

Issue 4 November 2010

# Radical Anthropology

*João Zilhão*  
**Neanderthals are us**

*Chris Knight*  
**The Chomsky enigma**

*Ian Watts*  
**Was there a human revolution?**

*Ifi Amadiume*  
**Re-placing the Goddess**

*Felix Padel*  
**India's 'civil war'**

*Rupert Read*  
**The call of *Avatar***

£3

[www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org)

ISSN 1756-0896 (Print) / ISSN 1756-090X (Online)

## Editor

**Camilla Power**

Email: [c.c.power@uel.ac.uk](mailto:c.c.power@uel.ac.uk)

## Editorial Board

**Kevin Brown**, political activist.

**Elena Fejdiova**, social anthropologist.

**Chris Knight**, anthropologist, activist.

**Eleanor Leone**, student at Goldsmiths College.

**Jerome Lewis**, anthropologist at University College London.

**Ana Lopes**, anthropologist.

**Brian Morris**, emeritus professor of anthropology at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

**Lionel Sims**, anthropologist at the University of East London.

## On the cover:

The journal's logo represents the emergence of culture (dragons feature in myths and legends from around the world) from nature (the DNA double-helix, or selfish gene). The dragon is a symbol of solidarity, especially the blood solidarity that was a necessary precondition for the social revolution that made us human. For more on this, see our website at [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org)

The cover picture features Mayday 2010 frolics beneath Big Ben, which inaugurated Democracy Village. See Raga Woods' article, page 42. Photo: Chris Knight.

Back cover: Images courtesy of Survival International, João Zilhão, Ian Watts, Ili Amadiume, Felix Padel

**RA is designed by** Kypros Kyprianou and Ana Lopes



Anti-copyright: all material may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes, but please mention *Radical Anthropology*

# Who we are and what we do

**Radical:** about the inherent, fundamental roots of an issue.

**Anthropology:** the study of what it means to be human.

*Radical Anthropology* is the journal of the Radical Anthropology Group. Anthropology asks one big question: what does it mean to be human? To answer this, we cannot rely on common sense or on philosophical arguments. We must study how humans actually live – and the many different ways in which they have lived. This means learning, for example, how people in non-capitalist societies live, how they organise themselves and resolve conflict in the absence of a state, the different ways in which a 'family' can be run, and so on.

Additionally, it means studying other species and other times.

What might it mean to be almost – but not quite –human?

How socially self-aware, for example, is a chimpanzee?

Do nonhuman primates have a sense of morality?

Do they have language? And what about distant times? Who were the Australopithecines and why had they begun walking upright? Where did the Neanderthals come from and why did they become extinct? How, when and why did human art, religion, language and culture first evolve?

The Radical Anthropology Group started in 1984 when Chris Knight's popular 'Introduction to Anthropology' course at Morley College, London, was closed down, supposedly for budgetary reasons. Within a few weeks, the students got organised, electing a treasurer, secretary and other officers. They booked a library in Camden – and invited Chris to continue teaching next year. In this way, the Radical Anthropology Group was born.

Later, Lionel Sims, who since the 1960s had been lecturing in sociology at the University of East London, came across Chris's PhD on human origins and – excited by the backing it provided for the anthropology of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, particularly on the subject of 'primitive communism' – invited Chris to help set up Anthropology at UEL. During the 1990s several other RAG members including Ian Watts, Camilla Power, Isabel Cardigos and Charles Whitehead completed PhDs at University College London and Kings College London, before going onto further research and teaching.

For almost two decades, Anthropology at UEL retained close ties with the Radical Anthropology Group, Chris becoming Professor of Anthropology in 2001. He was sacked by UEL's corporate management in July 2009 for his role in organising and publicising demonstrations against the G20 in April.

While RAG has never defined itself as a political organization, the implications of some forms of science are intrinsically radical, and this applies in particular to the theory that humanity was born in a social revolution. Many RAG members choose to be active in Survival International and/or other indigenous rights movements to defend the land rights and cultural survival of hunter-gatherers. Additionally, some RAG members combine academic research with activist involvement in environmentalist, anti-capitalist and other campaigns.

For more, see [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org)

# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Editorial</b>   | <b>3</b>  |
| To see ourselves as others see us  |           |
| <b>Neanderthals are us: genes and culture</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| João Zilhão discusses the latest news from the Middle Palaeolithic                       |           |
| <b>Was there a human revolution?</b>   | <b>16</b> |
| Ian Watts responds to recent challenges in archaeology                                   |           |
| <b>The Enigma of Noam Chomsky</b>  | <b>22</b> |
| Why the divorce between activism and science? asks Chris Knight                          |           |
| <b>Deconstructing War on Terror</b>  | <b>31</b> |
| Felix Padel investigates how the 'War on Terror' affects India's indigenous groups       |           |
| <b>Avatar: A call to save the future</b>   | <b>35</b> |
| Does <i>Avatar</i> deserve the criticism, or can it 'open our eyes'? wonders Rupert Read |           |
| <b>Premenstrual stress and the human revolution</b>                                      | <b>41</b> |
| Viky Sousa-Mayer introduces her research blog on PMS                                     |           |
| <b>An open confession from a member of Democracy Village</b>                             | <b>42</b> |
| Raga Woods enters a 'world turned upside down' on Parliament Square                      |           |
| <b>Re-placing gender and the Goddess</b>   | <b>44</b> |
| Ifi Amadiume hears from Igbo voices what 'development' has done to the Goddess           |           |
| <b><i>Direct Action</i>, by David Graeber</b>  | <b>54</b> |
| Review by Simon Wells  |           |
| <b><i>New World of Indigenous Resistance</i>, edited by Meyer and Alvarado</b>           | <b>55</b> |
| Review by Davide Torri   |           |

## To see ourselves as others see us

**N**eanderthal-modern human interrelations dominate *Radical Anthropology* this year, given developments within archaeology early in 2010. In our interview with top palaeolithic archaeologist João Zilhão, he modestly disclaims political relevance for studying Neanderthals.

*Radical Anthropology* begs to

differ. In trying to understand the process of how we became human, Neanderthals stand for the ultimate 'other' – so close to us, yet not quite us. Now, we discover, those of us who descend from lineages which emigrated from Africa some 80-60,000 years ago may indeed have mixed it up with Eurasian Neanderthals. People alive today carry smidgins of archaic DNA. 40,000-year-old Neanderthal and

early modern human fossils are generally distinguishable. But the flesh-and-blood beings whose remnants they are could have met, fallen in love, and had babies. And did!

Even more exciting for leading pigment specialist Ian Watts is the evidence attesting to the symbolic trajectory of each lineage. Pigments, cosmetics, make-up compacts

with bone applicators... Zilhão's Murcian excavations reveal beyond serious doubt that Neanderthals owned their traditions of self-decoration well before 'modern' humans arrived on the European scene.

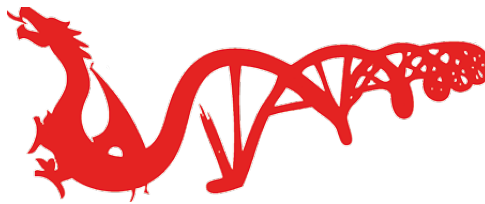
As ever in anthropology, we can seek out differences or analyse what's strikingly similar. In this case, it's healthy to do both. This past decade, palaeolithic archaeology has found that in both Africa and Eurasia, pigments followed by shell jewellery long precede any other art. We have to restore in imagination the dance and rituals such cosmetics would have adorned. Those rituals, of both Neanderthals and African moderns, were the revolutionary cutting edge of symbolic culture.

The fundamental human quality these cosmetics prove is the ability to 'see ourselves as others see us'. With no mirrors, palaeolithic women – European or African – fixed each other's make-up. Men might have, too. The intimate bonding experiences of mutual grooming and beautification lie at the root of language, art and religion. When Ian Watts writes about the social strategies underlying the human revolution engendering trust, he has this in mind. Only given such trust could we begin to share and explore each other's dreams.

Human eyes are designed for mutual mindreading: that is, letting each other see what we have in mind. The eyes evolved by all other monkeys and apes are not so easy to read. We can confidently predict Neanderthal eyes were much like ours, elongated with white background, making it easy to follow gaze.

The motif of seeing into each other's eyes is the trademark of the megacapitalist Hollywood 3-D film *Avatar*. One thing capitalists do very well is exploit our natural impulses in order to line their pockets. Many activists will be cynical on *Avatar*'s

wider impact. In a stylish essay, Rupert Read rebuffs the criticisms and analyses why *Avatar* has inspired numerous indigenous and civil rights actions, been denounced by the Pope and banned by the Chinese state. Remarkably for a film which is about the experience of doing anthropology, it forces the issue: either you sneer at it, or you can't ignore the call – you have to act.




Felix Padel echoes *Avatar*'s call for 'reverse anthropology': learning how to see ourselves afresh by understanding how those 'others' subject to our 'science' see us. The latest export of faltering global capital has been its War on Terror model, enabling state security forces to label inconveniently situated civilians – in this case, Adivasi tribal groups – as 'terrorists' in order to eradicate them. So the path is cleared to raw materials, thirsty new industrial plant and a compliant workforce. But late capitalism is riddled with contradictions: India's proudest export to the world has been its history of civil rights resistance. In the week after Padel's article was submitted, India's Environment Minister saved the Dongria Kond's sacred mountains; meanwhile, a hidden war of attrition against Adivasi peoples for land and resources grinds on.

The Women's Councils central to the Igbo dual-sex political system have a proud history of resistance to colonial exploitation, notably at times of capitalist collapse, as during the Women's War of 1929. Pre-eminent among African anthropologists, Ifi Amadiume listens to recent historic dialogues of Igbo elders trying to come to terms with the destruction of indigenous

religion. This fascinating article is of special interest to women who want to know what Goddess materially means when her worship and celebration are inextricably entwined with women's socioeconomic and cultural status. In an era of Christian-missionised village capitalist 'development', that particular Goddess – Idemili – has come under savage attack, and with her, women in their marketplace.

In *Radical Anthropology* two issues ago, when asked if scientists should get themselves 'collectively self-organised and consciously activist', Noam Chomsky responded that if they did, 'they would probably devote themselves to service to state and private power'. Why would Chomsky, inspiration of anarchists the world over, say such a thing? Chris Knight claims Chomsky-the-activist's target here is his own professional and institutional milieu, as represented by Chomsky-the-linguist. Knight is clearing the way towards an anthropology of the US military-industrial complex, treating Chomsky as shaman spinning the tribal myth.

Chomsky's agenda, says Knight, has been to quarantine the natural sciences from any ideological contamination by social science, and above all to denigrate human origins narratives as mere fairytales. If language is first and foremost 'inner speech', as Chomsky insists, the ability 'to see ourselves as others see us' is beside the point.

We could not resist the cover design of the maypole which several RAG members helped to raise on Parliament Square: our version of the Na'vi Home Tree. Raga Woods' vignette of Democracy Village tells how this led to a quite astonishing phenomenon of *communitas* – all normal hierarchy of status was suspended for over two months on a traffic island in the middle of Westminster. 

# Neanderthals are us: genes and culture

Archaeologist **João Zilhão** has been challenging the orthodoxy of the Recent African Origins model for the past 15 years. He discusses fresh revelations on the Neanderthal genome and Middle Palaeolithic symbolic artefacts with *Radical Anthropology*.

**Radical Anthropology:** What first led you to contest the current orthodoxy of the modern ‘human revolution’ of the Upper Palaeolithic sweeping in from Africa?

**João Zilhão:** Until the mid-1990s, I accepted that the orthodox Recent African Origin (RAO) model of modern human emergence best fitted the available archaeological, palaeontological and genetic evidence. I began to have second thoughts after reading a paper in May 1996 by Hublin *et al.*<sup>1</sup> showing that the human remains from the Châtelperronian levels of the Grotte du Renne, at Arcy-sur-Cure, France, were of Neanderthals. From this evidence, the authors concluded that the cultural advances typical of the Châtelperronian, such as use of personal ornaments, resulted from a ‘high degree of acculturation’ of late Neanderthals by immigrating modern humans of the Aurignacian culture. They rejected the only other hypothesis considered: that the Grotte du Renne’s Châtelperronian ornaments represented ‘imitation without understanding’. This was the view of Chris Stringer and Clive Gamble<sup>2</sup> who argued that Neanderthals lacked the cognitive capacity for symbolic culture.

However, there was another possible interpretation of Hublin *et al.*’s results: given the continuity in lithic technology between the Châtelperronian and the preceding Mousterian, establishing a Neanderthal authorship for the Châtelperronian could imply that (1) the Châtelperronian stood for an indigenous ‘Upper Palaeolithic’

revolution, and (2) views of the Neanderthals as somehow cognitively handicapped were inconsistent with the empirical evidence.

Later that year, I had the chance to discuss Hublin *et al.*’s conclusions with my colleague Francesco d’Errico, from the University of Bordeaux. He too had been struck by this conundrum: Why did the paper not even consider the most parsimonious interpretation of the results? Could it be that paradigmatic biases were blinding researchers to accept the obvious? Was there something fundamentally wrong with the RAO model that prevented us applying to the Neanderthals and the Middle-to-Upper Palaeolithic transition interpretations that would be straightforward in any other archaeological context?

We sent a comment to *Nature*, but thanks to it being rejected, we decided to do the right thing: to examine the contentious artefacts ourselves. We asked our colleague Michèle Julien, at the University of Paris I (Sorbonne), who at the time curated and studied the ornaments and bone tools from the Grotte du Renne, to see the material in mid-December 1996.

This brief examination convinced

both of us that neither acculturation nor imitation were viable explanations for the Châtelperronian material: it was technologically and typologically distinct from its putative Aurignacian sources and,



Author (on right) helps with bear skull removal

at the Grotte du Renne, there was clear evidence of on-site production (e.g., manufacture debris). So we teamed up with Michèle and two other French colleagues, Dominique Baffier and Jacques Pelegrin, to write a review of the Grotte du Renne and of the stratigraphy, chronology and material culture of the Châtelperronian.

In a special issue of *Current Anthropology* dedicated to all things Neanderthal, our review<sup>3</sup> laid out

the case that Francesco and I have been making for nearly fifteen years now: (1) stratigraphically (and chronometrically<sup>4</sup>) the Châtelperronian precedes the Aurignacian; (2) in these circumstances, ‘acculturation’ is an oxymoron (you cannot imitate or be influenced by something that does not even exist to begin with); (3) the association of diagnostic skeletal remains with the Châtelperronian at two different sites implies authorship, and a Neanderthal one at that, and (4) Neanderthals not only had the capacity for symbolic culture, they materialised it too (e.g., in the production of the personal ornaments and the decorated bone tools of the Châtelperronian).

**RA:** What is your view of the current evidence on genetic differences of the two populations?

genetic lineages whose geographic distribution encompassed the entire Old World and, therefore, may have been ‘early modern’ as much as ‘Neanderthal!’

These problems are compounded by the fact that archaeologists, anthropologists and media people (and even many geneticists) often mistakenly equate genetic ‘lineages’ (namely, mtDNA ones) with biological species. Take the recent realisation that the mtDNA extracted from a human phalange recovered in the cave site of Denisova, Siberia, belonged to a lineage that was even more distant from extant humans than the Neanderthals<sup>5</sup>: this finding was hailed as evidence for yet another ‘species’ of human living some 40,000 years ago! However, the levels whence the Denisova

1-4% and significantly higher in Eurasians than in Africans. These findings confirm that Neanderthals were not a separate biological species and, in retrospect, make it clear that the last 150 years of controversies surrounding their taxonomic status are a good example of the so-called ‘species problem in palaeontology’: the apparent contradiction noted by the late Stephen Jay Gould between Darwinian anagenetic evolution and the Linnaean concept of species, which arose under a fixist paradigm<sup>8</sup>. This is a problem in palaeontology, where morphology, not reproductive behaviour, underlies classification, but extant mammals that have been considered as different species, if not different genera, including primates (e.g., baboons), are now known to freely interbreed in the wild, producing fertile, viable offspring.

## Could it be that paradigmatic biases were blinding researchers to accept the obvious? Was there something fundamentally wrong with the RAO model?

**JZ:** Contamination is a major issue in palaeogenetics, and one that prevents us from fully understanding the genetic variation that existed in the Old World during the critical period between 35,000 and 60,000 years ago. Another major problem with ancient genomics is preservation. In tropical and temperate Mediterranean environments, DNA does not survive for the tens of millennia necessary for retrieval in early modern human fossils of Africa and the Near East, the regions of earliest appearance of the corresponding diagnostic anatomical traits, so we do not and cannot have any DNA from them. This fact has an implication that is seldom, if at all considered by palaeogeneticists: that what we are calling ‘Neanderthal’ mtDNA may in fact correspond to a group of extinct

phalanx came are so disturbed<sup>6</sup> that the chances of that phalanx being 20,000 (or even 10,000) years old are as large as its being 40,000; until it is directly dated, we can’t tell. In any case, the fossil simply goes to show the extent to which past human genetic variation was much higher than at present, something for which many clues exist even among the genes of extant humans.

In a *Science* paper published last May, Green *et al.*<sup>7</sup> released a draft of the Neanderthal genome, based on nuclear DNA extracted from three bones recovered in the Croatian cave site of Vindija. Their study significantly clarified the issues, as it found in the five present-day humans with whom the Vindija sequence was compared solid evidence of a Neanderthal contribution – estimated to be of

The 1-4% estimate doesn’t look that much, but, if you consider the environmentally driven imbalance in population size that existed during the Ice Ages between low-latitude Africa, representing the core of the human range, and high-latitude Eurasia, where the Neanderthals lived at low population densities and in overall small numbers, it is in fact a lot. If, for the sake of the argument, you assume, under a simple model of panmixia and unstructured post-contact populations, that, 50,000 years ago, there were 50,000 ‘Neanderthals’ in Eurasia and 500,000 ‘moderns’ in Africa, you would then not expect the Neanderthal contribution to those post-contact humans to be greater than 10% anyway. If, on top of this, you consider selection and continued evolution since 40,000 years ago, including the contingencies of population history, it is amazing that as much as a 1-4% contribution is still apparent today.

We also need to bear in mind that Green *et al.*’s estimate of

the percentage of Neanderthal contribution applies to the genome of extant humans and that we cannot extrapolate from their results that such was also the Neanderthal contribution to the genome of the Europeans of 40,000 years ago. The assumption of such an extrapolation would be total population continuity, which is unwarranted. In fact, most extant Europeans descend NOT from the mixed Neanderthal/modern people of 40,000 years ago but from the successive waves of migrants that came to our continent over the last ten millennia, namely as part of the process whereby farming spread from the Near East.

The contingencies of demographic history (namely, the demic underpinnings of the spread of farming) also impact the issue of where and when interbreeding occurred. Green *et al.* argued that it was right after the African exodus, some 50,000 years ago, and in the Near East, whence stem populations of 'moderns-cum-Neanderthal' genes would then have spread into Europe and the rest of Asia to become the ancestors of all extant Eurasians. Their argument is based on the fact that west Europeans come out in the comparisons as no closer to the Neanderthals than Papuans or Chinese, and many commentators hastily inferred from this that no interbreeding after initial contact in the Near East, namely as moderns spread deep into Eurasia, was one of Green *et al.*'s findings.

In fact, however, these authors did not exclude later interbreeding processes in western Europe precisely because, as explicitly acknowledged (p. 721), the pattern apparent in their study could be explained by the subsequent history of migrations connected to the spread of agriculture obscuring gene-flow.

So, where interbreeding in Europe

is concerned, all that Green *et al.* said was that they were unable to detect the corresponding signal in the samples, not that none occurred. I would only add that, if 'Neanderthals' and 'moderns' were not different biological species, then the null hypothesis for what

behavioural modernity related not to a speciation event but instead to a process of uneven and combined development affecting structured populations of humans — each perhaps worthy of subspecies status but, biologically, belonging to a single anagenetically evolving

## **The situation now is the exact reverse of what existed 20 years ago. Every single one of the sufficiently complete European modern human individuals dated to within 5,000 years of the time of contact feature anatomical archaisms**

happened at the time of contact anywhere must be extensive (albeit variable) interbreeding, as indeed shown by the fossils themselves. Therefore, my prediction is: since the frequency of 'archaic' skeletal traits in European early moderns is higher than in present-day Europeans, European early moderns should exhibit a Neanderthal-derived percentage of their genomes higher than 1-4%; i.e., when compared to the Neanderthals, they should come out closer to them than do present-day Papuans or Chinese. Unfortunately, it would seem that we will have to wait some time until the prediction can be tested because we still have no genomes of immediately post-contact Europeans.

**RA:** Tell us about the fossil specimens you have been involved with which you think show evidence of interbreeding.

**JZ:** At the time of the 1998 *Current Anthropology* paper, our findings were consistent with two alternative non-RAO models for the emergence of symbolism: that it emerged among different lineages, even different species of humans, as a result of convergent evolution; or that Neanderthals had not been a different species at all. In that case, the emergence of anatomical and

species of which *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo sapiens* would be but chrono- or palaeo-taxa.

Eventually, I went on to argue the latter alternative as a result of my involvement in the excavation and publication of three important early modern human fossils: in 1998-99, the child skeleton from the Lagar Velho site, in Portugal; and, in 2003-05, the mandible and cranium from the Oase cave, in Romania. The human palaeontological study of these fossils, led by Erik Trinkaus<sup>9</sup>, from Washington University (St.-Louis), concluded that all three presented a series of genetically inherited, archaic, if not diagnostically Neanderthal anatomical features that implied significant admixture at the time of contact.

This recognition coincided with the realisation, as a result of direct radiocarbon dating, that all the other purported early moderns lacking in such features, and upon which rested the notion that the Middle-to-Upper Palaeolithic transition in Europe featured total discontinuity in the realm of physical anthropology, were in fact of recent Holocene age. That was the case, in particular, of the supposedly Aurignacian-associated remains from the

south-west German cave site of Vogelherd.

So, thanks to the Lagar Velho and Oase finds, Erik's subsequent study of other long-forgotten Romanian fossils (from the caves of Cioclovina and Muierii), and the extensive analysis and monographic publication by Maria Teschler-Nicola *et al.*<sup>10</sup>, in 2006, of the early modern human sample from Mladeč (Czech Republic), the situation now is the exact reverse of what existed 20 years ago. Every single one of the currently known, sufficiently complete European modern human individuals (eleven in total) that have been dated to within some five millennia of the time of contact feature a similar, albeit variable mosaic of anatomical archaisms.

The robustness of the fossil pattern

**RA:** Genes apart, the most interesting aspect of your work is the theory and supporting data on cultural interaction between the populations, with influences travelling both ways. Can you give us an overview of this evidence?

**JZ:** In theory, one could argue that it would have been precisely because Neanderthals and moderns were both fully human that interbreeding might have been impossible—not as a result of (non-existent) biological barriers but because of cultural ones, e.g., prohibitions or taboos. But the archaeological record patterns against such expectations.

As I said, my involvement with these issues began with an argument on how acculturation did not work as an explanation for the ornaments and decorated bone tools

colleagues, were able to show that an early modern human-associated tradition of personal ornamentation existed in South Africa, the Maghreb and the Near East since the last interglacial, >70,000 years ago, perhaps as early as 100,000 years ago<sup>11</sup>. This tradition consistently and exclusively manufactured composite beadworks made with perforated shells from the different regional species of *Nassarius*, a small marine gastropod, or of morphologically very similar genera. Although no such evidence is currently known for the intervening period, by 45,000 years ago the tradition resurfaced again in the Initial Upper Palaeolithic (IUP or Ehmiran) of the Near East, which is widely accepted as the stem culture for the subsequent Ahmarian and the related Protoaurignacian of Europe.



Oase excavation, Romania, 2004

is such as to make it clear that interbreeding between the latest Eurasian Neanderthals and the first early modern humans who began to disperse into their territories around 42,000 calendar years ago did occur. In short, the fossil evidence accumulated over the last decade indicated that no biological barrier to interbreeding between Neanderthals and moderns ever existed, and that conclusion is now corroborated by genetics.

of the Châtelperronian. It's ironic that subsequent developments showed that acculturation (in the sense of cultural influence) in the reverse direction best explains the composition of the assemblages of personal ornaments of the earliest European modern human societies.

Between 2004 and 2006, Francesco d'Errico and his former student Marian Vanhaeren, together with Chris Henshilwood and other

**It's ironic that subsequent developments showed that acculturation in the reverse direction best explains the assemblages of personal ornaments of the earliest European modern human societies**

This pattern is important because the Protoaurignacian is the earliest cultural manifestation reliably associated with the dispersal of modern human groups into our continent (its radiocarbon dating overlaps with that of the Oase fossils). Given this, it can hardly come as a surprise that small, basket-shaped shell-beads similar to those of the Ahmarian and the IUP feature prominently in Protoaurignacian ornament assemblages. These



assemblages, however, also include items that are unknown in its Near Eastern sister-culture (the Ahmarian), in the preceding IUP, or anywhere in Africa prior to 40,000 years ago: namely, large, perforated and grooved teeth, bones or fossil shells that in all likelihood were used individually as pendants hanging around the neck, not as parts of composite beadworks.

Where or who did the Proto-aurignacians get the idea from? Given the long-term stability of the African/Near Eastern tradition, and the fact that the novelties in its repertoire correspond to the range of ornaments seen in the Châtelperronian and the coeval, also Neanderthal-associated, so-called 'transitional' cultures of Europe (Lincombian/Ranisian, Szeletian, Bachokirian, etc.), the parsimonious explanation is that they got it from the locals — i.e., from the Neanderthals. Put another way, that they interacted with them, and, in such a scenario, one can hardly see how any putative sex prohibition could have been 100%

significant for Neanderthals as the Blombos materials for moderns?

**JZ:** The Spanish evidence<sup>12</sup> consists of four types of finds:

1. perforated shells of large marine bivalves of the genera *Acanthocardia*, *Glycymeris* and *Pecten*, some of which were painted;
2. unperforated shells of the Mediterranean spiny oyster, *Spondylus gaederopus*. As all other species of this genus, this features upper valves with exuberant sculpture and vivid red or violet colour that inspired collection for ritual purposes in a large number of archaeological and ethnographic contexts worldwide. One specimen was used as a container for the storage or preparation of a complex cosmetic recipe where shiny bits of freshly ground haematite and pyrite (black) were added to a base of lepidocrocite (red);
3. lumps of iron pigments of different mineral species (haematite,

the perforated shells in personal ornamentation, probably as neck pendants. For instance, that is exactly how Daniela Bar-Yosef *et al.*<sup>13</sup> interpreted an assemblage of perforated and ochre-stained *Glycymeris* from the last interglacial, early modern human-associated site of Qafzeh, in the Near East. To question a similar interpretation for similar material in the Spanish case just because Neanderthals, not moderns, were involved, would therefore imply tons of special pleading — so much so that, in fact, to my knowledge, no one has so far ventured down that avenue of argumentation.

In the context of the Châtelperronian debate, this evidence is also particularly relevant in that the material from Cueva de los Aviones dates to 50,000 years ago, thus predating by ten millennia the Oase fossils, the earliest European modern humans currently known. The implication is inescapable: no matter what you or I or anybody else may think of the Châtelperronian, there can be no doubt that, in the

## **In any other archaeological context, the straightforward interpretation of this material would be that the pigments were used in bodily, most likely facial decoration, and the perforated shells in personal ornamentation, probably as neck pendants**

effective 100% of the time. So, both the cultural and the physical anthropological evidence agree that encounter situations resulted in the transmission to immigrating modern human groups of both Neanderthal memes and Neanderthal genes.

**RA:** Tell us about the latest evidence from Cueva Antón and Cueva de los Aviones in S.E. Spain, dating back to 50,000 years ago, and spell out the implications of this material for Neanderthal cognition and symbolic behaviour. Is it as

goethite, siderite), but mostly of yellow natrojarosite (whose only known use is in cosmetics);

4. and a kind of stiletto made of an unmodified pointed bone bearing pigment residues on the broken tip, suggesting use in the preparation or application of colorants.

In any other archaeological context, the straightforward interpretation of this material would be that the pigments were used in bodily, most likely facial decoration, and

Spanish case, neither imitation nor acculturation explains the observed facts.

In light of the Qafzeh finds, the Spanish evidence also raises an intriguing possibility, one that neither my colleagues nor I have formally presented in writing yet, for consistency, I will advance it here. The presence, in the Near East of last interglacial times, of the African tradition of *Nassarius* beads so far rests on a single find from Skhul. Marian Vanhaeren<sup>14</sup> and

her colleagues made a good case for that bead to come from the level that contained the burials of early modern humans. However, the true age of these remains is controversial (for instance, uranium series dates obtained on animal teeth suggest that an important component of that level dates to only 40,000-45,000 years ago). People like Chris Stringer and Milford Wolpoff have argued that two chronologically distinct populations, one anatomically less 'modern' than the other, could well be represented in the Skhul sample.

The possibility exists, therefore, that the Skhul *Nassarius* bead relates to a later period of occupation, i.e., that it relates to the modern humans who returned to the Near East after 45,000 years ago (those of the IUP), not to those who lived there some 90,000 years ago. If so, then the presence of painted/perforated *Glycymeris* shells in both Qafzeh and Aviones, coupled with the absence of *Nassarius* in either Qafzeh or Skhul prior to 50,000 BP, would allow the formulation of the following hypothesis: that the Aviones shells represent the survival in Europe, among Neanderthal societies, of traditions of personal ornamentation going back to the last interglacial, at which time they would have been spread around the shores of at least the whole of the north Mediterranean sea, regardless of (real or perceived) biological boundaries. Put another way, the possibility exists that, some 90,000 years ago, two different ornament traditions were already in existence: one in Africa and modern human-associated — the *Nassarius* beads tradition of the Still Bay culture of South Africa and the Aterian

culture of the Maghreb; another in Mediterranean Europe and the Near East and associated with both modern humans and Neanderthals — the perforated bivalve tradition of the Tabun C-type Mousterian of Qafzeh and the Middle Palaeolithic of Iberia.

**RA:** How does the Spanish data and a multispecies/population origin of symbolic behaviour impact on



João Zilhão

Perforated scallop shell from Cueva Antón, natural colouring on inside (left half), orangey pigment applied to outside (right).

a Noam Chomsky/Richard Klein position on major genetic mutation as the trigger of modern behaviour?

**JZ:** I don't think that multispecies views of human evolution are valid to begin with. However, if we accept them for the sake of the argument, the implication of the Neanderthal evidence is that a genetic 'flick-of-the-switch', triggering the emergence of symbolic behaviour, would have to have occurred independently, more than once, in different times and places, which is hardly consistent with parsimony. Therefore, a corollary of our findings is that the genetic mutation position can now be sustained only from within single-species models of human evolution. Having said

this, I believe that language is too complex to be anything but evolutionarily ancient. To my mind, the chain of neurological, physiological, cognitive and palaeontological arguments supporting this notion that Terence Deacon<sup>15</sup> put together in his 1997 book, *The Symbolic Species*, is extremely convincing.

On the other hand, considering how metabolically expensive the brain is<sup>16</sup>, why, if not to use it, would a particular lineage of great apes need to have a significantly expanded brain, with that expansion principally affecting the prefrontal cortex, the area that is involved in most advanced cognition tasks? Although on average smaller until 0.5 million years ago, *Homo* brain sizes overlap with the modern range of variation since at least one million years ago; therefore, I would expect the key hardware developments concerning language and cognition to have occurred at that time, not with the advent of anatomical modernity.

In my view, therefore, the right question to ask is why material manifestations of symbolism do not appear in the archaeological record until much later than one million years ago. Perhaps the problem lies in the operational definitions of symbolic material culture currently agreed upon by archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists; or perhaps no need existed for such material symbols until certain demographic and social thresholds were crossed. If that crossing eventually occurred around 100,000 years ago and not before, then that may well be the reason why we first see the

decoration of persons and objects at that time too.

**RA:** Comparing the overall records of possible early symbolic materials in Eurasia (Neanderthal ancestry) vs. Africa (modern ancestry), do you think there are still grounds for arguing for strategic, behavioural differences between the populations?

**JZ:** One of the aspects of the 'Human Revolution' paradigm that most hindered the last 20 years of research into Neanderthals and early modern humans was the notion that, in line with textbook definitions, each of these two 'species' would have been characterised by its own 'species-specific' behaviour. However, all attempts at defining a specifically 'modern human' behaviour as opposed to a specifically 'Neanderthal' behaviour have met a similar failure: When applied to the archaeological and the ethnographic records, such definitions always end up with some modern humans being behaviourally Neanderthal and some Neanderthals being behaviourally modern!

In the 1860s, when William King gave birth to *Homo neanderthalensis*, human fossils were used as ancillary evidence in mainstream ethnological views of the racial ladder, to which they added time depth. Today, ranking human 'races' in terms of cognition is no longer acceptable but, in western culture, the philosophical or religious need to place 'us' at the top of the ladder of life (or, for some, of creation) still prevails, and explains the continued search for images of what 'we' are not (or not anymore) that, by contrast, enhance the basics of what 'we' are. Such is the place occupied by Neanderthals in the Human Revolution paradigm, and that is how, explicitly or implicitly, species-specific perspectives of their behaviour treat them — the out-group against which 'modernity' or

'humanity' is defined.

Depending on different perceptions, going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of the fundamental basis for the triumph of civilised society and industrial capitalism, so (1) do Neanderthals tend to be represented as lacking in the corresponding behavioural feature and (2) do early moderns tend to be portrayed as benefiting from a 'selective advantage' consisting in its possession. To give but a few examples, the Enlightenment emphasised the power of reason, Adam Smith stressed the importance of the division of labour, and David Ricardo highlighted the role of international trade and comparative advantage. Not surprisingly, explanations for the demise of the Neanderthals have correspondingly postulated competitive inferiority caused by their lacking in symbolic cognition, in labour specialisation by sex and age class, in long-distance circulation of raw materials, or in logistical organisation of the subsistence base... And, not surprisingly either, if Neanderthals are found to conform to the opposite

but also a diverse range of cultures and adaptations, ones whose intra-'Neanderthal' and intra-'modern human' variability along latitudinal and longitudinal clines encompassed almost the entire gamut of ethnographically documented settlement-subsistence strategies. In the realm of subsistence, for instance, Neanderthals were logistically organized hunters 50,000 years ago at Salzgitter-Lebenstedt, in northern Germany, where they exploited reindeer in exactly the same manner as the Ahrensbourghians who recolonised the area 40,000 years later. In the Levant, however, they had a broad-spectrum economy, including significant exploitation of small mammals and plant foods. And, in areas of Iberia where the present-day coastline is close to theirs, late Neanderthals left sites featuring shell-midden accumulations that differ from Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic ones only in that their artefact component is Mousterian.

Where the social and sexual division of labour is concerned, Kuhn and Stiner have argued<sup>17</sup> that nowhere

## **To question a similar interpretation for similar material in the Spanish case just because Neanderthals, not moderns, were involved, would therefore imply tons of special pleading**

of these expectations, then the argument is turned upside down! Recent formulations, for instance, have been that it was their extreme focus on large mammal hunting that allowed modern humans, with greater behavioural flexibility and a broader subsistence base, to outcompete them.

In truth, the archaeological record shows that, on the ground, the Middle-to-Upper Palaeolithic transition in Eurasia was about people featuring not only somewhat different arrays of anatomical traits

in the Neanderthal record do we see any evidence that, as in all known ethnographic hunter-gatherer societies living in cold-temperate or subarctic environments, females had taken on the role of technology specialists. They pointed out that bone needles and awls, the types of artefacts commonly used to make tailored, weather-resistant clothing and well-insulated artificial shelters, which are female-associated tasks in most subarctic hunter-gatherer societies, do not appear until the Upper Palaeolithic. This is undisputedly true, but the early

Upper Palaeolithic culture where such evidence does appear for the first time is... the Neanderthal-associated Châtelperronian! Functional analysis and experimental replication by Francesco d'Errico and colleagues showed that the awls from the Grotte du Renne had been subjected to an intensive use — a minimum of 20,000 perforations on 2.5 mm

analysis showed it to be an extract of oak bark macerated in water, of a kind used until recent historical times in the tanning of hides for the manufacture of water-proof clothing and shoe wear. Danish environmental researcher Bent Sørensen<sup>18</sup> argues that even during the interglacial, Neanderthals faced a considerable heat-loss

structure in most if not all known African MSA sites as the modern standard!

More importantly, any such comparisons need to be put into historical perspective: the average campsite of the late Upper Palaeolithic is indeed more complex than the average campsite

## In my view, therefore, the right question to ask is why material manifestations of symbolism do not appear in the archaeological record until much later than one million years ago

thick leather, with many, given their fineness, having probably been used on lesser resistant materials, such as furs, bird hides or intestines. One can hardly think of what such intensive use might have been for if not the making of tailored clothes; thus,

problem, and tailored clothes would have been necessary for survival. So, even considering the differences in body mass and other anatomical details, for a human — Neanderthal or modern — the simple fact of successful settlement of cold-temperate and subarctic environments implies technologies and modes of social organisation without which survival would have been impossible. In Ice Age Europe, therefore, the difference between the Middle and the Upper Palaeolithic archaeological records is primarily one of visibility, not one of cognition or biologically based behaviour.

of the Middle Palaeolithic. Does this relate primarily to the anatomy of the human populations involved or to intensification over time, i.e., to the higher levels of knowledge of and control over the environment acquired across the tens of millennia involved, as generation after generation people innovated, experimented, failed, tried again and passed on the learning so accumulated to their descendants? This would bring about an increase in numbers as a side effect of adaptive success and trigger a feedback mechanism promoting further intensification as hitherto untapped niches had to be exploited and the technologies to do that had to be invented. Since no one tries to explain the Industrial Revolution in terms of biologically based behavioural variables, why should we think the approach is valid for the Upper Palaeolithic Revolution?



Team on excavation in Murcia

if, in subarctic environments, such tasks are primarily female ones, then the earliest real evidence for the existence of an institutionalised sexual division of labour is in fact found among Neanderthal, not modern human societies.

In actual fact, tailoring and shoemaking are also intimated by results from the analysis of the residue found on a flint flake from the German site of Neumark-Nord, dated to >100,000 years ago. The

A further problem with the 'biologisation' of the variation observed in the culture of Upper Pleistocene humans is that it is frequently framed by anachronistic comparisons. For instance, the argument that 'Neanderthal' camp sites are 'less elaborated and structured' than 'modern' ones is predicated on the use of European Upper Palaeolithic camp sites as the standard for a modern camp site and of European Middle Palaeolithic camp sites for a Neanderthal camp site. But the conclusion would have to be reversed if the habitation features apparent in the Grotte du Renne's Châtelperronian level X were used as the Neanderthal standard and the lack of any

This does not mean that important biological factors were not at work throughout. Erik Trinkaus, in particular, has suggested that many anatomical changes observed at this time, namely the trend to overall skeletal and dental gracilisation, were probably triggered by technological developments. The point is, such changes are observed among both moderns and Neanderthals (as in, e.g., the post-crania of Saint-Césaire). Understanding them

therefore requires units of analysis that go way beyond the simplistic opposition between Neanderthals on one hand and modern humans on the other. In my opinion, these examples show that the problem lies in the Human Revolution straitjacket. From within such a frame of mind, scholars are inevitably led to treat Neanderthal-modern human interaction as an abstract, totally ahistorical game played between two reified entities with little (if any) relation to actual empirical realities, as if a Neanderthal of 100,000 years ago was the same thing as a Neanderthal of 50,000 years ago, and as if a modern human of today or of 20,000 years ago was the same thing as a modern human of 200,000 years ago.

So, to me, the way forward is to treat what happened in the late Middle and early Upper Pleistocene from the perspective of (palaeo-)history and (palaeo-)ethnography. We will never understand this critical period of our past if we reduce the biological and cultural variation that existed at the time to the two anatomically defined categories of 'Neanderthals' and 'modern humans'.

**RA:** If we now all agree that Neanderthals were not stupid, and showed similar if culturally distinctive abilities, what then is your view on the fate of the Neanderthals? Why are we here and not them?

**JZ:** Although it is unquestionably true that, as a population/subspecies displaying a consistent set of anatomical traits, Neanderthals disappeared some time between 35,000 and 40,000 years ago, that does not mean that they went extinct without descent. Given the fossil and genetic evidence for interbreeding at the time of contact, I think the question that you ask should in fact be rephrased. The problem is not one of who won the

'us' versus 'them' confrontation. Instead, the problem is: Why is it that the anatomical *gestalt* that prevailed in the mixed populations resulting from the process of interbreeding was the 'modern' and not the 'Neanderthal' one?

As with all complex problems, it is vain to look for single-cause explanations for the observed outcome. People often overlook that explaining historical processes implies looking at different scales, in both time and space, and that general explanations valid in the long-term or on a transcontinental scale may well be irrelevant to explain what happened in the short-term or on a regional scale. In short, framing the issue of the fate of the Neanderthals in terms of simple dichotomies (us versus them, smart versus stupid, adaptive versus maladaptive,

mix, the smaller population (in our case, the Eurasian Neanderthals) will always be absorbed by the larger (in our case, the African moderns). Of course, the other things never all remain equal, so we also have to



Measuring ESR, Oase excavation, Romania

**The problem is not one of who won the 'us' versus 'them' confrontation. Instead, the problem is: Why is it that the anatomical *gestalt* that prevailed in the mixed populations was the 'modern' and not the 'Neanderthal' one?**

etc.) is easy, convenient and readily understandable; it is also fundamentally wrong.

To me, the starting point is the general biogeographical law that, all other things remaining equal, if the barriers (environmental, climatic, geographical, behavioural or other) between two populations that evolved in isolation for a significant amount of time disappear and the two genetic reservoirs effectively

include issues of selection (natural, sexual or cultural) and contingency in the equation.

Perhaps facial gracility was somehow selectively advantageous in the environment of accelerated technological innovation that characterises the period of contact in Europe. And catastrophic events, such as the major volcanic explosion that occurred near Naples 39,000 years ago (which probably wiped

out the mixed populations of south-eastern Europe soon after contact), may also have contributed to dilute the strength of the Neanderthal genetic signal. Or possibly social and economic practices and strategies gave rise to a differential in fertility favouring the peoples of the Protoaurignacian.

The problem is that, so far, no evidence has been found that the Protoaurignacian was indeed characterised by greater extractive efficiency and cultural complexity. Its possession of figurative art is often advanced as proof, but the widespread notion that Europe's earliest modern humans were 'astonishingly precocious' artists misrepresents the facts. The earliest such art anywhere in the world are the ivory sculptures of the German

the Châtelperronian was one of individually worn ornaments, then quantity cannot be automatically translated into quality, as it may well have taken 20, 50 or 100 shell beads to produce the functional equivalent of a single perforated carnivore tooth.

Finally, the last major problem with the 'us-versus-them' approach is that it frames the actual historical process in terms of competition only, and one that confronted two monolithic, reified entities. 'Modern' and 'Neanderthal' are 19th-21st century AD categories, to my mind very useful in some scientific contexts and very useless in others. But can we realistically assume that, at the time of contact anywhere in Europe, a 'modern human' would have known that he/

she was ... a 'modern human' (and ditto for Neanderthals)? Although it simplifies things to talk about the spread of 'modern humans' into Europe, what the record actually shows is a spread of the Protoaurignacian culture. There is good reason to think that the modern human *gestalt* hitchhiked the spread of the Protoaurignacian, but this does not have to have been as a result of the 'victory' of a monolithic biocultural entity. In fact, it is much easier to explain the process as a result of the widespread adoption of cultural innovations via

contact, exchange, co-operation and interbreeding. As is always the case in such situations, competition and conflict inevitably must have entered the equation, but reducing the process to a confrontation between two peoples/armies battling for living space is what I would call the videogame view of the Transition: fine for Hollywood, not so for palaeoanthropology.

**RA:** Do you feel the archaeological and palaeoanthropological community has responded in a spirit of dispassionate enquiry towards

your work? Or do you think such sharp and polarised controversy is part of the process of science when cherished myths are challenged? At what point does politics interfere with science?

**JZ:** Of course the palaeo-anthropological community hasn't responded dispassionately! And I wouldn't have expected it to in the first place, because scientists are also human beings; although trained to be much more open-minded than the average street man, scientists are nonetheless influenced by widely shared cultural values, by academic environments, and by personal interests. Also, science is in many ways inherently conservative, and will resist paradigm change until and unless it cannot be avoided; and for good reason, as it too follows the old common sense principle that 'if it isn't broken, don't fix it!' Until about five years ago my Neanderthal/modern human papers submitted for publication systematically faced more than 50% hostile (often very hostile) reviews. Still, in my experience, journal editors were more often than not inclined to listen to my rebuttals, and as a result the papers eventually all got published, read and discussed.

So, I have no complaints: the scientific process worked. It was not easy, but then again it never is, and that's how it should be: science can live with harsh and unfair criticism, but not with complacency.

I don't think 'politics' are involved in these controversies, although they are often permeated, especially in the media, by 'political correctness' issues. For instance, the notion was promoted that, by showing that we all shared a very recent common ancestry, RAO and the Mitochondrial Eve hypothesis provided a scientific weapon against racism. I always found this to be a very dangerous argument, as it implied that perhaps racism would be scientifically justified if



Author on excavation in Murcia

Aurignacian and the Chauvet cave paintings. But, in good agreement with the nature of the associated stone tools, the range of dates obtained for these manifestations falls entirely within the Aurignacian II, i.e., they postdate by some five millennia the time of contact in Europe. At that time, the only archaeologically visible difference is that the Protoaurignacian features a lot more objects of personal ornamentation. But, if the Protoaurignacian was a culture of composite beadworks whereas

the opposite ‘candelabra’ model of a very distant common ancestor and largely separate evolutionary trajectories in Africa, Asia and Europe were to have been shown correct.

Awareness of the influence of politics, culture and intellectual traditions in interpretations of human evolution is needed. But

political attitudes and choices should be dictated by the ethical and social issues of the present, to which knowing what exactly happened to the Neanderthals 40,000 years ago is not, I’m afraid, of much relevance. Finding it out helps us in understanding ourselves as a biological species, and in learning more about our place in the natural world and about cultural process.

Also, as Svante Pääbo rightly pointed out in the initial stages of the Neanderthal genome project, we may even eventually learn from the Neanderthals things about our genes that will have medical and therapeutical applications. This is good enough for me as ‘political’ justification for doing ‘Neanderthal’ science (read the adjective as you wish!). 🙏

**João Zilhão** is professor of Palaeolithic Archaeology at the University of Bristol, Dept of Archaeology and Anthropology. In 1998, he directed the salvage excavation of the Early Upper Paleolithic child burial of Lagar Velho (Portugal) and, in 2004-2005, the archaeological excavations at the Peștera cu Oase (Romania), site of Europe’s earliest modern humans. Ongoing projects include the Middle Palaeolithic sequence of Cueva Antón (Spain).



#### Notes

- Hublin, J.-J., F. Spoor, M. Braun, F. Zonneveld and S. Condemi 1996. A late Neanderthal associated with Upper Palaeolithic artefacts. *Nature* 381: 224–226.
- Stringer, C., and C. Gamble 1993. *In Search of the Neanderthals: Solving the puzzle of human origins*. London: Thames & Hudson
- D’Errico, F., J. Zilhão, D. Baffier, M. Julien, J. Pelegrin 1998. Neanderthal acculturation in Western Europe? A critical review of the evidence and its interpretation. *Current Anthropology* 39: S1-S44.
- Zilhão, J. and F. d’Errico 1999. The chronology and taphonomy of the earliest Aurignacian and its implications for the understanding of Neanderthal extinction. *Journal of World Prehistory*, 13: 1-68.
- Krause, J., F. Qiaomei, J. M. Good, B. Viola, M. V. Shunkov, A. P. Derevianko and S. Pääbo 2010. The complete mitochondrial DNA genome of an unknown hominin from southern Siberia. *Nature* 464: 894-897.
- Zilhão, J. 2007. The emergence of ornaments and art: an archaeological perspective on the origins of behavioural ‘modernity’. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 15: 1-54.
- Green, R. E., J. Krause, A. W. Briggs, T. Maricic, U. Stenzel, M. Kircher, N. Patterson, H. Li, W. Zhai, M. H. Fritz, N. F. Hansen, E. Y. Durand, A. Malaspina, J. D. Jensen, T. Marques-Bonet, C. Alkan, K. Prüfer, M. Meyer, H. A. Burbano, J. M. Good, R. Schultz, A. Aximu-Petri, A. Butthof, B. Höber, Barbara Höffner, M. Siegemund, A. Weihmann, C. Nusbaum, E. S. Lander, R. Carsten, N. Novod, J. Affourtit, M. Egholm, C. Verna, P. Rudan, D. Brajkovic, Ž. Kucan, I. Gušić, V. B. Doronichev, L. V. Golovanova, C. Laluzza-Fox, M. de la Rasilla, J. Fortea, A. Rosas, R. W. Schmitz, P. L. F. Johnson, E. E. Eichler, D. Falush, E. Birney, J. C. Mullikin, M. Slatkin, R. Nielsen, J. Kelso, M. Lachmann, D. Reich and S. Pääbo 2010. A Draft Sequence of the Neanderthal Genome. *Science* 328: 710-722.
- Gould, S. J. 2002 *The structure of evolutionary theory*. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Trinkaus, E. and J. Zilhão 2002. Phylogenetic implications. In J. Zilhão and E. Trinkaus (eds), *Portrait of the Artist as a Child. The Gravettian Human Skeleton from the Abrigo do Lagar Velho and its Archeological Context*, Lisboa: Instituto Português de Arqueologia, pp. 497–518; Trinkaus, E., S. Milota, R. Rodrigo, M. Gherase and O. Moldovan 2003. Early modern human cranial remains from the Pesteră cu Oase, Romania. *Journal of Human Evolution* 45: 245–253; Trinkaus, E., O. Moldovan, S. Milota, A. Bilgär, L. Sarcinã, S. Athreya, S. Bailey, R. Rodrigo, M. Gherase, T. Higham, R. Bronk Ramsey, and J. van der Plicht., 2003b. An early modern human from the Pesteră cu Oase, Romania. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 100: 11231–11236.
- Teschler-Nicola, M. (ed.) 2006 *Early modern humans at the Moravian gates: Mladec Caves and their remains*. Wien: Springer-Verlag.
- d’Errico, F., C. Henshilwood, M. Vanhaeren and K. van Niekerk 2005 *Nassarius kraussianus* shell beads from Blombos Cave: Evidence for symbolic behaviour in the Middle Stone Age. *Journal of Human Evolution* 48: 3–24; Vanhaeren, M., F. d’Errico, C. Stringer, S. L. James, J. A. Todd and H. K. Mienis 2006. Middle Paleolithic shell beads in Israel and Algeria. *Science* 312: 1785–1788; d’Errico, F. and M. Vanhaeren 2009. Earliest personal ornaments and their significance for the origins of language debate, in R. Botha and C. Knight, (eds) *The Cradle of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 16-40.
- Zilhão, J., D. Angelucci, E. Badal-García, F. d’Errico, F. Daniel, L. Dayet; K. Douka, T. F. G. Higham, M. J. Martínez-Sánchez, R. Montes-Bernárdez, S. Murcia-Mascarós, C. Pérez-Sirvent, C. Roldán-García, M. Vanhaeren, V. Villaverde, R. Wood, J. Zapata 2010. Symbolic use of marine shells and mineral pigments by Iberian Neandertals. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 107: 1023-1028.
- Bar-Yosef Mayer, D. E., B. Vandermeersch and O. Bar-Yosef 2009. Shells and ochre in Middle Paleolithic Qafzeh Cave, Israel: indications for modern behavior. *Journal of Human Evolution* 56: 307-314.
- Vanhaeren, M., F. d’Errico, C. Stringer, S. L. James, J. A. Todd and H. K. Mienis 2006. Middle Paleolithic shell beads in Israel and Algeria. *Science* 312: 1785–1788.
- Deacon, T. 1997. *The Symbolic Species: The co-evolution of language and the human brain*. London: Penguin.
- Aiello, L. C. and P. Wheeler 1995. The expensive tissue hypothesis: the brain and the digestive system in human and primate evolution. *Current Anthropology* 36: 199-221; Aiello, L. C., and C. Key, 2002. Energetic Consequences of Being a *Homo erectus* Female. *American Journal of Human Biology* 14: 551-565; Barrickman, N. L., M. L. Bastian, K. Isler and C. P. van Schaik. 2008. Life history costs and benefits of encephalization: a comparative test using data from long-term studies of primates in the wild. *Journal of Human Evolution*. 54: 568-590.
- Kuhn, S. and M. Stiner 2006. What’s a mother to do: The division of labor among Neandertals and modern humans in Eurasia. *Current Anthropology* 47: 953–980.
- Sørensen, B. 2009. Energy use by Eem Neanderthals. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 36: 2201-2205.

# Was there a human revolution?

**Ian Watts**, longtime member of the Radical Anthropology Group and one of the world's leading specialists on early symbolic materials, defends the 'human revolution'.



Ian Watts

World's oldest engraving, 100,000 year-old ochre from Blombos, found by the author

The debate between marxists and feminists over the roots of women's oppression brought me to anthropology and archaeology in the late 1980s. This was an exceptionally exciting time in human origins research, all the more so for me as I assimilated the latest developments through the lens of Chris Knight's 'sex-strike' model of the origins of symbolic culture, submitted as a Ph.D. thesis in 1987.

A 1987 genetics paper had argued that everyone on earth was descended from a single African woman (technically a single mtDNA lineage) living around 200,000 years ago. This became known as

the 'African Eve' hypothesis, and was to become the consensus in the 1990s. Previously, it had widely been thought that regional populations of modern humans evolved largely independently of each other over immense periods.

Also in the late 1980s, new dating techniques were applied to two cave sites in Palestine, containing burials of early *Homo sapiens*. Previously thought to be in the order of 40,000 years old, they turned out to be closer to 100,000 years old, representing an early migration of our species out of Africa. This population is now thought to have become extinct, with all non-African people today descended from a migration that occurred

sometime between 80-60,000 years ago. Most significant about these burials was that two were clearly symbolically elaborated: a middle-aged man claspng a boar's mandible, and a youth claspng a deer's antler. Prior to this re-dating, most archaeologists agreed that there was no compelling evidence for symbolic behaviours older than about 40,000 years old. It seemed clear to me that the Skhul and Qafzeh burials implied not only that symbolic culture was older than previously thought, but that it had evolved first in Africa among early *Homo sapiens*. It was to take another 15 years before the archaeological community at large would come to share this view.

The bizarre thing about this date of 40,000 for symbolism was that in introductory anthropology textbooks of the 1980s it was still common to find the claim that an essentially 'human' way of life, hunting and gathering, a home-base arrangement, a sexual division of labour, and even language, all went back about 1.5 to 2 million years. This extreme gradualism had been premised on two assumptions: first, that the association of stone tools with bones of large animals in Africa implied hunting; second, that the reduction in sexual dimorphism seen with *Homo erectus* implied reduced levels of inter-male competition and hence stable pair-bonding. 1980s research had shown that scavenging was a better explanation for the early bone/stone tool associations, while effective hunting of medium to large game could only be inferred



from about half a million years ago. The reduction in sexual dimorphism turned out to be evidence of females getting bigger, and was more informative about changes in life-history variables than levels of inter-male competition.

The final refuge of those defending extreme gradualism has been the observation that some late Asian *Homo erectus* crania had capacities falling within the modern human range. Did this mean the cognitive hardware for symbolic reference and language evolved shortly after 2 million years ago? But the overall trend in the brain-size story is of two periods of significant increase, the first with early *Homo*, around 2 mya, the second occurring within the last half million years, when *H. erectus* had given rise to *H. heidelbergensis* in western Eurasia and Africa.

Few palaeoanthropologists or archaeologists directly confronted the sharp contradiction between this gradualist perspective and the absence of generally agreed evidence for symbolic behaviours prior to 40,000 years ago. The developments in the late 1980s forced a

reevaluation. A second catchphrase – ‘the human revolution’ – joined ‘African Eve’. In a sense this was simply relabelling what had previously been referred to as ‘the symbolic explosion’ associated with the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition in Europe and western Asia, around 40,000 years ago. This transition marked the beginning of the replacement of Neanderthals by *Homo sapiens*.

Forty thousand was also the then current estimate of initial occupation of Australia, and

for the earliest African beads – associated with an industry thought to represent the earliest Later Stone Age. For most archaeologists, the Middle and Later Stone Ages of sub-Saharan Africa stood in the same relationship to each other as the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic in Eurasia (although lone voices in South African archaeology had been challenging this view in the 1980s). Overall, 40,000 appeared to be a date of global significance. But the change in phrase from ‘symbolic explosion’ to ‘human revolution’ acknowledged the huge discrepancy between the timing of our speciation (c.200,000 years ago) and the earliest compelling evidence for symbolism. If ‘we’ (Europeans) hadn’t morphed from Neanderthals, and we (*Homo sapiens*) weren’t a symbolic species from the outset, then what else other than a revolution could explain such a major change?

Neither ‘the symbolic explosion’ nor ‘the human revolution’ actually explained anything: They simply flagged a dramatic change in the archaeological record. Despite a few brave attempts,<sup>1</sup> archaeologists weren’t equipped to explain this

phenomenon. Indeed, I don’t think any single discipline was so equipped.

On the one hand, any explanation had to start from Darwinian premises. More specifically, I’d argue, it has to start from a behavioural ecology perspective, focussing on conflicts and trade-offs between male and female reproductive strategies, seasonality, environment and demography. Into this already complex mix, one needs to incorporate sexual selection models of signal evolution

to explore the communicative implications.

On the other hand, the field requiring explanation – symbolic culture – appears to defy the ‘selfish-gene’ logic of modern Darwinism<sup>2</sup>. Chomsky’s legacy of excluding social context from language origins debates is discussed by Knight in this issue. To make matters worse, the discipline best equipped to discuss symbolic culture – social anthropology – had spent most of the twentieth century refusing to engage with evolutionary theory. Consequently, social anthropologists didn’t even recognise the significance of our recent African origin. Here, at last was an origins story that could make sense of the symbolic universals identified by a succession of anthropologists, from Lewis Henry Morgan, through Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, and Lévi-Strauss.

Twenty years on, ‘the human revolution’ has almost dropped out of archaeological and wider palaeoanthropological discussion of human evolution. This can largely be attributed to archaeological findings resulting from the new

## **If we weren’t a symbolic species from the outset, then what else other than a revolution could explain such a major change?**

research agenda posed by the discrepancy in dates between our speciation and evidence for symbolism. A succession of papers from 2002 onwards demonstrated African traditions of geometric engraving and bead manufacture between 80-60,000 years ago, a date recently pushed back to c.100,000 years ago<sup>3</sup>. This means there was no revolution at 40,000 years: Symbolic culture was in place in Africa prior to any migration beyond the continent. It now looks as if some late Neanderthal populations (prior to contact with

*Homo sapiens*) also had symbolic culture (see João Zilhão, this issue). Are we to suppose that two distinct populations underwent separate cognitive revolutions? Isn't it more parsimonious to assume symbolic and linguistic capacities evolved earlier in the shared heritage of the two populations?

While the answers to questions of who, when, and where, become

which our model made predictions. By far the most detailed, unlikely, and therefore, refutable predictions concerned an underlying syntax to the mobilisation of ritual power, testable against ethnographic data. However, with social anthropology disengaged from evolutionary approaches and from 'grand theory' of any kind, response to the paper came largely from archaeologists, who were understandably more

pick and choose between females. Conversely, it reduced costs to those males prepared to invest.

While tied to the presence of real menstrual blood, the initial ritualised performances were dubbed 'sham menstruation'. For such a strategy to be effective in sending men off on collective big-game hunts, then the painting-up song-and-dance would have to be

## **The change in phrase from 'symbolic explosion' to 'human revolution' acknowledged the huge discrepancy between the timing of our speciation (c.200,000 years ago) and the earliest compelling evidence for symbolism**

clearer, of itself this brings us no closer to understanding why and how symbolic culture arose. Unless that is, the answers to the 'who?', 'when?', and 'where?' questions match the predictions of a pre-existing hypothesis or model of the origins of symbolic culture. Then ears should prick up. This is exactly the case with the archaeological record of earth pigment use.

Fifteen years ago, I co-authored a paper with Chris Knight and Camilla Power presenting an updated version of Knight's original thesis on the origins of symbolic culture.<sup>4</sup> We predicted: i) that the earliest pigment use should not predate c.500,000 years ago; ii) an initial and prevailing focus on blood reds; iii) that initial use would be irregular, but that before modern brain sizes were achieved, there should be a shift to regular use. A further prediction was that where appropriate pigments weren't available, people should incur considerable costs to procure them<sup>5</sup>. This was just one subset of archaeological predictions, and archaeology was just one among several disciplinary fields across

interested in claims about the pigment record than in the intricate details of rituals and myths.

The model's point of departure was to address how evolving hominin females met the unprecedented maternal energy costs of bearing larger-brained offspring given that brain size increased exponentially between c. 500-150,000 years ago. The hypothesis was that coalitions of females used sexual signals to influence male behaviour, ultimately securing regular male provisioning in the form of animal fats. More specifically, female coalitions used male interest in menstruation as a signal of impending fertility. Compared to pregnant and lactating females, a menstrual female is a good bet to be fertile soon. The problem for the burdened pregnant and breast-feeding females is that males will be all too inclined to focus their efforts on the menstrual females. To counteract this, coalitions of females appropriated the blood and took control of the dangerous signal, by using cosmetic substitutes such as red ochre. This drove up costs to philanderer males who tried to

performed regularly, regardless of whether any individual member was bleeding. This meant a 'sex strike', with women declaring themselves taboo until men returned with the meat. If their taboo status was marked by 'blood', then, extended to the blood of game animals, raw meat likewise became taboo, prohibiting hunters from consuming their kills out in the bush – a 'hunter's own-kill' rule.<sup>6</sup> So hunters had to surrender their kills to women who, as custodians of cooking fire, could transform the raw into the cooked. In establishing the identity of bleeding women and animals, humans created the first collective deception – a shared fantasy that is the essence of symbolic culture. The model specified a lunar cosmology, with performances tied to the dark moon, with the return of the hunt and lifting of blood taboos at full moon.

Archaeologists had long known that earth pigment use, either red ochre or black manganese, significantly predated 40,000 years, with the earliest ochre occurrences dating at least 250,000 years old. They had rightly been wary of inferring

symbolic culture on this basis alone. Moreover, in the absence of detailed studies, it was generally thought that there was little difference between the European and African records. The topic was thought unlikely to be informative about differences between Neanderthals and early *Homo sapiens* (and their respective immediate ancestors).

When we wrote the 1995 paper, I had recently returned from South Africa, examining Middle Stone Age (MSA) pigment assemblages held in various universities and museums. Pigments were absent or rare in the earliest MSA sequences, but were regular (within sequences) and virtually ubiquitous (between shelter sites) by the early Late Pleistocene. From a few sites in the Northern Cape and the East African tropics, pigments were reported from earlier but undated contexts. The overwhelming majority of material, especially in early contexts, was red ochre. These preliminary results seemed to accord with the predictions of our model.

probably then. As it turns out, this was an over-interpretation of the data, due to inadequate dating of one key sequence (Border Cave), and inadequate sampling of the ochre at another (Klasies River).

that Blombos inhabitants went to greater lengths to get these pigments in the later stages of occupation than in earlier stages due to changes in local environment. Curtis Marean invited me to join the team working



Chris Knight

Climbing up to Blombos Cave entrance

## **While ochre use of itself cannot be used to infer symbolic culture, habitual and widespread use, with consistent colour selection, can**

However, archaeologists had raised a number of objections to the common-sense inference that red ochre was primarily the residue of ritual body-painting. The ‘ochre’ might be fire-reddened deposit, or a tanning agent, or sun-block, or insect repellent, etc.. My Ph.D thesis addressed these issues, by investigating temporal patterning and colour selection in more detail. My key conclusion was that there was evidence for symbolic culture in southern Africa from at least c.110,000 years ago.<sup>7</sup> My data also indicated that there was an explosion in ochre use at around this time, which led me to a more contentious conclusion: that if there was a ‘human revolution’, it was

My post-doctoral research has involved working on two excavation projects along the southern Cape coast. Chris Henshilwood and Judy Sealy invited me to join the Blombos Cave excavation project. This site provided the first compelling symbolic evidence in the MSA, initially with a couple of geometric engravings on pieces of ochre,<sup>8</sup> and then with marine-shell beads – some bearing traces of ochre.<sup>9</sup> Both came from layers dated to c.75,000 years. My own contribution was in finding additional geometric engravings on ochre, taking the tradition back 100,000 years.<sup>10</sup> I also found that MSA people chose to use and modify the most saturated reds<sup>11</sup>. It also appeared

at nearby Pinnacle Point. There the sequence goes back to c.164,000 years; the same selective criteria among utilised pigments apply.<sup>12</sup>

While ochre use of itself cannot be used to infer symbolic culture, habitual and widespread use, with consistent colour selection, can. In this scenario, the beads of c.80-75,000 years ago are telling us something about historical developments, not about the initial conditions and form of symbolic culture.

My current understanding of the picture is that use of red ochre in Africa probably extends back between 500-400,000 years ago.

Between 300-200,000 years ago, immediately prior to our speciation, a couple of sites within the tropics demonstrate that such use was regular. In South Africa, however, it appears that ochre use only became regular and ubiquitous during the penultimate glacial cycle (the end of the Middle Pleistocene, between 190-130,000 years ago), remaining so thereafter. This rests on the absence of pigments in the few very early (but currently undated) MSA cave assemblages, together with its regular occurrence in overlying MSA assemblages at the same sites. Key here is the Border Cave (Kwa-Zulu Natal) sequence: pigment is rare in the two earliest excavation units where deposition of the younger unit is now thought to have begun around 200,000 years ago; by contrast, pigment occurs regularly throughout the overlying sequence, the oldest layer of which has provided age estimates between c.170-150,000 years ago – the middle of the penultimate glacial.

the early history of our species, isolating small sub-populations in refuge environments during the arid conditions of the penultimate glacial. The implications and issues are nicely summarised in a recent paper by Marean.<sup>13</sup>

In Europe and India, there are a handful of ochre finds between 300-200,000 years ago. This implies that selection pressures pushing ritual performance were common across the whole grade of *H. heidelbergensis* lineages. However, there then follows a Eurasian find-gap lasting at least 100,000 years, and there is very little Neanderthal use until after c.60,000 years ago. When it does pick up, in France at least, it's as likely to be black manganese as red ochre. Around this time, we have the compelling Spanish evidence for symbolism discussed by Zilhão. However, Neanderthal pigment use never seems to become ubiquitous, but remains fairly localised. This might reflect geological constraints,

symbolic culture evolved. Power<sup>14</sup> has suggested that Neanderthals and their European ancestors, living in a more seasonal environment (encouraging birth synchrony), would have had more stable pair-bonds than evolving *Homo sapiens*. Especially during Ice Ages, Eurasian females would be under less pressure to engage in costly ritual display to mobilise male labour. Under milder (less seasonal) conditions, such as interglacials, this might break down, which would lead to the patchy sporadic nature of the Eurasian record. Testing this hypothesis offers a direction for future work. In Africa, I think that regular use of red ochre – an index of habitual collective ritual – is implicated in our speciation. The behavioural changes involved promoted the subtle morphological changes by which our speciation is identified.

Such a process is entirely consistent with Darwinism, but it was also revolutionary, not just in its

## Habitual use of red ochre seems to be a hallmark of the spread of modern humans across the world

As previously noted, there are earlier pigments in South Africa, associated with an industry, the Fauresmith, generally considered transitional between the Early and Middle Stone Ages. The Fauresmith was long suspected to be more than 250,000 years old, but recent dating of one sequence indicates it extends back at least  $464 \pm 47,000$  years. We know very little about these pigment assemblages, whether use was regular, or how far back any regularity extends. However, we cannot speak of a continuous tradition, directly linking this material with that from c.160,000 years ago. I think it's important to bear in mind that palaeogeneticists infer a major population crash in

but I doubt it. It seems to accord with Zilhão's suggestion that locally contingent ecological and demographic factors played an important role. Widespread and regular use of red ochre is restricted to incoming *Homo sapiens* and those last Neanderthals who were the authors of the Châtelperronian industry, living in the shadow of the newcomers. Indeed, habitual use of red ochre seems to be a hallmark of the spread of modern humans across the world.

There are, therefore, very pronounced differences between the pigment records of the two lineages, and I think these speak to the questions of why and how

consequences, but in principle, as it involved the overthrow of primate male dominance as a viable strategy. This created sufficient levels of within-group trust for cheap, linguistic forms of communication to get off the ground, in the context of rules of distribution governing kinship, marriage and economics. It was from these rules that all other 'institutional facts' flowed. While there can be little doubt that there were significant developments in the cognitive and communicative abilities of earlier hominins, if by 'language' we mean anything like our own linguistic abilities, then I'm of the view that you either can or can't enter into a domain of shared fantasies, of which language is just


one aspect. It makes little sense to suggest that this evolved gradually over two million years, leaving no trace until 250,000, 100,000 or 40,000 years ago. Complexity may require both a gradualist history – all kinds of conditions may need to be met beforehand – and a revolution. A leap to a new level of complexity can follow the resolution of some previously insuperable problem.

The history of the Russian revolution may provide a heuristically useful way of approaching the discontinuity between the Fauresmith and Middle Stone Age pigment records. The Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 was preceded by the respectively failed and partial revolutions of 1905 and February 1917. The October revolution didn't catalyse a global communist revolution because it failed to link up with the revolutionary moments in Europe between 1918-1921, critically in Germany. The human revolution

eventually succeeded, but only after what appears to have been one or more false starts. Its initial success may have been restricted to a tiny population living in a specific area within the African tropics.

As to the question of why pigment use is the characteristic archaeological feature of this hypothesised revolution for the first hundred thousand years of our species' history, and why migration beyond Africa was so late, I suggest that the maxim 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' probably applies. While population densities were low, the initial human hunter-gatherer economy – monthly big-game hunts, mobilised through collective ritual – was sufficient. In the early Late Pleistocene, under milder, less seasonal conditions, regional African populations grew rapidly. While this may not have significantly undermined the basis of the original economy, it probably did require elaboration of social

markers in regions of the highest population density.

None of this is fundamentally at odds with Zilhão's position on Neanderthal symbolism, although obviously I don't share his gradualist perspective on why this has to be taken back over a million years. In the Neanderthal case, the evolution of symbolic culture didn't result in change to their archaic morphology, but it may have been none the less revolutionary, and probably sprung from similar selection pressures – enabling females to provide for their large-brained offspring. As Zilhão observes, why should revolution necessarily be tied into biological change? A critical difference for us as researchers, however, is that in the *Homo sapiens* case, we can investigate predictions concerning the form of symbolic culture not only against the archaeological record, but also against ethnographic data. Alas, we don't have Neanderthal myths against which to test our theories today! 

**Ian Watts** gained his Ph.D. at University College London in 1998 joining the Blombos project in 1999, and the Pinnacle Point project in 2005. Alongside his main focus on the archaeology of early symbolic behaviours, he has published on African hunter-gatherer initiation ritual, lunar cosmology and hunting practice. [ochrewatts@hotmail.com](mailto:ochrewatts@hotmail.com)



#### Notes

1. Stringer, C., and C. Gamble 1993. *In Search of the Neanderthals: Solving the puzzle of human origins*. London: Thames & Hudson; Mithen, S. 1996. *The prehistory of the mind: the cognitive origins of art, religion and science*. London: Thames & Hudson.

2. See Knight, C., R. Dunbar and C. Power 1999. An evolutionary approach to human culture, in R. Dunbar, C. Knight and C. Power (eds.) *The Evolution of Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp.1-11.

3. Henshilwood, C. S., F. d'Errico, R. Yates, Z. Jacobs, C. Tribolo, G. Duller, N. Mercier, J. Sealy, H. Valladas, I. Watts and A. Wintle 2002. Emergence of modern human behaviour: Middle Stone Age engravings from South Africa, *Science*, 295: 1278–1280; Henshilwood, C. S., F. d'Errico and I. Watts 2009. Engraved ochres from Middle Stone Age levels at Blombos Cave, South Africa, *Journal of Human Evolution*, 57: 27–47.

4. Knight, C., C. Power, and I. Watts 1995. The Human Symbolic Revolution: A Darwinian account'. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 5: 75-114.

5. Power, C. 2009. Sexual selection models for the emergence of symbolic communication: Why they should be reversed, in R. Botha and C. Knight (eds.) *The Cradle of Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 273, Table 14.2.

6. Knight, C. 1991. *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

7. Watts, I. 1999. The origin of symbolic culture, in R. Dunbar, C. Knight and C. Power (eds.) *The Evolution of Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 113–146.

8. Henshilwood et al. 2002.

9. d'Errico, F., C. Henshilwood, M. Vanhaeren and K. van Niekerk 2005. *Nassarius kraussianus* shell beads from

Blombos Cave: Evidence for symbolic behaviour in the Middle Stone Age. *Journal of Human Evolution*, 48: 3–24.

10. Henshilwood et al. 2009.

11. Watts, I. 2009. Red ochre, body painting and language: Interpreting the Blombos ochre, in R. Botha and C. Knight (eds.) *The Cradle of Language*, pp. 62–92.

12. Marean, C. M., Bar-Matthews, J., Bernatchez, E. Fisher, P. Goldberg, A. I. R. Herries, Z. Jacobs, A. Jerardino, P. Karkanas, T. Minichillo, P. J. Nilssen, E. Thompson, I. Watts and H. M. Williams 2007. Early human use of marine resources and pigment in South Africa during the Middle Pleistocene. *Nature* 449: 905–908; Watts, I. (in press). The pigments from Pinnacle Point. *Journal of Human Evolution*.

13. Marean, C. 2010. When the sea saved humanity. *Scientific American*, August, pp. 41-47.

14. Power 2009.

# The Enigma of Noam Chomsky

Responding to Chomsky's interview in *Radical Anthropology* in Issue 2, **Chris Knight** explores the paradoxical relationship between his activism and his science.

**Radical Anthropology:** Chomsky is a celebrated intellectual figurehead on the left. In your articles,<sup>1</sup> you always seem negative about his overall contribution. Why is that?

**Chris Knight:** I'm not negative at all. Whenever I read Chomsky on, say, US policy in the Middle East, I'm always in wholehearted support. Who else tells the truth so bluntly and so fearlessly?

**RA:** So why the criticism? Some articles – in the *Weekly Worker*, for instance<sup>2</sup> – have been pretty savage.

**CK:** That's a different Chomsky. In those articles I'm talking about the scientist. Distinguishing between this person and the activist, an interviewer once asked him: 'What do they say to each other when they meet?'. Chomsky replied: 'There is no connection, apart from some very tenuous

as a computational device.<sup>4</sup> It's almost as if Chomsky the activist wasn't responsible for the science. That comes from a different region of his brain.

**RA:** Our readers might find this hard to believe. What does he actually say?

**CK:** 'The one talent that I have which I know many other friends don't seem to have', Chomsky explains, 'is I've got some quirk in my brain which makes it work like separate buffers in a computer.'<sup>5</sup> One component produces science for a definite intellectual constituency while the rest of him produces political stuff for a quite different audience. As a scientist, he's anxious to avoid slipping over into politics; as an activist, he strives to avoid anything to do with science.<sup>6</sup> Each separate role comes with its own appropriate conceptual approach and corresponding

He uses language precisely to communicate – to denounce his own state, his own government, his own employers, his own institutional milieu. Short of denouncing his own science, Chomsky opposes just about everything he embodies in his alternative role.

**RA:** Are you saying he's two-faced – telling one audience one thing and another something else?

**CK:** The struggle to survive under capitalism forces us all into something like double-dealing for much of the time. We're forced into collusion. We compete to find jobs, to survive as wage-slaves, to establish at least a modicum of economic security for ourselves. Yet equally we need to hold our heads high, to maintain our self-esteem. It's not always easy to reconcile such conflicting priorities. It's just that Chomsky exemplifies

**I prefer to think of him as the conscience of America.**

**Once you view him in that light, the mysteries begin to clear**

relations at an abstract level...'<sup>3</sup>

**RA:** So Chomsky's really two people?

**CK:** In the 1960s he was so active people thought there must be six Chomskys! But, yes, two at least. When he speaks or writes politically, his passions are engaged and he takes full personal responsibility. In his scientific role, something quite different seems to be happening. According to his own account, one modular component of his brain – 'the science-forming capacity' – functions autonomously

language, resistant to translation across the divide. 'Now exactly how one can maintain that sort of schizophrenic existence I am not sure', Chomsky admitted on another occasion, 'it is very difficult'.<sup>7</sup>

In his scientific capacity, Chomsky views language as a biological 'organ' or 'device'. As such, it's devoid of humour, metaphor, emotion, communicative intent, social meaning or anything else people normally think of as language. Meanwhile, the other Chomsky continues to speak and write much like the rest of us.

this more sharply than most. So 'two-faced' would be unfair. I prefer to think of him as the conscience of America. Once you view him in that light, the mysteries begin to clear. 'What is important', as he explains, 'is to expose the crimes of my own state, which are often hidden from view by the propaganda institutions'.<sup>8</sup> His political writings are directed first and foremost against the military-industrial elite employing him. When he began working at MIT, in his own words, 'funding was almost entirely the Pentagon. About half the Institute's budget was

coming from two major military laboratories that they administered, and of the rest, the academic side, it could have been something like 90% or so from the Pentagon. Something like that. Very high. So it was a Pentagon-based university. And I was at a military-funded lab.<sup>9</sup>

Chomsky was conducting his researches within what had originally been part of the MIT Radiation Laboratory, in which radar had been developed during World War II. Now that Soviet Russia had replaced Nazi Germany as the main enemy, the military were interested in developing electronic systems for

which he moved. In May 1995, John Deutch was sworn in as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency following a unanimous vote in the Senate, making him head of the intelligence community – in charge of all foreign intelligence agencies of the United States. Shortly afterwards, Chomsky was interviewed about how well he'd known Deutch as a professional colleague at MIT. 'We were actually friends', replied Chomsky, 'and got along fine, although we disagreed on about as many things as two human beings can disagree about. I liked him. We got along very well together. He's very honest,

scientific elite. How could anyone cope – without a modular mind?

We can surely understand the very personal horror, almost personal responsibility, Chomsky must have felt while working as a respected scientist in the belly of the beast. Denouncing other people's crimes, as he puts it, is all too easy. One must expose one's own crimes – the crimes of one's own government, one's own institutional milieu – to retain one's self-esteem, to be able to 'look at oneself in the mirror without too much shame'.<sup>13</sup> Chomsky could reconcile his conscience with the job he loved

## **We're all supposed to keep political activism locked up in a separate box, insulated by a firewall from science. Mindless activism on the one hand; tongue-tied science on the other – that's been the tragic result**

purposes of surveillance, weapons 'command-and-control' and so forth.<sup>10</sup> Chomsky wasn't going to roll up his sleeves and build anything which actually worked. On the other hand, he had been inspired to take up linguistics thanks largely to his activist friend Zellig Harris, one of whose interests was machine translation. The project to develop automatic translation by equipping a machine with something like 'universal grammar' was officially part of Chomsky's first job. Although he had other ideas, Chomsky evidently felt at home analysing language in terms of postulated 'mechanisms', 'devices', 'circuits', 'switches', 'inputs', 'outputs' and so forth. So it's not that Pentagon pressure to develop their 'language machine' distorted Chomsky's thinking about how to revolutionise linguistics. It's not that he took the money and sold his soul. In purely intellectual terms, he was already there.

Now let's consider the circles in

very direct. You know where you stand with him.'<sup>11</sup> Chomsky actively supported Deutch's candidacy for the President of MIT, much to the surprise of his colleagues. In the event, that bid failed owing to faculty opposition.

It's important to grasp what's happening here. How many left-wing academics or activists maintain friendships of that kind? I'm not saying it's necessarily wrong. Once you've committed yourself to your chosen profession, you may have little choice. But Chomsky's 'schizophrenic existence' surely starts here, among such intense social and professional contradictions. According to his own account, 'the CIA does what it wants', conducting assassinations, bombings, invasions, mass murder of civilians and various other crimes against humanity.<sup>12</sup> While aware of the criminality of his institutional milieu, Chomsky rubs shoulders with these people, works for them, is part of the same professional and

only by publicly lashing out. He had to denounce the Pentagon – the military-industrial complex sponsoring his own research. Insofar as that complex possessed a conscience, Chomsky was it. He has retained that unique status to this day. That's why people come from far and wide to listen to him. It's not just his politics and it's not just his science. What attracts people – what carries conviction – is the painfully evident tension between the two.

**RA:** Yet you are implacably opposed to his science?

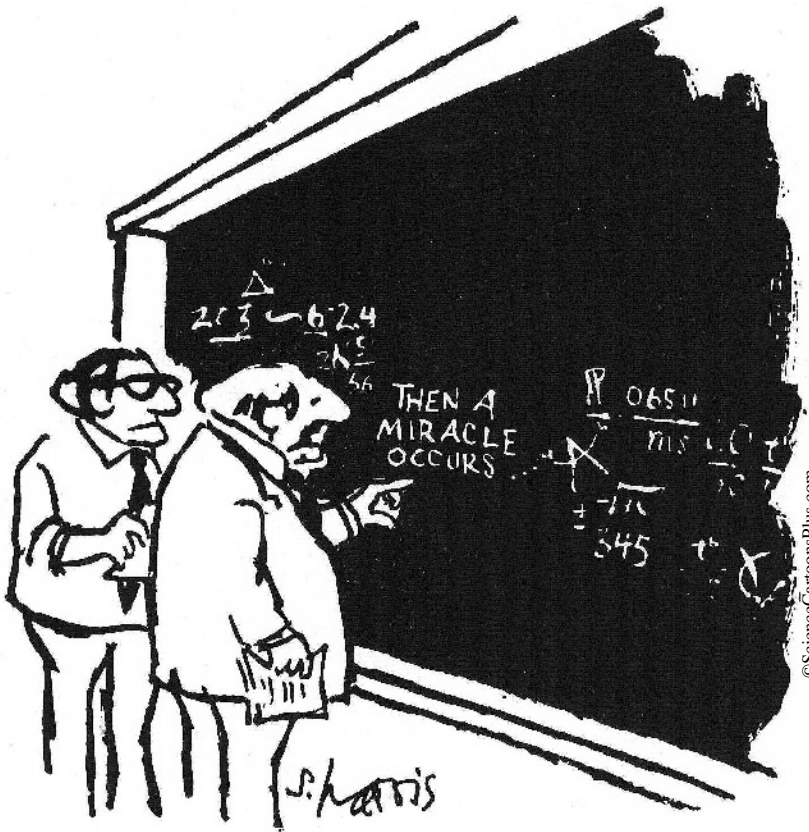
**CK:** Chomsky resists the behaviour of the military-industrial elite while endorsing and embodying its philosophy – its utterly bourgeois notion of 'science'. Let me put it this way. Imagine the most reactionary possible ideology. Imagine bourgeois individualism carried to its absolute logical extreme. Imagine a philosopher who took René Descartes' dictum 'I think, therefore I am!' as his point

of departure. Imagine going further even than Descartes in insisting that language exists only in the individual head, not to enable social communication but merely to enable thought. According to this ideology, no one else is required. You don't need language to share with anyone else, listen to anyone else, learn

is that I think they are relatively unimportant... Learning language is something like undergoing puberty. You don't learn to do it; you don't do it because you see other people doing it; you are just designed to do it at a certain time'.<sup>14</sup> According to Chomsky, the underlying principles of grammar

because it's already there, being present in every child thanks to its DNA. The child just has to find out which locally conventional sound to attach to the carburetor-concept already in its brain. Asked whether *Homo sapiens* possessed the concept of a carburetor thousands of years ago, long before the invention

**The brain-equals-digital-computer theory marginalises anthropology. Computers don't have a sense of humour, don't understand irony or metaphor, don't try to cheat or lie, don't have sex, don't pursue political agendas**



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

from anyone at all. You know it all already thanks to your genes. As Chomsky explained following a lecture about language acquisition: 'I emphasized biological facts, and I didn't say anything about historical and social facts. And I am going to say nothing about these elements in language acquisition. The reason

are internal features of your innate 'language organ', installed somewhere in your brain. Even the meanings of words are fixed internal features of this organ, so not even these need be learned. Take the word 'carburetor', for example. According to Chomsky, no child needs to learn this lexical concept

of motor cars, Chomsky insists that we must assume no less. As he explains: 'However surprising the conclusion may be that nature has provided us with an innate stock of concepts, and that the child's task is to discover their labels, the empirical facts appear to leave open few other possibilities.'<sup>15</sup>

So culture is irrelevant: nothing needs to be learned. Now add to this that you needn't bother about history: the language organ doesn't change, it doesn't undergo significant variation, it doesn't reflect social or political upheavals, it doesn't evolve. Imagine someone who claimed that language was conferred on the first human being in 'perfect' or 'near-perfect' form as if by 'a divine architect'.<sup>16</sup> Imagine all that and you're getting close to the scientific worldview of Noam Chomsky. I'm against it not only because it's nonsense but also because it's reactionary to the *n*th degree.

**RA:** Does Chomsky really deny language's communicative function?

**CK:** Language, he insists, 'is not properly regarded as a system of communication... It can of course be used for communication, as can anything people do – manner of walking or style of clothes or



hair, for example. But in any useful sense of the term, communication is not the function of language, and may even be of no unique significance for understanding the functions and nature of language.<sup>17</sup>

It's easy to see why Chomsky must say such things. To communicate, you need someone else. If language were to be regarded as communicative – hence social – then its study would amount to some kind of social science. Linguistics might then have to retain some connection with the social science tradition, influenced as that is by Marx. To make matters worse, it might have to connect up with Darwinism, hence with problems of conflict and competition – again matters of social dynamics, social relationships.

person suddenly got the language faculty, that person would have great advantages; the person could think, could articulate to itself its thoughts, could plan, could sharpen, and develop thinking as we do in inner speech, which has a big effect on our lives. Inner speech is most of speech. Almost all the use of language is to oneself...<sup>19</sup>

I've dwelt on all this not to convince you that it's complete nonsense. Of course it's complete nonsense! That's not my point. The job of an anthropologist is to conduct an analysis, something like decoding a myth. Chomsky himself uses the term 'fairy story', so we can agree it's pure myth. But why this particular myth? Why those narrative details and not others? And why Chomsky? Why did that particular figure during that historical conjuncture

a very rare person, almost to the point of non-existence, who can tolerate what's called "cognitive dissonance" – saying one thing and believing another. You start saying certain things because it's necessary to say them and pretty soon you believe them because you just have to.<sup>20</sup> Chomsky's achievement in this respect – his success in splitting himself in two – then became in subtle ways a model for the rest of us. To this day, we're all supposed to keep political activism locked up in a separate box, insulated by a firewall from science. Mindless activism on the one hand; tongue-tied science on the other – that's been the tragic result.

**RA:** But isn't this just an arcane dispute over what language is and how it might have evolved? Why does it matter so much? How far can

**The scientific community needs to defend itself against political interference, no matter how cleverly it is concealed. If science is to come first, we don't have a choice as to whether to become politically active.**

**If you're inactive, you're colluding in someone else's politics**

Anticipating where all this might lead, Chomsky takes pre-emptive action. Language, he legislates, is unconnected with anything else in the known universe, whether natural or cultural. It doesn't have a history; it didn't evolve. 'To tell a fairy story about it, it is almost as if there was some higher primate wandering around a long time ago and some random mutation took place, maybe after some strange cosmic ray shower, and it reorganized the brain, implanting a language organ in an otherwise primate brain'.<sup>18</sup> Why would such a miracle benefit an isolated mutant, utterly alone in the universe – with no one to talk to? Again, the objection is anticipated and legislated away: 'Actually, you can use language even if you are the only person in the universe with language, and in fact it would even have adaptive advantage. If one

have to invent that curious myth?

Rather than resort to psychological guesswork, let's keep to things we know about – to the institutional constraints. For Chomsky to manage his bifurcated life, linguistics at MIT had to be perceived as non-political. The Pentagon weren't going to fund an anarchist in his anarchist role. His officially sponsored science was one thing, his conscience quite another. His entire position – at the best of times a delicate balancing act – required constant vigilance in maintaining a firewall between the two. To prevent leakage either way, the divide had to be categorical: eliminate every trace of political or even social content from the science, eliminate every trace of scientific content from the politics. How does all this get internalised? Chomsky tellingly observes: 'It's

you attack Chomsky the linguist without attacking his politics as well?

**CK:** Chomsky has certainly set things up to make it seem politically difficult. Yes, the dangers are real. I would perhaps hold back except for one thing – the revolution needs to be won.

**RA:** Winning the revolution means overthrowing Chomsky?

**CK:** Winning the revolution means overthrowing that elitist philosophy, that politics, that class. It means putting science first, over and above the needs of big business or the military. It means informing our practice with what's best in modern science, while at the same time liberating science from its current institutional fragmentation and political marginalisation. More

specifically from an anthropological point of view, winning the revolution means gaining a proper understanding of what it means to be human. The idea of a mutation suddenly installing language is a complete distraction – in my view a deliberate one. Whether language emerged gradually or suddenly, we need to understand the precursors, the constraints and above all the social dynamics. If the process was sudden – as Chomsky claims – that implies a social revolution. Either way, we need to learn as much as we can about that

science?

**CK:** Chomsky's linguistics is supposedly non-political. In reality, though, it's about as political as you can get. Prior to Chomsky's intervention, no one defined language as biology and nothing else. While everyone agreed that language must have biological underpinnings, it was equally understood to be social, cultural, institutional to the core. It took Chomsky to re-invent linguistics as a rigorously 'Cartesian' discipline – one confined within the borders

scientific, unlike social science. Language enters into everything humans do, so whoever conquered linguistics, subordinating it to the methods of natural science, might well hope to conquer the rest. And so it turned out. In the eyes of his supporters, Chomsky was the figure who 'stormed the Winter Palace', acting as the most prominent standard-bearer for the so-called 'cognitive revolution' which quickly came to dominate much of linguistics, psychology, cognitive science and philosophy. He didn't have to engage directly

## The thread connecting Khlebnikov via Jakobson to Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky was a certain conception of freedom — a yearning for necessity imposed not externally but from within

momentous process, that event.

More effectively than any intellectual before or since, Chomsky has made it seem illegitimate to base revolutionary politics on science. Activists, he says, should keep science at arm's length. You couldn't get further away from Marx! Here's an example of how he justifies that stance: 'The idea that deep scientific analysis tells you something about problems of human beings and our lives and our inter-relations with one another and so on is mostly pretence in my opinion – self-serving pretence which is itself a technique of domination and exploitation and should be avoided'.<sup>21</sup> Marxist intellectuals, says Chomsky, always try to manipulate the masses by invoking the authority of science. His own view is that activists don't need science at all: everything people need to know about political matters is present on the surface for all to see.

**RA:** But maybe Chomsky is right on that score? Surely it would be disastrous to mix up politics with

of supposedly 'natural' science.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, Chomsky received massive institutional support for his intervention, which promised to turn the tide against the continuing intellectual influence of Marx. To finally discredit Marx, there seemed to be no choice but to go the whole way – the entire western intellectual tradition of social science had to go. Could the clock be turned right back to Descartes or even to Plato? Chomsky offered nothing less. No other intellectual was in a position to deliver on that extraordinary promise. No one else had the necessary moral authority or ambition. And as it turned out, it was a hugely successful attack, whose ramifications are still very much with us.

You have to remember that linguistics, in the immediate post-war period, was effectively 'the crown jewels'. It was that discipline within the humanities which seemed closest to natural science. Mathematics and physics were viewed as genuinely

with anthropology: the revolution was powerful enough to produce ripples almost everywhere. The agenda was to discredit Marxism and replace it with a 'naturalised' psychology – psychology conceptualised as natural science. Cultural and social phenomena would from now on be explained by invoking this or that module, this or that fixed property of the brain conceived as a digital computer.

Central to the 'cognitive revolution' was this bizarre idea: the human brain is a digital computer. It's a theory which marginalises evolutionary biology, anthropology, sociology and the humanities in general – intentionally so. Computers don't have a sense of humour, don't understand irony or metaphor, don't try to cheat or lie, don't have sex, don't pursue political agendas. Look at Chomsky's language organ: it's as disembodied and lifeless as that. There's apparently no connection with the rest of the brain, and no connection either with the rest of natural or social life. Provoked by Chomsky as he relentlessly pursued

his ‘revolutionary’ agenda, the ‘linguistics wars’ of the 1960s and 1970s were a disaster for everyone – an intellectual defeat from which we still haven’t recovered.

The outcome is that our current state of knowledge resembles a broken mirror, each fragment telling its own story. We need to put together the big picture, fighting for conceptual unification regardless of the political consequences. You can’t get away from politics – from power differences, conflicts of interest and so forth. In principle,

psychology’, it has only ever been applied to just one species – our own. Have you ever heard of ‘the evolutionary psychology of elephants’? Or ‘the evolutionary psychology of social insects’? Such things don’t exist because no self-respecting biologist would ever consider going down that road. You can’t study animals by extrapolating from supposed computational mechanisms inside their brains. Animals think, they are intelligent, they are conscious in various ways. But to understand what’s happening, scientists set out from what they do.

and astral projection’ module.<sup>24</sup> And so it goes on. Anthropologist Pascal Boyer views religious ideas as wholly ‘natural’: the modular brain determines which notions floating around are likely to get discarded and which passed on.<sup>25</sup> Pioneers in establishing this Alice-in-Wonderland approach are psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides. Not satisfied with modules in single digits, they need vast armies to solve every conceivable problem. ‘On this view’, as they explain, ‘our cognitive architecture resembles

## Have you ever heard of ‘the evolutionary psychology of elephants’? Or ‘the evolutionary psychology of social insects’? Such things don’t exist

however, scientific research involves accountability and collaboration on a level transcending such things. The scientific community needs to defend itself against political interference, no matter how cleverly it is concealed. If science is to come first, we don’t have a choice as to whether to become politically active. If you’re inactive, you’re colluding in someone else’s politics.

**RA:** Can you explain the impact on Darwinism of that ‘cognitive revolution’?

**CK:** A completely new version of Darwinism emerged, based on the idea that humans alter their behaviour according to how corresponding ‘modules’ evolve inside their heads. Nobody ever thought of explaining animal behaviour in this way, but then no one ever thought of animal brains as digital computers – they’re evidently nothing of the kind. So we had this new kind of Darwinism, utterly different from anything Darwin himself could remotely have envisaged. Described by its supporters as ‘evolutionary

So-called ‘evolutionary psychology’ is restricted to humans because our minds alone are imagined to be digital computers whose internal features can be studied independently of what we actually do.

A person, according to evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, is a ‘digital mind in an analog world’.<sup>22</sup> The mind/brain is a digital computer, so it doesn’t matter what the physical brain is actually made of – digital ‘software’ (mind) carries identical information regardless of the ‘hardware’ (brain) on which it runs. So let’s ignore matter: mind comes first. In similar spirit, archaeologist Steven Mithen pictures *Homo sapiens* evolving with a mind divided up into (a) social, (b) natural history and (c) technological intelligence – three computational modules in all.<sup>23</sup> But what about, say, shamanism? What’s the modular explanation for that? The answer duly appeared in a scholarly journal: shamanism is the distinctive output of a previously unsuspected ‘soul flight, soul journey, out-of-body experience

a confederation of hundreds of thousands of functionally dedicated computers (often called modules) designed to solve adaptive problems endemic to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Each of these devices has its own agenda and imposes its own exotic organization on different fragments of the world’.<sup>26</sup> Invent enough modules and you can ‘naturalistically’ explain what you like.

**RA:** And the effect on anthropology?

**CK:** In anthropology, the results have been far-reaching and overwhelmingly reactionary. Take, say, the study of cargo cults in Melanesia. When these were first studied, anthropologists treated them as indigenous responses to colonial and post-colonial exploitation. The natives apparently suffered from a strange delusion. In the light of their own tribal values, they imagined there must be justice somewhere in the world. When forced to concede that this wasn’t so – the rule of the white man was manifestly unjust – they refused

to give up. Instead, they shifted responsibility from the living to the dead. On the day when the dead returned to life and established their own rule, justice would at last be done and seen to be done. The white man's cargo planes and ships destined for distant lands would miraculously reverse direction, bringing untold riches to those who had created all that wealth in the first place.<sup>27</sup> The new 'modular' approach, however, is to explain such phenomena psychologically. Exploitation and oppression conveniently disappear. The natives' puzzling behaviour is instead traced back to 'micro-processes at the psychological level'.<sup>28</sup> The mind is a mass of computational modules, and sometimes glitches arise. The effect, needless to say, is to exonerate western capitalism and colonialism. You can guess who'll be funding this kind of anthropology and whose interests are served!

**RA:** Would you bracket Darwin and Marx together as victims of the cognitive revolution? It seems an unlikely alliance.

**CK:** Darwin and Marx differed on many things, but they shared a belief in the value of conflict, of internal social struggle, of 'civil war' as engines of change. All history is the history of life-and-death struggle for survival, whether between organisms (Darwin) or classes (Marx). Neither Darwin nor Marx saw the individual mind, whether animal or human, as capable of explaining anything. Both were materialists in that they looked to the body and its material interactions – the struggle to find food, to reproduce and so on – to explain whatever might be happening in anyone's mind.

**RA:** Presumably Chomsky is not some malevolent scheming mastermind in the pay of the Pentagon? What is the intellectual ancestry here? How does someone of left-wing anarchist inclination end up generating reactionary

scientific theory? Is there some dialectical process starting from a revolutionary tradition?

**CK:** During revolutionary periods, those struggling for freedom invariably resist the prevailing deterministic logic – the deadening belief in iron laws beyond anyone's power to defy or overthrow. If revolution is imminent, why not seize the moment? Why not defy the law and, while you're about it, why not take on nature's laws as well?

During and immediately following the Russian revolution, artists, poets, musicians and other revolutionary intellectuals became seized with such hopes and dreams, letting their imaginations run wild. This was the period of cubo-futurism and constructivism – libertarian communist/anarchist movements



Agitprop poster by Vladimir Mayakovsky

based on the idea that art was for changing reality, not just passively reflecting it. Form takes priority over content. You dream, you play, you fantasize – and you fight to realize those dreams. In this spirit, Darwin and Marx are turned on their heads. Those stereotypically grey-bearded, grim thinkers' rigidly deterministic, spiritually imprisoning 'laws of history' – whether natural or human – are cheerfully defied and turned upside-down. Revolution transports you from the realm of necessity to that of freedom.

The Russian poet who soared highest with such ideas was Velimir Khlebnikov – the 'King of Time' celebrated for predicting the date of the 1917 revolution back in 1912.<sup>29</sup> Khlebnikov's extraordinary theories about mathematics, historical time and language – about the power of the imagination and the magic of words – heavily influenced the young linguist and literary critic Roman Jakobson. Why does Jakobson matter? Well, in the 1920s he co-founded the Prague school of linguistics. He later became Claude Lévi-Strauss' close friend and source of theoretical inspiration. One final point: in the 1950s, from his office in MIT, Jakobson helped Chomsky to get his first job.

**RA:** So there's a thread linking Khlebnikov to Chomsky?

**CK:** I've no evidence Chomsky ever heard of Khlebnikov. But Jakobson was a huge influence on twentieth century linguistics, hence inevitably on Chomsky. Jakobson when only a teenager mingled intimately with Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky and the other 'futurists' or 'cubo-futurists', as they called themselves.<sup>30</sup> These iconoclasts instinctively embraced the October revolution, becoming in many ways its principal artistic expression. Khlebnikov explored word roots in his native Russian convinced that he could unearth a 'transrational' language of pure sounds common to humanity. While perhaps not very scientific, his work inspired Jakobson, who helped found a school of linguistics which eventually produced 'distinctive features' theory. If anything about linguistics was truly 'scientific', this was widely tipped to be it. The approach reaches beneath cultural variation to the bedrock of human nature – to genetically determined biology and psychology. The pharynx, tongue, lips and so forth function as digital switches, offering no intermediate states between lips 'open' and lips 'closed', voicing 'off' and voicing 'on'. By combining selected 'features'

of this categorical kind, you can generate any vowel or consonant in any of the world's languages. So it's a kind of universal language rooted in a natural digital apparatus – a universal alphabet of pure sounds.

Is language in its entirety a digital system? And if so, is that a reflection of the innate digital architecture of the distinctively human mind? Under the influence of Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss invented 'structural anthropology' on the basis of just that idea. A decade later, Chomsky was gravitating around the same body of theory. Might it be possible, he wondered, to extend distinctive features theory from phonetics through syntax all the way to meaning – to the possibility of some kind of 'generative semantics'? The idea seemed thrilling since it offered the prospect of explaining language in all its aspects in purely biological, purely naturalistic terms. What happened next is a long story. Suffice it to say that from the moment it was seriously attempted, Chomsky realised the idea wouldn't work. Intractable problems led to bitter disputes culminating in the infamous 'linguistics wars'. Despite this, Chomsky has never let go of the basic idea. He continues to view semantic meanings as somehow 'internal' – as genetically fixed features of the digital mind. The thread connecting Khlebnikov via Jakobson to Lévi-Strauss and ultimately Chomsky is a certain conception of freedom – a yearning for necessity imposed not externally but from within.

**RA:** So a school of linguistics originating among Russian revolutionary anarchists ends up being sponsored by the US military-industrial establishment?

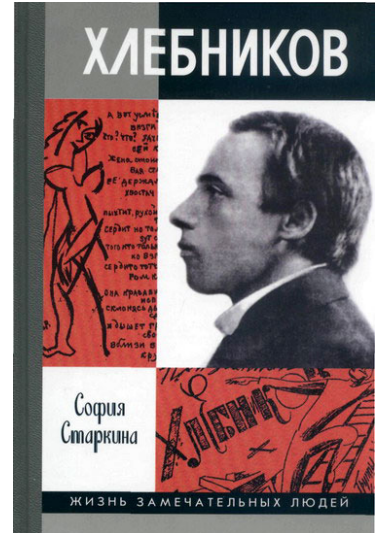
**CK:** Yes. And to understand that trajectory is to decode a good chunk of the twentieth century. Why, for example, was Chomsky

working at MIT in the first place? Why did it seem politically acceptable for an anarchist to rub shoulders like that with the US scientific and military elite? Let's remember how all this started. Go back to the 1930s and to Hitler's

he went quiet on hearing the terrible news about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet the idea of science against the Nazis was central to the political ethos of the time, especially if – like Chomsky – you were left-wing and Jewish. And that



Kazimir Malevich, 'The Knife-Grinder'. 1912



Velimir Khlebnikov: 'the King of Time'

rise in Germany. Across Europe you had a generation of young scientists, many of them Jewish anti-fascists and sympathisers with the revolutionary cause. When war broke out, it was mathematics against the Nazis, nuclear physics against the Nazis, digital computers against the Nazis. In Britain, Alan Turing – theoretical genius behind the digital computer – helped crack the Enigma Code used by the Germans to encrypt military communications. In the United States, of course, scientists were working feverishly on the Manhattan Project – the project to develop the first nuclear bomb. If you wanted an Allied victory, why not work for their war machine, for the military-industrial complex, for your own side's secret agents and spies? Wasn't it all part of the same anti-fascist fight?

A teenager during those years, Chomsky was too much of an anarchist to feel comfortable about collusion with the state. His instincts verged on pacifism:

political culture didn't just die at the end of the war. It lived on. When Chomsky took up linguistics before getting his job at MIT, it was with the encouragement of Zellig Harris, Roman Jakobson and a network of radicalised scientists and scholars in positions of influence, many of them refugees fortunate to have escaped the gas chambers



Inputs and outputs: the Enigma machine

in Europe. Chomsky's approach appealed to them because it seemed almost mathematical, promising understanding beyond mere politics or ideology. Could Chomsky be the Galileo of our age, destined to revolutionize the known world? His friends gave him the benefit of the doubt, ensuring his meteoric rise to ascendancy over linguistics and much else. Revolutionaries usually have to fight their way up. In Chomsky's case, the gods seemed to be hoisting him aloft.

By the 1950s, of course, the official enemy was no longer Germany – it was the Soviet Union. But it wasn't difficult for the US propaganda machine to depict Stalin as the new Hitler, Moscow as the new centre of

all evil, the new totalitarian threat. In place of science against the Nazis, you could now have science against Marxism – natural science against oppressive and fraudulent so-called 'social science'. That was the political thrust behind Chomsky's 'cognitive revolution'. Having defeated its enemy on the right, US imperialism needed to target the left.

**RA:** What's the relevance of all this to our present situation?

**CK:** There's no point waiting around for a genetic mutation. Becoming human didn't depend on that when language first emerged and it certainly doesn't depend on it now. We need to become aware

of the intelligence and power we already have. We've invented the internet – the necessary communications technology – but its potential has yet to be realised. For that, we need a revolution embracing life, politics and science. We need to bring together the social and natural sciences and help solve the mystery of human origins. Whatever the details, the process of becoming human was social. My commitment is to the human revolution: the most successful social revolution in history! We did it once; we can do it again.

**RA:** So when is the revolution? Any forecasts?

**CK:** 2017 could be a good year! 🍷



Neil Jackson

**Chris Knight** is Professor of Anthropology at Comenius University, Bratislava, having been sacked by University of East London's corporate management for his role in organising the G20 demonstrations in April 2009. [chris.knight@live.com](mailto:chris.knight@live.com)

## Notes

1. Chris Knight 2004. Decoding Chomsky. *European Review* Vol. 12, No. 4, 581-603. [http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org/old/class\\_text\\_070.pdf](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org/old/class_text_070.pdf)
2. Chris Knight 2007. The Chomsky Enigma. *Weekly Worker*, 655 (January 11). US Establishment Anarchist. *Weekly Worker* 656 (January 18). Chomsky's Parallel Lives. *Weekly Worker* 657 (January 25).
3. The treachery of the intelligentsia: A French travesty. Interview dated 26 October 1981. In Noam Chomsky 1988, *Language and Politics*. Edited by Carlos Otero. Montreal: Black Rose Books, p. 318.
4. Noam Chomsky 1988. *Language and Problems of Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 156.
5. Interview with David Barsamian. In Noam Chomsky 1996, *Class Warfare*. London: Pluto Press, p. 15.
6. Noam Chomsky 2000. *The Architecture of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.
7. Interview with Carlos Otero. In Noam Chomsky 1988, *Language and Politics*, p. 98.
8. The treachery of the intelligentsia, p. 319.
9. Interview with David Barsamian, p. 102.
10. Frederick Newmeyer 1986. *The Politics of Linguistics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 84-87.
11. Interview with David Barsamian, p. 101.
12. Noam Chomsky 1988. The 'right turn' in U.S. policy (22 October 1986). In *Language and Politics*, p. 649.
13. Interview with James Peck. In Noam Chomsky 1988. *The Chomsky Reader*. Edited by James Peck. London: Serpent's Tail, p. 55.
14. Chomsky 1988. *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, pp. 173-4.
15. Noam Chomsky 2000. *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 65-6.
16. Noam Chomsky 1997. *Powers and Prospects. Reflections on human nature and the social order*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 29-30.
17. Noam Chomsky 2002. *On Nature and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 76.
18. Chomsky 2000. *The Architecture of Language*, p. 4.
19. Chomsky 2002. *On Nature and Language*, p. 148.
20. Chomsky 1988. The 'right turn' in U.S. policy, pp. 653-4.
21. Chomsky 2000. *The Architecture of Language*, p. 2.
22. Steven Pinker 1999. *Words and Rules. The ingredients of language*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, pp. 269-287.
23. Steven Mithen 1996. *A Prehistory of the Mind*. London: Thames & Hudson.
24. Michael Winkelman 2002. *Shamanism and cognitive evolution*. Cambridge Archaeological Journal, 12:1: 71-101.
25. Pascal Boyer, 1994. *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
26. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides 1995. Foreword. Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness. An essay on autism and theory of mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. xi-xviii.
27. Peter Worsley 1968. *The Trumpet Shall Sound*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.
28. Robert McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson 2002. *Bringing Ritual to Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 180.
29. Velimir Khlebnikov, 1990. *The King of Time. Selected Writings of the Russian Futurian*. Edited by Charlotte Douglas and translated by Paul Schmidt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
30. Jakobson, R. 1997. *My Futurist Years*. New York: Marsilio.

# Deconstructing War on Terror

Watching from the frontline of the Indian ‘civil war’, *Felix Padel* urges anthropology to wake us up to the reality of ‘terror’.

When I first studied anthropology, one of the books that excited me most was Rodney Needham’s *Right and Left* (1973). If dual symbolic classification is intrinsic to most tribal societies, it assumes a more extreme form in modern mainstream culture, from Left and Right in politics, to winners and losers in a game of football, sanctifying the principle of competition.

An American traveler I met visited a remote tribal community in Brazil. Missionaries had taught the boys to play football. The American loved this game, and when he joined in, the temperature rose until two boys fell down, locked in a fight. At this, one of the men appeared with a spear, and speared the football through its middle. The American

Elected politicians depend on funds from corporations and banks that set an agenda towards short-term profit for the controlling elite, whose complex social structure of divided labour, involving accountancy and law firms, hedge funds and commodity analysts, calls out for clear anthropological analysis.

Critically, social anthropology has the expertise to make a radical contribution to defusing the insane ‘war on terror’ presently engulfing our world. Beneath terror as a weapon of war, being waged by governments and armies through high-tech weapons systems and by ‘terrorists’ on behalf of marginalized, oppressed populations, lurks another terror – repeatedly played on – which anthropologists are in the perfect position to assuage: fear of ‘the other’.

widespread attacks on villages in the war against Maoists in tribal areas of central India. Arguably, this is one of the worst wars there has ever been in India, though poorly comprehended by the media or travellers to the country.

India’s Adivasi (indigenous or tribal) areas are presently witnessing a ‘Highland Clearances’ comparable to the genocidal removal of indigenous societies all over America and Australia. Adivasi land and resources are being taken over on precisely the same rationale as Scottish clansmen were cleared from their crofts during the 19th century: for being ‘uneconomic’. Cartel-style control of prices of food grains as well as metal ores, and the devaluation of long-term sustainability in relation to short-term profit, spell death for millions

**Adivasi land and resources are being taken over on precisely the same rationale as Scottish clansmen were cleared from their crofts during the 19th century: for being ‘uneconomic’**

was utterly shocked. ‘The football was sacred to me, and I asked the kids, why did he do that?’ He saw the men collecting in a semicircle facing the forest, each speaking as the spirit moved him, and asked the kids ‘what are they saying?’ One of the boys said, ‘Our parents don’t like this game. They think it divides us.’ ‘Stars went off in my head when I heard that,’ the American told me.

What anthropology offers is ways of seeing ourselves afresh, through other people’s eyes. Perhaps the core area, where we have failed to develop at all, is in the problem of power. ‘Democracy’ is often a sham.

The war on terror emerges from an ideology that believes in a ‘clash of civilisations’ – in other words, from a long history of intolerance and misunderstanding between different kinds of society. As experts in ‘other cultures’, and in reflective understanding of our own, mainstream society from the perspective of other cultures, isn’t it a responsibility for anthropologists to play a more proactive role? The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan set a new model of war. This has already had an influence on escalating wars in other countries, to horrific effect in Sri Lanka, and provided the example for

of small-scale farmers in India and other ‘developing countries’. The very term ‘developing countries’ implies a hierarchy, in which rich western countries are ‘ahead’ and set the model. Surely, enforced industrialisation displacing sustainable farming has reached its limits and needs reversing?

Conflicts over land and resources enveloping hundreds of areas threaten to transform India from a land of villages to a situation where most of the countryside is being farmed more ‘economically’ by the bio-tech companies and their associates (according to top

economist Jeff Sachs and India's Home Minister P. Chidambaram). Vast mineral deposits are being 'utilised' – extraction of non-renewable mineral and water wealth transforming large fertile areas into industrial wastelands. Scores of people's movements against the takeover of land and resources face harsh repression, hardly reported in the world's media. One example is



Author on the bauxite-capped summit of a mountain threatened with mining near Karlapat in Orissa

the state violence brought against villagers resisting Tata's new steel plant being built on tribal land at Kalinganagar in Orissa.<sup>1</sup>

The vicious repression and lack of justice faced by people in these movements adds to the appeal of Maoist armed struggle. But as soon as a movement can be shown to be taken over by alleged Maoists, the armed police are sent in, and village land is forcibly taken over with impunity. The highest-paying market for steel and aluminium is the arms industry, burgeoning in India, and at the heart of the economy of all the 'developed countries' – a 'double death', since this civil war in India's tribal heartland is promoted, consciously or unconsciously, in pursuit of metals for war.<sup>2</sup> The arms industry,

arguably, is at the centre of the world's economy, little discussed in relation to the financial crisis, just as the metals industry that feeds it is little discussed in relation to global heating, even though it is among the main agents.

What is new is encapsulated in the name: 'War on Terror'. Before we can conceive of ways to bring peace to so many inflamed situations, perhaps we – and our leaders – have to go deeper into understanding the contradictions inherent in a 'war on terror'. To do this, anthropology is crucial. Many people turn to anthropology from a deep interest in what makes human beings tick, and what could solve the world's problems. Too often they are disappointed by jargonistic models, that still subordinate analysing mainstream social structures to studying marginal groups, including the world's last remaining tribal societies. Tribal societies have a vast amount still to teach us – but this can only happen by learning from them how to see ourselves afresh, rather than by continuing to treat them as 'objects of study'. We need 'reverse anthropology', that draws on other cultures' ways of understanding us as well as them. If anthropology has value, what analysis and insights can we offer that carry an authoritative perspective on how to end the war on terror?

Contradictions in the idea of 'war on terror' operate on several levels. Confusion in the concept acts as a smokescreen, dispersing clear thinking. For one, linguistically, the phrase does not make sense: how can war be waged on an abstract noun? Contradictions in the concept go back to the 'terrorist' label applied to Armenians in Turkey during the first world war, used to justify genocide. They are well analysed in relation to US interventions in Latin America in Edward Herman's *The real terror*

*network* (1982).

Generating the linguistic distortion, the basic error is an assumption that 'others' are the ones using terror as a tactic, rather than 'us'. Yet it is obvious that both sides in every war use terror as a tactic, and 'shock and awe' tactics used in the invasion of Iraq set a model of extreme use of terror against civilians as well as enemy soldiers. The *Wikileaks* release of over 90,000 documents on the Afghan war (July 2010) reveals what anyone who has followed the war closely already knew well: that thousands of civilian deaths have been caused by 'allied forces' as well as Taliban. Many of these deaths are, in effect, war crimes, and have been covered up by those pursuing the war.

If the two sides in the war on terror both use terror as a tactic, and often show themselves as ruthlessly uncaring about loss of life and suffering they cause, they differ in one main respect. 'Terrorists' use low-tech tactics: guerilla warfare, suicide bombings, videoed beheadings... This is war waged by 'the wretched of the earth', fuelled by outrage at the double standards that treat the deaths of civilians in the world's top cities as far worse than civilian deaths in faraway countries 'where we can't even say the name'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet both sides use not just extreme violence and intimidation by terror (of civilians as well as fighters), they also use the concept of 'sacrifice'. UK and US politicians behave exactly like Al Qaeda and Taliban in speaking of our own men's deaths in terms of sacrifice. Neither side speaks of sacrificing civilian lives by their own actions, whether 'collateral damage' from aerial attacks or suicide bombings. 'Our brave boys' are heroes whose sacrifice makes us proud, just as we know that every 'terrorist' or insurgent group refers to deaths of their fighters in terms of sacrifice and martyrdom. This concept of



sacrifice fuels the conflict.

In a sense, the model of a justified war is premised on this idea: Casualties of civilians as well as fighters are justified by noble ends. This is a concept of human sacrifice on a scale that eclipses all the prehistoric models known to history and anthropology.

In discussions of the *Wikileaks* that now admit allied soldiers have killed many civilians in Afghanistan (as in Iraq), this is still hedged with 'of course, far fewer than the Taliban have killed'. But is this true? With statistics, everything depends what one is counting. There have been few let-ups in killings of Afghan civilians since the time of Soviet intervention and western funding of anti-Soviet jihadists, till now. When 'the allies' decided to attack Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, they set in motion an escalation in violence that has not ceased. Whether allied soldiers or Talib have killed more civilians could be debated forever. But the pattern of violence, arrests and torture by allied soldiers has led to at least 100,000 deaths in Afghanistan. Women's groups in Afghanistan have been as outspoken as anyone about excesses by occupying soldiers, and their alliance with Afghan warlords who have acted as repressively towards women as the Taliban. An estimate by the Afghan women's group RAWA put the number of civilians killed by US jets in October-December 2001 at over 3,000 – already exceeding the civilians killed in the 9/11 attack.<sup>4</sup>

Many other governments and security forces have followed the example set by these 'legitimate' wars. Escalation of the Palestine-Israeli conflict, Turkey's war against the PKK and Kurds, Russia's Chechen wars, and 'Operation Tribal Hunt' in central India<sup>5</sup> are similar in their devastating effects on civilian populations.

The plight of Turkey's Kurdish

population is one of the world's worst-reported conflicts. An estimated 6,000 Kurdish villages have been destroyed and depopulated, producing a stream of refugees and an ongoing cultural genocide, since the 1980s. PKK resistance has been noted for its maintenance of 'honourable' standards – such as observing the Geneva Conventions, whereas PKK fighters are regularly tortured. Labelling the PKK as terrorists, as happened in Britain in 2000, has been strongly questioned by a range of campaigners, and arguably is only maintained because Turkey is seen as a key ally of the West.<sup>6</sup> Anna Politkovskaya's reporting on Chechnya documents another extreme example of brutal

occupation and invasion of a remote population, who lost any recourse to justice,<sup>7</sup> a situation tacitly condoned by Western powers.

The slow escalation towards civil war in India's tribal areas gathered pace in mid-2005, when many shady deals were signed between state governments and mining companies. Deals signed for more iron ore mines and steel plants in South Chhattisgarh immediately preceded the formation of Salwa Judum, a tribal militia that was claimed to be a 'spontaneous tribal uprising against the Maoists', but was actually a police-armed outfit, under non-tribal leadership, that has burnt over 600 tribal villages in Dantewara district alone. The pattern that has emerged is of Salwa Judum attacking tribal villages, killing and raping selected victims, burning the houses, and forcing captives into roadside refugee

camps, where men and youths are forced to join the militia. Since some part of most villages escaped to the Maoist side, civil war aptly describes the situation, and the attempt by many villagers not to take sides becomes next to impossible. Both sides use terror tactics, and while Maoist atrocities are well-publicised in the media, human rights reports suggest that atrocities by Salwa Judum and security forces are much more common. A recent interview by a senior Director of Police lists large-scale abuse by armed police, and the failure to bring perpetrators to justice, as a principal fuel stoking tribal recruitment to the Maoist armed struggle.<sup>8</sup> Repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act

## UK and US politicians behave exactly like Al Qaeda and Taliban in speaking of our own men's deaths in terms of sacrifice

(which guarantees impunity for offenders in uniform) could go a long way to bringing peace.

Adivasi culture has an ingrained regard for truth and law. Niyam Raja, 'King of Law', is a supreme deity for Dongria Konds, the tribe resisting the takeover of their sacred mountain for bauxite mining by Vedanta Resources, registered in London. One Kond elder, who had come to demonstrate outside India's Supreme Court at the legal process which in effect sold this mountain in exchange for huge sums the company would have to pay for 'tribal development', 'forestation programs' and 'wildlife management', described a particular judge's role with the words: *Taro karma, amoro dharma* - his the karma/action/sin, ours the dharma/duty/law.

An ecological awareness permeates



From Amarendra & Samarendra Das' documentary, 'Earth worm: Company man', 2005

Dongria woman

## 'Where are the saints in your society?' Here we're all saints'

tribal spirituality: a sense of laws upholding a balance of life. The 4,000-foot summits are sacred to Niyam Raja, with a taboo on cutting trees that has left a covering of primary forest in his honour, with a clear understanding that this helps nourish the mountain's fertile, mineral-rich perennial streams.

Mountains where bauxite has been mined lose their water-holding capacity: the monsoon water runs straight off, perennial stream dry up, and farmland below loses its fecundity.

'Where are the saints in your society? Here we're all saints' are words of another Kond elder, his

meaning that in a traditional tribal village, people share what they have, with no one much richer or poorer than others, and no waste. Could we relearn the joys of sharing? Could we start by enforcing caps on salaries and a ceiling on wealth, to ensure that food and other resources can be shared in the interests of everyone? What about long-term protection of the environment alongside the community rights of those who have lived sustainably with their environment?

Anthropology has a major role to play in opening people's minds. 🌍

### Editor's Note:

On August 24, 2010, shortly after this article was written, India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh blocked Vedanta Resources' controversial plan to mine bauxite on the Dongria Kond tribe's sacred hills. Ramesh cited 'shocking and blatant disregard' by Vedanta for protected tribal groups. In this test case, the Indian government has set an example to the world. Some things are sacred.



**Felix Padel** is an independent anthropologist, currently a senior visiting fellow at the Institute of Rural Management at Anand in Gujarat [IRMA] and an honorary fellow at Durham University. His first book *Sacrificing People: Invasions of a Tribal Landscape* (Orient BlackSwan 2010) has been republished while his second *Out of this Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (Orient BlackSwan 2010) is coauthored with Samarendra Das.

### Notes

1. Javed Iqbal: 'The Unending war of Kalinga', in *The New Indian Express*, 17.4.2010, <http://expressbuzz.com/searchresult/javed-iqbal>

2. Padel: 'Mining as a fuel for war', in *The broken rifle*, no.77, February 2008, on War Resisters International website, <http://www.wri-irg.org/br75-en.htm>

3. A line in a song by Jackson Brown.

4. Seumas Milne: 'The innocent dead in a coward's war: Estimates suggest US bombs have killed at least 3,767 civilians', 20.12.2001, at <http://www.rawa.org/civilian.htm>

5. Javed Iqbal: 'Operation tribal hunt', in *TNE*, 15.11.2009, <http://expressbuzz.com/searchresult/javed-iqbal>

6. 'Memorandum for the information of the Home Secretary of the UK: Listing of

the Kurdish Workers' Party as a terrorist organisation', 14.4.2010.

7. *A Small Corner of Hell*, 2003.

8. Shoma Chaudhury: 'Bringing on the army against the naxals will be a disaster', in *Teelka*, 12 June 2010, at [http://www.teelka.com/story\\_main45.asp?filename=Ne120610bringing\\_on.asp](http://www.teelka.com/story_main45.asp?filename=Ne120610bringing_on.asp)

# Avatar: A call to save the future

Rupert Read reviews the criticisms levelled at the film *Avatar* and sees it as a call to action.

“The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”  
Thomas Berry

**A** *Avatar* begins with a dream. A dream of flying: over a beautiful place with an intact ecosystem. We might call it: a dream of Earth. A dream of what Earth has been, and could be again, if we restore its ecosystems. *Avatar* quickly follows this with a long sleep and an absence of dreaming. The protagonist, the narrator, an everyman, our avatar in the film, tells us that if you are cryogenically suspended, “You don’t dream at all.”

The film invites us, by contrast, to dream. It suggests to us that to dream is to live; that to live without dreaming is not really to live at all. That if we live like that, then we might as well already be in cryo. In other words: the “You” in the above quotation is you. The film suggests to us also that we need to wake up, that we need to open our eyes, to become enlightened.<sup>1</sup> The film opens with the protagonist’s eyes closed. Perhaps it isn’t surprising then that it ends with a shot of a pair of eyes – the same eyes, and yet not the same, as at the start of the film – opening.

The Na’vi call the avatars ‘dreamwalkers’. This seems a desperately apposite term. So long as the avatars stay aloof from the lived socio-ecological reality of the world in which they find themselves – so long as humans fantasise themselves as separate

from their/our world – they are just as if dreaming. They are merely dreaming, as opposed perhaps to deeply or great-heartedly dreaming. They need to wake up – and find that the dream is real. As Jake himself puts it: ‘Everything is backwards now. Like out there [on the living surface of Pandora] is the true world, and in here [in the artificial atmosphere of the Earthlings’ colonial outpost] is the dream...’.



Two Na’vi protested outside Vedanta’s AGM

I want to invite you, the reader, to join the dream. I shall proceed by identifying the obstacles to doing so – the key objections that have been made against *Avatar* – and dispensing with them, one by one.

## The ‘sentimentalisation’ objection

To the charge that *Avatar* sentimentalises its world,<sup>2</sup> we can

reply in the negative. For Pandora is a world much more naturally hostile than ours – there are no fluffy bunnies here. The Pandoran jungle is a morass of menace. Our hero in the film is repeatedly, contemptuously described by his love (before she loves him) as ‘like a baby’: he has no clue how to survive in this natural, hostile world. He doesn’t know what to do. Similarly, we are at sea, so many of us, now, in nature; and this will be a serious problem, if we are ever

forced back to relying on it again...as we will be. This is why we tend to deny and fear nature, and cling to hope of techno-fixes as solutions to our environmental, economic, and even our spiritual malaise. But *Avatar* suggests various kinds of limits to such fixes. In particular, it suggests that the techno-fix mentality involves at its core an evasion and a loss: evasion of our true nature; loss of the sense of beauty and connectedness that it can yield up for us.

Of course, being ‘like a baby’ can have its upsides too, if one needs to see things genuinely

afresh, to wake up... to be reborn... This is just what happens to the protagonist in *Avatar* in two ways.

First, this is why he becomes a student of the Na’vi, in an obvious instance of ‘reverse anthropology’ from the moment when he says to Neytiri, ‘If I’m like a child, then maybe you should teach me.’ She replies, ‘Some people cannot learn,

you do not see.’ She is right. He seems to know this, responding, ‘Then teach me how to see.’ She replies, with feeling, ‘No one can teach you how to see.’ And this too is true – unless the ‘teaching’ is of another kind from what we are typically taught to think of as ‘teaching’. The kind that can come from immersion – immersion in another life; or, failing that, immersion in another world through

are implicitly questioned in the poignant closing section of the film. Pandora may be as yet a relatively unspoiled world, but it is a world where humans have to face the consequence of an atmosphere that spells destruction for them (and that means: for us)... Does this remind you of anything? The hothouse atmosphere of Pandora has very high levels of CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>4</sup> It is unbreatheable for us. While Earth

despoiled even more systematically than it has yet been in our time. In such a world, the predominant attitude toward nature will be one of fear and disgust – the attitude that is impressed upon the new Marine arrivals on Pandora. The way in which the humans in this film are treating Pandora, merely as a massive new mine for ‘natural resources’, and not as a possible new home, expresses profoundly

**He is on the final stage of his journey to completely going native.  
To going from being merely an American, to being a Native American.  
This is the kind of journey, the film intimates to us,  
that we all need to go on, if we are to save ourselves.**

the world-making properties of art (especially, of 3-D film).

Secondly, this is part of the significance of the remarkable scene toward the close of the film in which Neytiri cradles Jake in his disabled human form, after she has saved his life, and says ‘I see you’. She sees him, as human, awakening, as deeply loveable. The human Jake will later experience full rebirth – as one of the Na’vi. He is on the final stage of his journey to completely going native. To going from being merely an American, to being a Native American. This is the kind of journey, the film intimates to us, that we all need to go on, if we are to save ourselves.

Does *Avatar* romanticise ‘the natives’? Well, it accurately reflects the genuinely ecological sensibility of some (not, of course, all) native peoples/native Americans, etc.<sup>3</sup> Take for instance the requirement to take no decision which shall harm the interests of the seventh generation, laid down by the Iroquois, and still inspiring political thought today. The Na’vi are not depicted as saintly, not as homogenous, nor as entirely peace-loving. Crucially, their tendency to righteous anger and their willingness to go to war

in the dystopian future imagined here has been utterly ravaged by humans, the utopia of Pandora carries with it a subtle but grim reminder of the most pressing current form of this destruction – namely, the awful damage that we are doing to our atmosphere. Will our atmosphere always be breathable? Will it support human life, human civilisation? Will it, rather, roast us to death? This awesome question angsts us, at the back of our minds, constantly, and rightly so. *Avatar* doesn’t let us forget it. If we destroyed the Earth’s ecosystems, through catastrophic climate change occurring as a result of changes we were responsible for, it would make a kind of grim sense if we couldn’t even breathe the atmosphere of the world that we tried to escape to.

We should note that the Earthlings in the film don’t literally attempt to escape to Pandora – they are not in the customary sense of the word ‘settlers’. Pandora is not really being settled, and nor is it being treated as a tourist destination. Why is this? The impression we have of the future-Earth in this film is of a planet where human beings are systematically alienated from nature, and where nature has been

the alienation from nature that is a central topic of the film – and from which the film aims to midwife a birth.

### **The ‘prejudiced against the disabled’ objection**

Does *Avatar* romanticise embodiment but yet attack/fear the power our bodies can have over us? Some have complained that *Avatar* is prejudiced against the disabled.<sup>5</sup> Our hero is wheelchair-bound; he wants to be able to walk, to run, (to fly!), again. Well, so of course do most disabled people. But it is a complete misunderstanding of the film to find any prejudice whatsoever here against the disabled, for three reasons.

First, this disabled Marine is a feisty fighter, with strong arms, able to take care of himself to a remarkable degree, despite the prejudice he encounters for being disabled. That prejudice is social, contingent – the film endorses the ‘social model’ of disability, in that it makes clear that Jake is deprived of the operation that could enable him to walk again simply because he lacks enough money to pay for it, and in that it is the prejudice of his fellow humans and their failure to make an environment that works

for him as a wheelchair-bound person which restricts him.

Secondly, and more importantly still: not being able to walk is trivial, compared with not having a clue how to survive, and indeed not being able to breathe. All human beings – all these ‘babies’, one might say – are placed in the subject-position of the disabled, on Pandora. Thus a disabled human serves as a prototypical representative of the entire human race. Jake’s (contingent, simultaneously physical-and-social) disability stands in for our (contingent, simultaneously physical-and-social) disability in relation to the natural world – to nature that we see as Other, to a greenhouse atmosphere we can’t survive in. We see ourselves in a disabled person because we are all disabled by Pandora. In other words: we all risk being disabled by nature until we can find ourselves at home in it again. The film radically turns around our social norm, of thinking of

atmosphere of Pandora due to the attack by his former commander on the building in which he is lying there ‘dreamwalking’, is in any case a pretty devastating refutation of the ‘*Avatar* is prejudiced against the disabled’ line. It is a deeply moving scene. She cries out, “Jake! My Jake!” when she finds his threatened human body, caught up in the general human incapacity to exist in the greenhouse atmosphere of Pandora. Far from Neytiri being appalled when she finally sees Jake’s real body, she is moved, and loving. If we have been harbouring discriminatory thoughts toward Jake as a disabled person, she shames us, flushing them into the open. She says, ‘I see you’, the ultimate epistemological compliment. She sees that this is not just a broken body; this is a person who she loves. This is the psychical and corporeal home, in a way obviously the true form, of the man she loves. She pulls us up short from any remaining tendencies we may have had to think that Jake will be well-shot of his disabled human

### **Anti-american and leftist objections**

The film draws you into its world, Pandora, and the native people there, the Na’vi. It’s Cowboys and Indians all over again – only this time, you’re on the Indians’ side.<sup>6</sup> For the invasion of this new frontier comes – as one watches the film and learns from the Na’vi and joins Jake in his progressive transformation into one of them – increasingly to seem an appalling thing. Incipient disaster triumphant. But it is a total misunderstanding of the film to dub it, as many right-wing commentators have done, ‘anti-American’. This is for a number of reasons, of which I will focus on two.

This charge is merely the flipside of a charge that has been made by left-wing critics of the film, that it is tacitly racist or imperialist in putting an American up front as the central character, and seeing the whole thing ‘through his eyes’. That charge is wrong. Jake Sully goes native. And takes us with him.

## **All human beings are placed in the subject-position of the disabled, on Pandora. Thus a disabled human serves as a prototypical representative of the entire human race**

the disabled as a perhaps-pitiable lesser version of ourselves, and forces us to find ourselves in them. Far from being prejudiced against the disabled, the film finds them as icons for humanity, and requires us all to really think disability, to think-feel what it means. To experience it vicariously, to be able to empathise with the disabled and know what life may be like for them, perhaps for the first time. The film does the very opposite of disparaging the disabled.

Thirdly, as mentioned above, the scene in which Neytiri saves Jake, as he starts to have to breathe the

form as soon as possible, if possible. There is nothing special about being big and blue; there is no prejudice against the disabled and in favour of the able-bodied. There is instead a love and a deeply-nurtured capacity for understanding and empathy, that the film facilitates.

It is in fact the soldiers who see Jake arriving in Pandora and Quarritch and the other military folk like him who are prejudiced against Jake on the grounds of his legs not working. It is Quarritch who says to him, ‘I’ll see to it that you’ll get your legs back. Your real legs.’ – and makes this ‘gift’ conditional on an act of treachery and genocide.

The film sets out, makes available to experience, exactly the kind of change that needs to occur in our world if we are to save ourselves. Indigenous peoples are not in a position to save our common future by themselves. We need to learn from them actively; we need as it were to convert to them. As Jake puts it: ‘There’s nothing we have that they want.’ *Avatar* is onto the gross falsification involved in the very idea of ‘sustainable development’ – the absurd notion that we are developed and that they need to become more like us. This idea needs to be stood on its head, and the film helps us to do that. We need to do what *Avatar* shows.

But the reason for the ‘left-wing’ charge against *Avatar* refutes the accusation of ‘anti-Americanism’; it is precisely Americans who play a crucial role in joining with Tsu’tey and others in literally leading the charge against the Marine attackers, especially Jake, and Trudy Charon the rebel helicopter pilot. The truth is of course between – or rather, orthogonal to – the crude charges of racism on the one hand or anti-Americanism on the other;

armed struggle against the Marines. Grace in particular plays a critical role in laying the groundwork for the psychological transition that Jake goes through, and that we go through with him. It needs more than a soldier, to make the change. It needs thinking people open to truly learning from the other, to be the change.

How does this happen? What matters is what these academics

objectifying them. As we learn about the Na’vi’s rituals, their ecology, their eating-habits, their connectedness with the creatures and with their Earth, we come to understand, appreciate and start to share in their wisdom. This cannot be done if one remains aloof, and ‘superior’. One has to learn with and from them. One has, to some extent, to become one of them.<sup>10</sup>

This might be (and has been) termed



Oren Ziv/Activestills.org

Na’vi protest against the apartheid wall, Bilin, Palestine

**Indigenous peoples are not in a position to save our common future by themselves. We need to learn from them actively; we need as it were to convert to them. As Jake puts it: There’s nothing we have that they want**

for the film does not generalise about Americans. It picks out a few – including crucially an iconic everyman, our protagonist-narrator, Jake – as somehow more open to the transformation that needs to happen, becoming closer to the kind of life that the Na’vi enjoy. It’s not racist to try to save humankind by targeting your efforts directly on transformation of the consciousness and practices of those currently doing most of the destroying... It’s common-sense.<sup>7</sup>

Also absolutely crucial are the film’s ‘scientists’: who are at heart anthropologists. Again, Americans, to a woman and man. ...Perhaps it is all too easy for me to like this latter aspect of the film: For, admittedly, there is something unduly attractive to an academic about a film in which it is, most unusually, academics who save the world. Without Grace and Norm, there would be no opportunity for Jake to help lead the

are. They are not mineralogists nor physicists nor even letrists; they are biologists and anthropologists. They are seeking to learn about ‘the natives’. But these are not classical anthropologists going to find out all about the strange, wacky ways of ‘the Other’.<sup>8</sup> Under the striking leadership of Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), they are genuinely seeking to learn from the other(s).<sup>9</sup> They do not regard those others’ knowledge as merely superstition; they regard it as genuine candidate-knowledge. These anthropologists have overcome the central prejudice of social science, that this is about ‘us’ ‘scientifically’ understanding ‘them’. Rather, what true anthropology ought to be about is about us finding out about ourselves through finding out about them; about us finding out about the world through finding out about them; and about finding out about them through genuinely being with them, seeing them, rather than

‘reverse anthropology’. As I say, this is anthropology/ethnography as it ought to be done, as it would be done escaping from cultural imperialism and from misplaced scientism.

As the Tsahik, Mo’at, says: the Na’vi will try to teach Jake, to teach the anthropologists (: to teach us): ‘Then we will see if your insanity can be cured.’

And as Grace puts it, as she learns: ‘The wealth of this world isn’t in the ground, it’s all around us’. Unobtainium (the name given by them to what the Earthlings are mining on Pandora) is a blind, a macguffin: in this case, to marvellous Brechtian effect. The very name makes clear that this film is to be taken as about our world, as a symbolical and healing psychological journey for us (for you), not as an escapist fantasy. It is quite pathetic that so few critics of the film have

been able to see this, and have, in some cases, altogether laughably taken the name ‘Unobtainium’ to reflect a simple failure of imagination on the part of the film’s creators. Why go to the trouble to create a whole new Na’Vi language, and fall at the first hurdle of coming up with a believable name for the mineral that the Earthlings are hunting on Pandora? Obviously, because the name is a clue to the (deliberately symbolical) nature of the work, an invitation to reflect upon that – and, specifically, to facilitate reflection upon what the Earthlings miss about Pandora. Those critics who pan the name ‘unobtainium’ are failing to see the film in just the way that most of the Earthlings in the film fail to see Pandora! The real wealth of the world is in its networks of consciousness and communication and energy. And that is uncapturable – unobtainable – by even the most sophisticated mining equipment... The real wealth of Pandora can only be ‘obtained’ (the very word seems wrong) by one willing to get down and dirty in the world, to become part of it and of its people. It can’t really be obtained at all, but only understood, participated in. By one willing to participate in and become part of its wealth.

You have to be ‘like a baby’, ready to let the Earth, nature, the creatures around you, and works of art such as this one reshape and educate you. As one of Grace’s team puts it: ‘We’ve got to get in the habit of documenting everything, you know, what we see, what we feel, it’s all part of the science.’ Think about that statement. This is in fact a radical reconceptualisation of what (human) ‘science’ is.

### **The ‘glorification of violence’ and ‘unrealistic ending’ objections**

*Avatar* issues to us a call. But the call is not a simple call to arms. For it is crucial to understand the poignant lesson that the battle which ends the main action of the

film teaches. The struggle against all odds to fight back against the Marines with military means does not succeed. Its failure is captured in the magnificently sad music – including tremendous solo wails of pain, expressing our innermost despair about what is happening to this good Earth – that accompanies the military defeat of the attack on the Marines, echoing the earlier destruction of Home Tree; and also in the terrible image of one of the Pandoran horses ablaze.

Against the crucial charge that *Avatar* glamourises violence, romanticises the anti-colonial struggle in an apolitical way, and offers a silly fairytale ending, then, we can reply in the negative. Yes, Ai’wa comes to the rescue. But we know that Gaia won’t. The rebellion of the Na’vi against the colonising Marines fails. It is a glorious

example of the heroic virtues, but it does not succeed. We so desperately (even to our own surprise) want the American forces to be killed by the rebels and the Na’vi; we so desperately want the Na’vi to win. But they don’t. Only the *deus ex machina* of Ai’wa yields victory. And this cannot be hoped for. We have to do it ourselves. We have to embody this deity; we have to become and be Ai’wa, collectively.

To the ultimate objection that is made against *Avatar*, that its ending is unbelievable, and is thereby an unacceptable romanticisation of hope, we can then accept what factually motivates the objection, but refuse the claim that it is an objection. The unbelievability of the end of *Avatar* is in the end a great strength, not a weakness! This grand narrative ‘deficiency’ is in fact the cleverest of twists. For it

is what ought to happen. The very planetary ecosystem, Gaia, the creatures of our world ought to rise up in fury about what is being done to them. But Gaia will not strike back. The end of *Avatar* has to be unbelievable; so that we can become clear to ourselves about the difference between this fairy tale and our actual historical situation. Only with such clarity can we go on to start to do what is necessary to prevent us from killing our mother Earth. Jake tells us: ‘See, the world we come from, there’s no green there. They killed their mother. And they’re gonna do the same here.’

The call of *Avatar* is to become an eco-warrior who can win. This will require bold but carefully judged political strategy, not outright attack. It will require the winning of the climate war, but also a more sustained addressing

## **what true anthropology ought to be about is about us finding out about ourselves through finding out about them**

of the generalised ecological crisis of which manmade climate change is just the most short-term pressing phenomenon, the canary in the coalmine that tells us that our way of living needs to change. It will require the kind of eco-psychological transformation that *Avatar* aims to present to us and to midwife in us.

The call is to open your eyes and act, before it is too late, to save this beautiful creation. We have to learn to think for the future, to think collectively, in fact to think as an ecosystem.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This film has been found by so many millions to be emotionally compelling because of the journey it takes them on, because of the assumptions it puts into question, because it speaks to our condition

as alienated from our planetary home and from each other. This is why *Avatar* was in effect banned in China;<sup>12</sup> why it has inspired colourful protests against the apartheid wall in Palestine;<sup>13</sup> why it is inspiring the activist work of the Radical Anthropology Group (see <http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org/new/Home.html>); why it is inspiring protests against destructive mining projects...<sup>14</sup>

We should pause to consider in this connection why the Na'vi themselves are literally larger than life. They dwarf us. They are figured as our new parents. Again, this is part of what is happening in the beautiful scene in which Neytiri cradles Jake's broken human body, and responds to him lovingly without patronising him. This is part of a journey to maturity that she is seeing him through. She is gradually moving from being his mother to truly being able to love him as his lover, a point that she arrived at prematurely earlier in the film to great cost. She sees the beauty of his human form, of him.

Figuring the Na'vi as our new parents is a wonderful boulevers of the standard stereotype of 'primitive' peoples as like children. Similarly, there is an obvious connect here with Jake referring to human activity on Earth as meaning that humans have 'killed their mother' – and so are badly in need of new parents. All the same, it might be claimed that there is something oddly Oedipal about the scene that I keep returning to in which Neytiri cradles Jake – the 'iconography' is all mother-and-child. Well, as I

have just pointed out, one simply has to see the scene in the context of their developing relationship, a complicated one, because of who they are and because of Jake's witting and unwitting role in the betrayal of the Na'vi people, leading to the destruction of Home Tree. He isn't mature enough, it turns out, to be her lover, her equal, until about the point where he finally 'goes native', and turns and fights against Quarritch, the 'father-figure' (who repeatedly addresses him as 'Son'). By the end of the film, Jake no longer needs mothering by his lover, his equal. He has truly learnt – and so, perhaps, have we – that Ai'wa (Gaia) needs to be respected and not raped, that our mother can be kept alive; and that future generations are collectively our children, that it is they that need virtual 'parenting' by all of us, and that we just have to be mature enough to make that happen.


The most powerful moment of hope in the film is perhaps the very last shot, that mirrors the opening of the film I discussed earlier: the flicking open of Jake's eyes, now transmigrated fully into his avatar body. He has become his own avatar. It is worth dwelling on this shot. What do we see – what are we seeing – when Jake's avatar eyes flick open for and onto us?

Firstly, it's a look of love. His eyes are opening onto the face of Neytiri, his lover, his love, who we can safely assume is leaning over him.

Secondly, therefore, it can be seen as a point of view shot from her. That is interesting: in the very final shot of the film, this inspiring

'take-away', we see from the point of view of the central female Na'vi character. This is subtle, as easy to miss as the fact that we die as Quarritch (we experience his death – the needful death of the Quarritch in each of us - in a point-of-view shot), when he is transfixed by her second arrow. We are witnessing Jake's final transformation into one of 'them'; but we are doing it from a subject-position which is already that of one of 'them'. This perhaps implies: We may have already in some sense made this transformation for ourselves. Our avatar may already be ahead of us, waiting to meet us.

Thirdly, it is perhaps a look of enlightenment. He has left his human form behind; he finally knows what it is like to live as a Na'vi, fully a Na'vi body-self, rather than just an avatar.

Fourthly, and most important of all, he is looking directly at you. You, the viewer, receive this look directly. He looks you in the eye. This look completes the call to you. It asks you: What are you going to do? It addresses you; it requires that you now act, that your point of view becomes activated (activist-ed). The film in a certain sense is not complete until you complete it – through your own transformation and your own action. For, if you don't act differently, you have not really been transformed. This look underlines the call – the call upon you to complete the film which it ends.<sup>15</sup> 

Thanks to Survival International for permission to use their photograph, <http://www.survivalinternational.org/>

**Rupert Read** is Reader in Philosophy at the University of East Anglia, specialising in environmental and political philosophy. He is a Green Party Councillor in Norwich. His most recent books are *Philosophy for Life* and *There is No Such Thing as a Social Science*. [R.Read@uea.ac.uk](mailto:R.Read@uea.ac.uk)





## Notes

1. In this regard, *Avatar* follows a venerable 'philosophical' tradition of 'enlightenment' films. Consider *Fight Club*'s climactic line, just prior to Jack's overcoming of his parasitic Tyler Durden self, 'My eyes are open'. Compare also the meaning in context of Leon's call to Deckard in *Blade Runner*: 'Wake up! Time to die...'. *Avatar* pulses through a long sequence of fallings-asleep and wakings-up. That's how the humans switch in and out of their avatar personas. And take for instance Grace's important remark: 'You need to wake up, Parker... The wealth of this world isn't in the ground, it's all around us. The Na'vi know that, and they're fighting to defend it.' This is what the film is trying to teach us, about our own world. Can it wake us up enough, to hear it?

2. A charge issued by some critics and Leftists, but made most famously by no less than the Pope: <http://www.moviephone.co.uk/2010/01/11/vatican-calls-avatar-sentimental-hokum>

3. The 'etc.' here is important. As Joshua Clover puts it, on p.6 of "The struggle for space" (Film Quarterly 63:3, pp.6-7): 'The blue anthro-feline Na'vi, three meters tall, are not so much any indigenous people, but rather any number thereof: Native Americans in their natural harmony, or the Uruina of the Amazon rainforest – but no more these than, say, Iraqi natives (cued bluntly by the phrase "shock and awe").'

4. See e.g. <http://james-camerson-avatar.wikia.com/wiki/Pandora>

5. For example, <http://flowtvorg/2010/02/i-see-you-gender-and-disability-in-avatarmichael-peterson-lauriebeth-clark-and-lisa-nakamura/>

6. Of course, this point in itself isn't new. See *A Man Called Horse*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last of the Mohicans*.

7. Thus <http://io9.com/5422666/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar-completely-misses-the-point>.

8. Thinking here for example of James Frazer, as critiqued by Wittgenstein in his "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough". See also my *There is no such thing as a social science* (Ashgate, 2008), co-authored with Wes Sharrock and Phil Hutchinson.

9. Though we should note that, prior to the action of the film, Grace herself apparently had to go through a transformative journey of her own – the early attitude of the anthropologists towards the Na'vi was it seems one of trying to get them to wear Western clothes etc. The anthropologists have already gone through a process of reversing their assumptions qua anthropologists

10. My *There is no such thing as a social science* explores how such true anthropology prescind altogether from the category of science, and how 'social science' is a recipe for endless failure to understand the other (and to change oneself).

11. Deep ecological thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Susan Flader, John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess have taught us to 'think like a mountain'. We need to redesign human societies so that they work as ecosystems do, without having any waste; this is the central principle of permaculture. And we need to learn to ensure that we are not living in a way incompatible with ecosystemic resilience among those ecosystems that are primarily or almost entirely outside of human life. The Na'vi – and real indigenous peoples – can help with both tasks.

12. The Chinese authorities in a certain sense interpreted the film more or less correctly; like the right-wing critics of the film, they perceived its genuinely radical potential – and were scared.

13. See e.g. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/7222508/Palestinians-dressed-as-the-Navi-from-the-film-Avatar-stage-a-protest-against-Israelis-separation-barrier.html>

14. New protests keep appearing which take inspiration from *Avatar*: the latest that I have encountered, just as this article goes off to press, is <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/6273>

15. Thanks to my avatariar co-conspirators Vincent Gaine and Peter Kramer for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. Thanks also to Chris Knight (especially), and to an audience at the University of East Anglia.

---

# Premenstrual stress and the Human Revolution

Viky Sousa-Mayer introduces a project on PMS

'In order to see anger as a blessing instead of a curse, it may be necessary for women to feel their rage is legitimate.'  
Emily Martin (1988: 178)<sup>1</sup>

I have just returned from a conversation with a neighbour. In her late fifties, she's had depression from age 28 that was never addressed. Recently her state deteriorated: she was hearing sounds inside her head and couldn't walk. When she told me about another neighbour who committed suicide at the local cliffs, I recalled a high-school colleague who did the same when depression became unbearable.

By 2020, depression could be the second most common killer disease in the world. The need to understand it is now an emergency. Unfortunately, depression is often viewed with a mixture of attitudes, meeting disbelief and stigma. So if you are depressed and you tell people, they think you might be lying and lazy, or mad and dangerous. There are many ways in which the

disease manifests itself. Men as well as women have depression, but in this study I started with premenstrual stress (PMS). Women are more prone to depression during the main reproductive phases of their life. Hormonal fluctuations are often invoked as a cause.

It is a step further from dismissal and disbelief, but it's not the whole story. Mainstream attitudes and frameworks towards depression(s) need to be turned on their head. PMS needs to be approached not as a symptom of a dysfunctional woman but as a symptom of dysfunctional life circumstances. As a self-regulatory mechanism, PMS serves a function. This could have mattered to our ancestral foremothers in becoming human, providing the mental and emotional impetus in a new sex-strike strategy, intended to encourage male investment. In my

researches, several accounts of PMS experiences show common features: primarily unhappiness with life but also, determination, aggression and creativity. These could have been essential during the sex-strike rituals that, according to Chris Knight, created human symbolic culture. The sex-strike model suggests ways of understanding PMS as a functional and natural response.

I explore this possibility further in my blog on <http://divagosantropologicos.blogspot.com/2010/06/pms-and-human-revolution-viky-mayer.html>

1. Emily Martin, 1988. Premenstrual Syndrome: Discipline, Work, and Anger in Late Industrial Societies. In Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (eds), *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, pp. 161-181.

# An open confession from a member of Democracy Village

Democracy Village pitched up on Parliament Square on Mayday 2010 after a Carnival against the sham general election.

**Raga Woods**, a founder villager, reflects on her experiences in this 'world turned upside down'.

This is an attempt to describe the development of an experiment in participative democracy – a gathering of people living on Parliament Square. We have called this Democracy Village.

Like the Diggers we are indeed a ragged band at the village. Right now as we wait for judgement to be handed down on June 29 many members of the general peace/green movement will be busy dismissing us as chancers, nutters and even wandering drunks. True, along with the committed participants who gather at our meetings, there are people who have just stumbled across us. But we have come to see that this is bound to be the nature of an inclusive-style democracy, and, yes, it is tough. The truth is that many of us British citizens are indeed struggling to hold ourselves together and London is where the mirror we hold up to society reflects that truth most poignantly.

On Parliament Square we regularly hold meetings in the round where we discuss everything from sanitation on the square to the ongoing struggles in Afghanistan. A lot of political passion and a lot of personal pain emerges.

However, we consistently find ourselves to be impressively strong and capable. We find we are a rich mix of resilience and daring, with huge dollops of Pythonesque self-send-up added as a leavening agent. Also, some of us are very skilled at warmly supporting other people's needs with compassion and genuine empathy.

We often feel irritated that the popular media seems duty bound to represent us as a nest of lawbreakers and worse. We regret this kind of lazy, clumsy reporting which seems to be just churned out without much regard for the rather more interesting phenomenon of a cross-cultural community who have been surviving on a traffic island for a couple of months. We are really quite an exotic bunch, as you would expect in London, with many messages to give and display about bringing fairness and peace to the world, though we accept we sometimes fall short of being able to transmit our statements to full effect. But we keep trying!

We who do actually stay in the village have come to appreciate the grand English tradition of pantomime being adapted to complement the ongoing production across the road. We have a mad King and a fantasy Queen all of our own. Her Maj is particularly fond of having people executed so she carries a large Wonderland axe around with her and sometimes wears an impressive cloak and crown. She was hilarious on the day of the State Opening of Parliament and helped us keep it all in perspective in the village. The assembled populace did their great ranting and jeering as the golden coach rolled by.

Our wit has been noted within both Houses of Government, though not many Members have dared to negotiate the siren-ridden traffic that surrounds us like a monster

racetrack. Meanwhile, back at the High Court, deliberations continue.

We villagers have all dared to show our heads above the parapet and defied the bye-laws of the city of Westminster. Yes, Brian was here before us by almost nine years and frequently makes it clear we are not welcome to share his patch. This is yet another rather darker aspect of our mad Pantomime. Brian Haw frequently swears Democracy Village is run by MI5 and that we are mostly agents of the state come to do our dirty work and rid the square of him forever. Meanwhile strange spooky men with cameras, possibly posing as tourists, actually do creep around the edges of the gardens where we frequently glimpse them hiding behind the lavender beds.

One day a young woman was dancing a shamanic spell aimed at the evil CCTV camera on the Treasury Building opposite, it graciously waved back but sadly we don't think the spell has been quite strong enough...yet! We guess that there are indeed plenty of dedicated agents of the state who are glad to watch over us. We speculate we inadvertently employ a good chunk of well-paid followers in our wake who enjoy the rewards of getting to know us.

Actually we suspect we are sinking ever deeper within the vulnerable underside of the establishment. Our banners silently declare that peace cannot be achieved by war, the words

penetrate and attune to the thoughts of passing motorists. Parliament Square has become more electric than Piccadilly. Daily the media give away their news sheets and with terrible regularity announce yet another bloodletting, and so our messages and banners flood the consciousness of Westminster. Our work is to question the necessity of sacrificing young people in a so-called war that is possibly all about the need to control the power of oil in the Middle East. Is it about Opium? or the aftermath of Nato-spawned terrorism? It appears UK soldiers are preparing the way of an oil pipeline under a cover story about the education of women in Afghanistan. We do get sad and our hearts seem to resonate with our doleful mechanical brother, Big Ben. We feel a hollow booming sound inside our souls but our banners and rainbow flags demand we carry on for as long as we possibly can. Yes, we delight in knowing that we are an antidote to pomposity and we celebrate knowing we absolutely are not what any nervous new government wants to have on display in the front garden of the House. This is a creative expression of democratic people-power. This hands-on experience leaves us feeling alive and kicking. We are bearing witness. This war is not in our name!

And a little about myself, excuse me for this digression but everything begins with the personal. I am a grandmother. I have, over the years been actively involved in various campaigns including Twyford Down and the Ogoni campaign to Save Ken Saro Wiwa before he was murdered in Nigeria. Earlier, when known as Tessa Fothergill,

I realized I needed to find other one-parent families to share my experiences of loneliness with. This led me to founding a self-help network I called Gingerbread in Christmas 1969 which has since developed into a fairly significant organisation based in North London with groups all over the country.

As we move towards the conclusion of the court proceedings I imagine the Judge in the High Court understood what I meant when I recently stated I want to move on from the Parliament Square traffic island. The future is rooted in our

as a resource in our society and I believe our time has come for making a special contribution. Clearly many of our families and young people are expressing a sense of lostness and resentment in the face of social neglect and economic mismanagement. As I ponder on how to continue the process of grassroots revitalization, I sense it is time to investigate the traditions of tribal elders, held in high esteem in traditional societies. Today wise women could use their experience to facilitate the development of young people who are negotiating changing social boundaries. Just to say for now that my experience at Democracy Village has greatly opened my mind and increased my confidence in the future.

We will also always assert that we provided the best possible offering to those who administer our democracy and who sometimes seem defensive or disconnected at the roots. We came, we stayed, we raised our banners and we called out to the citizens of this city that we are all needed to keep alive at the grassroots or die of apathy and ignorance.

We are now awaiting judgement, but as they say, we do not hold our breath!

I want to end with an acknowledgement of full respect to Brian Haw for the powerful stance he has taken on Parliament Square; he has been an inspiration to thousands. And to Maria, the true enabler of all that's taken place on Parliament Square in the name of the peace movement. 🌈

ragawoo@gmail.com  
<http://democracyvillage.org/>



Chris Knight

People's Assembly on Democracy Village, Parliament Square

past and here and now has a strong sense of urgency. Like so many of us, I want to use my allocated time to some good purpose. I see how much we care about each other and I ask the unknown future to give us guidance and calling at this time. My dream is to set up a kind of democratic training where citizens like myself can learn how to develop both personal and collective communication skills and I particularly see how mature women can play a significant role in providing some old-style dragon power as we go on to try to evolve new forms of grassroots democracy.

All and everyone is needed of course and our design for the future must be inclusive of all. However, older women are greatly underestimated

# Re-placing Gender and the Goddess: Layers of Ethnographic Disruptions and Discourse

In dialogue with Igbo elders, *Ifi Amadiume* explores the consequences of a history of ‘faith interruptus’ as missionaries and developers impose their vision of modernity.

Colonialist violence was not only in an interruption of faith in existing indigenous religions, but in the psychological violence of the imposing of new religions. Natives were also forced to witness their cultures being condemned and rejected, thus creating disconnections and empty spaces, and in some cases, an imposed inferiority complex, as opposed

– as visionaries, faith interruptus would result in empty spaces in their invisible world if not filled by their ancestors, spirits and their own deities and supernatural forces. One can then imagine the bifurcation in the minds of the ordinary people being subjugated by an alien and contradictory ontological sacred. In resistance, new African religious movements, such as prophetic movements and African Independent Christian churches, have incorporated elements of traditional symbols and

resistance. I draw on my father’s direct statements to back my case for the continuing relevance of indigenous knowledge and local voices as an important social text in conversation with the scholarly text in postcolonial discourse. I challenge, post-modernist denial of the continuing relevance of African traditions.

## Gender Contest

My work on the anthropology of gender, based on the ethnography of a Nigerian Igbo village, Nnobi (over 60,000 in population), developed



Ifi Amadiume

Afor market spills into the streets.

**For indigenous religious leaders, faith interruptus would result in empty spaces in their invisible world if not filled by their ancestors, spirits and their own deities and supernatural forces**

to precolonial native pride of identity. The consequences of these experiences remain a destabilising factor in African societies, village life and politics, and present the challenges of empty spaces for radical anthropology and its relationship to its ethnographic base. I use the term ‘faith interruptus’ to address the cultural, social and philosophical ramifications of the disconnections and empty spaces created due to colonialist intrusions and interruptions in African experiences.<sup>1</sup>

For indigenous religious leaders – prophets, mediums and priests

beliefs to create a more familiar Christianity, but still grounded in Biblical faith. The fact remains that Christianity has a hierarchical officialdom and approved doctrines that reject the African creative efforts at indigenisation that are not in accordance with its accepted orthodoxy; therefore, the ranking of superiority and inferiority of faith still holds.

I use conversations with my father Chief Solomon Amadiume (1918 – 2004), whose chieftaincy title was Eze Ideyi,<sup>2</sup> to visit the question of empty spaces in the context of local discourse of oppression and

into an interest in the complexity of socio-cultural systems, including the intersections of religion, culture and politics<sup>3</sup>. My study of religion in indigenous Nnobi society identifies and brings into focus women’s social agency and their models countering a patriarchal representation of religion.

Traditional African societies present several myths and do not impose a single sacred narrative on their communities. I have used an interdisciplinary perspective informed by gender analysis to probe some empty spaces in Igbo religions in general and Nnobi

religion in particular. How can I hear women's voices of resistance in myth narratives and philosophical propositions in traditional Nnobi thought? West African primordial myths about Earth and Sky reveal gendered principles of contestation speaking to real histories and milestones in shifting systems of matriarchy and patriarchy.

The argument or quarrel between Earth and Sky about who is senior parallels the history of migration and of immigrant clans or communities imposing patriarchal rule over indigenous Earth religions and matriarchal ideologies and cultures. One sees this myth as a diachronic history of change in religious practices, with gender implications. One also sees synchronic patterns: structural contestation of gender between constituting institutions, and between male and female leadership over primordial first-rights in a system that recognizes the seniority of elders; and in other forms of hierarchical systems of titled Chiefs, Queens and Kings.

However, social or structural contestation does not mean that there isn't also an ideal of gender complementarity in practice. Cooperation and balance are encouraged by propositional Igbo statements of no absolutes (*Ife kwulu, ife akwudobe ya*, there is another side to a coin); and similar propositional statements about the twinness of things; that things exist in pairs (*Ihe di abuo abuo*); this suggests an ideal of equality. In Nnobi society, ideals are discursive, and such discussion of claims and counter-claims characterize social processes. This plurality of paradigms makes for social dynamism, and therefore indigenous models of opposition.<sup>4</sup>

### The Goddess and 'development'

A conversation with Ideyi in Enugu on August 19, 1994 illustrates the indigenous nature of dispute, discourse, opposition and conflict resolution. It also shows native

elders using traditional culturally shared knowledge and strategy to challenge a modern lawyer over a land dispute with implications for gender and change in Nnobi traditional goddess religion. The breakdown of communication has serious ramifications for inter-lineage and inter-village relations in post-colonial Nnobi society.

Ideyi was responding to the criticism of the ignorance of elders and tradition by Anthony Appiah<sup>5</sup>, by saying that there are different types of elders, knowledgeable ones who seek wisdom and – as in any other society – there are also the palm-wine drinking elders, not interested in acquiring knowledge.

*Ifi: I was reading a book called In My Father's House, by Anthony Appiah. He is saying that what is holding Africans back is because they do not have a written tradition, only an oral tradition. You are saying that if we go to the elders with their wisdom they can explain matters of tradition. Appiah is saying that this is not correct, that when you go and ask them, they are not able to explain anything. He says the only thing you hear them say is what their forefathers said, and that to say what your fathers said is not knowledge because that knowledge does not leave room for discussion, that is, for one to challenge what was said by their fathers for progress. This is because knowledge is a history of a series of discussions. On this basis, African traditional religion or African traditional systems of knowledge is working on something static. It is always what their fathers said, and proverbs are the same, they are fixed. Therefore it does not leave room to improve on things. The culture does not leave room for opposition, for conversation,*

*for disputation. Whereas European scientific culture is rich because of different views. This is what Appiah is saying.*

*Ideyi: Who knows the kind of elders that this author interviewed, and they are in the majority. What our people call such elders is palm-wine-smashing-elders (okenye otikponkwu), if you do not pour them more than two cups of palm-wine, they'll fight you. Is it this sort of elder that you'll go and*

## Traditional African societies present several myths and do not impose a single sacred narrative on their communities



Ideyi is looking into the entrance to the Igwe's palace, with the market and market women selling right outside and into the entrance.

*interview? If you get the right elder, you can interview him intelligently, if you bring argument, he'll equally respond. If you were to meet those like Ezeaku or Ejeaku of Nnobi, or my Nnaochie Ezenyikatu who knocked down a lawyer.*

*Ifi: Did what?*

*Ideyi: He asked a lawyer a question and the lawyer could not give an answer.*

*Ifi: In court?*

Ideyi: In court. The lawyer of Ebenesi asked the spokesman of Awuda: 'Isn't it a fact that Nnobi consists of three quarters and Ebenesi is the senior?' My Nnaochie Ezenyikatu raised his hand and said that the Chief Judge should be informed that he wants to respond to this question because it is their responsibility to do so as elders. The Judge said, 'why is this person causing trouble and who is he?'. He was informed that he was one of the leaders and wants permission to respond to this question himself. The Judge said, ok, he should answer, so my Nnaochie got up and said to the lawyer of Awuda to say to the chief Judge that he would like to respond with a question. Is he permitted to use a question instead? The Chief Judge sitting on the judgment seat said, 'ok, with all pleasure'. Everybody was wondering what he wanted to ask. Do you know that it was to a lawyer that he wanted to pose a question! So they said to him ask, and he said that he is addressing himself to the lawyer. That they have explained to him that Nnobi is in three quarters. What he wants to ask the lawyer is that three pieces of mud mounds are used to carry a load (akwukwa nato na ebu otu ibu). Does he agree that that is so? In that case of the three mud mounds which is carrying the load the most? The place burst into a roar of laughter! (Oda zooo!) The elders at the back row roared with laughter because they understood his question. Lawyer didn't know what it meant and said they should explain to him the question that this man asked. And they told him that in a tripod, which is carrying the pot more than the other? The lawyer could not answer and for five minutes the Chief Judge was saying yes? yes? to him!! You see why I am telling this story is to show that some elders have more knowledge than others.

Ifi: In what year did this happen?

Ideyi: This would be in the early 1930s because I was grown by then.

That was how Awuda won that case. The land that they were disputing is in the border with Ebenesi. It is very clear that it belongs to Ebenesi. But when they got to court Awuda was more clever. It was my Nnaochie who did the trick. He died prematurely and there is suspicion that this might be the cause of his death because those involved are Ifite people, ndi isi Idemili, who have the priesthood of the Goddess Idemili.

Ifi: The custodians of the Goddess Idemili.

Ideyi: Yes, Ifite and they don't forgive anybody.

Ifi: Right, because how is it that Idemili forest is in Awuda? It doesn't make sense.

Ideyi: Emeh is now explaining that Idemili is in Awuda. The whole of Agbor Idemili (Idemili forest) was involved in this particular case. They made rubbish of our lawyer. Why I am recounting this story is to show that the person who helped win this case was an ordinary elder who was knowledgeable. Had such an elder been interviewed by the author of that book that you mentioned he would make him to change his mind.

Ifi: Yes, because things changed. History was made there. That is true.

Ideyi: History was made there.

Ifi: There was immediate change. What was the Igbo word that he used for tripod?

Ideyi: Akwukwa nato. There is a proverb that says 'no n'akwukwa nato ite sili'. The meaning of the proverb is if you are finding three people at fault, for that matter to go forward, there must be a consensus. So if that is agreed as we disperse, I'll say that proverb to you.

Ifi: In English, it is called a court

in a triangle, because triangles all have equal sides.

Ideyi: After discussion as we are leaving I remind you by saying that proverb. That if the three mud mounds do not have consensus any pot put on top will fall. In the land case where they were saying that Ebenesi had first share, my Nnaochie tried to disprove it by saying not in this case.

Ifi: Had they another clever elder from Ebenesi, it actually leaves room for a debate.

Ideyi: He'll fire back.

Ifi: This case challenges what the professor is saying.

Ideyi: One would fire back.

Ifi: He'll fire back with the rights of di-okpala, first son.

Ideyi: Yes, one would fire back. If it had been with Amadunu, where we had Ikesebe, or Ibanwalie, or in our Umunshim with people who can talk.

Ifi: Speakers, Orators!

Ideyi: When things get tough in Amadunu we go and call Ezezbue in the obi of Uzuako or Anoliefo. Ifite are more action people. Their things are done more in secret. They believe very much on means (imensi?), because really after that case, many heads rolled in Awuda, including that of my Nnaochie. This man that I am telling you about called Ezeenyikatu; do you see how that name sounds, when he speaks, it sounds like thunder descending from the sky.

This conversation with my father tells us about the expected role of elders, indigenous cultural resources for resistance and oratory. It shows there is room for innovation and cleverness, even in the intimidating presence of colonial might and modernity as

represented by hitherto unknown and, in the eyes of the colonized, punitive institutions – the law court, lawyers and prisons. Elders can use oratory and creativity to dispute and overturn the customary law of primogeniture, for example. But, injured parties do not leave it at that, they resort to indigenous subversive means known and feared by all, like power-medicine, magic and sorcery mentioned by Ideyi, both part of the indigenous culture that everyone knew. This incident took place during the early days of colonialism and the account of the dispute over Agbor Idemili, Idemili's forest, shows the power of indigenous religion and the Goddess Idemili in

people (indigenous to the land, i.e. followers of the traditional religion), were in the minority. But, the Goddess Idemili still commanded the respect of all, including the Christians who were against the indigenous religion. The opposition to the 'developers' was complex with counter arguments from many perspectives, including a class perspective on the developers, a conservation and environmental perspective, a gender perspective on their patriarchal greed. Most important was a religious perspective on the sacrilege being committed by the developers who dared to clear and build on sacred lands, especially Idemili's sacred

are sectional. In a socio-cultural sense, all of Nnobi is still influenced by the Goddess Idemili in spite of a majority Christian population; traditional cultural practices are woven into the very fabric of social life.

However, in addition to the grand narrative of gender that portrays the Goddess Idemili as central

## **Nnobi was in turmoil over what was seen as the excesses of 'developers' who were encroaching on and grabbing land, including the Goddess Idemili's forest**

Nnobi. Most of Nnobi during that period still practiced the indigenous religion.

Today, many do not know this important history that explains why Idemili's forest that ought to belong to Ifite, her priestly lineage, remains in the hands of Awuda. I was not given this account during fieldwork in the 1980s, therefore it is not in my ethnography of Nnobi.<sup>6</sup> Local people in a position to know seemed to have avoided talking about this major historic incident. However, the situation was different in the early 1990s when Nnobi was undergoing major development constructions to expand and modernize Afor market, the central market place. Nnobi was in turmoil over what were seen as the excesses of 'developers' who were encroaching on and grabbing land, including the Goddess Idemili's forest, and the sacred groves of other revered spirits and power-medicines. While in the 1930s' dispute over the Goddess Idemili's forest, practically all of Nnobi were with the traditional religion, in the early 1990s' conflicts, Odinani

forest. This is due to its implications for Nnobi matriarchy.

In my study of ritual and gender, I link a matriarchal ideology to the worship of the Goddess Idemili, and a patriarchal ideology to the ancestor religion, having examined the beliefs and practices surrounding these spirit entities. The presence of a matriarchal ideology 'generated and supported favourable female ideas and strong matrifocality in Nnobi culture'.<sup>7</sup> Although believed to be supernatural and spiritual, all these spirit entities are very much part of social discourse. They are present in all sorts of cultural narratives, involving, for example, questions of seniority, family and marriage relationships, rights of succession and inheritance, names of markets, a calendar to determine market days, village ceremonies and festivals of thanksgiving to the Goddess Idemili.<sup>8</sup> Most of the extra-descent social and religious activities are held in the name of the Goddess Idemili, so that she is all-embracing and worshipped by all of Nnobi, while other spirit entities



Ifi Amadiume

Uncut tree in Nnobi forest.

to the overall administration of Nnobi economy, social and political issues, this all-powerful Goddess is also subjected to some of the contradictions present in narratives of everyday gender realities in social relations between men and women concerning marriage, sex and romance. Idemili is paired with a lesser deity, Aho. In the politics of gender, just like contemporary people, traditional people invent stories around their religious super s/heroes.

I recorded two versions of the Nnobi myth of origin, one following a pattern of Igbo matriarchal naming of villages after the mother, so that Nnobi becomes Nne-Obi, mother

of Obi. In the second version recounted to me by the then priest of Idemili, the Goddess Idemili originates from the Idemili River as a woman to bring prosperity or benefit, *ulu* to Nnobi people. Since the senior wife said that she did not have the means, it was a junior wife in Ifite (a minor lineage in Ebenesi, the first major patrilineage in Nnobi), who provided all that Idemili demanded in order to come out of the water on condition that Idemili would be in her possession. A house temple, (*Okwu Idemili Nke Uno*), was therefore built for Idemili in the compound of the junior wife, and this explains why the main temple of the Goddess

Awuda and Ifite of Ebenesi over the Goddess Idemili's forest and village capitalist development. Added to that is the problem of Christian patriarchy dictating development in a historically matriarchal African village.

The marketplace was and still is a traditional Igbo woman's second home. With 'modernity' and development, men increasingly encroach on this women's space, and this has been the case in Nnobi where market women have faced and resisted the intrusion of so-called market masters and other male government officials who are constantly collecting tolls and

stressed. . . As well as the maternal role of the goddess being stressed, peaceful qualities were also attributed to her'.<sup>11</sup>

The grand indigenous matriarchal narrative couldn't be clearer about the power of the Goddess Idemili, and the interconnections between economic success and women's power. In this context, historical developments have also given new significance to the narrative of a quarrel between Aho and Idemili that I had previously recorded. Although seen as gods and goddesses, myth also represents Aho and Idemili as husband and wife in a family. Idemili's

## **The grand indigenous matriarchal narrative couldn't be clearer about the power of the Goddess Idemili, and the interconnections between economic success and women's power**

Idemili is in Ifite.<sup>9</sup> Idemili grows in popularity and establishes her temples and influence in the major village quarters of Nnobi (in the order of seniority they are Ebenesi, Ngo and Awuda) and throughout all the lands of Idemili – meaning all the villages along this river. Her daughter, the Goddess Edo, with the gifts given to her by her mother, repeats her mother's fame by establishing her own influence throughout the lands of Edo, a neighboring town, Nnewi.<sup>10</sup>

In the grand narrative the Goddess Idemili is everywhere, so also is her power. Not so Aho, her supposed husband. Nnobi indigenous matriarchal culture does not seem to have any problems with a founding mother looming so large. The interruptions by colonialism and Christianity imposed a marginalisation of women, the very subject of feminist and radical anthropology. What once seemed a straightforward narrative of gender politics between Aho and Idemili, and how Idemili market came to be in Afor, takes on a different meaning in the context of the conflict between

levies. When local governments or local developers are involved, the threats to women's control of their markets grow with total reorganisation, displacement of women by men and loss of market sheds whether by design or because they are too expensive to afford.

For women in Nnobi, religion, culture, the market place and the economy are interrelated in the matriarchal tradition. In addition to the house temple of the Goddess Idemili in Ifite, as a water spirit, she also has another temple by the stream, a sacred place that only her priest and the most senior of titled Ekwe women called Agba Ekwe could enter to consult her. However specific people were able to take refuge in her house as it was a sanctuary for some social offenders. The sacredness of the stream was also extended to all creatures in it. This includes the python that is 'personally associated with the goddess and was taboo among the communities settled along the holy stream. It was a totemic symbol and was referred to as mother just as the maternal role of the goddess was

industriousness brings her great wealth, she 'became a great woman; rich, powerful and much more popular than her husband, Aho'.<sup>12</sup> Aho sees Idemili as arrogant and decides to humble Idemili by marrying a second wife, Afor. Idemili gets angry and counters by closing all the rivers of these other deities, Aho and Afor, and declares that only her own river will continue to flow. That is when Aho declares that all important activities in Nnobi should be done in Afor's place. So Afor became the central marketplace, where most activities take place. Afor is also the name of one of the four days in the week in Igbo calendar. It is indeed Nnobi main market day in the traditional rotation or cyclical market system that still governs Igbo marketplace patterns.

Given present developments, Ifite remembers that what is today Afor marketplace was previously Idemili market in Ifite. The secular explanation is that it was moved to the present location to be more centrally accessible to everyone. But the temple to Chi Idemili (Chi



being the divinity, essence, power in everyone and everything) is in Afor market place, and all festivals and ceremonies that take place at Afor are in the name of the Goddess Idemili. The public group worship of Idemili, *Ilo Chi Idemili*, (led by and dominated by women) takes place in Afor where Chi Idemili is located.<sup>13</sup> For the opening of the Odinke (the displaying of cows and taking of the prestigious Ogbuefi title by both men and women) festival, the priest of the main Idemili temple goes to Afor to perform Oke Opi dance.<sup>14</sup> The same priest also gives the signal for the New Yam Festival through the display of new yam in Afor market place.<sup>15</sup> During the festival of the outing or exhibition of the religious spirits, all the religious icons and objects were also displayed in Afor marketplace. This was led and organised by Inyom Nnobi, Nnobi Women's Council, consisting of all the women of Nnobi, which sees to women's affairs, All these sacred grounds are tended by women who sweep the open spaces and keep them clean.

Here we see the contradictions that fuel social and religious conflicts. The contradiction is between Ifite, the custodians of the main temple of the Goddess Idemili, who look after her, love her and are still very proud of her, continuing her traditions, and Christian fundamentalists and zealots who would like to completely destroy the 'shrine' of the Goddess Idemili in Awuda. One can argue that the traditional Goddess is conceptually in exile in Awuda. The questions of faith interruptus and empty spaces relate to new religious fundamentalism and the fanatical attacks on the perceived paganism of traditional religions. Many Christians, rejecting Nnobi traditional religion, see even normal, but important cultural practices as pagan. Such people have attacked indigenous Nnobi religion, cutting down forests and sacred groves and destroying spirit temples. An additional dimension of conflict is

with what Ideyi in disdain liked to call 'the new order' based on new religious fundamentalism. Ideyi argued that in many such cases of conflict, when deeply observed, in each case tradition triumphs. This is due to social necessity; to fulfill practical needs in these multilateral societies with higher human interaction and interdependence.

Even though the traditional institutional structures of social organisation remain the same, as are categories and terms of kinship relations, Christians object to some ritual practices that they consider pagan. This leads to constant reforming of

these Christian attacks.

During the period of these interviews, 'Big Men' in Nnobi and the leadership of Nnobi Welfare Organization (NWO) under the Presidency of Mr. B.B.O. Emeh were embroiled in personal



Ifi Amadiume

Market women in open sheds

**The marketplace was and still is a traditional Igbo woman's second home. With 'modernity' and development, men increasingly encroach on this women's space**



Ifi Amadiume

Market women now in concrete sheds

life-cycle ceremonies and argument over what is to be allowed, especially in marriage ceremonies, funeral and burial rites. Temples to the traditional religious spirits are considered pagan shrines and therefore burned down or cleared; traditional music and masquerades are banned. In the tradition of restoring voice to text, what better than to give voice to the local people and have them speak for themselves, conveying local flavour and nuances. I find that each time I re-read these direct ethnographic accounts, they come alive and give power to local people, and I discover something new and exciting. The following conversations with different factions in Nnobi in 1994 discuss

rivalries, competition and quarrels about who did what and who brought what to Nnobi. Protestant and Catholic rivalry, and the privileging of one's own village quarter over others lay beneath these conflicts, especially over the development and expansion of Afor and other markets in Nnobi. With ineffective and underfunded local

governments to meet development needs, villages and village-towns depend on fundraising and powerful personalities, with big men acting as government. This leads to a persistent question of accountability. Unfortunately these men are also competing for leadership and the control of NWO, a nongovernmental town union that seems to run the affairs of the whole of Nnobi.<sup>16</sup> Some of their power conflicts have resulted in court cases that the general public have found disturbing in a society that still thinks in kinship terms, fearing the power-medicines and spirits.

First, a short excerpt from an interview with Ideyi, my father Solomon Amadiume in Enugu on August 19, 1994. The clearing of Ichiabia – the power-medicine spirit in Afor central market place – came up consistently as a cause of

*another example . . . Leaving it there does not mean that we believe in it or that we are worshipping it. Jesus Christ said that we should give to God what belongs to God and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. That is the interpretation, rather than fighting what one does not know about. One should face what they know and do it well. Those who know the other things know how to do it, let them do those. Going to criticize and fight that which you do not know is a mistake. . . There is freedom of religion. But it is tradition that we are discussing, where everything that one does is dubbed idol worshipping. That is wrong.*

A short excerpt from an interview with the traditional chief of Nnobi, Igwe Eze Okoli on August 6, 1994 in Nnobi, about Idemili and Eke, her

*abode in my house.*

*Ifi: It came after Ichiabia was cleared?*

*Igwe: It is in here now.*

*Ifi: It came on its own?*

*Igwe: Yes, this is the sole thing Nnobi is suffering – having to clear Ichiabia without a ceremony.*

Interview with Moses Ndukwe an Ifite elder – formerly a Christian, now chief priest of Idemili – on August 6, 1994 in Nnobi, on Afor Nnobi as the central marketplace. Ndukwe understood the need for new markets and market expansion, but not at the expense of respect for and right of Nnobi customary traditions and religion.

*Moses: Ebenesi has land at Afor;*

## Many Christians, rejecting Nnobi traditional religion, see even normal but important cultural practices as pagan

anger for Nnobi traditionalists, their supporters and concerned citizens. It was seen as an attack on Nnobi traditional religio-cultural heritage by Christians.

*Ifi: You have said many times that it is a clash between tradition and religion. It isn't a clash between tradition and religion because you need to qualify that religion; perhaps a clash between tradition and new religions, in Christianity, not Igbo religion.*

*Ideyi: Yes, new order.*

*Ifi: Igbo culture and Christianity. It is very clear, because when Igbo culture is integrated with the religion of the same culture, it doesn't have this sort of clashing, and this is really what the Christians are fearing that they are being pulled back to 'paganism'.*

*Ideyi: The clearing of Ichiabia is*

*python totem and messenger. Igwe read the presence of the pythons in his house as a sign of the Goddess Idemili's displeasure with the interference with sacred groves, the clearing of forests and the politics involving market expansion and the allocation of new sheds.*

*Igwe Eze Okoli: The traditional source of Idemili is from Agulu lake. It continues from sources until it came from Obosi to Nnobi and was given another name – Obi Aja. Then it came to Obosi and it is called Idemili. You will see python (Eke) there. The only way to confirm this is that if the Eke bites someone from this Agulu lake (Idemili), it will not hurt. If it bites you after Agulu it is instant death. Instant death.*

*Ifi: Really?*

*Igwe: Absolutely. There is Eke in my house right now. If I bring out one here you will all run away. Since Ichiabia was cleared Eke has taken*

*Awuda has land at Afor, Ngo's land is at Afor. It is because it is the centre. Afor market used to be right here at this Afor Ifite. It is the original Afor where Nnobi conducted their buying and selling. Later it was moved to that place. When it started having problems was when all other towns and counties began to trade there that Nnobi decided that the centre is the best thing to do. Furthermore, they wanted to avoid a fight with Nnewi. Where it was in Ifite, it would cause a fight with Nnewi. You know we always fight with them during certain seasons. So before any town will bring a fight now it will be difficult. That is why they did all these things, putting powerful medicine spirits like Odakolo and Ukpakaikae there. When something is placed, they also add what it does. A dibia (traditional medicine priest) placed a medicine pot for Ichiabia. What has happened now is that there is problem. Idemili got annoyed that all the 'order' given have no more standing. Nobody*

regards them. You understand?

Ifi: Yes.

Moses: All the spirits moved (erupted) because they have no place to stay. Because if one has no place to sit (that is home), he will have no place to sit and break kolanut or eat. They have no place to stay, they began to wonder about and 'war' ensued.

Ifi: Igwe said that Eke (python) is camping in his home since Ichiabia was moved.

Moses: Okay, let them live with him.

Ifi: He says that there are three pythons. What is going to be done to right these things so that Nnobi will be alright.

Moses: You have to start from where that water got soiled. That Emeh I called him when all these things started. . . I told him about four things – Eke that is being killed and eaten in Nnobi, 'Mbubo' (Monkey) that was shot. Power-medicine place that is being cleared... four things I told him. I wrote it down... I talked about the spirits that are being disturbed. All of them. I told him about all these things. What they are doing now is pointing accusing fingers... Okeke. Okafor, etc. Suddenly one person and the other start quarrelling. It is nothing but simple mistake.

A short excerpt from an interview with an Odinani (one who practices the traditional religion), Obidike, an Ebenesi elder, a palm wine tapper and a dibia, a traditional medicine priest on August 6, 1994 in Nnobi. A thorough Odinani elder, Obidike had a holistic approach and believed in the power of the spirits to punish wrongdoing. He also spoke from the perspective of the poor and oppressed in criticizing corruption.

Obidike: I am in Odinani. . . We don't tell the Christians all the Odinani things. We tell your father.

the reason we don't is because after you tell them, they will take it to the white man. They ruin things. The church people went to Idemili's temple and burnt it and killed the monkeys. We are not telling. If

If we want any land we have to appeal to the spirits... The trees, are they inside Ichiabia. It is good. That is not the problem. It is Ukpakaikae.

Ifi: They removed Ukpakaikae. It is



Concrete walls around the centre of what was a shrine to Ichiabia. An electric pole is placed in the middle, and a biblical verse written on a wall.

Idemili calls you, you go and make the sacrifice if you want to. If you don't want to, then leave it. You can't tell people everything.

Ifi: The church people went and cleared the Ichiabia grove.

Obidike: Ukpakaikae. (Obidike is referring to the powerful medicine spirit that inflicts small pox, "kitikpa") . . . What I am telling you is: go down to certain areas and see what the Ide is doing.

Ifi: That is mud slide and erosion.

Obidike: In the next two years you will hear that erosion has reached here. It wants to pull down our hall. They are coming from different directions and converging. All the trees there are falling down. . . We agreed that we needed a market at Afor. We have no land and we have to clear some bush, but we will have to create a place for the spirits. We gave them order to clear the market but no one should touch the shrines.

not there anymore. The two trees I saw, what are they? One this way and the other that way, and you have a big electric pole in the middle at Ichiabia.

Obidike: I don't know. If it is alive (active), if it is not alive. Who knows its relationship with the spirits. You know some of them have something to do with the powerful medicine.

Ifi: I went to see the Igwe. He said that the three Eke, pythons, are in his house and talking to him; that nobody told him before doing all these things.

Obidike: The trouble in Nnobi is causing all this. Odinani is not being regarded. You know, we started. We have done Ikwu Ahu. Our people came out and we did Ahor. . . What is happening at Nnobi. The plan was to help poor people and give them a place, but the whole thing changed. They could have cleared a field around there and kept it clean, but they refused. All this trouble...

No, we are not in it. They do not want our input.

Ifi: Even Inyom Nnobi, we hear they have a new set.

Obidike: Oh yes. They have disbanded the old group...people

Chukukwa, leader of Inyom Nnobi.

Ifi: What does she mean that women were not allocated sheds in the market? Does this mean after the rebuilding of the market?

Ideyi: Yes, after the market was

Women's Council.) She would have had her own palace in the market.

Ideyi: Right. They should have been given two sheds where they would install traders and use the income to run their organization. When next I go to Nnobi I'll ask what happened, especially from her.

## **Authenticity also means the opposite of empty spaces; it means reconnections and an affirmation of a shared culture or a shared struggle against oppression. Traditional peoples and their elders are not ignorant**

who would say it as they see it. They brought a new group whom they say are educated people. The other group were always there to advise on certain traditional things because they were born into *Odinani* (traditions of the land). We are looking at them.

All the spirits of our land they have cleared; some they burnt and that is what is causing upheaval in the land today. We are looking at them. They did not tell us the truth. Church is not money. Every time they ask for money and when you give it a few people misuse it. Poor people and widows suffer most.

Short excerpt from an interview with Ideyi about Inyom Nnobi, the Women's Council, an organisation of all the women in Nnobi that takes care of women's affairs, on July 16, 1994 at Enugu. Under the traditional system, Inyom Nnobi was the parallel political women's administrative government in a dual-sex political system that is ameliorated by a flexibility in gender classification so that men and women can share power.<sup>17</sup> With the patriarchy of colonialism and Christianity, men and NWO began to encroach on women's spaces and traditional rights and power, as can be seen in their marginalisation over market sheds and the strong response from the women's leader. Ifi and Ideyi are talking about Mrs

rebuilt, certain compensations were given. For example shed was given to Igwe, to Okpala. . .

Ifi: Igwe and Okpala got, but women didn't get.

Ideyi: Yes, Igwe and Okpala got as a matter of respect. So, Inyom Nnobi said that they too should get. It will be useful to them, because if they are given the shed, they can get rentals from it and use the money to sponsor their organization. We do not pay a salary to Okpala; we do not pay a salary to Igwe. They get money from putting people in the sheds that we gave to them. We promised them sheds, but Mrs Chukwuka came up with another program. She said that someone gets a newborn and names the child 'ehe obu'!

Ifi: 'Ehe obu'! meaning 'whenever'!

Ideyi: Yes, because we told them that we shall think over it. So Mrs. Chukwuka refused.

Ifi: She said to make a decision.

Ideyi: Yes.

Ifi: Giving the child the name that means 'later'! Mrs. Chukwuka! She is right because if it were in the olden days, she and her other leaders would be Ekwe titled women. (Ekwe titled women were leaders of Nnobi

Short excerpt from interview with Anoliefo, a young lawyer who was closely and passionately involved in the events in Nnobi on July 31, 1994 at Enugu:

Anoliefo: . . . Ukpakaiké has been allotted and shared out, and market stalls built on it. Why don't they just build something around a spot and indicate that this is the place of Ukpakaiké and build all the market space that they want by the side. But they want all these built, and posterity will not know these things again. There is need to preserve these things. Whether you like it or not, there were people whose lives were influenced by these institutions.

Ifi: It is their history; it is their culture.

Anoliefo: It is their culture, it is their way of life. We didn't just fall from the sky.

Ifi: You don't replace it with something borrowed, your concrete, your electricity built as your concept of enlightening.

### **Conclusion**

In a discourse that involves practical and conceptual questions of gender and power on placing and replacing the female principle and the Goddess, one is constantly engaging with layers of ethnographic disruptions and empty spaces. How can oppressed people risk existing as a blank slate in a situation of race, gender, cultural, religious, ethnic, class and sexual oppression? Hence, the importance of cultural history

to inform the present and the future.

An anti-colonialist perspective, like an anti-imperialist stance, emphasises African authenticity and dignity against the backdrop of European destruction of and misrepresentation of native societies and traditional cultures. No matter how one reads the colonial experiences of African societies, the challenge for postcolonial discourse is in analysing why and how and what followed? We are faced with the task of examining the character of the traditional system, and the effects of the European encounter. We are also compelled to interrogate the writers, ethnographers, anthropologists, etc. to see if they represented this social history in a way that leaves empty spaces – missing out local voices and opinions.

In the study of traditional Africa, it is unfortunate that those who know are not able to make their case. Others speak for them through secondary sources, resulting in misrepresentations and appropriations. The example of Nnobi shows that traditional social systems present multiple myths,

narratives and structures; they have practices of pluralism, diversity and opposition. Socio-cultural claims and propositional statements are certainly contested, and form part of traditional African philosophies, discourse, action and reaction, oppositional models and local

are results in a misrepresentation of the character of society in Africa before the colonial encounter, thus a hierarchical dichotomisation of pre-colonial ‘tradition’ and post-colonial ‘modernity’.

The traditional can be dynamic



Ifi Amadiume

Stumps of cut down trees in Ichiabia shrine.

traditional activism. Authenticity also means the opposite of empty spaces; it means reconnections and an affirmation of a shared culture or a shared struggle against oppression. Traditional peoples and their elders are not ignorant; people are not just subservient followers of custom. The assumption that they

and juxtaposed with other newer forms, with society progressively and creatively moving backward and forward in spite of mixes and hybridization. It is therefore important to give recognition to local voices and indigenous activism, especially on the question of gender and social justice. ✍️

**Ifi Amadiume** is Professor of Religion and African and African-American Studies at Dartmouth College, USA. Her books include *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987, Zed Books), *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women, Culture, Power and Democracy*. (2000, Zed Books) and three award-winning volumes of poetry.

#### Notes

1. The argument for a social text and the topic of ‘faith interruptus’ are developed in two consecutive essays, ‘Restoring Voice to Text – Ideyi and My Own Father’s House’ in a collection of essays in *Aboriginal Voices* to be published in the *Social Text* journal. It is in fact an abstraction from another paper, ‘Faith Interruptus and the Politics of Religion and Culture in African Post-colonial Discourse’ that I had presented at a colloquium on ‘Religion and Postcolonial Criticism’, by the Center for the Study of Religion and the Department of English at Princeton University, New Jersey, USA, March 10-11, 2006.
2. In this essay, I use Dad and Ideyi interchangeably.
3. I. Amadiume 1987. *Male Daughters,*

- Female Husbands; Gender and Sex in an African Society*, London: Zed Books & St. Martin’s Press.
4. I. Amadiume, 2002. ‘Subverting Greed: African Perspectives on Religious Conscience and the Global Economy’, in Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar (eds), *Subverting Greed: Religious Conscience and the Global Economy*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, pp. 15-37.
5. K. A. Appiah, 1992. *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Amadiume 1987.
7. Amadiume 1987, p.99.
8. Amadiume 1987, p.101.

9. Amadiume 1987, p.100.
10. Amadiume 1987, p.29.
11. Amadiume 1987, p.54.
12. Amadiume, 1987, p.110.
13. Amadiume 1987, p.104.
14. Amadiume 1987, p.102.
15. Amadiume, 1987, p.101.
16. I. Amadiume 2000. *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women, Culture, Power and Democracy*. London, New York: Zed Books and St. Martin’s Press.
17. I. Amadiume 2007. ‘Dual-Sex Political Systems’ in Bonnie G. Smith (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Women in World History*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

***Direct Action: an ethnography***, by David GraeberA review by **Simon Wells**

Black bloc ready for action

David Graeber, anarchist, academic and anthropologist, has used his skills to write up an ethnography of direct action. His case study is the 2001 protests at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. The book is divided into ten chapters, the first half of the book dealing with events building toward the protests at Quebec City, the second dealing with direct action itself, power and the state, and the overall meaning of anarchism.


Graeber describes his book as a classic in the sense that, as Franz Boas puts it, the general is in the service of the particular. What he means is that the words in print are not there to make a theoretical point but to describe the actions of the anarchists who are creating an alternative narrative. This echoes the consensus decision-making processes of anarchism as compared to majoritarian politics. As Graeber says, 'in consensus, you're trying to come up with a compromise, or synthesis, so the incentive is to always look for the best or smartest part of other people's arguments' (p. 305). Further, anarchism fits the purpose of ethnography, as it teases 'out the implicit logic in a way of life along with its related myths and rituals, to grasp the sense of a set of

practices' (p. 222). This is because anarchism 'is a way of living, or at least, a set of practices' (p. 215).

The period of the ethnographic study is perhaps unique for activists. It followed the collapse of 'Communism', when capitalism put its foot to the floor and assumed it could bring about the End of History, as Francis Fukuyama put it. However, activists had other ideas when they dreamed that another world was possible. The reader is plunged immediately into the meetings and travails of the New York City *Ya Basta!* Collective and the Direct Action Network as it makes its way to the heated battles with the Canadian state machinery in Quebec City. On the way we learn that the activist is kitted out in a black hoodie, a black bandana, military pants over thermal underwear, cashmere sweaters and a formal shirt. Not that this would have provided protection when 'Tear gas canisters started bouncing, spinning, exploding all around us' from a 'faceless line of police, all in gas masks and battle armor' (pp.153, 154). There was only going to be one winner in this particular battle. But battles don't always win wars.

From the perspective of non-anarchists, all of this action may appear futile. Graeber quotes Evans-Pritchard about Zande witchcraft: 'how can otherwise reasonable people claim to believe this sort of thing?' (p. 218). However, he answers this by showing the practical problems of creating a new society in the shell of the old. He shows that the 'coercive force of the state' (p. 282) is everywhere limiting human possibilities with the threat of violence, because it has the power to maintain the monopoly over the use of force. So of course

it leaves 'people with the feeling that radical politics is unrealistic' (p. 284). But Graeber summarises Marx who 'never ceased to insist that what makes human beings different from animals is that they can first imagine something, and then try to bring it into being' (p. 514). With the force of state violence, the anarchist world is therefore in a state of construction and destruction. And even among co-radicals of marxist persuasion, the threat of bureaucratic violence is not far away. For example, we learn that all the anthropologists of a British left-wing group were purged because they did not agree with the party line that humans had only really become human in the neolithic. Graeber cannot be sure of this story, but this actually happened to members of the Radical Anthropology Group. I can confirm it is true – if not purged then silenced.

It is understandable why the book runs to 568 pages, and it can appear daunting to read through the descriptions of meetings, just as some of the activists I am sure felt they were tedious. But it's a rewarding book that puts together the recent history of activism and also acts as a guide for activists in creating another world that is morally transparent, democratic and unselfconscious as Graeber's study of the rural communities of Madagascar showed. For me a lesson to take from this book is that if you are pursuing your own agenda then you are not practicing solidarity. 

*Direct Action: an ethnography*, by David Graeber, AK Press, 2009, pp.568.

**Simon Wells** is an activist and student of anthropology at University of East London.

## ***New World of Indigenous Resistance***, L. Meyer and B. Alvarado (eds)

A review by ***Davide Torri***

Indigenous communities are imagining a different path to progress, autonomy and self-governance. All over the world, they are facing cultural annihilation and a new wave of oppression, often at the hands of the same post-colonial entities who were facing colonial exploitation just a few generations ago.

*New World of Indigenous Resistance* explores the meaning of indigenous unrest at the beginning of the 21st Century. This is done through long interviews with Noam Chomsky and the answers he received from a wide selection of American Voices, often speaking directly from the field.

The starting point is the Oaxaca Movement, in Mexico: in 2004 an indigenous movement broke out, requesting dignity and equal rights for the population. An innovative educational project was launched, based on the links between scholarisation, language(s) and communities. The Mexican state-formation process was leaving behind indigenous communities, and scholarisation was, under a veneer of modernisation, just a way to homogenise them into an obedient class of low-waged workforce. At the same time, it was destroying local cultures and communities.

In a couple of years, in 2006, the movement was so strong and diffused that it was able to seize the power for seven months. During that time, Oaxaca was administered through the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO, *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca*). Conflict with the State was inevitable, and bloody: Oaxaca Popular Assembly was defeated and many people were killed.

The book revolves around the

concept of *comunalidad* as a new category of thought in the dialectic of power between State and Society. An indigenous category, elaborated through the practice of conflict and resistance against State-promoted initiatives: 'Indigenous *Comunalidad* reaches far beyond Western ideas of cooperation, collectivization, or social concern for the other, addressing the philosophical, moral, even spiritual question: what, or who, is the very ground of existence, both human and cosmic?' (p. 23). For the indigenous communities, on a deeper ontological level, the land does not belong to those who work it. This could appear like a great gap between the Indigenist and Marxist thought, but, as Chomsky points out quoting Rosa Luxemburg: 'we are never going to have socialism until there is a spiritual transformation among the population to recognise a different array of values' (p. 353).

The school is another battlefield for the Indigenist movement, and an ambiguous one: as one commentator says, in Bolivia during the first half of the twentieth century the movements fought for access to scholarisation and access to the Spanish language; then, in the second half, for the equally important preservation of their own

languages. Several commentators deal with the state-controlled and organised school system as an instrument of oppression used against marginal communities. But they also recognise the progressive role a local-centered and administered school could have: the use of local idioms and knowledges together with the usual school subjects will produce a conducive environment for the new generations.

The book explores also the implication of NAFTA agreements, and the alternatives brought forth by the Zapatistas, Via Campesina and the leftist governments of Brasil, Venezuela, Bolivia. The book is intended as an ongoing conversation offering a vision of indigenous resistance, survival and possibly a new hope for the future. *WPM*

*New World of Indigenous Resistance*. Noam Chomsky and Voices from North, South and Central America. Edited by Louis Meyer and Benjamin Maldonado Alvarado, City Lights Books, 2010, pp. 416.

Dr Davide Torri is Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester  
Email [d.torri@chester.ac.uk](mailto:d.torri@chester.ac.uk)

### **Subscriptions:**

*Radical Anthropology* is an annual journal and appears every October.

Latest issue £3 Five current issues £10

A few back copies are available – £10 for all four issues to date.

Send a cheque made payable to 'Radical Anthropology Group' to:  
*Radical Anthropology*, c/o Camilla Power, Anthropology Programme,  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of East London,  
4-6 University Way, London E16 2RD Email: [c.c.power@uel.ac.uk](mailto:c.c.power@uel.ac.uk)

The journal is also available free via our website:

[www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org)



# ANTHROPOLOGY

AN EVENING CLASS INTRODUCTION

Chris Knight

Tuesdays 18:00 - 21:00

St Martin's Community Centre  
43 Carol Street  
London NW1 0HT  
📍 Camden Town

further information:

tel: 07769 695359  
email: governmentofthedead@gmail.com

[www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org)  
[www.chrisknight.co.uk](http://www.chrisknight.co.uk)

