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Irene J. Dabrowski
Saint Johns University, dabrowsi@stjohns.edu

Anthony L. Haynor
Seton Hall University, haynoran@shu.edu

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MOVING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK

Hunting/Gathering Societies and Models for the Future

Irene J. Dabrowski

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

dabrowsi@stjohns.edu

Anthony L. Haynor

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

haynoran@shu.edu

Abstract

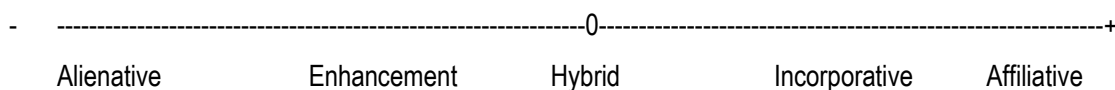
This paper reviews and assesses recent scholarship that focuses on the lessons that contemporary societies can learn from our hunting/gathering ancestors. The paper examines social organization for 99% of human history, with particular attention given to dominant “relational structures”: and modes of adaptation (cognitive, appreciative, moral, and technical) to the “physico-chemical, “organic,” and “telic” environments, on the institutional, symbolic, and self-identity levels. The paper then goes on to sketch fundamental relational and adaptive shifts as a result of the agricultural, industrial, digital revolutions, as well as scenarios for the emerging transhumanist age (involving the increasing merger of human and machine).

It is important at the outset to place this presentation in proper context. Anthony Haynor and I (both sociologists by formal training) are currently working on a project that deals with the transhumanist movement, which argues for the increasing merger of human and machine (Kurzweil, 2006) and unleashing our capacity to manipulate genetic structure (Habermas, 2003) in order to extend longevity and enhance the quality of life. It soon became apparent to us that we could not explore this movement (with its social, personal, and ethical dimensions) in a self-contained way. Rather, we needed to see transhumanism as an end point (a provisional one for sure) in civilizational evolution. Our foundational premise was that civilizational development can be best analyzed in terms of “synergistic” processes that take place at various levels (physical, organic, psychological, social, cultural, technological) of reality, in interactions with each other that produce “emergent” properties (Corning, 1983). That is to say, human civilization at any point in time is the result of a concatenation, cluster, or confluence of factors, forces, and processes. Thus, in order to investigate transhumanism, it was necessary, we believed, to see it in broader evolutionary terms. How is the “new” civilizational form (transhumanism) emerging from what preceded it (the “old”)? So, we concluded that we needed to backtrack in civilizational history, to the very beginning, to the stage at which 99% of our species have existed—hunting and gathering. There has been increasing interest in this civilizational stage (there is even a journal dedicated to it), and various commentaries as to whether it represents a kind of “default” for humankind, any significant deviation from which sets *Homo Sapiens* down a path of nature conquest that has brought us disease, war, and environmental degradation. For example, Wells (2010) focuses on the critical move 10,000 years ago to agriculture, which have spawned “unforeseen costs” (sedentariness, overpopulation, resource depletion, hierarchy and inequality,

and disease) that we are still wrestling with (however unsuccessfully) today. Narvaez (2014) argues that hunting/gathering societies facilitated through their emphasis on tactile nurturing and play the development of a neurobiology capable of fostering a communal ethic. For Narvaez, hunting and gathering societies represent the model for this kind of nurturing and we are living with the consequences of abandoning that model (drug abuse, narcissism, authoritarianism). The post H/G model, rather, fosters a self-protective ethic that manifests itself in war, racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia.

Diamond (2012) takes the position that hunting/gathering societies were based first and foremost on “diffuse” relationships, that is, on relationships that are long-lasting, intense, and deeply personal. In modern societies, conversely, Diamond notes, the preponderance of our relationships are with “strangers,” a shift contributing to an instrumental mentality, authoritarian structures, and market impersonality. On the other side are the likes of Steven Pinker (2012), who argues that the level of violence has declined since early times due to increased trade and the humanitarian revolution, developments that occurred in modern times. Pinker, in pointing to the “dark” side of hunting/gathering societies, offers a contrasting narrative. Civilizational analysis at its insightful best identifies the synergistic forces at work that explain the evolution from hunting/gathering to agricultural societies, from agricultural societies to industrial societies, from industrial societies to service societies, from service societies to information societies, from information societies to digitalized societies, and from digitalized societies to transhumanist societies. This is an incredibly daunting project, and many scholars continue to unravel the mysteries of major civilizational change. Our project will examine the transhumanist age against the civilizational backdrop of what preceded it. We argue that it cannot be understood otherwise. It is perfectly legitimate to raise the question: “What were the manifest and latent effects of civilizational shifts?” This is what Wells, Narvaez, Diamond, Pinker, and many others have tried to do as they attempt to make sense of the voluminous evidence available to them. Our focus in this project is on understanding how the impending transhumanist age evolved from earlier ones, and the fact that 99% of human history took place in hunting/gathering societies calls for a particularly intense investigation of that period. As we have embarked on this project, an elementary conceptual framework has emerged that can serve to structure our investigation (and hopefully, make it more manageable). It revolves around the truism (from our standpoint at least) that an important aspect of the human condition has to do with how we “subjectivize” our object world (Latour, 2007). We adopt a “critical realist” epistemology in arguing that there are levels of reality “out there” to which we need to adapt. How we do so is a function of how we meaningfully organize our experience of those worlds. So, we must adapt to *the personal world* (intimates; acquaintances; strangers, and also ourselves as objects to ourselves); *the socio-cultural world* (primary groups; organizations; neighborhoods; communities based on class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; nations, the global community, institutional practices as well as the symbolic constructs associated with group memberships and social practices); *the material world* (mountains, rocks, soil, climate, natural resources, and human-made things and technologies—machines, computers, smart phones, televisions); *the organic world* (plants, animals); and *the telic world* (supernatural forces, the Divine, ultimate truths). We draw here on Parsons (1978) and

his “Paradigm of the Human Condition.” Our “subjectivizing” of these object worlds can be mapped as “valences” along a continuum. We draw here on the work of Sennett (2012) and Burns et al. (1986). On the extreme positive (+) end is an “affiliative” orientation, in which there is total identification with the object. The next valence is “incorporative.” In this case, the object is wrapped into one’s existing identity and becomes part of an expanding frame of reference. The middle, neutral position (0) is the “hybrid” option. Here the object is seen as one distinct part of an overall identity. It is compartmentalized with other object identifications. On the extreme negative (-) side of the spectrum is the “alienative” posture. In this case, the object is seen as a threat, something to be feared, contained, avoided, even eliminated. Finally, a more moderate negative orientation is that of “enhancement.” Here the object is seen as a means to an end. This clearly involves an “instrumental” orientation to the object world. See the diagram below:



In the Q & A we can go over some examples of each type in relation to the object worlds. How does this line of inquiry relate to and support civilizational analysis? A proposition that makes considerable intuitive sense is that each civilizational stage is characterized by a particular configuration of object valences. (For example, if Narvaez is correct, there is a strong affiliative valence in relation to other persons particularly those whom one is nurturing, while in modern societies it would be less than affiliative.) It would be the task of civilizational analysis to map the valence configurations. It should also be said that the object world itself changes with civilizational shifts. For example, human-produced goods and technologies have proliferated greatly during the industrial, information, and digitalized ages. As we continue to map the valence configurations, we can begin to ask the following questions: “What are the manifest and latent effects of these valence configurations on human flourishing? Are these effects positive or negative or a complex mix of the two? Is the existing value configuration appropriate for the civilizational stage we are in or should changes be made to modify that configuration in the service of greater human flourishing? These questions can and should be applied to the emerging transhumanist age (once the necessary mapping of prior civilizational stages is done). The ambitious research agenda will require that serious thought be given to how to best “measure” valences. (It would seem that a combination of survey, in-depth interviewing and participant observation would be advisable.) In keeping with Corning’s synergistic framework, a comprehensive understanding of the various civilization stages would see them as a cluster of infrastructural (material/organic), structural (social), psychological (personal) and superstructural (symbolic) elements. (See Sanderson and Alderson, 2004) To further complicate matters, it would appear to be the

case that each world or realm would have its own built-in valences, with possible synergies with other worlds or realms. For example, Fiske (1993) argues that there are 4 relational models possible in the social world (Authority Ranking, Communal Sharing, Equality Matching and Market Pricing.) One could make the case that AR is “alienative” (to the degree that it involves exacting tribute), CS is “affiliative” or “incorporative,” EM is associated with the “hybrid” position, and MP with an “enhancement” position. Whether this parallelism exists in the other object worlds needs to be explored. In this presentation, we have attempted to lay out a robust research program for analyzing civilizational evolution, setting the stage for the analysis of an emerging period in human history—the transhumanist era.

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