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Unfreezing the Ice Age

In and out of chains: the protean possibilities of human politics

Most societies imagine a mythic age of creation. Once upon a time, the story goes, the world was different: fish and birds could talk, animals could turn into humans and humans into animals. It was possible, in such a time, for things to come into being that were entirely new, in a way that cannot really happen any more: fire, or cooking, or the institution of marriage, or the keeping of pets. In these lesser days, we are reduced to endlessly repeating the great gestures of that time: lighting our own particular fires, arranging our own particular marriages, feeding our particular pets – without ever being able to change the world in quite the same way.

In some ways, accounts of 'human origins' play a similar role for us today as myth did for ancient Greeks or Polynesians, or the Dreamtime for indigenous Australians. This is not to cast aspersions on the scientific rigour or value of these accounts. It is simply to observe that the two fulfil somewhat similar functions. If we think on a scale of, say, the last 3 million years, there actually was an age in which the lines between (what we today think of as) human and animal were still indistinct; and when someone, after all, did have to light a fire, cook a meal or perform a marriage ceremony for the first time. We know these things happened. Still, we really don't know how. It is very difficult to resist the temptation to make up stories about what might have happened: stories which necessarily reflect our own fears, desires, obsessions and concerns. As a result, such distant times can become a vast canvas for the working out of our collective fantasies.

This canvas of human prehistory is distinctively modern. The renowned theorist of culture W. J. T. Mitchell once remarked that

dinosaurs are the quintessential modernist animal, since in Shakespeare's time no one knew such creatures had ever existed. In a similar way, until quite recently most Christians assumed anything worth knowing about early humans could be found in the Book of Genesis. Up until the early years of the nineteenth century, 'men of letters' – scientists included – still largely assumed that the universe did not even exist prior to late October, 4004 BC, and that all humans spoke the same language (Hebrew) until the dispersal of humanity, after the fall of the Tower of Babel sixteen centuries later.[1]

At that time there was as yet no 'prehistory'. There was only history, even if some of that history was wildly wrong. The term 'prehistory' only came into common use after the discoveries at Brixham Cave in Devon in 1858, when stone axes, which could only have been fashioned by humans, were found alongside remains of cave bear, woolly rhinoceros and other extinct species, all together under a sealed casing of rock. This, and subsequent archaeological findings, sparked a complete rethinking of existing evidence. Suddenly, 'the bottom dropped out of human history.'[2]

The problem is that prehistory turns out to be an extremely long period of time: more than 3 million years, during which we know our ancestors were, at least sometimes, using stone tools. For most of this period, evidence is extremely limited. There are phases of literally thousands of years for which the only evidence of hominin activity we possess is a single tooth, and perhaps a handful of pieces of shaped flint. While the technology we are capable of bringing to bear on such remote periods improves dramatically each decade, there's only so much you can do with sparse material. As a result, it's difficult to resist the temptation to fill in the gaps, to claim we know more than we really do. When scientists do this the results often bear a suspicious resemblance to those very biblical narratives modern science is supposed to have cast aside.

Let's take just one example. Back in the 1980s, there was a great deal of buzz about a 'mitochondrial Eve', the putative common ancestor of our entire species. Granted, no one was claiming to have actually found the physical remains of such an ancestor; but sequencing the DNA in mitochondria – the tiny cell-motors we inherit from our mothers – demonstrated that such an Eve must have existed, perhaps

as recently as 120,000 years ago. And while no one imagined we'd ever find Eve herself, the discovery of a variety of other fossil skulls rescued from the East African Rift Valley (a natural 'preservation trap' for Palaeolithic remains, long since swept to oblivion in more exposed settings) seemed to provide a suggestion as to what Eve might have looked like and where she might have lived. While scientists continued debating the ins and outs, popular magazines were soon carrying stories about a modern counterpart to the Garden of Eden, the original incubator of humanity, the savannah-womb that gave life to us all.

Many of us probably still have something resembling this picture of human origins in our mind. More recent research, though, has shown it couldn't possibly be accurate. In fact, biological anthropologists and geneticists are now converging on an entirely different picture. Rather than everyone starting out the same, then dispersing from East Africa in some Tower-of-Babel moment to become the diverse nations and peoples of the earth, early human populations in Africa appear to have been far more physically diverse than anything we are familiar with today.

We modern-day humans tend to exaggerate our differences. The results of such exaggeration are often catastrophic. Between war, slavery, imperialism and sheer day-to-day racist oppression, the last several centuries have seen so much human suffering justified by minor differences in human appearance that we can easily forget just how minor these differences really are. By any biologically meaningful standard, living humans are barely distinguishable. Whether you go to Bosnia, Japan, Rwanda or the Baffin Islands, you can expect to see people with the same small and gracile faces, chin, globular skull and roughly the same distribution of body hair. Not only do we look the same, in many ways we act the same as well (for instance, everywhere from the Australian outback to Amazonia, rolling one's eyes is a way of saying 'what an idiot!'). The same applies to cognition. We might think different groups of humans realize their cognitive capacities in very different ways – and to some extent, of course, we do – but again, much of this perceived difference results from our having no real basis for comparison: there's no human language, for instance, that doesn't have nouns, verbs and adjectives; and while humans may enjoy very different forms of music and dance, there's no known human population that does not enjoy music and dancing at all.

Rewind a few hundred millennia and all this was most definitely *not* the case.

For most of our evolutionary history, we did indeed live in Africa – but not just the eastern savannahs, as previously thought: our biological ancestors were distributed everywhere from Morocco to the Cape.[3] Some of those populations remained isolated from each another for tens or even hundreds of thousands of years, cut off from their nearest relatives by deserts and rainforests. Strong regional traits developed.[4] The result probably would have struck a modern observer as something more akin to a world inhabited by hobbits, giants and elves than anything we have direct experience of today, or in the more recent past. Those elements that make up modern humans – the relatively uniform 'us' referred to above – seem only to have come together quite late in the process. In other words, if we think humans are different from each other now, it's largely illusory; and even such differences as do exist are utterly trivial and cosmetic, compared with what must have been happening in Africa during most of prehistory.

Ancestral humans were not only quite different from each other; they also coexisted with smaller-brained, more ape-like species such as *Homo naledi*. What were these ancestral societies like? At this point, at least, we should be honest and admit that, for the most part, we don't have the slightest idea. There's only so much you can reconstruct from cranial remains and the occasional piece of knapped flint – which is basically all we have. Most of the time we don't even really know what was going on below the neck, let alone with pigmentation, diet or anything else. What we do know is that we are composite products of this original mosaic of human populations, which interacted with one another, interbred, drifted apart and came together mostly in ways we can still only guess at.[5] It seems reasonable to assume that behaviours like mating and child-rearing practices, the presence or absence of dominance hierarchies or forms of language and proto-language must have varied at least as much as physical types, and probably far more.

Perhaps the only thing we can say with real certainty is that, in terms of ancestry, we are all Africans.

Modern humans first appeared in Africa. When they began expanding out of Africa into Eurasia, they encountered other populations such as Neanderthals and Denisovans – less different, but still

different – and these various groups interbred.[6] Only after those other populations became extinct can we really begin talking about a single, human 'us' inhabiting the planet. What all this brings home is just how radically different the social and even physical world of our remote ancestors would have seemed to us – and this would have been true at least down to around 40,000 BC. The range of flora and fauna surrounding them was quite unlike anything that exists today. All of which makes it extremely difficult to draw analogies. There's simply nothing in the historical or ethnographic record that resembles a situation in which different subspecies of human interbred, interacted, co-operated, but sometimes also killed each other – and even if there were, the archaeological evidence is too thin and sporadic to test whether remote prehistory was really anything like that or not.[7]

The only thing we can reasonably infer about social organization among our earliest ancestors is that it's likely to have been extraordinarily diverse. Early humans inhabited a wide range of natural environments, from coastlands and tropical forest to mountains and savannah. They were far, far more physically diverse than humans are today; and presumably their social differences were even greater than their physical ones. In other words, there is no 'original' form of human society. Searching for one can only be a matter of myth-making, whether the resultant myths take the form of 'killer ape' fantasies that emerged in the 1960s, seared into collective consciousness by movies like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*; or the 'aquatic ape'; or even the highly amusing but fanciful 'stoned ape' (the theory that consciousness emerged from the accidental ingestion of psychedelic mushrooms). Myths like these entertain YouTube watchers to this day.

We should be clear: there's nothing wrong with myths. Likely as not, the tendency to make up stories about the distant past as a way of reflecting on the nature of our species is itself, like art and poetry, one of those distinctly human traits that began to crystallize in deep prehistory. And no doubt some of these stories – for instance, feminist theories that see distinctly human sociability as originating in collective child-rearing practices – can indeed tell us something important about the paths that converged in modern humanity.[8] But such insights can only ever be partial because there was no Garden of Eden, and a single Eve never existed.

WHY THE 'SAPIENT PARADOX' IS A RED HERRING; AS SOON AS WE WERE HUMAN, WE STARTED DOING HUMAN THINGS

Human beings, today, are a fairly uniform species. This uniformity is not, in evolutionary terms, particularly old. Its genetic basis was established around half a million years ago, but it is almost certainly misguided to think we could ever specify a single, more recent point in time when *Homo sapiens* 'emerged' – that is, when all the various elements of the modern human condition converged, definitively, in some stupendous moment of creation.

Consider the first direct evidence of what we'd now call complex symbolic human behaviour, or simply 'culture'. Currently, it dates back no more than 100,000 years. Where exactly on the African continent this evidence for culture crops up is determined largely by conditions of preservation, and by the countries that have so far been most accessible for archaeological investigation. Rock shelters around the coastlands of South Africa are a key source, trapping prehistoric sediments that yield evidence of hafted tools and the expressive use of shell and ochre around 80,000 BC.[9] Comparably ancient finds are also known from other parts of Africa, but it's not until later, around 45,000 years ago – by which time our species was busily colonizing Eurasia – that similar evidence starts appearing much more widely, and in greater quantities.

In the 1980s and 1990s it was widely assumed that something profound happened, some kind of sudden creative efflorescence, around 45,000 years ago, variously referred to in the literature as the 'Upper Palaeolithic Revolution' or even the 'Human Revolution'.[10] But in the last two decades it has become increasingly clear to researchers that this is most likely an illusion, created by biases in our evidence.

Here's why. Much of the evidence for this 'revolution' is restricted to a single part of the world: Europe, where it is associated with replacement of Neanderthals by *Homo sapiens* around 40,000 BC. It includes more advanced toolkits for hunting and handicrafts, the first clear evidence for the making of images in bone, ivory and clay – including the famous sculpted 'female figurines',[11] dense clusters of

carved and painted animal figures in caves, often observed with breathtaking accuracy; more elaborate ways of clothing and decorating the human body; the first attested use of musical instruments like bone flutes; regular exchange of raw materials over great distances, and also what are usually taken as the earliest proofs of social inequality, in the form of grand burials.

All this is impressive, and gives the impression of a lack of synchrony between the ticking of our genetic and cultural clocks. It seems to ask the question: why do so many tens of thousands of years stand between the biological origins of humanity and the widespread appearance of typically human forms of behaviour; between when we became capable of creating culture and when we finally got round to doing it? What were we actually doing in the interim? Many researchers have puzzled over this and have even coined a phrase for it: 'the sapient paradox'.[12] A few go so far as to postulate some late mutation in the human brain to explain the apparently superior cultural capacities of Upper Palaeolithic Europeans, but such views can no longer be taken seriously.

In fact, it's becoming increasingly clear that the whole problem is a mirage. The reason archaeological evidence from Europe is so rich is that European governments tend to be rich; and that European professional institutions, learned societies and university departments have been pursuing prehistory far longer on their own doorstep than in other parts of the world. With each year that passes, new evidence accumulates for early behavioural complexity elsewhere: not just Africa, but also the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent.[13] Even as we write, a cave site on the coast of Kenya called Panga ya Saidi is yielding evidence of shell beads and worked pigments stretching back 60,000 years;[14] and research on the islands of Borneo and Sulawesi is opening vistas on to an unsuspected world of cave art, many thousands of years older than the famous images of Lascaux and Altamira, on the other side of Eurasia.[15] No doubt still earlier examples of complex pictorial art will one day be found somewhere on the continent of Africa.

If anything, then, Europe was late to the party. Even after its initial colonization by modern humans – starting around 45,000 BC – the continent was still thinly populated, and the new arrivals coexisted

there, albeit fairly briefly, with more established Neanderthal populations (themselves engaged in complex cultural activities of various sorts).[16] Why there appears to be such a sudden cultural efflorescence, shortly after their arrival, may have something to do with climate and demography. To put it bluntly: with the movement of the ice sheets, human populations in Europe were living in harsher and more confined spaces than our species had encountered before. Game-rich valleys and steppe were bounded by tundra to the north and dense coastal forests to the south. We have to picture our ancestors moving between relatively enclosed environments, dispersing and gathering, tracking the seasonal movements of mammoth, bison and deer herds. While the absolute number of people may still have been startlingly small,[17] the density of human interactions seems to have radically increased, especially at certain times of year. And with this came remarkable bursts of cultural expression.[18]

WHY EVEN VERY SOPHISTICATED RESEARCHERS STILL FIND WAYS TO CLING TO THE IDEA THAT SOCIAL INEQUALITY HAS AN 'ORIGIN'

As we will see in a moment, the societies that resulted in what archaeologists call the Upper Palaeolithic period (roughly 50,000–15,000 BC) – with their 'princely' burials and grand communal buildings – seem to completely defy our image of a world made up of tiny egalitarian forager bands. The disconnect is so profound that some archaeologists have begun taking the opposite tack, describing Ice Age Europe as populated by 'hierarchical' or even 'stratified' societies. In this, they make common cause with evolutionary psychologists who insist that dominance behaviour is hardwired in our genes, so much so that the moment society goes beyond tiny bands, it must necessarily take the form of some ruling over others.

Almost everyone who isn't a Pleistocene archaeologist – that is, who is not forced to confront the evidence – simply ignores it and carries on exactly as they had before, writing as if hunter-gatherers can be assumed to have lived in a state of primordial innocence. As

Christopher Boehm puts it, we seem doomed to play out an endless recycling of the war between 'Hobbesian hawks and Rousseauian doves': those who view humans as either innately hierarchical or innately egalitarian.

Boehm's own work is revealing in this regard. An evolutionary anthropologist and a specialist in primate studies, he argues that while humans do have an instinctual tendency to engage in dominance-submissive behaviour, no doubt inherited from our simian ancestors, what makes societies distinctively human is our ability to make the conscious decision *not* to act that way. Carefully working through ethnographic accounts of existing egalitarian foraging bands in Africa, South America and Southeast Asia, Boehm identifies a whole panoply of tactics collectively employed to bring would-be braggarts and bullies down to earth – ridicule, shame, shunning (and in the case of inveterate sociopaths, sometimes even outright assassination)[19] – none of which have any parallel among other primates.

For instance, while gorillas do not mock each other for beating their chests, humans do so regularly. Even more strikingly, while the bullying behaviour might well be instinctual, counter-bullying is not: it's a well-thought-out strategy, and forager societies who engage in it display what Boehm calls 'actuarial intelligence'. That's to say, they understand what their society might look like if they did things differently: if, for instance, skilled hunters were *not* systematically belittled, or if elephant meat was *not* portioned out to the group by someone chosen at random (as opposed to the person who actually killed the beast). This, he concludes, is the essence of politics: the ability to reflect consciously on different directions one's society could take, and to make explicit arguments why it should take one path rather than another. In this sense, one could say Aristotle was right when he described human beings as 'political animals' – since this is precisely what other primates never do, at least not to our knowledge.

This is a brilliant and important argument – but, like so many authors, Boehm seems strangely reluctant to consider its full implications. Let's do so now.

If the very essence of our humanity consists of the fact that we are self-conscious political actors, and therefore capable of embracing a wide range of social arrangements, would that not mean human

beings should actually have explored a wide range of social arrangements over the greater part of our history? In the end, confusingly, Boehm assumes that all human beings until very recently chose instead to follow exactly the same arrangements – we were strictly 'egalitarian for thousands of generations before hierarchical societies began to appear' – thereby casually tossing early humans back into the Garden of Eden once again. Only with the beginnings of agriculture, he suggests, did we all collectively flip back to hierarchy. Before 12,000 years ago, Boehm insists, humans were basically egalitarian, living in what he calls 'societies of equals, and outside the family there were no dominators'.[20]

So, according to Boehm, for about 200,000 years political animals all chose to live just one way; then, of course, they began to rush headlong into their chains, and ape-like dominance patterns re-emerged. The solution to the battle between 'Hobbesian hawks and Rousseauian doves' turns out to be: our genetic nature is Hobbesian, but our political history is pretty much exactly as described by Rousseau. The result? An odd insistence that for many tens of thousands of years, nothing happened. This is an unsettling conclusion, especially when we consider some of the actual archaeological evidence for the existence of 'Palaeolithic politics'.

IN WHICH WE OBSERVE HOW GRAND MONUMENTS, PRINCELY BURIALS AND OTHER UNEXPECTED FEATURES OF ICE AGE SOCIETIES HAVE UPENDED OUR ASSUMPTIONS OF WHAT HUNTER-GATHERERS ARE LIKE, AND CONSIDER WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN TO SAY THERE WAS 'SOCIAL STRATIFICATION' SOME 30,000 YEARS AGO

Let's start with rich hunter-gatherer burials. Examples can be found across much of western Eurasia, from the Dordogne to the Don. They include discoveries in rock shelters and open-air settlements. Some of the earliest come from sites like Sunghir in northern Russia and Dolní

Věstonice in the Moravian basin, south of Brno, and date from between 34,000 and 26,000 years ago. What we find here are not cemeteries but isolated burials of individuals or small groups, their bodies often placed in striking postures and decorated – in some cases, almost saturated – with ornaments. In the case of Sunghir that meant many thousands of beads, laboriously worked from mammoth ivory and fox teeth. Originally, such beads would have decorated clothing made of fur and animal skins. Some of the most lavish costumes are from the conjoined burials of two boys, flanked by great lances made of straightened mammoth tusks.[21]

At Dolní Věstonice, one triple burial contains two young men with elaborate headdresses, posed either side of an older man, all lying on a bed of soil stained red with ochre.[22] Of similar antiquity is a group of cave burials unearthed on the coast of Liguria, near the modern border between Italy and France. Complete bodies of young or adult men, including one especially lavish interment known to archaeologists as *Il Principe* ('the Prince'), were laid out in striking poses and suffused with jewellery, including beads made of marine shell and deer canines, as well as blades of exotic flint. *Il Principe* bears that name because he's also buried with what looks to the modern eye like royal regalia: a flint sceptre, elk antler batons and an ornate headdress lovingly fashioned from perforated shells and deer teeth. Moving further west, to the Dordogne, we encounter a 16,000-year-old burial of a young woman, the so-called 'Lady of Saint-Germain-de-la-Rivière', which contains a rich assemblage of stomach and pelvic ornaments made of shell and stag teeth. The teeth are taken from deer hunted in the Spanish Basque country 190 miles away.[23]

Such findings have completely altered the specialist view of human societies in prehistory. The pendulum has swung so far away from the old notion of egalitarian bands that some archaeologists now argue that, thousands of years before the origins of farming, human societies were already divided along lines of status, class and inherited power. As we'll see, this is highly unlikely, but the evidence these archaeologists point to is real enough: for instance, the extraordinary outlays of labour involved in making grave goods (10,000 work hours for the Sunghir beads alone, by some estimates); the highly advanced and standardized methods of production, possibly suggesting specialized

craftspeople; or the way in which exotic, prestigious materials were transported from very distant locations; and, most suggestive of all, a few cases where such wealth was buried with children, maybe implying some kind of inherited status.[24]

Another unexpected result of recent archaeological research, causing many to revise their view of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, is the appearance of monumental architecture. In Eurasia, the most famous examples are the stone temples of the Germuş Mountains, overlooking the Harran Plain in southeast Turkey. In the 1990s, German archaeologists, working on the plain's northern frontier, began uncovering extremely ancient remains at a place known locally as Göbekli Tepe.[25] What they found has since come to be regarded as an evolutionary conundrum. The main source of puzzlement is a group of twenty megalithic enclosures, initially raised there around 9000 BC, and then repeatedly modified over many centuries. These enclosures were established at a time when the surrounding plain was a mixture of woodland and steppe, teeming with wild plant and animal species that colonized the Middle East as the last Ice Age was drawing to a close.

The enclosures at Göbekli Tepe are massive. They comprise great T-shaped pillars, some over sixteen feet high and weighing up to a ton, which were hewn from the site's limestone bedrock or nearby quarries. The pillars, at least 200 in total, were raised into sockets and linked by walls of rough stone. Each is a unique work of sculpture, carved with images from the world of dangerous carnivores and poisonous reptiles, as well as game species, waterfowl and small scavengers. Animal forms project from the rock in varying depths of relief: some hover coyly on the surface, others emerge boldly into three dimensions. These often nightmarish creatures follow divergent orientations, some marching to the horizon, others working their way down into the earth. In places, the pillar itself becomes a sort of standing body, with human-like limbs and clothing.

The creation of these remarkable buildings implies strictly coordinated activity on a really large scale, even more so if multiple enclosures were constructed simultaneously, according to an overall plan (a current point of debate).[26] But the larger question remains: who made them? While groups of humans not too far away had

already begun cultivating crops at the time, to the best of our knowledge those who built Göbekli Tepe had not. Yes, they harvested and processed wild cereals and other plants in season, but there is no compelling reason to see them as 'proto-farmers', or to suggest they had any interest in orienting their livelihoods around the domestication of crops. Indeed, there was no particular reason why they should, given the availability of fruits, berries, nuts and edible wild fauna in their vicinity. (In fact, there are good reasons to think the builders of Göbekli Tepe were different, in some quite startling ways, from nearby groups who were beginning to take up farming, but this will have to wait for a later chapter; for the moment, we're just interested in the monuments.)

To some, the raised location and orientation of the buildings at Göbekli Tepe suggest an astronomical or chronometric function, each chain of pillars aligned with a particular cycle of celestial movements. Archaeologists remain sceptical, pointing out that the structures may once have been roofed, and that their layout was subject to many alterations over time. But what has mostly intrigued scholars of different disciplines so far is something else: the apparent proof they offer that 'hunter-gatherer societies had evolved institutions to support major public works, projects, and monumental constructions, and thus had a complex social hierarchy prior to their adoption of farming.'[27] Again, matters are not so simple, because these two phenomena – hierarchy and the measure of time – were closely interwoven.

While Göbekli Tepe is often presented as an anomaly, there is in fact a great deal of evidence for monumental construction of different sorts among hunter-gatherers in earlier periods, extending back into the Ice Age.

In Europe, between 25,000 and 12,000 years ago public works were already a feature of human habitation across an area reaching from Kraków to Kiev. Along this transect of the glacial fringe, remains of impressive circular structures have been found that are clearly distinguishable from ordinary camp-dwellings in their scale (the largest were over thirty-nine feet in diameter), permanence, aesthetic qualities and prominent locations in the Pleistocene landscape. Each was

erected on a framework made of mammoth tusks and bones, taken from many tens of these great animals, which were arranged in alternating sequences and patterns that go beyond the merely functional to produce structures that would have looked quite striking to our eyes, and magnificent indeed to people at the time. Great wooden enclosures of up to 130 feet in length also existed, of which only the post-holes and sunken floors remain.[28] Göbekli Tepe too is likely to have had its wooden counterparts.

Monumentality is always to some degree a relative concept; that's to say, a building or structure is 'monumental' only in comparison to other buildings and structures a viewer has actually experienced. Obviously, the Ice Age produced nothing on the scale of the Pyramids of Giza or the Roman Colosseum – but, by the standards of their day, the kind of structures we've been describing can only have been considered public works, involving sophisticated design and the co-ordination of labour on an impressive scale. Research at the Russian site of Yudinovo suggests that 'mammoth houses', as they are often called, were not in fact dwellings at all, but monuments in the strict sense: carefully planned and constructed to commemorate the completion of a great mammoth hunt (and the solidarity of the extended hunting group), using whatever durable parts remained once carcasses had been processed for their meat and hides; and later covered with sediment to create a durable marker in the landscape.[29] We are talking here about really staggering quantities of meat: for each structure (there were five at Yudinovo), there was enough mammoth to feed hundreds of people for around three months.[30] Open-air settlements like Yudinovo, Mezhirich and Kostenki, where such mammoth monuments were erected, often became central places whose inhabitants exchanged amber, marine shells and animal pelts over impressive distances.

So what are we to make of all this evidence for stone temples, princely burials, mammoth monuments and bustling centres of trade and craft production, stretching back far into the Ice Age? What are they doing there, in a Palaeolithic world where – at least on some accounts – nothing much is ever supposed to have happened, and human societies can best be understood by analogy with troops of chimps or bonobos? Unsurprisingly, perhaps, some have responded

by completely abandoning the idea of an egalitarian Golden Age, concluding instead that this must have been a society dominated by powerful leaders, even dynasties – and, therefore, that self-aggrandizement and coercive power have always been the enduring forces behind human social evolution. But this doesn't really work either.

Evidence of institutional inequality in Ice Age societies, whether grand burials or monumental buildings, is sporadic. Richly costumed burials appear centuries, and often hundreds of miles, apart. Even if we put this down to the patchiness of the evidence, we still have to ask why the evidence is so patchy in the first place: after all, if any of these Ice Age 'princes' had behaved like, say, Bronze Age (let alone Renaissance Italian) princes, we'd also be finding all the usual trappings of centralized power: fortifications, storehouses, palaces. Instead, over tens of thousands of years, we see monuments and magnificent burials, but little else to indicate the growth of ranked societies, let alone anything remotely resembling 'states'. To understand why the early record of human social life is patterned in this strange, staccato fashion we first have to do away with some lingering preconceptions about 'primitive' mentalities.

IN WHICH WE DISPOSE OF LINGERING ASSUMPTIONS THAT 'PRIMITIVE' FOLK WERE SOMEHOW INCAPABLE OF CONSCIOUS REFLECTION, AND DRAW ATTENTION TO THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF ECCENTRICITY

In the last chapter, we suggested that the really insidious element of Rousseau's legacy is not so much the idea of the 'noble savage' as that of the 'stupid savage'. We may have got over the overt racism of most nineteenth-century Europeans, or at least we think we have, but it's not unusual to find even very sophisticated contemporary thinkers who feel it's more appropriate to compare 'bands' of hunter-gatherers with chimps or baboons than with anyone they'd ever be likely to meet. Consider the following passage from the historian Yuval Noah

Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014). Harari starts off with a perfectly reasonable observation: that our knowledge of early human history is extremely limited, and social arrangements probably varied a great deal from place to place. True, he overstates his case (he suggests we can really know nothing, even about the Ice Age), but the basic point is well taken. Then we get this:

> The sociopolitical world of the foragers is another area about which we know next to nothing ... scholars cannot even agree on the basics, such as the existence of private property, nuclear families and monogamous relationships. It's likely that different bands had different structures. Some may have been as hierarchical, tense and violent as the nastiest chimpanzee group, while others were as laid-back, peaceful and lascivious as a bunch of bonobos.

So not only was everyone living in bands until farming came along, but these bands were basically ape-like in character. If this seems unfair to the author, remember that Harari could just as easily have written 'as tense and violent as the nastiest biker gang', and 'as laid-back, peaceful and lascivious as a hippie commune'. One might have imagined the obvious thing to compare one group of human beings with would be ... another group of human beings. Why, then, did Harari choose chimps instead of bikers? It's hard to escape the impression that the main point of difference is that bikers *choose* to live the way they do. Such choices imply political consciousness: the ability to argue and reflect about the proper way to live – which is precisely, as Boehm reminds us, what apes don't do. Yet Harari, like so many others, chooses to compare early humans with apes anyway.

In this way, the 'sapient paradox' returns. Not as something real, but as a side effect of the weird way we read the evidence: insisting either that for countless millennia we had modern brains, but for some reason decided to live like monkeys anyway; or that we had the ability to overcome our simian instincts and organize ourselves in an endless variety of ways, but for some equally obscure reason only ever chose one way to organize ourselves.

Perhaps the real question here is what it means to be a 'self-conscious political actor'. Philosophers tend to define human consciousness in terms of self-awareness; neuroscientists, on the other hand, tell us we

spend the overwhelming majority of our time effectively on autopilot, working out habitual forms of behaviour without any sort of conscious reflection. When we are capable of self-awareness, it's usually for very brief periods of time: the 'window of consciousness', during which we can hold a thought or work out a problem, tends to be open on average for roughly seven seconds. What neuroscientists (and it must be said, most contemporary philosophers) almost never notice, however, is that the great exception to this is when we're talking to someone else. In conversation, we can hold thoughts and reflect on problems sometimes for hours on end. This is of course why so often, even if we're trying to figure something out by ourselves, we imagine arguing with or explaining it to someone else. Human thought is inherently dialogic. Ancient philosophers tended to be keenly aware of all this: that's why, whether they were in China, India or Greece, they tended to write their books in the form of dialogues. Humans were only fully self-conscious when arguing with one another, trying to sway each other's views, or working out a common problem. True individual self-consciousness, meanwhile, was imagined as something that a few wise sages could perhaps achieve through long study, exercise, discipline and meditation.

What we'd now call political consciousness was always assumed to come first. In this sense, the Western philosophical tradition has taken a rather unusual direction over the last few centuries. Around the same time as it abandoned dialogue as its typical mode of writing, it also began imagining the isolated, rational, self-conscious individual not as a rare achievement, something typically accomplished – if at all – after literally years of living isolated in a cave or monastic cell, or on top of a pillar in a desert somewhere, but as the normal default state of human beings anywhere.

Even stranger, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was *political* self-consciousness that European philosophers came to see as some kind of amazing historical achievement: as a phenomenon which only really became possible with the Enlightenment itself, and the subsequent American and French Revolutions. Before that, it was assumed, people blindly followed traditions, or what they assumed to be the will of God. Even when peasants or popular rebels rose up to try to overthrow oppressive regimes they couldn't admit they

were doing so, but convinced themselves they were restoring 'ancient customs' or acting on some kind of divine inspiration. To Victorian intellectuals, the notion of people self-consciously imagining a social order more to their liking and then trying to bring it into being was simply not applicable before the modern age – and most were deeply divided as to whether it would even be a good idea in their own time.

All this would have come as a great surprise to Kandiaronk, the seventeenth-century Wendat philosopher-statesman whose impact on European political thought we discussed in the previous chapter. Like many North American peoples of his time, Kandiaronk's Wendat nation saw their society as a confederation created by conscious agreement; agreements open to continual renegotiation. But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many in Europe and America had reached the point of arguing that someone like Kandiaronk could never have really existed in the first place. 'Primitive' folk, they argued, were not only incapable of political self-consciousness, they were not even capable of fully conscious thought on the individual level – or at least conscious thought worthy of the name. That is, just as they pretended a 'rational Western individual' (say, a British train guard or French colonial official) could be assumed to be fully self-aware all the time (a clearly absurd assumption), they argued that anyone classified as a 'primitive' or 'savage' operated with a 'pre-logical mentality', or lived in a mythological dreamworld. At best, they were mindless conformists, bound in the shackles of tradition; at worst, they were incapable of fully conscious, critical thought of any kind.

Such theories might be considered the high-water mark of the reaction against the indigenous critique of European society. The arguments attributed to figures like Kandiaronk could be written off as simple projections of Western 'noble savage' fantasies, because real savages were assumed to live in an entirely different mental universe. Nowadays no reputable scholar would make such claims: everyone at least pays lip service to the psychic unity of mankind. But in practice, as we've seen, little has changed. Scholars still write as if those living in earlier stages of economic development, and especially those who are classified as 'egalitarian', can be treated as if they were literally all the same, living in some collective group-think: if human differences show up in any form – different 'bands' being different from each

other – it is only in the same way that bands of great apes might differ. Political self-consciousness, or certainly anything we'd now call visionary politics, would have been impossible.

And if certain hunter-gatherers turn out not to have been living perpetually in 'bands' at all, but instead congregating to create grand landscape monuments, storing large quantities of preserved food and treating particular individuals like royalty, contemporary scholars are at best likely to place them in a new stage of development: they have moved up the scale from 'simple' to 'complex' hunter-gatherers, a step closer to agriculture and urban civilization. But they are still caught in the same Turgot-like evolutionary straitjacket, their place in history defined by their mode of subsistence, and their role blindly to enact some abstract law of development which we understand but they do not; certainly, it rarely occurs to anyone to ask what sort of worlds they *thought* they were trying to create.[31]

Now, admittedly, there have always been exceptions to this rule. Anthropologists who spend years talking to indigenous people in their own languages, and watching them argue with one another, tend to be well aware that even those who make their living hunting elephants or gathering lotus buds are just as sceptical, imaginative, thoughtful and capable of critical analysis as those who make their living by operating tractors, managing restaurants or chairing university departments. A few, such as the early-twentieth-century scholar Paul Radin in his 1927 book *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, ended up concluding that at least those he knew best – Winnebago and other Native North Americans – were actually, on average, rather more thoughtful.

Radin himself was considered something of an oddball by his contemporaries (he always avoided getting a proper academic job; the legend in Chicago was that when once given a teaching fellowship there, he was so intimidated before his first lecture that he immediately marched out to a nearby highway and contrived to get his leg broken by a car, then spent the rest of the term happily reading in the hospital). Perhaps not coincidentally, what really struck him about the 'primitive' societies he was most familiar with was their tolerance of eccentricity. This, he concluded, was simply the logical extension of

that same rejection of coercion that so impressed the Jesuits in Quebec. If, he noted, a Winnebago decided that gods or spirits did not really exist and refused to perform rituals meant to appease them, or even if he declared the collective wisdom of the elders wrong and invented his own personal cosmology (and both these things did, quite regularly, happen), such a sceptic would definitely be made fun of, while his closest friends and family might worry lest the gods punish him in some way. However, it would never occur to *them* to punish him, or that anyone should try to force him into conformity – for instance, by blaming him for a bad hunt and therefore refusing to share food with him until he agreed to perform the usual rituals.

There is every reason to believe that sceptics and non-conformists exist in every human society; what varies is how others react to them.[32] Radin was interested in the intellectual consequences, the kind of speculative systems of thought such out-of-sync characters might create. Others have noted the political implications. It's often people who are just slightly odd who become leaders; the truly odd can become spiritual figures, but, even more, they can and often do serve as a kind of reserve of potential talent and insight that can be called on in the event of a crisis or unprecedented turn of affairs. Thomas Beidelman, for instance, observes that among the early-twentieth-century Nuer – a cattle-keeping people of South Sudan, famous for their rejection of anything that resembled government – there were politicians and village 'bulls' ('operator types' we'd now call them) who played fast and loose with the rules, but also 'earth priests' who mediated local disputes, and finally prophets. The politicians were often unconventional: for instance, it was not uncommon for the local 'bull' actually to be a woman whose parents had declared her a man for social purposes; the priests were always outsiders to the region; but the prophet was an altogether more extreme kind of figure. He might dribble, drool, maintain a vacant stare, act like an epileptic; or engage in long but pointless tasks such as spending hours arranging shells into designs on the ground in the bush; or long periods in the wilderness; or he may even eat excrement or ashes. Prophets, as Beidelman notes, 'may speak in tongues, go into trances, fast, balance on their head, wear feathers in their hair, be active by night rather than by day, and may perch on rooftops. Some sit with tethering pegs up their anuses.'[33] Many, too,

were physically deformed. Some were cross-dressers, or given to unconventional sexual practices.

In other words, these were seriously unorthodox people. The impression one gets from the literature is that any Nuer settlement of pre-colonial times was likely to be complemented by a minor penumbra of what might be termed extreme individuals; ones who in our own society would likely be classified as anything from highly eccentric or defiantly queer to neurodivergent or mentally ill. Normally, prophets were treated with bemused respect. They were ill; but the illness was a direct consequence of being touched by God. As a result, when great calamities or unprecedented events occurred – a plague, a foreign invasion – it was among this penumbra that everyone looked for a charismatic leader appropriate to the occasion. As a result, a person who might otherwise have spent his life as something analogous to the village idiot would suddenly be found to have remarkable powers of foresight and persuasion; even to be capable of inspiring new social movements among the youth or co-ordinating elders across Nuerland to put aside their differences and mobilize around some common goal; even, sometimes, to propose entirely different visions of what Nuer society might be like.

WHAT CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS LEARNED FROM THE NAMBIKWARA ABOUT THE ROLE OF CHIEFS, AND SEASONAL VARIATIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE

Claude Lévi-Strauss is one of the few mid-twentieth-century anthropologists to take seriously the idea that early humans were our intellectual equals; hence his famous argument in *The Savage Mind* that mythological thought, rather than representing some sort of pre-logical haze, is better conceived as a kind of 'neolithic science' as sophisticated as our own, just built on different principles. Less well known – but more relevant to the problems we are grappling with here – are some of his early writings on politics.

In 1944, Lévi-Strauss published an essay about politics among the

Nambikwara, a small population of part-time farmers, part-time foragers inhabiting a notoriously inhospitable stretch of savannah in northwest Mato Grosso, Brazil. The Nambikwara then had a reputation as extremely simple folk, given their very rudimentary material culture. For this reason, many treated them almost as a direct window on to the Palaeolithic. This, Lévi-Strauss pointed out, was a mistake. People like the Nambikwara live in the shadow of the modern state, trading with farmers and city people and sometimes hiring themselves out as labourers. Some might even be descendants of runaways from cities or plantations. Still, he noted, their ways of organizing their lives could be seen as a source of insights into more general features of the human condition, especially as these pertain to politics.

For Lévi-Strauss, what was especially instructive about the Nambikwara was that, for all that they were averse to competition (they had little wealth to compete over anyway), they did appoint chiefs to lead them. The very simplicity of the resulting arrangement, he felt, might expose 'some basic functions' of political life that 'remain hidden in more complex and elaborate systems of government'. Not only was the role of the chief socially and psychologically quite similar to that of a national politician or statesman in European society, he noted, it also attracted similar personality types: people who 'unlike most of their companions, enjoy prestige for its own sake, feel a strong appeal to responsibility, and to whom the burden of public affairs brings its own reward'.[34]

Modern politicians play the role of wheelers and dealers, brokering alliances or negotiating compromises between different constituencies or interest groups. In Nambikwara society this didn't happen much because there weren't really many differences in wealth or status. However, chiefs did play an analogous role, brokering between two entirely different social and ethical systems, which obtained at different times of year. Allow us to explain. In the 1940s, the Nambikwara lived in what were effectively two very different societies. During the rainy season, they occupied hilltop villages of several hundred people and practised horticulture; during the rest of the year they dispersed into small foraging bands. Chiefs made or lost their reputations by acting as heroic leaders during the 'nomadic adventures' of the dry season, during which times they typically gave orders, resolved crises and behaved in what

would at any other time be considered an unacceptably authoritarian manner; in the wet season, a time of much greater ease and abundance, they relied on those reputations to attract followers to settle around them in villages, where they employed only gentle persuasion and led by example to guide their followers in the construction of houses and tending of gardens. In doing so they cared for the sick and needy, mediated disputes and never imposed anything on anyone.

How should we think about these chiefs? They were not patriarchs, Lévi-Strauss concluded; neither were they petty tyrants (even though for certain limited periods they were allowed to act as such); and there was no sense in which they were invested with mystical powers. More than anything, they resembled modern politicians operating tiny embryonic welfare states, pooling resources and doling them out to those in need. What impressed Lévi-Strauss above all was their political maturity. It was the chiefs' skill in directing small bands of dry-season foragers, of making snap decisions in crises (crossing a river, directing a hunt) that later qualified them to play the role of mediators and diplomats in the village plaza. But in doing so they were effectively moving back and forth, each year, between what evolutionary anthropologists (in the tradition of Turgot) insist on thinking of as totally different stages of social development: from hunters and foragers to farmers and back again.

It was precisely this quality that made the Nambikwara chief such a peculiarly familiar political figure: the calm sophistication with which he shifted between what were in effect two different social systems, all the while balancing a sense of personal ambition with the common good. These chiefs were in every sense self-conscious political actors. And it was their flexibility and adaptability that enabled them to take such a distanced perspective on whichever system obtained at any given time.

Although Lévi-Strauss went on to become the world's most renowned anthropologist and perhaps the most famous intellectual in France, his early essay on Nambikwara leadership fell into almost instant obscurity. To this day, very few outside the field of Amazonian studies have heard of it. One reason is that in the post-war decades, Lévi-Strauss was moving in exactly the opposite direction to the rest of his discipline. Where he emphasized similarities between the lives

of hunters, horticulturalists and modern industrial democracies, almost everyone else – and particularly everyone interested in foraging societies – was embracing new variations on Turgot, though with updated language and backed up by a flood of hard scientific data. Throwing away old-fashioned distinctions between 'savagery', 'barbarism' and 'civilization', which were beginning to sound a little too condescending, they settled on a new sequence, which ran from 'bands' to 'tribes' to 'chiefdoms' to 'states'. The culmination of this trend was the landmark *Man the Hunter* symposium, held at the University of Chicago in 1966. This framed hunter-gatherer studies in terms of a new discipline which its attendees proposed to call 'behavioural ecology', starting with rigorously quantified studies of African savannah and rainforest groups – the Kalahari San, Eastern Hadza and Mbuti Pygmies – including calorie counts, time allocation studies and all sorts of data that simply hadn't been available to earlier researchers.

The new studies overlapped with a sudden upswing of popular interest in just these same African societies: for instance, the famous short films about the Kalahari Bushmen by the Marshalls (an American family of anthropologists and film-makers), which became fixtures of introductory anthropology courses and educational television across the world, along with best-selling books like Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*. Before long, it was simply assumed by almost everyone that foragers represented a separate stage of social development, that they 'live in small groups', 'move around a lot', reject any social distinctions other than those of age and gender, and resolve conflicts by 'fission' rather than arbitration or violence.[35] The fact that these African societies were, in some cases at least, refugee populations living in places no one else wanted, or that many foraging societies documented in the ethnographic record (who had by this time been largely wiped out by European settler colonialism and were thus no longer available for quantitative analysis) were nothing like this, was occasionally acknowledged. But it was rarely treated as particularly relevant. The image of tiny egalitarian bands corresponded perfectly to what those weaned on the legacy of Rousseau felt hunter-gatherers *ought* to have been like. Now there seemed to be hard, quantifiable scientific data (and also movies!) to back it up.

In this new reality, Lévi-Strauss's Nambikwara were simply irrelevant. After all, in evolutionary terms they weren't even really foragers, since they only roamed about in foraging bands for seven or eight months a year. So the apparent paradox that their larger village settlements were egalitarian while their foraging bands were anything but could be ignored, lest it tarnish this crisp new picture. The kind of political self-consciousness which seemed so self-evident in Nambikwara chiefs, let alone the wild improvisation expected of Nuer prophets, had no place in the revised framework of human social evolution.

IN WHICH WE RETURN TO PREHISTORY, AND CONSIDER EVIDENCE FOR BOTH 'EXTREME INDIVIDUALS' AND SEASONAL VARIATIONS OF SOCIAL LIFE IN THE ICE AGE AND BEYOND

The twentieth-century Nambikwara, Winnebago or Nuer cannot provide us with direct windows on the past. What they can do is suggest angles of investigation we might not otherwise have thought to look for. After considering their social systems, it seems self-evident to ask if, in early human societies, there is evidence for seasonal variations of social structure; or if highly anomalous individuals were not only treated with respect, but played important political roles in the Palaeolithic period. As it turns out, the answer in both cases is 'yes'. In fact, the evidence is overwhelming.

Let's return to those rich Upper Palaeolithic burials, so often interpreted as evidence for the emergence of 'inequality', or even hereditary nobility of some sort. For some odd reason, those who make such arguments never seem to notice – or, if they do, to attach much significance to the fact – that a quite remarkable number of these skeletons (indeed, a majority) bear evidence of striking physical anomalies that could only have marked them out, clearly and dramatically, from their social surroundings.[36] The adolescent boys in both Sunghir and Dolní Věstonice, for instance, had pronounced congenital deformities; the

bodies in the Romito Cave in Calabria were unusually short, with at least one case of dwarfism; while those in Grimaldi Cave were extremely tall even by our standards, and must have seemed veritable giants to their contemporaries.

All this seems very unlikely to be a coincidence. In fact, it makes one wonder whether even those bodies, which appear from their skeletal remains to be anatomically typical, might have been equally striking in some other way; after all, an albino, for example, or an epileptic prophet given to dividing his time between hanging upside down and arranging and rearranging snail shells would not be identifiable as such from the archaeological record. We can't know much about the day-to-day lives of Palaeolithic individuals buried with rich grave goods, other than that they seem to have been as well fed and cared for as anybody else; but we can at least suggest they were seen as the ultimate individuals, about as different from their peers as it was possible to be.

What does all this really tell us about social inequality in the last Ice Age? Well, first of all it suggests we might have to shelve any premature talk of the emergence of hereditary elites. It seems extremely unlikely that Palaeolithic Europe produced a stratified elite that just happened to consist largely of hunchbacks, giants and dwarfs. Second, we don't know how much the treatment of such individuals after death had to do with their treatment in life. Another important point here is that we are not dealing with a case of some people being buried with rich grave goods and others being buried with none. Rather it is a case of some people being buried with rich grave goods, and most others not being buried at all.[37] The very practice of burying bodies intact, and clothed, appears to have been exceptional in the Upper Palaeolithic. Most corpses were treated in completely different ways: de-fleshed, broken up, curated, or even processed into jewellery and artefacts. (In general, Palaeolithic people were clearly much more at home with human body parts than we are.)

The corpse in its complete and articulated form – and the clothed corpse even more so – was clearly something unusual and, one would presume, inherently strange. Some important circumstantial evidence reinforces this. In many such cases, an effort was made to contain the bodies of the Upper Palaeolithic dead by covering them with heavy objects: mammoth scapulae, wooden planks, stones or tight bindings.

Perhaps saturating them with clothing, weapons and ornaments was an extension of these concerns, celebrating but also containing something potentially dangerous. This too makes sense. The ethnographic record abounds with examples of anomalous beings – human or otherwise – treated as both exalted and dangerous; or one way in life, another in death.

Much here is speculation. There are any number of other interpretations that could be placed on the evidence – though the idea that these tombs mark the emergence of some sort of hereditary aristocracy seems the least likely of all. Those interred were extraordinary, 'extreme' individuals. The way they were treated – and here we are speaking not only about the ostentatious display of riches, but that their corpses were decorated, displayed and buried to begin with – marked them out as equally extraordinary in death. Anomalous in almost every respect, such burials can hardly be interpreted as proxies for social structure among the living. On the other hand, they clearly have something to do with all the contemporary evidence for music, sculpture, painting and complex architecture. What is one to make of them?

This is where seasonality comes into the picture.

Almost all the Ice Age sites with extraordinary burials and monumental architecture were created by societies that lived a little like Lévi-Strauss's Nambikwara, dispersing into foraging bands at one time of year, gathering together in concentrated settlements at another. True, they didn't gather to plant crops. Rather, the large Upper Palaeolithic sites are linked to migrations and seasonal hunting of game herds – woolly mammoth, steppe bison or reindeer – as well as cyclical fish-runs and nut harvests. This seems to be the explanation for those hubs of activity found in eastern Europe at places like Dolní Věstonice, where people took advantage of an abundance of wild resources to feast, engage in complex rituals and ambitious artistic projects, and trade minerals, marine shells and furs. In western Europe, equivalents would be the great rock shelters of the French Périgord and the Cantabrian coast, with their deep records of human activity, which similarly formed part of an annual round of seasonal congregation and dispersal.[38]

Archaeology also shows that patterns of seasonal variation lie behind the monuments of Göbekli Tepe. Activities around the stone temples

correspond with periods of annual superabundance, between midsummer and autumn, when large herds of gazelle descended on to the Harran Plain. At such times, people also gathered at the site to process massive quantities of nuts and wild cereal grasses, making these into festive foods, which presumably fuelled the work of construction.[39] There is some evidence to suggest that each of these great structures had a relatively short lifespan, culminating in an enormous feast, after which its walls were rapidly filled in with leftovers and other refuse: hierarchies raised to the sky, only to be swiftly torn down again. Ongoing research is likely to complicate this picture, but the overall pattern of seasonal congregation for festive labour seems well established.

Such oscillating patterns of life endured long after the invention of agriculture. To take just one example, they may be key to understanding the famous Neolithic monuments of Salisbury Plain in England, and not just because the arrangements of standing stones themselves seem to function (among other things) as giant calendars. Stonehenge, framing the midsummer sunrise and the midwinter sunset, is the most famous of these. It turns out to have been the last in a long sequence of ceremonial structures, erected over the course of centuries in timber as well as stone, as people converged on the plain from remote corners of the British Isles at significant times of year. Careful excavation shows that many of these structures – now plausibly interpreted as monuments to the ancestors of a Neolithic aristocracy – were dismantled just a few generations after their construction.[40]

Still more striking, the people who built Stonehenge were not farmers, or not in the usual sense. They had once been; but the practice of erecting and dismantling grand monuments coincides with a period when the peoples of Britain, having adopted the Neolithic farming economy from continental Europe, appear to have turned their backs on at least one crucial aspect of it: abandoning the cultivation of cereals and returning, from around 3300 BC, to the collection of hazelnuts as their staple source of plant food. On the other hand, they kept hold of their domestic pigs and herds of cattle, feasting on them seasonally at nearby Durrington Walls, a prosperous town of some thousands of people – with its own Woodhenge – in winter, but largely empty and abandoned in summer. The builders of Stonehenge seem to have been neither foragers nor herders, but something in between.[41]

All this is crucial because it's hard to imagine how giving up agriculture could have been anything but a self-conscious decision. There is no evidence that one population displaced another, or that farmers were somehow overwhelmed by powerful foragers who forced them to abandon their crops. The Neolithic inhabitants of England appear to have taken the measure of cereal-farming and collectively decided that they preferred to live another way. How could such a decision have been made? We'll never know, but Stonehenge itself provides something of a hint since it is built of extremely large stones, some of which (the 'bluestones') were transported from as far away as Wales, while many of the cattle and pigs consumed at Durrington Walls were laboriously herded there from other distant locations.[42]

In other words, and remarkable as it may seem, even in the third millennium BC co-ordination of some sort was clearly possible across large parts of the British Isles. If Stonehenge was a shrine to exalted founders of a ruling clan – as some archaeologists now argue – it seems likely that members of their lineage claimed significant, even cosmic roles by virtue of their involvement in such events. On the other hand, patterns of seasonal aggregation and dispersal raise another question: if there were kings and queens at Stonehenge, exactly what sort could they have been? After all, these would have been kings whose courts and kingdoms existed for only a few months of the year, and otherwise dispersed into small communities of nut gatherers and stock herders. If they possessed the means to marshal labour, pile up food resources and provender armies of year-round retainers, what sort of royalty would consciously elect *not* to do so?

CONCERNING 'BUFFALO POLICE' (IN WHICH WE REDISCOVER THE ROLE OF SEASONALITY IN HUMAN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE)

Recall that for Lévi-Strauss, there was a clear link between seasonal variations of social structure and a certain kind of political freedom. The fact that one structure applied in the rainy season and another in the dry allowed Nambikwara chiefs to view their own social