

Chapter 2

The History of Americanist Hunter-Gatherer Research

The Early Years: 1600–1880

As we have seen, social evolutionary theory rested on the premise that material economy—more particularly subsistence economy—is fundamental to cultural progress and determines its evolutionary trajectory. Hunter-gatherers were conceptually critical to that premise. In opposing culture and nature, progressive evolutionary theory necessarily implied that the behavior of primitive peoples was to be construed in natural rather than cultural terms, that is, as a direct response to nature, technology, and environment. It followed that in its initial stages evolutionary progress was accomplished by replacing the natural hunting and gathering economy with a cultural economy founded on agriculture (see later discussion). As hunter-gatherers known in the nineteenth century showed, without this first step human progress was impossible (cf. Chinard 1947, p. 51; Pearce 1988, pp. 66–72, 132). In social evolutionary theory, then, ecology and environment and hunter-gatherer research were inseparable; one could not account for the latter without considering the former.

As we have also seen, the tradition of British social evolutionary theory regarded environment and hunter-gatherers as problems that were essentially solved and required little further attention. Operating within the same theoretical framework, individuals in the USA arrived at a different conclusion. Environment and primitive peoples were poorly understood, and the development of a complete theory of social evolution required more thorough studies of both subjects.

The difference was partly a function of geography. There were primitive peoples in the United States, many of them hunter-gatherers, that could be studied first-hand. As European naturalists had been able to study plants and animals directly in their drawing rooms, gardens, and estates, so could American anthropologists study their subject matter in their own backyards. Sooner or later, this was bound to foster an intellectual concern for environmental and technological context—topics that remained matters of speculation for European conjectural historians and social

evolutionary theorists. It did not hurt that in the case of primitive New World peoples, the study of environmental context was entirely consistent with any version of progressive evolutionary theory to which one might subscribe. As we have seen, the theory of social evolution as progress allowed Powell to join Ward and others in denying the utility of selectionist interpretations as a basis for contemporary social policy without requiring him to abandon them in the special case of primitive hunter-gatherers, where he himself often found them most useful (see also Burrow 1966, pp. 226–227).

As Pearce (1988) and Chinard (1947, pp. 53–54) point out, the American interest (as opposed to European disinterest) in primitive peoples and natural environment was more than a simple matter of geography and easy accessibility. Between 1600 and 1850, Americans developed a distinctly un-European world view in which they saw themselves in a distinctly un-European national struggle—not against external challenges posed by other nations, ethnic groups, or conquering despots, as was the case in Europe, but rather against internal challenges posed by nature and the environment. To this end, Americans employed the Indian as a symbol of nature and, through that device, a symbol of what contemporary Americans were not and should not be (Pearce 1988, p. 104, 208). Much simplified, Indians were savages; as hunters they were a part of nature and representatives of New World prehistory. Americans were civilized; as agriculturalists they were apart from, and masters over, nature and represented the New World present and future.

Because European worldviews made little reference to either the environment or primitive peoples (see Chap. 1), European ideas about primitives were comparatively uncomplicated (Pearce 1988, p. 4). Primitives were simply noble to those who use them as a device through which to criticize progress and civilization (as in the primitivism of Rousseau)—and simply ignoble to the defenders of social evolutionary progress and civilization (as in the progressivist antiprimitivism of Charles Dickens, James Mill, and Buffon; see later discussion).

By contrast, because Americans saw Indians as the contradiction of their own multifaceted national character, the American portrayal of the savage Indian character was necessarily multifaceted and in that sense much more sophisticated than its European counterpart (Pearce 1988, p. 103). The philosophy of social evolutionary progress assured Americans that it was their manifest destiny to civilize the New World, to replace savagery with civilization. The Indian was, thus, to be pitied as the one whose carefree and unfettered way of life was doomed and whose natural rights to the land had to give way to progress and civilization (Pearce 1988, p. 53). Guilt arising from the recognition of this regrettable but inevitable unfolding of social evolutionary progress gradually produced the idea Pearce terms *savagism* (1988, p. xvii, 76). In it, both savage Indians and civilized Americans were imbued with both noble and ignoble qualities, though of different kinds, and the differences between savage and civilized qualities were seen primarily to reflect differences in material circumstances, that is, technology and environment (Pearce 1988, p. 115, 121, 131). American anthropology arose from early attempts to harness these ideas about primitives, environment, and social evolutionary progress to a workable program of scientific research.

Jefferson on Primitives and the New World Environment

Morgan is often credited with being the first American to attempt a blend of evolution and materialism, but the distinction more properly falls to Thomas Jefferson. His progressive evolutionary interpretation of living Native American cultures seems to have been, for its time, every bit as materialistically sophisticated as Engel's adaptation of Morgan, which Harris (1968a) proffers as the first systematic periodization of prehistory. Jefferson believed that by touring the United States, ethnographers could "re-live" the essential stages of human evolution.

Let the philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association, living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skin of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers, in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens the pioneers of advance civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. (Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Ludlow, dated 6 September 1824; quoted in Chinard 1947, p. 54)

Given his many and varied intellectual pursuits, Jefferson's interest in the primitive inhabitants of the New World in a sense requires no explanation. His special interest in materialist-ecological interpretations of social evolution, however, did not arise of its own in a vacuum (cf. Glacken 1967, pp. 681–682; Chinard 1947, p. 42, 56; Pearce 1988, pp. 91–94). He developed and presented these interpretations as alternatives to environmental and evolutionary propositions regarding New World peoples and environments advanced by Old World scholars of the armchair tradition. Here, Jefferson was reacting principally to the evolutionary interpretations of the famous French naturalist Buffon and other antiprimitivists including Robertson, a Scottish social evolutionary philosopher whose work, directly and indirectly, drew extensively on the work of Montesquieu, Buffon, and others influenced by Buffon, including Peter Kalm, Cornelieus de Pauw, and Abbé Raynal, all of whom had written on the subject of the suitability of the New World as a human habitat (Chinard 1947, p. 38, 42–44). Buffon's seminal contributions to evolutionary theory in relation to the mutability of species are well known. His interpretation of New World natural history, however, emphasized environmental rather than evolutionary causes. It was solidly rooted in, and in some ways drew directly from, the older tradition of theories of environmental influence. For Buffon the primitive state, that is, lack of evolutionary change, of the American Indian was chiefly due to the "weakness" of the New World environment and its inhabitants and the recency of their occupation of that environment (Chinard 1947, p. 31). Simply put, the environment discouraged human invention and achievement. Buffon and others inspired by his work, who often took more extreme positions (e.g., Kalm and Raynal; Chinard 1947, pp. 30, 33, 37), argued, further, that parallel environmental effects were readily evident in New World animals, particularly in domesticates brought from Europe, which had grown steadily smaller following their introduction.

Jefferson was offended at every turn by these theories and, being a wealthy intellectual and politically influential, was in a position to do something about it. Early on, he made it a point to inform Buffon of his erroneous interpretation of the New World environment and its natural and cultural inhabitants (Jefferson 1787). Later, as president of the United States, he took the further, and more important, step of gathering—and seeing that others gathered—empirical evidence to evaluate the implications of Buffon’s theory. Moved to action by the speculations of Buffon, Robertson, de Pauw, Kalm, Raynal, and others that he was convinced were as baseless in fact as they were often abhorrent in principle, Jefferson emerges as a pivotal figure in the early development of American anthropology (Hallowell 1960, p. 15; Glacken 1967, pp. 681–682). His interest in the evolutionary status of Native Americans and the influence of environment on their culture and economy are evident in his instructions as to the ethnographic particulars the explorers Lewis and Clark were to observe on their journey to the Pacific coast (Chinard 1947, p. 56; Hallowell 1960).

Jefferson set important precedents for the future of American anthropology, not only in regard to the participation of the government in the development and support of that discipline, as Hollowell has observed, but in the environmental and materialist biases he gave that association. From Jefferson and the Lewis and Clark expedition (cf. Pearce 1988, pp. 106–107), we can easily see the path to later government surveys, particularly that of Powell, and through Powell to a governmentally sponsored program of environmental-materialist inquiry regarding the primitive native inhabitants of the United States. Intellectually, however, the road to Powell lead through Lewis Henry Morgan.

Morgan

Two decades before Powell, Morgan had the opportunity to observe first-hand a comparatively primitive people (Pearce 1988, pp. 130–131), the Iroquois, and it seems reasonable to think that the tangibility of his subject matter lent his evolutionary theories a more contextual and materialist perspective than they would have otherwise had (cf. Bohannan 1965, p. x, xvi–xvii). It is telling in this regard that in criticizing the Spanish accounts of Aztec royalty, Morgan observed that they lacked “the realism of Indian life” (Morgan 1881, p. 274). Morgan does not emerge as an important fieldworker, to be sure. He had, nevertheless, considerably more experience with primitive peoples than either Spencer or Tylor, which makes his materialism more understandable. It is perhaps this sense of first-hand familiarity with the American Indian that caused Morgan to choose so prosaic a subject as houses and house life for a volume in which material and evolutionary themes were intertwined.

To a very great extent communism in living was a necessary result of the condition of the Indian tribes. It entered into their plan of life and determined the character of their houses.

In effect it was a union of effort to procure subsistence, which was the vital and commanding concern of life.... It is made reasonably plain, I think, from the facts stated, that in the Upper Status of savagery, and also in the Lower Status of barbarism, the Indian household was formed of a number of families of gentile kin; that they practiced communism in living in the household, and that this principle found expression in their house architecture and predetermined its character. (Morgan 1881, p. 63, 139)

Harris (1968a, pp. 213–216) notwithstanding, materialism was a fundamental element of the progressive evolutionary theories of Morgan, though to a lesser degree than it was for Spencer.

The progress of mankind from their primitive condition to civilization has been marked and eventful. Each great stage of progress is connected, more or less directly, with some important invention or discovery which materially influenced human progress, and inaugurated an improved condition. (Morgan 1881, p. xxv)

Unlike Tylor, Morgan was at least willing to hazard an explicit formulation of the relationship between specific technological innovations and the course of evolution. It can hardly be denied, in any event, that Marx was attracted to Morgan because of the materialism in his unilinear evolution (e.g., his reliance on technological developments that define stages of progress; Morgan 1877, p. 9; Hobsbawm 1964, pp. 24–25; cf. Harris 1968a, pp. 213–214; see Chap. 6).¹

Environment and Ecology in Early American Anthropology: 1880–1920

From Morgan it is only a small step to the beginnings of American anthropology as a formal discipline, where the prominence of the environmental-materialist perspective is clearly evident. It is well known, to be sure, that Boas inaugurated his career with a study of the relationship between culture and geography among the Eskimo of Baffin Island (Boas 1888) and, having done this much, never again explored such relationships seriously. Yet many of his equally distinguished contemporaries did just that, for Boas by no means spoke for early American anthropology as a whole; indeed, at that time he was a rather minor figure (cf. Buettner-Janusch 1957; Meltzer 1983). The funding for early American anthropology was largely provided by the government, and it was in Washington, specifically within the Smithsonian Institution, where the power lay. There, under the leadership of Powell, the scientists at the National Museum and the Bureau of Ethnology undertook penetrating studies of environment and technology without wandering through the sterile morass of extreme environmental determinism as later set down by those such as Huntington (1945, 1963) and Semple (1911).

¹ Although their theories shared much in common, (i.e., conflict), Spencer's support for individualism and capitalism prevented Marx from turning there, for a theory of primitives: Morgan was the logical alternative.

The institutional support for such ethnographic studies looms large indeed when one surveys just the list of important ethnobotanical contributions made by individuals in federal service (e.g., Palmer 1871, 1874, 1878; cf. Bye 1972; Coville 1892; Dutcher 1893; Chestnut 1902). With the formal employment of O. T. Mason by the National Museum in 1884, governmental support for environmental and materialist research broadened to include the problem of primitive technology, a subject theretofore largely uninvestigated.

As we have seen (Chap. 1), the direction in which Powell took Washington anthropology was partly the result of a long-standing tradition of governmental research that began with Jefferson and Lewis and Clark. Powell did not join in that tradition for the sake of mere science. He championed the study of nature and man and the study of primitive man in relation to nature as part of an overarching theory of progressive social evolution intended as a blueprint for social policy.

Powell and Social Progress

The world that Powell and Morgan confronted was remarkably different from the one in which Jefferson had first sought to gain an understanding of the relationship between nature and primitive mankind. By the close of the nineteenth century, America was no longer the wild continent the Pilgrims had encountered. Joined by the railroad and telegraph and the subject of ambitious and intense federally sponsored surveys, little remained that could be called truly unexplored or remote. Timber, mining, and agricultural interests and the western press of settlement threatened quickly to gobble up what little of the pristine environment then remained intact. As Hinsley (1981) has pointed out, this profoundly affected the way Powell and other Americans saw themselves and how they saw the future.

As we have seen, unlike Great Britain and the rest of Europe, America has always seen itself as a nation born in the wilderness and firmly rooted in that wilderness heritage (Chinard 1947, pp. 53–54). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the wilderness itself was quickly fading and with it the natural setting of the American self-image. The social evolutionary theories of both Morgan and Powell spoke to this issue. To a far greater degree than Morgan, however, Powell sought to reanchor Western civilization through a social evolutionary theory that ultimately led back to the natural environment.

As they had been to Jefferson, the American Indian was essential to the social evolutionary theories of Powell because as primitives they had always been regarded as part of the natural landscape. The impending loss of the wilderness was, to a great degree, paralleled by the imminent demise of aboriginal America and its “wild” hunter-gatherers (e.g., Pearce 1988, p. 163, 208). In many ways, late nineteenth-century Americans saw in the “Indian problem” the elements of their own dilemma: Peoples increasingly disenfranchised from their wilderness heritage and natural context. The chief difference lay in the fact that, through enlightened (i.e., scientifically guided) social policy, civilization could do some-

thing about the problem; to them, primitives had neither the means nor the intellect to do so.

The Museum Connection

As Hinsley (1981, pp. 83–83) and others have observed, museums of natural history were places where these problems could be confronted intellectually and where a sense of natural order could be restored for nineteenth-century Americans. Joseph Henry, first secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, made this a theme of his address at the dedication of the American Museum of Natural History.

[The American Museum of Natural History] is to be a temple of nature in which the productions of the inorganic and organic world, together with the remnants of the past ages of the human family are to be collected, classified, and properly exhibited. It is to be ... an attractive exhibit which shall arrest the attention of the most unobserving of those who, having been confined all their lives to the city, have come to consider edifices of brick and of stone as the most prominent objects of the physical world. (Joseph Henry 1874, quoted in Hellman 1968, pp. 24–25)

Primitive peoples provided the essential linchpin for this natural order. As Margaret Mead (1960) had pointed out, the image of primitive peoples as part of nature was fostered very early in America by museums of natural history. By placing the art and technology of North American Indians in halls adjacent to those containing biological and geological specimens, “the tradition was established by which anthropology ... became part of natural history [in accord with progressive social evolutionary theory].... Man was shown to be a part of nature ... man transcending nature” (Mead 1960, pp. 10–11). Himself convinced that the study of the sciences was an essential ingredient of anthropological training, Powell was fully sympathetic to this idea and played a key role in developing that theme (cf. Buettner-Janusch 1957; Hinsley 1981, p. 162). Through the museum context, the early roots of mankind in nature could be demonstrated to the public in such a way that they would understand their own evolutionary relationship to nature.²

Otis T. Mason was a leading figure in this early museum research. As made clear by their titles (e.g., “Technogeography, or the Relation of the Earth to the Industries of Mankind”), his works were guided by a creative (rather than strongly deterministic) theory of materialism (Mason 1894, 1895, 1905; Buettner-Janusch 1957). A prominent founding member of the Anthropological Society of Washington (progenitor of the American Anthropological Association) and notable contributor to its journal, the *American Anthropologist*, as well as to the Smithsonian Institution and US National Museum Annual Reports, Mason undoubtedly deserves credit as the architect of the materialist approach we know today as technoenvironmental determinism (cf. Harris 1968a). Wissler (1914, p. 449) was quick to credit the contribu-

² Given the important role museums played in developing progressive social evolutionary theory, it is difficult to credit the claim of Collier and Tschopik (1954, p. 771) that museum men in the period from 1890 to 1920 were “empirical, strongly historical, and anti-evolutionary.”

tions of Mason in relation to his own work on natural and cultural areas. Kroeber, too, was fully aware of the importance of Mason's works, including the one entitled "Influence of Environment on Human Industries or Arts" (Mason 1895), in which was introduced the concept of the environmentally defined "culture area."

It is of more than passing significance that Mason seems to have taken for granted that archaeology and ethnology shared a common purpose (cf. De Laguna 1960, p. 94). Within the Smithsonian Institution, that had been assumed from the very beginning (Hallowell 1960, p. 31). This, undoubtedly, reflected the American idea of savagism in which contemporary Indians, addicted to a hunting lifeway, were portrayed as part of American prehistory (Pearce 1988, pp. 192–195). The subject matters of New World ethnology and archaeology were thus one and the same. This shared museum heritage (in which both Mason and Powell were important figures; cf. Buettner-Janusch 1957, pp. 319–321) and the consequent mutual interest of both disciplines in studies of material culture—a necessary aspect of museology and a central explanatory theme in savagism—seems best to account for the close relationship that has historically existed between American archaeology and cultural anthropology. In short, it is arguable that the distinctive alliance of these disciplines in the United States is more due to the idea of savagism and the museum tradition of technoenvironmental materialism it inspired than to governmental involvement in the Moundbuilder problem (cf. Willey and Sabloff 1980, p. 79). Indeed, the latter must be seen not as a cause of the American archaeological/ethnological alliance but rather as a response to the same forces that produced it.³

Technogeography and Social Evolution

In Mason's technogeography, the interaction between nature and technology caused primitive peoples to follow parallel but historically distinct lines of development resulting in the formation of culture areas, or *oikoumene* (Mason 1894, pp. 148–153). That line of reasoning, however, seemed contradictory in its implications to the millennial unity of civilized mankind envisioned in the progressive social evolutionary theories of Powell and others (1885, 1888a; Morgan 1877, Kimball [cf. Ward] 1968, p. 197, 224,302; McGee 1899, pp. 439,446–447; Hinsley [cf. Holmes] 1981, p. 288; Spencer held a similar view [cf. 1865, pp. 476–484]). To bring his views into line with those theories, Mason argued that the "centrifugal" technoenvironmental forces that led to cultural differentiation in primitives were superseded in the more advanced stages of civilization by "centripetal" political, technical, and intellectual

³ One cannot avoid drawing the further conclusion that it is the early grounding of technoenvironmental materialism in museums, rather than institutions of higher education, that explains the subsequent decline of materialist theory and rise of Boasian particularism in American anthropology. As Bureau director and museologist, respectively, Powell and Mason produced no real students. Boas, on the other hand, produced them by the score: Kroeber, Mead, Benedict, Lowie, Sapir, Speck, Herskovits, and so on.

forces that would in the end (i.e., under Western civilization) unite the world as a single culture area (Mason 1894, p. 153).

In this respect, Mason's technogeographical version of world-systems theory is a particularly good example of how an overriding interest in social evolution and its effects tend to diminish the importance of technoenvironmental explanation and the instructive value of primitive peoples. In Mason's scheme, the most powerful force was intellect, and the people who used that power to the fullest were destined to inherit the earth. Outside the National Museum, Powell exhibited these philosophical tendencies to a far greater degree. As Powell's interest in social evolution and its potential for application in social policy grew, his interest in studies of environment and primitive peoples lessened. Most of his later work dealt with social evolutionary theory and metaphysical philosophy (Darrah 1951, pp. 350–384); preoccupied with these, he never finished his manuscript on the Numic-speaking hunter-gatherers of the Great Basin, the aboriginal group with which he was most familiar. Thus, as had been the case with the interpretation of the American Indian through the idea of savagism (cf. Pearce 1988, p. 232), it appeared more and more that Powell's interest in anthropology had less to do with understanding primitive man than in understanding Western civilization.

Further, as his commitment to his own social evolutionary theory grew, Powell grew more willing to stretch empirical cases to match predictions, particularly when it came to hunter-gatherers. As had been the case with Spencer (Kimball 1968, p. 296; Kennedy 1978, pp. 15–16), Powell and one or two of his more devoted staff members increasingly found ethnographic facts about primitive peoples interesting only insofar as they could be used to support a theory the truth of which was not in question (Meadows 1952, p. 99). A comparatively minor and easily forgiven example was Powell's attempt to demonstrate that Numic hunter-gatherers were zootheistic because, being in a state of savagery, they depended on plants and animals for subsistence (Fowler and Fowler 1971, p. 21). McGee's effort to please Powell (his superior) by hammering the Seri into the mold of Powellian social evolutionary theory was far more bold—and wholly unforgivable (cf. Hinsley 1981, pp. 239–245).

McGee's Seri Ethnography

During the course of an 1894 Bureau of American Ethnology collecting excursion to the Southwest, W. J. McGee, a geologist-turned-ethnologist working under the direction of Powell, heard lurid accounts of a warlike people called the Seri and decided that they merited the immediate scientific attention of the Bureau. Over the course of two different field expeditions to coastal Sonora, Mexico, in that year and the next (1895), McGee managed to spend only “about a week” interviewing, perhaps 60 Seri (McGee 1898, p. 13; but see Hinsley 1981, p. 239). On the basis of this and the historical sources at his disposal, McGee published a 343-page ethnography. Though less openly chauvinist, his account of the Seri is remarkably compatible with the spirit of Lubbock's survey of primitives (Chap. 1).

As Powell (1898, pp. 1xv–1xvii) noted in introducing the monograph, the point that emerges most clearly with the Seri is that their “activities ... reflect environment with exceptional closeness.” Representing the “lowest recognized phase of savagery” (McGee 1898, p. 294), the Seri are profoundly affected by natural selection.

The lowly Seri are actually, albeit unconsciously, carrying out a meaningful experiment in stripiculture—an experiment whose methods and results are equally valuable to students, (p. 163)

The harshness of “Seriland” is clearly reflected in Seri physique and ingrained habits and especially evident in their excessively migratory behavior (pedestrian habit), inability to make or use complex tools (lack of tool sense), and distrust of aliens (race sense; p. 156).

A striking correspondence between Seri physique and Seri habitat is revealed in the pedal development, with the attendant development of muscle and bone, lung capacity, and heart power, together with other faculties involved in the pedestrian habit. (p. 157)

The Seri, male and female, young and old, may be described as notably deep-chested and clean-limbed quick-steppers, or as human thoroughbreds. (p. 138)

Exacerbated in part by an unspoken primitive superstition preventing them from camping near water, “the tribesmen and their families are perpetual fugitives (their movements being too erratic and aimless to put them in the class of nomads)” (pp. 181, 221).

Unfortunately, although physically well adapted, the Seri remain severely limited in their technical abilities.

A trait of the Seri ... is habitual use of hands and teeth in lieu of the implements characteristic of even the most lowly culture found among most primitive tribes. (p. 152)

The Seri may be described with reasonable accuracy as a knifeless folk. (p. 152)

Conformably with their striking independence of knives, the Seri are conspicuously unskillful in all mechanical operations involving the use of tools. (p. 153)

The Seri are practically without flaked or chipped implements, ... they eschew and discard stones edged by fracture whether naturally or through use. (p. 248)

[Natural stones] come into use as implements through chance demands met by hasty selection from the abundant material ... the great majority of the objects so employed are discarded after a use or two. (pp. 248–249)

[On the whole], Seri industries are significant as (1) local, (2) fortuitous, (3) primitive, (4) autochthonous; and these features combine to illumine a noteworthy stage in primitive thought. (p. 267)

The Seri are positively animal-like in their hostility to outsiders.

The race-sense of the Seri may be regarded as the product of long-continued stripicultural processes, initially shaped by environment, yet developed to unusual degree by somatico-social habits, kept alive largely through continuous environmental interaction. (p. 163)

The Seri can no more control the involuntary snarl and growl at the approach of the alien than can the hunting-dog at sight or smell of the timber-wolf. (p. 155)

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