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"Synthetic and Multicausal Approaches to the Study of Nomadic Peoples"

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SYNTHETIC AND MULTICAUSAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF NOMADIC PEOPLES

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It is quite natural for an anthropologist, in attempting to explain ethnographic case material or in working up a more general theoretical framework, to emphasize particular aspects, to stress specific factors, and to focus upon certain relationships. After all, explaining and theorizing are aimed at clarifying and illuminating and thus must provide an order and meaning which makes sense of the complexities of human life, society, and culture. It is common to do this by distinguishing between the important and the unimportant, the core and the peripheral, the basic and the contingent. Such a distinction can then guide us in accounting for ethnographic patterns, in formulating generalizations, and in directing research.

And so it is that anthropological theory directs us, over the years, to patterns of culture, to social structure, to modal personality, to deep structure, to ecological adaptation, to transactions, to mode of production, for explication and explanation of human life. Often our theoretical formulations stress one such aspect and either dismiss others or absorb them. Human life is thus presented in a unitary perspective. The dominant and determining forces are identified, and other phenomena are shown to be determined by or to be reflections of those forces.

Such unitary theoretical perspectives, in which human life is seen to be primarily a function of one central force or influence, are very attractive. They are powerful, sorting out the complexities of human life clearly and decisively, and are definitive, distinguishing themselves absolutely from each other. These characteristics facilitate communication, identification, and a certain aesthetic satisfaction.

But there are certain assumptions underlying unitary theoretical formulations which may be problematical. Most basic is the sense that the nature of existence is monistic, all of a piece, unified, rather than a plurality of forces and elements which feed into one another. Now while it would be convenient if some coherence were supplied by an underlying monism, it seems to me chancy to assume that this is so. Implicitly depending upon this monistic perspective is the tendency to base general heuristic theory upon a central master concept which purports to

identify the crucial key to human life. The difficulty here is a reductionist tendency which overemphasizes one element of reality and obscures or minimises the importance of other aspects of reality. The inevitable consequence of such an approach is the perception of other theoretical emphases as contraries rather than complementaries and errors rather than parallel enriching insights. This results in an unnecessary hardening and an artificial distancing of theoretical positions. It facilitates lively dialectics of debate and perhaps advances career trajectories, but whether it deepens our understanding of human life is very much open to question.

For this reason the oft bemoaned gap between general heuristic theory on the one hand and ethnographic research and analysis on the other can be seen as something of a blessing in disguise. For, most of us, however transported by heuristic enthusiasms, remain sensitive in our capacity as ethnographers to the many facets of human life, to the multiple influences on social and cultural patterns, to the complexity in human existence. The richness of ethnographic context and process often stimulates us to record, recognise, and appreciate a plurality not stressed by our unitary theoretical perspectives. The response to this is in some cases a stretching of the unitary theoretical framework and a resulting contradiction between the increasing encompassment and the framework's original unitary integrity.

The question that I would like to raise here is whether the insights derived from ethnographic fieldwork and our reflections on what we have seen can be phrased theoretically in a less restrictive, non-reductionist framework, rather than the more typical unitary formulations. Must we not construct a theoretical approach which honours the complexity of human life and the many influences which feed into that complexity? It is all well and good, you may reply, to stress the complexity and multiplicity of human life and the plurality of influences, but such an approach--whether we call it synthetic or pluralistic or multicausal--does not take us very far, does not tell us very much, does it? I must of course agree that such a synthetic or pluralistic theoretical approach does not provide us with a 'key' to human life, a single crucial factor which provides us with answers before we even ask our questions. But if I am correct in arguing that there is a multiplicity of influences and that there is no single key, this synthetic approach is the only feasible one, for the unitary, reductionist approaches must then be understood as misleading. All right, you may reply, even if we suppose that a synthetic, pluralistic approach is most true to what we know of the world, how can such an approach help us in understanding and explaining the differences and similarities of human life in different places and times? How can it help us say anything definite and instructive? I agree, of course, that this is the challenge, and I shall return below to synthetic theory as

a basis for research, analysis and understanding. But first I would like to turn to very brief sketches of some ethnographic and theoretical examples which illustrate the appropriateness of a synthetic approach.

In my own research (Salzman 1983) on the nomadic tribes of Iranian Baluchistan, I directed my attention to ecology and was particularly interested in the relationship between adaptation and social and political organization. What I discovered was that the development of tribes on the Sarhad of Baluchistan entailed a nomadization and pastoralization of a previously agricultural area, and that both the nomadic, multi-resource adaptation and the rather peculiar political structure combining a segmentary lineage system with a chiefship seem to derive from a convergence of at least three distinct elements: cultural commitments, such as a stubborn streak of independence; environmental and demographic constraints and possibilities, such as a scanty and erratic spread of pasturage over the landscape; and political presences, such as the Kurdish hakomate in Washt/Daptan area. It is the conjunction of these various factors, none of which is reducible to any other, which seems to have generated the particular socio-political configuration of the Sarhadi tribes. A difference in any one of these factors would have changed the equation and resulted in a different configuration.

A second example I would draw from the work of Pierre Bonte (1979), from his analysis of the segmentary lineage system as an ideological cover for territorial expansion as the solution to the contradiction between differential accumulation and the norm of equal access to communally held means of production. Bonte is at pains to put the segmentary lineage system in its place, as a symbolic manifestation, and a distorting one at that, of hard productive factors, such as differential accumulation and access to the means of production. This reader receives a strong impression from Bonte's style of presentation that material factors are seen to be the spring of action, and the cultural systems, the frameworks of ideas and understandings, are merely the lubricants of the spring. But Bonte's account could be rephrased to give more open acknowledgement of the degree to which social life is culturally constituted. If differential accumulation is taken as a material fact resulting from individual and circumstantial factors (although Bonte points to kinship influences as critical, which raises further questions about cultural constitution), the other element in this critical contradiction can hardly be considered so. To say that the means of production, in particular pasturage, is held communally, is to discuss the political and legal framework of rights and obligations in the society. Here we find not only notions of collective ownership and universal access to resources, but notions of equity and equality. It seems to me that such symbolic frameworks must be seen as influences upon productive

arrangements as much as reflections of them.

What I wish to emphasize with reference to Bonte's argument is that cultural, that is symbolic elements, particularly conceptions and commitments, are integral to and partially determinants of the political economy of East African pastoralists. Notions of who has a right to resources, frameworks binding individuals into categories or groups perceived as having common interests, and definitions of privileges and obligations among specified kinds of people put shape and direction into economic production and distribution, mediate between physical sensations and desires and the material factors which directly or indirectly satisfy them, and generate and cathect what are felt as needs by the actors. Even the means to effect material ends, that is technology, is less importantly a set of bovines, patches of grass, ropes, skin containers, hoes, and so on, than it is a set of theories and understandings about how the world works, about how one can intervene to gain desired products, about seasonal cycles and livestock behavior and the causes of disease.

While there are undoubtedly environmental and demographic possibilities and constraints in any human situation, and while people are physically constituted to require certain kinds of consumption, the way people construe their world, their circumstances, and their needs, the way in which they select, stress, and emphasize certain of the multiple elements of their world and organize themselves in relation to those elements are arbitrary in the sense that they in no way follow inevitably from the given externalities. This construing, selecting, and organizing are collective, and they are traditional in that even in innovation they draw upon established and thus available understandings and preferences. Therefore, given these critical cultural components, it hardly makes sense to think of adaptation, production, distribution, and competition over resources as material as opposed to cultural, for they can hardly be considered as somehow objectively given and unmediated factors.

Nor can patterns of ownership, work and consumption be taken as material as distinct from some hypothesized superstructure of peripheral cultural elaborations, for there is hardly any cultural construction which does not play a significant part, whether direct or indirect, in constituting those very patterns. It is the recognition of this cultural component in political economy which leads some materialist theorists (e.g. Godelier 1978) to acknowledge that in certain societies the mode of production is constituted by such symbolic frameworks as kinship, religion, and myth. I agree, of course, that this is the case. The question which arises is in what sense such a formulation can be regarded as materialist. Perhaps it would be better if we had

the courage of our ethnographic convictions in our theoretical formulation and admitted that the cultural components cannot be reduced to material factors and must be seen as independent influences among others.

Perhaps the final refuge of the materialist monist is, remarkably enough, psychology. Having granted the cultural elements in adaptation, production, distribution, and even in the needs of the actors, and having recognised the absence of any dependent cultural forms, this position holds that material benefit, however defined in the society, is the prime motivator in human affairs. The difficulty in this view is, of course, that it posits a universal psychology in the face of strong evidence that psychologies vary impressively from society to society as well as from individual to individual and group to group within societies. People everywhere simply do not want the same thing. While some people undoubtedly sometimes pursue culturally constituted material interests, such as increase of livestock or preferred access to pasture, people also pursue order, peace of mind, righteousness, the benefit of their fellows, security, fun, rest, harmony with the universe, power, a good rebirth or afterlife, honour, or understanding for their own sake, even at the expense of short and long term material benefit. To suggest that human motivation can be reduced to a seeking of material benefit, even through a mystifying cultural idiom, is surely something of a travesty of any serious attempt to understand people and their complex desires, concerns, and motives.

In contrast to the materialist approach, a cultural or semiotic perspective emphasizes the importance of segmentary and other models in defining interests, as illustrated by Galaty's account (1981) of Maasai political action, which I mention as a third example. He argues that particular political events which he analyses cannot "be explained by the material conditions which existed at the time of the event[s]"(83). But, I would argue, one cannot deny that certain aspects of the events must be related to elements independent of cultural models, such as demographic, technological, and political facts, for we are told that in the particular cases discussed the influence of distance and the presence of the government played a decisive part in who was present on an occasion of political mobilization and who was not. Indeed, in the end Galaty grants if somewhat grudgingly that cultural models "invariably combine with other relevant systems in determining specific events" (88). Thus it is the complex conjunction of cultural models and their rules of application with other non-cultural factors which generates patterns of action.

Let us examine a bit more closely the reasons that culture cannot account totally for human action and the resulting events.

There is no doubt that culture provides models of the world and models for action, and that these models and their associated rules of application mediate between the world and the people who hold them. But no one can totally construct their world, for there are always factors, influences, and pressures which are external to those models, which operate under their own independent force, which are in no way generated by the directives contained in the models, and which interfere with the natural and unimpeded course dictated by the models. In the Maasai case described by Galaty, the intrusion of the national government, following its own models, influenced the events otherwise shaped by the Maasai segmentary model, and skewed those events into a form distinct from any based solely upon the Maasai segmentary model. Similarly, demographic constraints--in this case population density and consequent distance between groups of Maasai--impeded the fruition in action of imperatives dictated by the segmentary system, such that the intentions of Maasai acting to fulfill segmentary obligations were frustrated. The case of government intrusion demonstrates that other peoples' culture can become constraining material factors for actors trying to carry out their cultural imperatives. The case of distances between Maasai segments too great to cover in the time available demonstrates that the exigencies of the material world cannot always be overcome in the fulfillment of culturally defined objectives.

We must of course grant that people try to respond in cultural terms to influences not generated by their models and not consistent with them. Undoubtedly they try to respond to whatever extent possible in terms of their extant cultural models. But continued frustration of culturally constituted objectives is probably a cause of elaboration and modification of cultural models. The conjunction of cultural models and incompatible external circumstances is an occasion conducive to innovation in the cultural sphere.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that all impediments to the application and acting out of cultural models are external to the society or even always material. Contradictions within societies, either between institutions, between social, cultural and psychological systems, or even between models, can frustrate the fulfillment of particular models. Within society, actors following different models or pursuing different cultural goals can be impediments to each other. Furthermore, models are always general and relatively simple while specific situations are particular and complex. Thus the question of application of a model to a specific situation can be rife with ambiguities and alternative possibilities, opening actors to influences from circumstantial elements and idiosyncratic psychological characteristics. The consequence of these various features of society is a lack of strict determination of actions and events by cultural models, an openness in the influence of models on

choice and behavior.

Certainly circumstances are mediated by cultural models and decisions are influenced by models, but it is equally undeniable that circumstances bearing on actions and events often result from factors operating under their own independent power and that cultural influences on decisions are often refracted through the multiplicity, multivalence, and generality of models. For these reasons, culture is necessary but not sufficient for determining acts and events, and is a partial but not complete basis for our accounts of human actions and their consequences. Culture is therefore not the way that people construct their world, but rather the way people struggle in their world, struggle for survival, for meaning, for order, a struggle which, as we all know, is only partially and unreliably successful.

I am suggesting that various monistic theoretical approaches recommending one or another aspect of human life as decisive and assigning other aspects to a derivative or reflective role, and thus elaborating a unitary conception of human life, society and culture, neglect the pluralistic nature of human life and the multiplicity in influence, miss the dialectics and multilectics of cross influence and mutual contribution, and thus distort through reductionism the polymorphous complexity of society and culture. But how could such a basic error take place? What underlies this misconception which is shared by theoretical perspectives as diverse as cultural materialism, structural marxism, semiotics, and transactionalism? The answer is that we are suffering from a fetishism of theory, a fixation and obsession leading to reification and commitment to theory in itself for itself. How else can we explain why theoretical positions stand unrevised even while we often take much more realistic positions in ethnographic analysis? Our theoretical commitments and labels become shibboliths, identifying allies and enemies, truth speakers and falsifiers, thus generating and reflecting the theoretical segmentation of the profession decried by Ivan Karp and Kent Maynard in their recent paper, "Reading THE NUER" (1983), where they convincingly argue that Evans-Pritchard's position was neither materialistic nor structural, but pluralistic and synthetic, recognising both the independent influence and combined impact of material and structural factors.

This fetishism of theory both results from and reenforces an unfortunate emphasis upon heuristic theory and can be partially corrected by a redirection of attention to substantive theory of more restricted scope, the so-called but little attempted middle range theory, or, as it is referred to in certain theoretical traditions, historical analysis. And it is here that a synthetic, pluralist approach, which may seem unexciting or nebulous in the abstract, can show both its power and its

integrity in dealing with ethnographic reality. There is nothing conceptually unusual in this kind of middle range, pluralistic model; it is unusual only in that we do not attempt it nearly often enough.

But what exactly would constitute a model based upon a synthetic, pluralist approach? Primary in such a model, and that which distinguishes it from monistic, reductionist models, is the partial independence and self contained causal power of a variety of factors: cultural models, established organizational forms, demographic patterns, psychological comlexes, available resources, and so on. The nature of any particular society at any particular time is a result of the conjunction and interaction of these factors. Change is understood as coming from the dynamics of any one or any combination of these factors--such as symbolic elaboration, resource expansion or contraction, organizational refinement, or technological innovation--which shift the system as a whole through impact upon the other factors. Explanation, then, resides in identification of the dynamics in particular factors which lead to pressure on other factors. Of course, the significance and impact of a changing factor depends upon the nature of the other factors with which it is conjoined, so that for example technological innovation in a densely populated, rich environment would have consequences different from those in a poor environment with a meagre population, or population increase would have different consequences in age grade and segmentary lineage systems. Thus generalization takes the form of middle range or historical models which specify a set of interacting factors--organizational, cultural, material, psychological--and which indicate the differences in overall pattern when one or the other of the factors varies, either across cases or in one case through time. Recognition of causal plurality does not preclude generalization, it merely requires that a wider range of parameters be indicated and that the multiplicity of sources of change be recognised.

Is it really necessary to illustrate this pluralistic approach with examples, given--what seems to me obvious--that most of the classic ethnographic literature stands as a tribute to it? Evans-Pritchard's work on the Nuer (1940) has already been mentioned, and the same can be said for his account of the Bedouin of Cyrenaica (1949). Indeed, I think there is reason to believe that the pluralist model is the one most widely held among anthropologists, although it is unfortunately all too seldom formulated explicitly.

Perhaps for the purposes of clarity, it would not be too onerous for the reader to consider just one brief example of pluralistic analysis. The Plains Indians of North America, nomadic hunters of bison whose domesticated horses were, as

mounts, tools in the hunt, did not live on the plains and off of the bison from time immemorial. Rather, as is well known, the Great Plains were little occupied and the bison little exploited until horses originating in the Old World became available to hunting and horticultural peoples living on the peripheries of the Plains. Mounted hunting became the technological innovation which made possible fruitful exploitation of the bison and substantial population movement onto the Plains. But what was the nature of the resultant society and culture on the Plains, and how did it come to be what it was? In a masterly analysis, Oliver (1962) shows how the divergent pre-Plains cultures of these peoples combined with the convergent exigencies of bison hunting on the Plains resulted in patterns of similarity and difference among Plains Indian peoples. Some Plains tribes had formal leadership and some did not; some had year-round police societies and some did not; some had clans and some did not. These differences reflected the different cultures that the tribes brought to the Plains: tribes originating in loosely organized and fragmented hunting peoples were characterized by informal and contingent leadership and organization, whereas tribes originating in more formally organized horticultural communities were characterized by more highly structured and permanent social organizations. The similarities among the Plains tribes included collective tribal units during the summer with dispersed bands during the rest of the year, police societies during the summer period, cross-cutting military societies, and status based upon individual achievement in warfare, hunting, and leadership. These similarities reflected the conditions on the Plains, especially the seasonal migration and concentration/dispersion of the bison herds which required mobility and flexible organization on the part of the hunters, and the control of horses, the main tool of exploitation, which involved effective acquisition and defense. The organizational patterns of the Plains tribes thus reflected both the ecological requirements of mounted bison hunting and the differential cultural commitments and preferences of the previously nomadic band hunters and village horticulturalists who came to the Plains to pursue the new adaptive opportunity afforded by the arrival of the horse. Understanding the social patterns of the Plains tribes necessitates, as we have seen, taking into account a plurality of factors, including technology, ecology, and culture, and the interplay of these over time as cultural commitments become social patterns and ecological adaptations become cultures.

The pattern of development seen among the Plains Indian tribes is mirrored to some degree by the Baluchi nomad case mentioned above, in which a region previously exploited by irrigation cultivation was occupied by tribes committed to pastoral nomadism whose culture became the ecology of the region. In this as in other cases, the intellectual futility of trying to identify one determinant--even 'in the final analysis'--seems obvious. Indeed, some contemporary theorists seem to acknowledge

the plurality of forces shaping human life by bringing in through the theoretical back door factors other than their favored structural or material ones, an exercise in conceptual elasticity which becomes more and more transparent.

The fact that we recognise the multiplicity of influences in pluralistic models may make these models less true to unitary theoretical visions, but it will make them more true to ethnographic reality, and thus erase the gap between heuristic theory and ethnographic analysis by respecting the complexity of social reality. Surely our understanding is more powerful in grasping a true complexity than in asserting a false simplicity.

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