

RUNCIMAN, W. G. (ed.). *The origin of human social institutions*. 259 pp., maps, figs., tables, illus., bibliogr. Oxford: Univ.Press, 2001. £29.50 (cloth)

Was the evolution of *Homo sapiens* a purely gradual process? Or did it culminate in a relatively sudden transition to 'mind', 'language,' and 'society'? This prestigious volume champions the second alternative - human consciousness was born in a revolution. Curiously, however, it dates the key transition to the period when 'social complexity' began arising among sedentary farmers.

There never was a 'human revolution' – or rather, as Colin Renfrew (p. 96) puts it – the 'true human revolution came only much later than the emergence of the species'. The first social institutions were property rights, marital contracts, and religions based on priesthoods and temples. We owe our humanity not to the establishment of 'primitive communism' as claimed by Marx – whose writings haunt this whole volume – but to the collapse of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism and its replacement by the family, private property, and the state.

With the entry of modern humans into Europe, claims Renfrew (pp. 93-4), 'nothing very much of interest happened'. Nothing? Anticipating charges of exaggeration here, Renfrew acknowledges certain Upper Palaeolithic innovations in tool-making and art. He insists, however (p. 94), that these 'are not such as would greatly interest either untutored laymen...or the perceptive extra-terrestrial observer casually visiting our planet'.

The world's hunters and gatherers, continues Renfrew, lack a 'fully developed mind' (p. 95). This 'should not be taken as a disparagement of the status of recent and contemporary mobile hunter-gatherer groups', however. After all, underprivileged children in our own times can have capacities which remain unfulfilled. 'I realize', continues Renfrew (p. 96), '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 facts are facts: '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' (p. 113).

Why should 'mind' be related in this way to 'property'? Renfrew here invokes *The German ideology* (p. 100) and *Das Kapital* (pp. 110-11), adapting Marx's insights to a reversed political agenda. 'Mind', Renfrew explains, is not just 'brain'. It is socially constituted. Productive labour, moreover, is the key. Among the earliest sedentary farmers in Britain and Ireland, the laborious construction and ceremonial use of a burial mound 'could help promote the emergence of a coherent new social unit' (p. 109). The 'end product' of a monument such as Stonehenge 'could be the emergence of a coherent larger community where none was before' (p. 109). Such sacred sites not only came to symbolize 'community' – they served to bring coherent, large-scale community into being.

Lacking such temples, a hunter-gatherer group would be unable to form a community sufficiently large, coherent, or stable to agree on what philosophers term 'institutional facts' – social truths such as that 'this stone is *sacred*' whereas 'that one is a mere stone'. Apparently unaware of Aboriginal Australian quartz

crystals, bullroarers, ritual dance-grounds, and other ‘secret/sacred’ items, Renfrew explains (p. 101):

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.

Hunter-gatherers would equally be incapable of establishing belief in ‘divinities’ which are ‘effective’ or possess ‘long-term persistence’ (p. 102). Where ‘abstract concepts’ such as ‘property’, ‘debt’, ‘obligation’, and so forth cannot be sanctified, ‘mind’ itself can hardly be said to exist (pp. 97-8).

In his final chapter, Runciman drives Renfrew’s arguments to their logical conclusion. Hunter-gatherers, he admits, possess ‘culture’ – but then so do many animals. Chimpanzees, for example, display a wide range of culturally varied traditions ‘transmitted by genuine imitation and learning (p. 236). Upper Palaeolithic peoples, Runciman speculates, may well have danced and ‘observed the elements’ – but such habits will simply have spread by means of ‘imitation and learning alone’, without ‘established practices defining acknowledged social roles’ (p. 242).

Runciman concedes that Upper Palaeolithic peoples valued red ochre for use in body decoration. But this doesn’t imply ‘social institutions’; neither does it indicate that people’s roles were ritually or institutionally defined. Bodily designs can ‘function as cultural markers differentiating one from another group without thereby giving rise to institutionalised roles’ (p. 241). Loftily, the author sustains this one-sentence argument without needing to familiarize himself with the scholarly literature – now considerable – debating precisely the significance of the ochre record to an understanding of how symbolic culture emerged (I. Watts 1999, ‘The origin of symbolic culture’ in *The evolution of culture* [eds] R. Dunbar, C. Knight and C. Power, Edinburgh: University Press; L.S. Barham 2002, ‘Systematic pigment use in the Middle Pleistocene of South-Central Africa’, *Current Anthropology* **43**, 181-90).

In Runciman’s account, ‘cumulative cultural evolution’ including ‘language’ gets under way at some unspecified date and independently of any special institutional context. ‘For the purposes of this chapter’, he hastens to add, ‘it does not matter when or how the capacity for grammar and syntax evolved’ (p. 236). Regardless of such details, even if hunter-gatherers *can* evolve language, their strategies could never permit ‘the transition from culture to society’ (p. 242). This, he claims, remained impossible until ‘human beings began to lead their lives in an emergent world of armies, markets, temples, estates, treasuries, assemblies, courts.....and inherited differences in status.....’ (p. 236).

Not all the chapters are as patently ideological. Ofer Bar-Yosef (pp. 1-38) opens the book by persuasively detailing how very early sedentism in southwest Asia prepared the way for farming. Richard Bradley (pp. 69-92) offers an insightful discussion of megalithic monuments, long barrows, and their precursors, drawing upon ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘wasteful advertising’ theory. Other eminent scholars make worthwhile contributions, combining to yield a volume that usefully addresses a previously neglected question – the role played by property in human evolution. We now know the issues at stake. Ken Binmore (pp. 149-70) in particular deploys complex mathematical formulae to persuade us that ‘communism’ would have been ‘beyond the comprehension’ of prehistoric hunter-gatherers (p. 167). Anarchists at best, these people not only lacked

property – being incapable of group-level social contracts, they lacked ‘social institutions’ of any kind.

The vigour of the Runciman-Renfrew assault on ‘the human revolution’ suggests a political motive. What are these eminent figures so worried about? Specialists nowadays link syntactical speech with the emergence in Africa of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* (C. Knight, M. Studdert-Kennedy and J. R. Hurford [eds] 2000, *The evolutionary emergence of language*, Cambridge: University Press). Could it be that symbolic culture – with its associated ‘social institutions’ – was also an African rather than Eurasian invention (Watts 1999)? Runciman’s response has been to ignore this whole literature and instead convene a select gathering under the auspices of the British Academy. In this secure institutional setting, he offers as models of what it means to be human: not trance-dancing egalitarians but ‘nobles and commoners, landlords and tenants, masters and slaves’ (p. 236).

The first casualty of political warfare is always science. Long after the supposed death of Marxism, the spectre of ‘primitive communism’ seems to haunt the quadrangles of Cambridge. To invoke absence of ‘property’ as evidence that hunter-gatherers ‘lack fully developed mind’ is not only abhorrent. It is quite simply unsustainable unless you choose to ignore the whole of social anthropology. In defending the human status of hunter-gatherers, therefore, I find myself in good company. One doesn’t have to be a Communist to acknowledge that an Australian Aboriginal eight-section system is a ‘social institution’ – and quite a ‘complex’ one at that.

CHRIS KNIGHT

University of East London