modern Western society. Despite the triumphalist platitudes of neoconservatives, practical and theoretical problems abound. Growing worldwide industrialization and the ceaseless search for short-term profits pose major threats to global ecology, unless new, clean and cheap sources of energy can be developed. Poor societies are being exploited and destabilized as never before and the poorest members of developed societies are increasingly malnourished and diseased. A pervasive and growing psychological malaise blights the lives of ever larger numbers of people who participate in the so-called "new economy" (Trigger, 1998). How far can such societies and a world economic system be kept operating by a monopolistic information system that propagates the view that no viable alternatives to the way things are currently being done are, or ever can be, imagined?

Unfortunately, 20th-century efforts to build socialism foundered to no small degree as a result of the uncontrolled greed, corruption and self-interest of those in authority. It is no accident that some of the bureaucrats of the former Soviet Union are among the most successful capitalists of post-Soviet Russia. At the same time, the welfare bureaucracies of Western societies were widely discredited because neoconservative propagandists were able so easily to persuade the public that these services had become arrogant and were benefitting those who managed them more than they did their intended beneficiaries. The assumption that, because human beings are essentially good, as capitalist society withered a more egalitarian way of life would replace it, has not been confirmed. Socialism failed politically because it failed to create for large-scale, industrial societies mechanisms to control domination and rapacity that were equivalent to those of the hunter-gatherer anti-state.

In recent decades the anthropological left has critiqued neoconservative ideologies in Western society and elsewhere. These critiques have made anthropologists as a whole increasingly aware of the socially constituted and political aspects of their individual and collective theorizing (Patterson, 2001). Critical anthropologists have not, however, made much progress in determining how the world might be fundamentally changed. The neoconservatives have vastly outflanked both the left and the centre in not only imagining the world as they wish it to be but in actually making it that way (Marchak, 1991). The challenge of the present is for progressive anthropologists to draw on their knowledge of social behaviour to try to design societies of a sort that have never existed before in human history: ones that are large-scale, technologically advanced, internally culturally diverse, economically as well as politically egalitarian, and in which everyone will assume a fair share of the burdens as well as of the rewards of living on a small, rich, but fragile planet (Trigger, 1998). Ideally, these will also be societies that will not revert to neoconservative policies, as most social democracies have recently done, as soon as their work of repairing the injuries wrought by laissez-faire capitalism has been accomplished.

How, and to what extent, can large-scale, enduring egalitarian societies be fashioned? What control mechanisms are needed to keep societies both democratic and economically egalitarian? What forms of social control, performing the same role as public opinion in hunter-gatherer societies, might counter the elitist tendencies inherent in the state? What would be the costs as well as the benefits in terms of human happiness of deploying such mechanisms? Could such a society be justified as truly providing the greatest good for the greatest number? What limits, if any, does human biology impose on our capacity for altruism? Might a broader definition of self-interest significantly encourage the more equitable sharing of wealth in capitalist societies? Or is this Utopian and can a significant sharing of wealth occur only when its possessors fear that the alternative may be to lose all, as was the case during the Cold War?

These are issues that progressive anthropologists must address. As part of their forward planning, they must take account of the less flexible aspects of human nature and how these aspects might articulate with different kinds of societies. It is not sufficient only to consider cultural and social values. The goal of such research must also be not to produce technocratic knowledge but to encourage informed public discussion of alternative possibilities.

Hunter-gatherer societies do not provide a model for the future; they merely demonstrate that social and political egalitarianism was possible in societies that were small enough to be controlled by public opinion. Progressive anthropologists are challenged to shift from merely criticizing the more deplorable features of contemporary societies to using what they and other social scientists, as well as psychologists and neuroscientists know, or can learn, about human beings to formulate practical and attractive alternatives. A shift in this direction might also help to rescue anthropology from its current role of playing second fiddle to cultural studies and restore it to its former central position in debates concerning the future development of a viable, as well as a more humane, global society.

Bruce Trigger, Department of Anthropology, McGill University, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3A 2T7. Email: bruce.trigger@mcgill.ca

Acknowledgments

References

Clastres, Pierre
 1977 *Society against the State*, New York: Urizen Books.
Coe, Michael D.
 1993 *The Maya*, 5th ed., London: Thames and Hudson.
Conroy, Glenn C.
 1990 *Primate Evolution*, New York: Norton.
Cowgill, George L.
 1997 State and Society at Teotihuacan, Mexico, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26: 129-161.
Fuller, Peter
 1980 Beyond the Crisis in Art, London: Writers and Readers.
Geras, Norman
 1983 *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London: Verso.
Hardin, Garrett J.
 1968 The Tragedy of the Commons, *Science*, 162: 1243-1248.
Kenoyer, Jonathan M.
 1997 Early City-States in South Asia: Comparing the Harappan Phase and Early Historic Period, *The Archaeology of City-States: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, Deborah L. Nichols and Thomas H. Charlton (eds.), Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press: 51-70.
Leach, Edmund R.
 1954 *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Lee, Richard B.
 1979 *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 1990 Primitive Communism and the Origin of Social Inequality, *The Evolution of Political Systems: Sociopolitics in Small-Scale Sedentary Societies*, Steadman Upham (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 225-246.
Maisels, Charles K.
 1999 *Early Civilizations of the Old World: The Formative Histories of Egypt, the Levant, Mesopotamia, India and China*, London: Routledge.
Marchak, M. Patricia
 1991 *The Integrated Circus: The New Right and the Restructuring of Global Markets*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Patterson, Thomas C.
 2001 *A Social History of Anthropology in the United States*, Oxford: Berg.
Possehl, Gregory L.
 1998 Sociocultural Complexity without the State: The Indus Civilization, *Archaic States*, Gary M. Feinman and Joyce Marcus (eds.), Santa Fe: School of American Research Press: 261-291.
Rousseau, Jérôme
 2001 Hereditary Stratification in Middle-Range Societies, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 7: 117-131.
Salzman, Philip C.
 1999 Is Inequality Universal? *Current Anthropology*, 40: 31-61.
 2001 Toward a Balanced Approach to the Study of Equality, *Current Anthropology*, 42: 281-284.
Stone, Elizabeth
 1997 City-States and Their Cities: The Mesopotamian Example, *The Archaeology of City-States: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, Deborah L. Nichols and Thomas H. Charlton (eds.), Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press: 15-26.
Thompson, J.E.S.
 1954 *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
Toulmin, Stephen E. and June Goodfield
 1966 *The Discovery of Time*, New York: Harper and Row.
Trigger, Bruce G.
 1969 *The Huron: Farmers of the North*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
 1976 Inequality and Communication in Early Civilizations, *Anthropologica*, 18: 27-52.
 1985 Generalized Coercion and Inequality: The Basis of State Power in Early Civilizations, *Development and Decline: The Evolution of Sociopolitical Organization*, H.J. Claessen, Pieter van de Velde and

M.E. Smith (eds.), South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey: 46-61.

1990 Maintaining Economic Equality in Opposition to Complexity: An Iroquoian Case Study, *The Evolution of Political Systems: Sociopolitics in Small-Scale Sedentary Societies*, Steadman Upham (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 119-145.

1993 *Early Civilizations: Ancient Egypt in Context*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

1998 *Sociocultural Evolution: Calculation and Contingency*, Oxford: Blackwell.