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The Anthropology of Anarchy

Charles J-H Macdonald

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2009

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Note on the Author

Charles Macdonald is a social and cultural anthropologist. He is a Senior Fellow (Directeur de Recherche) in the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and a researcher at the Center for Social and Bioanthropological Studies (Adaptabilité Biologique et Culturelle — UMR 6578) of the University of Aix-Marseille II. He is a member in the School of Social Science at the IAS for the year 2008–2009, with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation. He is a founder and was the director of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (IRSEA) in Aix-en-Provence, and the founding director of the Asia-Pacific Studies Center (Maison Asie-Pacifique) in Marseille. He has been a Visiting Research Associate at the Universities of Oxford (St Antony's College), Kyoto (Center for Southeast Asian Studies — CSEAS), Leiden (International Institute for Asian Studies-IIAS), Manila (IPC, Ateneo de Manila), and Singapore (Asian Research Institute-ARI). Specializing in Southeast Asia, he has done extensive periods of fieldwork with the Palawan indigenous community in the southern Philippines as well as with the Raglai culture and society of Southern Vietnam. Two topics in his more recent studies concern suicide and personal names. He has published a book on suicide (*Uncultural Behavior*, University of Hawai'i Press and Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto, Honolulu 2007) and edited another one on names (*Asian Names: History, Culture and Identity*, Edited by Zheng Yangwen and Charles Macdonald, Preface by James C. Scott, Introduction by Anthony Reid and Charles Macdonald, NUS Press, Singapore, in press). His most recent field of interest concerns anarchic, egalitarian and peaceful organizations, which he examines in a cross-cultural and theoretical perspective. He is preparing a book on the subject, while currently completing a Palawan-Tagalog-English dictionary.

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Note on the Occasional Papers

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School’s weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School’s programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

Introduction

My aim in this talk is to present a few ideas regarding anarchy in human organization and to look at what an anarchist anthropology is or could be. I will proceed in two steps, firstly I will take a look at the relations anthropology and anarchism have had so far, secondly I will sketch a tentative hypothesis for anarchic societies (those studied by anthropologists). It may be that an anthropology of anarchy is an anarchist anthropology, or will fuel an anarchist project, but I am not sure of that. I am convinced, however, that a true understanding of existing anarchic societies will have interesting results as far as our understanding of human sociality in general is concerned.

A few definitions are in order. Anarchy has two meanings, one is “disorder” or “chaos”; the other follows from its etymology “without a chief or leader.” “The condition of society in which there is no ruler” (Barclay 1982: 13) is the definition I am using when I employ the word “anarchy.” When I speak of an anarchic organization, I refer to a situation where rules of conduct are not enforced by any government apparatus, not even by leaders, a situation with minimal status hierarchy or no political power. I distinguish anarchic from acephalous. The communities I have in mind are stateless societies characterized by egalitarian behavior devoid of status competition, mainly foragers and horticulturalists, who generally lead a peaceful and ordered life.

In a sense, however, I will not completely reject the other meaning of the word, “chaos” or “disorder”; I will show that a state of anarchy implies immanence, randomness, unpredictability and complexity, all concepts that dwell uneasily in a standard notion of what an ordered society is or ought to be.

As for anarchism, the word refers to social theories and political philosophies with no unified doctrine or single program, but one central concern, the rejection of authoritarian government and its manifestation in the state together with

free agreement as a guiding principle. It is, in Woodcock's words "a system of social thought, aiming at fundamental changes in the structure of society and particularly— for this is the common element uniting all its forms—at the replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of nongovernmental co-operation between free individuals" (Woodcock 1962: 13). The founding fathers of anarchism, Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, sought to propose a recipe for a just and free society and their successors proposed many different views on how to promote a just society or what a just society exactly looks like. There are violent and nonviolent varieties of anarchism. There are individualistic, communist and collectivist variants of anarchism. It is mostly left-wing, but there are also right-wing variants (anarcho-capitalism). Anarchistic ideas and ideals are embedded in various types of intentional enclaved communities (e.g. Hutterites), intentional enclaved and occasional communities (e.g., the Rainbow Family—see Niman 1997), political parties or institutions (e.g., the International Anarchist Congress), social movements whether insurrectional as in Spain in the years 1930 to 1936, or pacifist and religious movements not necessarily under the banner of anarchism proper, but having in common an anti-authoritarian bend, an egalitarian and community-oriented ethos. In any case, anarchism is an interesting blend of notions for a social anthropologist, especially for a social anthropologist who has observed at close quarters and for a long period of time an anarchic society. Not all anthropologists have had this opportunity.

In the nineteenth century, thinkers like Proudhon or Bakunin were trying to construct a theory of society without government, without a state, based on individual freedom, mutualism or collectivism, and federalism. They were mostly imagining such a society, as the few historical examples, like the Swiss confederacy observed by Kropotkin, for instance (Ward 2004: 86), or the medieval city commune, could not

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provide sufficient empirical ground to test their ideas. It is in the next century that anthropologists started to intensively investigate a number of truly "anarchic societies." They provided a host of empirical evidence leading to the conclusion that a stable collective existence was possible in a state of anarchy. In a way, then, the data collected by anthropologists in the twentieth century supported the theories of the nineteenth century libertarians and anarchists, or at least gave some indication that these theories had a measure of empirical validity. Birket-Smith, an ethnographer, wrote in 1959 of the Eskimo: "If anywhere there exists that community...of which Kropotkin dreamt, it is to be found among these poor tribes neighboring upon the North Pole" (quoted in Barclay, 1982: 39) Can anarchism then be validated as a social theory? Or, to put it in another way, is anarchism an anthropology of anarchy?

In spite of the great many books and articles written on "primitive" societies and attempts at constructing a comparative theory of social organization and a typology of such organizations, anthropology has somewhat remained at a stand-still for almost fifty years now. We have an outdated typology of societies in an evolutionist perspective, the famous sequence of band-tribe-chiefdom-kingdom-state, with peasant societies somewhere in the middle. Maybe this is because anthropology was trapped in functionalism and evolutionism, orientations that were subsequently abandoned in favor of other pursuits, jettisoning as a result "social structure" and other pre-postmodern objects. Research on comparative social structure has slowed down, to say the least, and has not come up with a really new typology, evolutionary or otherwise. I am proposing, therefore, to look again at the so-called "simple" societies of hunters-gatherers and horticulturalists, and maybe some others, under a different light. I will try to understand their complexity because this is what I think they are, but of course their complexity is not what we use to mean when we

speak of large modern urban societies. There is complexity in what looks simple. I am betting on the fact that the complexity of small, anarchic populations can teach us something about our own modern sociality and that we can at the same time learn something about our past.

The Still-born Anarchist Anthropology

A bibliography of articles in the social sciences (Goehlert 1976) covering the period 1900 to 1975 contains more than 400 references on anarchy and anarchism, but only three or four relate to anthropology or appear in an anthropological journal. Historians, political scientists, and philosophers have clearly shown a much greater interest for anarchy and anarchism than social anthropologists, and this is surprising since the latter have been looking at societies without government right from the start of modern descriptions of hunters-gatherers in the Arctic, in Australia, in South America and elsewhere. Whereas many anthropologists in the past fifty years have called themselves Marxists, very few (or even none that I can recall) have called themselves anarchists or have defended anarchism with a belief that it could explain human development or human society as well as, or better than, Marxism and dialectical materialism do (Graeber 2004: 2–3). There are a number of reasons I can think of, one being that anarchism by nature is a discourse on the future of human society rather than on its past, a normative project rather than an objective assessment. It has therefore appeared as a purely critical discourse on the state on the one hand, and as a moral, even utopian, discourse aimed at the foundation of a better and more just society on the other. Marx and Engels used anthropology, particularly the work of Lewis Henry Morgan's speculative evolutionary history and the notion of primitive communism. Marxism and anthropology have traded ideas and information ever since,

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but there has been mainly a one-way circulation of ideas between anthropology and anarchism, especially under the form of anarcho-primitivism, showing influence from anthropologists like Sahlins or Levi-Strauss. Still, the fact that anthropologists have shown so little interest in anarchism is intriguing.

There have been exceptions, one being the young A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, later the founder and main proponent of functionalism in anthropology, a theory that can be regarded as a pure antithesis of anarchism. Yet, in his student years, Radcliffe-Brown professed an admiration for Kropotkin and was known as "Anarchy Brown" (Graeber 2004:16). I am not sure that there were anthropological seeds for the blooming of a potential anarchist anthropology in early and influential works by Marcel Mauss, especially his essay on the gift (Mauss 1925), arguing that human society was built on gift economies and "prestations totales." Mauss had his doubts, also, on the role of the state, but his leanings were towards socialism and not anarchism.

In France, the name of Pierre Clastres is the one most associated with an anarchist theory in anthropology (Clastres 1989). What sets his ideas apart from those current at the moment—the seventies, when Levi-Straussian structuralism ruled the roost—is not that primitive society is stateless, something everybody knew, of course, but that primitive society was actively geared to prevent the emergence of the state. For Clastres, primitive society is not without state; it is *anti-state*. He had an idea that there was a discontinuity of essence between the primitive form of organization and the civilized, that the second could not under any normal circumstance emerge from the former. He saw the emergence of political power as a mystery to be explained. The internal organization of the Amazonian Indian societies he took as examples made sure that the chiefs had no power and were actually in an inferior position compared to their constituents (because chiefs were the only polygamists and, as such, were

in a position of indebtedness towards the other members of their group). His argument has been criticized on several grounds, one that Indians could not fight something they did not even know existed (the state), and second because of a lack of empirical data to support his claim. In spite of the drawbacks and thinness of his writings (Clastres met a premature death in a car accident in 1977), he correctly saw in primitive economies a principle of non-reciprocity and, in chiefly positions, roles without power. Clastres can be seen as a proponent of the long tradition of the “great divide,” between nature and culture, *communitas* and structure, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. He was correct in theorizing that primitive societies could not, in normal circumstances, transform themselves into state societies (214), but the argument needs to be overhauled. Clastres, indeed, spoke at times of primitive society as an essence, a fixed Hegelian category, but there are many different kinds of “primitive” societies, and not all of them are anarchic, by a long way. There is a divide but the fault line lies elsewhere, not just between modern and pre-modern, but somewhere among the pre-modern.

More recently, the work of David Graeber has spurred an interest in what an anarchist anthropology could be. In his essay *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), he proposes a number of ideas, asks provocative questions, and probes avenues into various domains, pointing out problems which have found no solution in standard socio-anthropological theory: what intellectual tools should we use to speak of political entities that are not states? (68–9), or “where did the bizarre notion of the ‘corporation’ come from?” (73). I think some of his insights are excellent, particularly his attention to the notion of complexity.¹ But, in the end, this essay does not

¹ Such as this quote: “to ignore the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings that human life is really made of, is to make a rule and threaten anyone who breaks it” (72–3).

Conclusion

Small anarchic populations exist in different parts of the world, possibly as remnants of what could have been the dominant mode of sociality among humans. It is based on a richness of weak ties and, at the same time, on certain conditions that facilitate cooperation, especially ties that lead to friendship and enable people to create temporary fellowships. Social life was thus eminently unpredictable, creation of groups was random, culture was complex. Communities were necessarily small, based on personal, multi-stranded relations. These communities were probably peaceful, avoiding violent confrontation and, of course, were strictly egalitarian. Proudhon’s statement that liberty is the mother, not daughter, of order holds true in this instance.

What small anarchic communities did not have, and what possibly changed the future of human sociality, was the invention of corporation and strong personal ties based on dependence. Once those ties became the basis of the social fabric as in European feudal society, described by Marc Bloch (1968), or like those societies where ties of personal dependence were followed into death (Testart 2004), they could be transferred to a corporation, an abstract, transcendent, collective entity (like a nation). The invention of corporations to which one pledges one’s loyalty is central in our social, political, economic, and moral life, but it remains—in my view—an anthropological puzzle. In this case Proudhon’s formula has to be reversed: order has become the mother of liberty.

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The other one is the socially-structured type of collective life, extremely successful in a different sort of way, nowadays eradicating relentlessly all survivors of the other option.

If evolutionary sociologists are correct (Maryanski 1994), humanoid sociality, going back to the Last Common Ancestor of apes and humans, evidenced a “fluid organizational structure, consisting of a low level of sociality and a lack of intergenerational group continuity over time” (Maryanski 1994: 384). The reasons for that lie in several forces, one being the dispersal of females and another in the low level of bonding between males, characterized by high individual autonomy and high individualism creating fluid social networks (id., 385).¹¹ To quote again the same author: “A richness of weak ties over strong ties...provide humanoids with a degree of integration at the macro-population level in contrast to monkey populations where a richness of strong ties over weak ties is seen to provide integration at the micro-group level of organization” (id., 386). If a “weak tie” is defined as a tie that may at any time be terminated by the decision of any one party (as opposed to ties that cannot be terminated at will), if weak ties are by nature short-lived and strong ties permanent or long-lasting, humanoids and their descendants were successful because they acquired great individual opportunities to create new ties, enabling them to produce large but loose aggregates. The benefits of that for a far-roaming animal like *Homo*, are several. Ranging far and wide, being highly mobile, he needs to frequently associate and disassociate himself from his conspecifics. So here we are, humans are not essentially “social” animals. They are gregarious in the sense that they need to interact and cooperate with their conspecifics, provided they maintain a great deal of personal autonomy.

¹¹ Wrangham—quoted in Boehm 1993: 238—reached different conclusions in a previous reconstruction from humans and African apes. His are closed social networks and some dominance, but no female alliances and hostility between groups (Wrangham 1987).

provide, nor does it purport to, a well-articulated set of principles on which to develop an anarchist anthropology, and these fragments remain alluring, but tentative and disconnected.² Reviewers dispensed scathing criticism (Aya 2006: 591), but anarchist ideas no matter how mildly and scholarly put, seem to always irritate and tend to be impatiently dismissed.

Elements for an Anarchist Anthropology

The most obvious introduction to a study of anarchy in anthropology would be to go over the many studies that dealt with the problem of political order in stateless or acephalous societies. As said earlier, one of the main results of these studies was to place these social forms at the bottom of the evolutionary ascent towards the emergence of the state. Strictly anarchic acephalous societies belonged to the category “band society” and, to some extent, to “tribes,” but “tribes without rulers” (the title of a book by Middleton and Tait, 1958). Most social scientists have never gone beyond a notion that these societies were just simple, defined by a “lack of,” and not worth theorizing too much. I will say a few things below on the band society and the study of hunters-gatherers.

Harold Barclay is a researcher who stands apart. He is the author of a book called *People without Government* (1982). He calls a spade a spade, and puts anarchy and anarchies squarely at the center of a discussion on societies that many authors have refused to call so, instead calling them acephalous, democratic, egalitarian, etc. “I believe many anthropologists, in their own projection of personal and cultural values, have obstinately refused to apply the one truly clarifying term to

² The same author, in a more recent volume (Graeber 2007), has put together a number of essays with topics relevant to a discussion of anarchy and anarchism from an anthropological perspective.

those numerous societies which are without government and are, therefore, anarchies” (16).

Without calling itself “anarchist,” a topicality has been present in anthropological discourse that could begin to point in the direction of anarchist thinking. It is the notion of anti-structure, which is a state observed by folklorists and anthropologists at crucial moments of social cycles: what Gluckman called rituals of rebellion (Douglas 1954:96), and liminal situations characterized by a symbolic subversion of hierarchy and role reversals, such as those found in medieval carnivals that were so brilliantly interpreted by Bakhtin (1970). These crucial and highly ritualized moments of social life were theorized by Turner (1977) as expressing *communitas*, a state of undifferentiated equality, and spiritual togetherness, at the opposite pole of the definition of regular social structure with its ranked statuses and ordered roles. In this sense, structure and anti-structure cannot be separated and are part of the same totality. The binary of structure and anti-structure is reminiscent of the opposed poles of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* posited by Tönnies ([1887]1955), two radically different forms of associative processes resulting, one from a natural communitarian will, the other from a rational individualistic will (Adair-Totef 1995: 59). Indulging further in the game of ideological pairing, other mythical divides may be brought in, rooted in ancestral paradigms such as Rousseau’s “*état de nature*” and Hobbes’ “state of war.” Probably our western way of thinking about man has been one that pits the modern state-dominated condition of social life against some fantasy of pre-social, pre-cultural and even pre-human existence cast in the “Metaphysical triangle of anarchy, hierarchy and equality” (Sahlins 2008: 4). This primeval state has been mainly defined as post-edenic and evil, overwhelmingly Hobbesian rather than Rousseauian (id.). Anarchy being on the side of the primeval and the primitive, any attempt at its sublimation smacks of anarchism and must be seen as

4. Other factors

I have considered so far the autonomy and low self-affirmation of subjects, the personal and multi-stranded aspect of relations, and sharing. All these requirements create conditions of felicity and permit bonding or, as I will explain below, a richness of weak ties. Interpersonal relations thus created rest on a number of other dimensions and personality traits that are conducive to bonding: self-disparagement, humility, and often laughter and humor, as well as envy. The process of consensus-building through long discussions is also very much of the essence. Last, but not least, is another important dimension: culture in the general sense of communicative skills, the performance of arts (music, oral literature), rituals and ceremonies. It offers people not bound together by strong jural ties the venue for sharing in a meaningful and profound manner, and feel part of a community of interest. It may be also that non-utilitarian activities having cultural and spiritual significance mobilize a larger cooperative work force than strictly utilitarian or practical activities.

Personal Autonomy and the Force of Social Ties

From hominoid evolutionary prehistory, chances are that several diverging forms of adaptation survived and still exist side-by-side. I hypothesize, therefore, that two branches on the hominin terminal ramification, not in the form of biological speciation, but in the form of societal speciation (resulting from selection at the sociocultural level), are surviving from ancient adaptation of hominoids to specific conditions. One is the gregarious, anarchic, egalitarian, non-social type of collective life, which proved to be adaptive and successful over tens of thousands of years (more than 90% of *Homo Sapiens* life on earth).

rior to B, the agent incurring the debt. This is indeed a powerful mechanism and could pass as a “social contract” in Rousseau’s or Hobbes’ sense (Godelier 1996). It is to society what an engine is to an automobile. More recent research has shown, however, that sharing is based on a different principle: it is a division of an object, commodity or good, between persons or groups, without anyone being seen as giver and no one being in a position of incurring a debt. It looks strange, a gift without a donor, something like the zen koan of one hand clapping, but it is actually something that has an empirical basis. There are various ways to achieve this. For example, large animals caught by hunters—Hazda or Inuits— are declared to be gifts of nature and must be shared, often by someone who is not the hunter. Another way to achieve this has been called “demand sharing” (Peterson 1993), whereby the person who owns an object lets himself be dispossessed of it under the request put to him by someone else. This concept is similar to “tolerated theft,” a notion used in the study of primate behavior. In all these cases, there is no expectation of reciprocity. You cannot give back something that is not given to you in the first place. Sharing has been confused with what Sahlins called general reciprocity (Sahlins 1965) and with the moral concept of generosity. It is neither, although it looks like it. Avoiding debts was a very intentional position and clearly something people were aware of. Inuits said famously “with gifts one makes slaves” (Freuchen 1976). The main lesson that sharing has to teach is the affirmation of equality. Gifts entail a debt that creates inequality. This is why sharing, even if it is not the only way people allocate resources, is a moral dimension of equality and a requirement in maintaining a state of anarchy.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Macdonald 2008 a) for a full development of this argument.

utopian or regressive. Interestingly, primitive communism, which is more of a myth than primitive anarchy, did not give such bad publicity to the communist project, at least in the eyes of the anthropological community. What is so repellent about primitive anarchy that is so attractive about primitive communism? At any rate, anthropologists could be suspected of harboring anarchist sympathies, since they were finding some merit in the stateless societies they studied.

If an anarchist anthropology has not been hatched in European or American academic nurseries, another current of interest has in part taken its place, and that is peace anthropology, “the study of peoples whose way of life seems remarkably peaceful” (Dentan in press: 2).³ This field has yielded a number of important studies in recent years (Howell and Willis 1989, Sponsel and Gregor 1994, Kemp and Fry 2004), the latest and most comprehensive to date being Fry’s *The Human Potential for Peace*, 2006 (see also Dentan 2008 a) and b).). Peace studies were consonant with an anti-war concern dating back to Meadian peace activism, and an interest in peace and nonviolence flared up during the sixties. Books like Thomas’ *The Harmless People* (1959), Turnbull’s *The Forest People* (1961), and Dentan’s *The Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya* (1968), seemed relevant to a general argument against war, but also, as Dentan points out, could have led to some anarchist vindication of egalitarianism and statelessness, as these nonviolent peoples were also strictly anarchic. These books found an audience among “flower children,” but again anarchist anthropology did not flourish as an academically-based school of thought, and concerns with war were seen as more urgent, maybe, than a desire for peace. Peace studies, however, gained momentum in the 1980’s, but not out of a political or ideological agenda (Dentan in press: 10). The main result of these studies is to drastically reconsider what was deemed as a necessary dimension of

³ I will base the following considerations on Dentan’s paper (in press).

human nature, namely violence and a propensity to wage war, and to cast serious doubts on the belief that man is inherently violent and aggression-prone (Fry 2006).

Relevant to an anthropological discussion on anarchy has been the study of hunter-gatherer sociality and the question of band society started by Julian Steward in 1936, followed by Elman Service's *The Hunters* (1966), and marked by fierce controversies that found several venues in symposia and collective volumes (Ingold et al. 1988, Lee and Daly 1999). Although the phrase "ordered anarchy" had been coined by Evans-Pritchard in reference to the Nuer, a pastoralist people, some of the "real anarchists," if I may call them so, are to be found among the foragers and hunters-gatherers from different parts of the world, who live in bands, small nomadic aggregates of fifteen to fifty persons, who are egalitarian and whose leaders hold no power. They can "persuade but not command" in the words of Lee and Daly (1999: 4). The band society displays great instability in its composition, bands being in a constant process of fission and fusion. The groups are also affected by a seasonal variation, dispersing and splitting into very small clusters one part of the year, and concentrating into larger aggregates during the other part of the year. Several other important aspects of their way of life are remarkably similar among many such cultures and are in striking contrast to many sedentary and agricultural societies, leading one of their best interpreters to the conclusion that hunters-gatherers have a "distinct mode of sociality," to the point of actually having no society: "The distinctiveness of hunter-gatherer sociality lies in its subversion of the very foundations upon which the concept of society, taken in any of its modern senses, has been built" (Ingold 1999: 399). Later, Ingold explains that "Together, the principles of immediacy, autonomy, and sharing add up to a form of sociality utterly incompatible with the concept of society, whether by society is meant the interlocking interests of "civil society", the imagined

of any totality from which they would derive their mutual significance. But this immediacy and intimacy can obtain only within relatively small aggregates. Coalescence needs time, accumulation of knowledge, growth, multiple and repetitive interaction. Familiarity cannot be built with thousands. He who has many friends has no friends, said Aristotle. It cannot either be built in minutes, but in months and years. Anarchic communities are therefore producing small aggregates (bands are around 25 persons, neighborhoods around 50 or less) of fellows or companions bound by a variety of interests and ties requiring a certain amount of emotional intimacy to develop. Such communities have a strong psychological dimension and are, by nature, extremely volatile; their composition is in a constant state of flux.

3. Sharing

Sharing is another central dimension of anarchic sociality. And this was the third point in Taylor's list of requirements, the dimension of sociality that insures not only a just allocation of goods, but a fair relationship between economic actors. Anarchists, like Proudhon, have always insisted on mutuality and cooperation as one of the basic elements of a just society. It would take too long to go into this question in detail as it has been the object of numerous articles and essays in the past twenty years. The gist of it is that reciprocity and sharing are two different things, and entail distinct relations between participants. Reciprocity implies that something is given and another thing is given back (A gives to B who gives to A or to C who gives to A); but first of all, it entails an obligation binding the participants. The whole point is the debt created by the initial gift and the chain reaction that it puts in motion. The active principle of this process is, of course, the moral obligation binding the debtor to the creditor through the debt thus created. This is, in essence, an unequal relation: A, the creditor, is supe-

combination of personal autonomy and relative adherence to a system of values that ensure continuous operation of the system. North Alaska Eskimos maintained a peaceful, generally nonviolent, gregarious way of collective life with absolutely no form of punitive justice. Violence, however, was not absent and bullies were a known institution. They were eventually isolated and/or killed (Hippler 1974). It is because people were autonomous in the sense of being able to move away from such dangerous individuals or, in extreme cases, do away with these individuals, that life remained relatively safe and gregarious. Norms were not enforced, or at least not negatively enforced by punishment. Removing a dangerous individual—a hazard to his community—was apparently not done to set an example or create a deterrent. People were interested in peace, not in justice. The idea is that people who see eye-to-eye, people who share the same values, stay together; those who do not, just go somewhere else. But, again, it is not only communality that matters, but the nature of the values shared by members of anarchic communities.

2. Personal and multisided relations

The second point, direct and multi-sided/stranded relations, is what permits and limits anarchy at the same time. It is essential, indeed, that relations between persons not be mediated either by a specialized function or by membership in a group. Marilyn Strathern remarked that English persons saw each other as “parts of a whole” (quoted in Bird-David 1994: 597), but for the Nayaka of Southern India, persons are seen as wholes and coalesce with each other, as in the ritual metaphor of drops of oil coalescing with each other (id.). Sociality is there defined as coalescence requiring co-presence, in a physical sense, of participants. Persons relate to each other not as personas in the capacity of role- or status-holders, but as immanent beings in the world, complete in themselves, not parts

community of the ethnic group or nation, or the regulative structures of the state” (id : 408). ” Such very provocative and daring statements deserve attention because, if true, they may contain far-reaching consequences for our understanding of human sociality in general. I will critically examine their truth in the rest of my presentation. I will show that it applies to other peoples than foragers, hunters and gatherers. It is not the foraging or hunting-gathering mode of production in itself that explains this specific mode of sociality, since it applies to a number of horticulturalists as well, but a distinct disposition to maintain collective life in a state of gregariousness, immanence and unmediated interpersonal relations. It is not the least surprising and serendipitous twist in our painfully slow anthropological progress that the very people at the bottom of the human pyramid, those typically branded as living like brutes in a short life of solitude and poverty—to paraphrase Hobbes—that these very people have something decisively important to offer to modern anthropological theory. What looked like matters that concerned hunters and gatherers only, has seeped into the anthropology of agricultural people as well. The first—to my knowledge—to call attention to what seemed at the time an exceptional fact is J. Stauder in an article entitled *Anarchy and Ecology: Political Society among the Majangir* (1972). In this paper, the strict egalitarianism of the Majangir, an agricultural people of southwest Ethiopia, is noted as to fit uneasily in the then current typology of hunting and gathering bands with which, however, Majangir society seemed to share most of its fundamental traits, particularly an absence of any corporate groups outside the domestic family. The author correctly surmised that the Majangir case was casting doubts on the evolutionary typology proposed by Service and Sahlins (Stauder 1972: 159, 163), and pointed out, also, that the anarchic state the Majangir were in was an “adaptive disorganization” (164). Another landmark in the emergence of the “hunting-gathering type of sociality” applied

to non-hunting-gathering people, was T. Gibson's study of the Buid or Taobuid, a culture from southern Mindoro in the Philippines (Gibson 1986). A student of Woodburn,⁴ who was a specialist of hunters and gatherers and someone who had advocated important ideas—notably the concept of sharing (Woodburn 1998)—Gibson's observations on the Buid matched those of Woodburn on the Hadza of Tanzania, particularly their sharing ethos, active pursuit of egalitarianism, and peacefulness. Other studies in the same general area, particularly R. Dentan's study of the Semai—equally an horticulturalist people—(Dentan 1968, 1992) were starting to form a body of knowledge supporting the view that the anarchic ethos of hunters-gatherers was at work in groups characterized by what Woodburn called delayed-return economies. Thus, concepts that seemed to fit only foragers' bands—sharing, immediacy, anarchy, etc.—and just the lowest stage of the evolutionary model proposed in the sixties and seventies, were found relevant not only for nomadic foragers, but for other social formations as well.

The Ethnography of Anarchy

Actually, before reading Ingold's contribution, I had reached the same conclusion myself, namely that the group I had studied, the Palawan people, could hardly be called a "society," in the sense of having a "social structure." It looked to me more like a collection of individuals and domestic families in perpetual motion. I came to this conclusion after studying this indigenous group from the Southern Philippines, for more than thirty years. Let me then give you a very brief synopsis of their sociology.⁵

⁴ T. Gibson, personal communication.

⁵ For details, see Macdonald 2007.

archical model that comes along" (Lee 1992:40). How do they do it? There are several ways to look at it, but I think it best to look at the processes through which anarchic people construct their community, to examine the system, ethos and even style of their relations.

In his cogently argued essay *Community, Anarchy, and Liberty*, M. Taylor (1982) posits and demonstrates the need for community in order to make anarchy possible. Anarchy, community and equality are absolute requirements, each entailing the others, "they form a coherent set" (Taylor 1982: 167). According to him, any community has three prerequisites, that of possessing common values and beliefs, that of maintaining direct and multi-sided ties between its members, and third, reciprocity.

1. Values and attitudes

Large societies with a very rigid hierarchy, ethnically heterogeneous, and complex in the usual sense of being made of numerous and functionally distinct parts—the Indian caste society for instance—do have common values—the opposition of pure and impure and the trichotomy of functions as Dumont and Dumezil have shown for Indian society. The requirement is rather that *certain* special values and norms are held in commonality in order to maintain equality and peace. Whether we look at the Semai, Palawan, Buid, Caribou Inuit, Hazda, Nayaka, Piaroa, or many others, we find a certain kind of attitude, or rather an array of attitudes and values, as particularly salient. For the time being, I will characterize it as an insistence on personal autonomy coupled with minimal self-affirmation. It has also a lot to do with sharing in the sense I will give to this word. Words like "humility" and "compassion" can be used as approximate glosses if detached from their religious connotations. It is necessary that a majority, but not all, members of a community hold such values and act accordingly. It is the

and predictable view of society. The “organic” view of society proposed by Durkheim, is anatomical and mechanistic, and not truly organic. We have a situation of random and unpredictable disorder on which is predicated order at another level. This is what anarchy is all about, both chaos and order at the same time.⁹

The Production of Equality: Community-building

Since equality is almost synonymous with anarchy in its strict sense, to say that anarchy requires equality is a tautology. The absence of power clearly requires an absence or limitation of hierarchy, maybe a mechanism like a “reverse dominance hierarchy” (Boehm 1993). A real anarchic society must limit power relations to an extreme degree. There must be “no concentration of force at all” (Taylor 1982: 7). But this is not the result of inertia or just “the absence of” (power, hierarchy, etc.). Equality is not at all a given to be taken for granted—as sociologists believe, like Michael Mann, for whom “An egalitarian society is self-explanatory. Hierarchical differences...are not institutionalized” (Mann 1986: 37). Equality is constructed, an active process enforced by various means and by constant effort. Egalitarianists do not just abstain from inequality, like they would from consuming alcohol or wearing T-shirts; they produce and actively maintain equality. They show an active *commitment* to create and preserve it; in the words of R. Lee, “they are just not sitting ducks waiting to adopt the first hier-

⁹ The biological metaphor used in this paragraph is not the only possible one. A common feature of biological systems at multiple levels of organization shows redundancy (multiple identical units performing same function) and degeneracy (multiple non-identical units capable of performing the same function), such that loss or damage in a few units does not appreciably alter the functional integrity of the system as a whole. (Prashanth AK, personal communication)

Although they also hunt and collect wild products from the forest, the 45,000 Palawan people invest the greater part of their time and effort in upland dry rice and tuber agriculture. They live in small, dispersed settlements or hamlets, defined with appropriate vagueness as “neighborhoods,” and are heavily committed to an egalitarian and peaceful way of life. Until recently, the concept of private property of land was either unknown or consciously rejected. The inner working of their society can be grasped⁶ looking at three different domains: locality, kinship and justice. The first two, kinship and locality, account for their general morphology: small nuclei of related domestic families centered on sororal sibling groups, with an initial absence of male philopatry (male dispersal is within a limited perimeter, however), predominant uxori- and matri-locality. Neighborhoods are made of an aggregation of nuclei and vary in composition through time, but at any point in time have an identity which rests on the place (geographically defined) and/or on the presence of a senior person of authority. Authority is here again understood as a capacity to influence or persuade, not as a power to give orders. Authority is constructed as the outcome of two separate factors, a kinship role and an expertise in customary law. There is very little asymmetry in status between men and women, and role specialization is best seen as two overlapping domains of mastery, rather than one being in a subordinate position to the other. As in other similar cultures of the region (Insular Southeast Asia), wives are not expected to defer to their husbands, no more than women to men in general.

The neighborhood is also based on ties that lay outside the legal or kinship realms. It is based on free association between individuals and families. The flexibility and intricate network of bilateral kinship ties allow for a wide range in personal

⁶ The ethnographic present applies to the seventies for most areas, to the eighties and nineties for the central highland area.

choices and selection of neighbors. People become neighbors because they develop a liking for each other, not just because they are kin. It is often the other way around: kinship ties are a way to institutionalize friendship (Macdonald 1999). Neighborhoods are large groups of people who acknowledge kin ties. They are, as such, not “kinship groups,” groups created by the automatic enforcement of kinship principles, but “groups of kinsmen.” Spatial proximity between households both creates and is created by free choices and affinities between individuals. The forces of friendship, or companionship to use Gibson’s apt term (Gibson 1985:392 and *passim*), are at work. I propose, also, to use the notion of *fellowship*, an association of friends, of equals who share a common interest and freely chose each other’s company to pursue this common interest. Palawan society is nothing, after all, but a large fellowship or a series of overlapping fellowships.

From the point of view of Durkheimian sociology, the kind of arrangement I am describing is both simple and mechanical, due to its segmentary nature, and not organic, that is, based on the complementarity of the segments. I take the opposite view that this kind of arrangement is complex and organic. The complexity of this arrangement is a result of two different aspects of its operation. Firstly, “society” in this case is the aggregation of individual subjects by virtue of what I have called elsewhere “the conditions of felicity” of collective life, something that ethno-methodologists and Goffmanian sociologists have gone a considerable way to elucidate.⁷ The coalescing in a semi-stable aggregate of highly complex subjectivities is of an order of complexity different from what we usually call complexity while referring to institutions or “facticities” in modern urban and industrial society. In other words, society results from a statistical and, above all, *random* arrangement of its constitu-

⁷ I have tried to explain and illustrate this concept in another unpublished paper (Macdonald 2008 b).

tive elements. That is the second most important reason to call this arrangement complex. At least three traits defining complexity are present: first, a sociality based on personal ties and therefore complicated psychological requirements; second, a great number of possible arrangements; and third, randomness in the result of these arrangements. As a result, also, there is unpredictability and unstability inasmuch as the exact number and composition of aggregates in future time cannot be predicted with certainty. But if aggregates are not permanent, they recreate themselves constantly and the general result in this constant shift of individual units between aggregates is the stability of the whole. In other words, aggregates are more energy than matter. Or better, let us see this as a real living organism, as Edgar Morin, quoting von Neumann, suggested (Morin 2005: 43). Our body is made of 50 to 100 trillion cells, and 10 to 20% of them are being degraded and replaced each year. The total number of cells will be replaced in five to ten years, but the organism in which this process takes place will not substantially change.⁸ The whole is more durable than the parts, as opposed to, for instance, an automobile engine in which the parts are often more durable than the whole. By the same token, if you take a Palawan population in one area composed of maybe 1,500 to 3,000 persons, it will remain the same social and cultural entity after one generation during which all of its neighborhoods will have shifted both in location and in composition. Its component parts will not be the same. I submit that the nature of this complex organization based on *random* and *unpredictable* arrangements of its constitutive parts, is a concept that socio-anthropological theory cannot come to terms with because, in spite of disclaimers to the contrary, it rests on a mechanistic

⁸ With thanks to Jun Song of the School of Natural Sciences, IAS, for checking the figures. The replacement rate of cells is not the same, however, for all tissues. Brain cells, apart from a few exceptions, don’t divide and are not replaced (Prashanth AK, School of Natural Sciences, personal communication).