

The Origins of Human Society

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"Every educated person since Darwin has labelled himself an 'evolutionist'. But a real evolutionist must apply the idea of evolution to his own forms of thinking. Elementary logic, founded in the period when the idea of evolution did not yet exist, is evidently insufficient for the analysis of evolutionary processes. Hegel's logic is the logic of evolution. Only one must not forget that the concept of 'evolution' itself has been completely corrupted and emasculated by university professors and liberal writers to mean peaceful 'progress'. Whoever has come to understand that evolution proceeds through the struggle of antagonistic forces; that a slow accumulation of changes at a certain moment explodes the old shell and brings about a catastrophe, revolution; whoever has learned finally to apply the general laws of evolution to thinking itself, he is a dialectician, as distinguished from vulgar evolutionists"

Leon Trotsky, In Defence of Marxism

Until the 1980s, ideas about human origins were for the most part gradualist. It was believed that a recognisably human lifestyle began emerging some two to three million years ago, in a drawn-out evolutionary process linked with the establishment of bipedalism and tool-making. According to this way of thinking, speech co-evolved with the making of simple stone tools, becoming increasingly complex as technology evolved. Art, ritual, the organisation of kinship and other aspects of culture became more complex in the same gradualistic, piecemeal way.

Such gradualism, although still defended, has recently become a minority position. It is nowadays widely acknowledged that those archaeologists who excavated early hominid sites in Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania, and saw the beginnings of "home bases", "language" and "a sexual division of labour" among these bipedal toolmakers were projecting assumptions and stereotypes derived from modern culture onto the distant past.

Over the past two decades, there has been a revolution in archaeology and palaeontology, leading to the view that the earliest tool-makers, while more intelligent than apes, were involved in essentially primate-style social and reproductive relationships. Admittedly, humans were co-operatively hunting large game animals by at least 500,000

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years ago. But archaeologists have found no evidence for art, ritual or other "symbolic" behaviour at such early dates. Most archaeologists are now agreed that even large-brained humans such as the Neanderthals were not leading a recognisably human or "hunter-gatherer" lifestyle. The dominant view is that anatomically modern humans emerged in Africa around 130,000 years ago and then, some 60,000 years later, rather suddenly spread across the world in an explosive process known as the "human revolution". It was during the earliest stages of this revolutionary process that symbolic art, ritual and language emerged.

by Chris Knight

<http://dreamflesh.com/essays/societyorigins/>