

ARE WE *HOMO SAPIENS* YET? MARK JARZOMBEK



!Kung being photographed for a documentary.

From Sapiens To Hunter/Gatherers

We may appreciate the Enlightenment-era optimism about our intrinsic epistemological capacity, but when the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (1707- 1778) coined the term *Homo sapiens*, this was not the Socratic mandate to know thyself. Instead our “knowledge” belonged to a complex classificatory tree, the smallest element of which was a species and its ‘varieties’. It was a revolution just as significant as Darwin’s theory of evolution some hundred years later. Linnaeus’ Man was not a creature of the Bible tortured by the perplexing duality of body and spirit, but an animal, one of the thousands, that populates the world. And yet, *Homo sapiens* had a special gift, for it alone sees that everything fits into a single, vast *Imperium*. The argument was the perfect and perhaps somewhat frightening fusion of reason and empire.

Imperium- the phenomenal world

Regnum- the division of nature into animal, vegetable, and mineral.

Classis- the subdivisions of the above; in the animal kingdom, six were recognized (mammals, birds, amphibians, fish, insects, and worms)

Ordo- the subdivision of the above- the class Mammalia has eight, including Primates

Genus- the subdivisions of the order- in the order Primates there are four. One of which is *Homo*

Species- the subdivisions of genus, e.g. *Homo sapiens*.

Varietas- the species variant, e.g. *Homo sapiens europaeus*.

As it turns out *Homo sapiens* was not a particularly stable category.¹ In the 1735 first edition of *Systema*, distinctions were based on color. But in the 1766 edition, Linnaeus changed his mind and divided *Homo* into categories that reflect the increased contact with non-European people.

1735

Sapiense europaeus albus (white)

Americanus rubescens (red)

Asiaticus fuscus (brown)

Africanus niger (black)

1766

Europaeus (regulated by law)

Americanus (regulated by custom)

Asiaticus (regulated by opinion)

Afer (African, governed by caprice)

furus (wild)

monstrosus

troglydites (nocturnal people)

Just as the lower animals were governed by instinct, *sapiens* were now bound to one of four social frameworks: custom, law, opinion and caprice. Among the four, *Homo sapiens europaeus* still reigned supreme since he alone was governed by law. Linnaeus also expanded the geographical reach of his humans. There were now also three sub categories. Troglodytes- or what we would today call 'cave men' – were regulated by the sun and moon. Whereas the Wild People (*furus*), or what we might call the Eskimos, were the most unregulated of all.

Though today *Homo sapiens europaeus* has silently slipped into the waters of historical amnesia, the word *Homo sapiens* has most certainly not. But its stability is hardly assured and indeed it might be good to remind ourselves just how difficult it was to identify humankind's claim of self-knowledge. In 1802, William Turton, an English naturalist whose specialty was sea shells- and a member of the society- translated Linnaeus' work from the Latin into English, but kept, of course, the famous term. And it stuck. However, whereas Linnaeus focused on what regulates humans, Turton gave his *sapiens* psychological characteristics. The metaphys-

1 Philip Sloan, "The Gaze of Human Nature," *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-century Domains*, Edited by Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, Robert Wokler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 124.

ics of law and geography was replaced by a metaphysics of personality types.

Americans: copper-colored, irritable, erect
Europeans: fair, sanguine and brawny
Asiatics: sooty, melancholy and rigid
Africans: black, phlegmatic and relaxed²

The shift from social custom to psychology reaffirmed the colonial superiority to the *Homo sapiens europaeus*, while acknowledging that that superiority might have more to do with brawniness than with the rule of law. This was not the last transformation. Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) divided the dark whites from the blond whites, and the Spaniards from the Berbers and Swedes. Joseph Deniker, a French anthropologist (1852-1918) went even further, making thirteen divisions yielding 29 races, one of which, and his most lasting contribution to the field of racial theory, was the designation, *la race nordique*, which for him replaced *Homo sapiens europaeus*. By the 1920s there were *Homo sapien bushmen* and *Homo sapiens dravidicus* (Indians) and so forth. In 1950, even the authorities at UNESCO waded into the issue and announced in their "Statement on Race" that there were just three divisions of *Homo sapiens*, namely Mongoloid, Negroid and Caucasoid with many unspecified subgroups.³ Clearly this did not help. The term Caucasian turned out to be complex and ambiguous. But it was only in 2005, that the United States National Library of Medicine finally decided to replace it with "European Continental Ancestry Group."⁴

To avoid the problem of race, anthropologists turned to geography, as in a species that was discovered in 2010, that was named *Homo gautengensis* after an archaeological site in South Africa, namely Gautenag. The same logic is true for *australopithecus africanus* ("southern ape of Africa"), *Homo floresiensis* (named after the island of Flores), the *Homo neanderthal* (named after a valley in Germany), and *Homo*

- 2 Carl von Linné, William Turton, *A General System of Nature*, Vol. 1 (London: Allen and Co., 1806), 9.
- 3 Ashley Montagu, "The Race Question: Statement issued 18 July 1950," 5. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001282/128291eo.pdf>
- 4 http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/nd03/nd03_med_data_changes.html [accessed June 2, 2013] See also: Bruce David Baum, *The Rise and Fall of the Caucasian Race: a Political History of Racial Identity* (New York NY: New York University Press, 2006), 64-67.

heidelbergensis (named after a city in Germany).⁵ Simultaneously there was an attempt to push back the point at which *Homo sapiens* emerged historically to make the category more – shall one say- inclusive. The result was that *Homo heidelbergensis* was no longer a hulking predecessor to *Homo sapiens*, but itself a *Homo sapiens*! And the *Homo sapiens*, in order to be differentiated from its hominoid cousins, were now called *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This subspecies (namely you and me) began to be used in the 1950's by scholars like Ernst Mayr, George Simpson and Theodosius Dobzhansky and it was related to their shared view that *sapiens* represented a polytypic species meaning that the various genetically isolated populations of early humans arose as local differentiations of a single stock. This position stands in opposition to polyphyletic models of modern human origins, which argues that there were several 'beginnings' not just one. Regardless of the scholarly point, the bizarre doubling of our knowledge-carrying capacity is what now differentiates us from our Neanderthal predecessors.

The irony of all this is that if we turn to anthropology, which claims to see our ancient past not through the lens of abstract categories, but through the ostensible realities of flesh and blood, our ancient ancestors were what they called "hunter-gatherers." The term is not an old one, but appeared in the early 1970s, more or less at the same time that *Homo sapiens* became *Homo sapiens sapiens*.⁶ It was adopted with almost no criticism in the rising tide of anthropological studies. There is a whole encyclopedia, published by Cambridge University Press in 1999 that is dedicated to "hunter-gatherers."⁷ The *Homo sapiens* went from being the high arbiter of reason, to a creature groveling around for food, a tuber or two away from starvation.

Some anthropologists now admit that it was wrong to identify ancient cultures solely with food acquisition. Most of the time spent by ostensible "hunter-gatherers" is not in hunting and gathering, but in activities of social cohesion.

5 This followed the dictum of Frank Livingstone, who wrote, "There are no races, there are only clines," invoking a word coined in 1938 to describe geographical gradients of features in natural populations. Frank Livingstone and Theodosius Dobzhansky, "On the Non-Existence of Human Races," *Current Anthropology* 3 (1962), 279 (279–281).

6 For a review of the disciplinary problems associated with research into hunter/gatherers see Peter Mitchell, "Hunters and Gatherers," *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeology*, Edited by Barry Cunliffe, Chris Gosden, Rosemary A. Joyce, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 411-416.

7 *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Richard Daly, editors. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Naturally, food collecting is an important activity, but remarkably the majority of the time spent by the !Kung, for example, is spent in other pursuits, such as resting in camp or visiting other camps. Women spend their time preparing food, doing embroidery, visiting other camps, or entertaining visitors from other camps. The men go on hunts, but their schedule is unpredictable and subject to magical control. During periods when there is no hunt, the men spend time visiting, entertaining, dancing and preparing their bows and arrows.⁸ The life of the !Kung cannot be considered completely identical to those of ancient times, but at least it shows that a well-positioned camp close to water, nut-bearing trees, animal habitats and other human settlements was more stable, orderly and complex than was assumed even a few decades ago.

So why this emphasis on food acquisition since it brings us back to statements like the following from 1870?

*Care for his natural wants must have absorbed his whole being; all his efforts must have tended to one sole aim – that of insuring his daily subsistence.*⁹

I suspect that the sudden appearance of “hunter-gatherers” in the 1970s had something to do with the so-called War on Hunger. The World Food Council, after all, was created in 1974. Coincidentally, the !Kung in Africa appeared on the anthropological map in the early 1970s and quickly became the poster child for the new category. Anthropologists were eventually amazed to figure out that the !Kung had lived in the Kalahari Desert quite comfortably for a hundred thousand years.¹⁰ Studies have made it clear that when so-called hunter-gatherers encountered agriculturalists many adapted; but others did not fundamentally change their way of life. For them, the world was in essence already “farmed.” All that needed to be done was the harvesting. During his study of the !Kung, the anthropologist, Richard Lee, when he asked the people why they did not farm, received the reply, “Why should I farm

8 James Woodburn, “An introduction to Hadza Ecology,” *Man the Hunter*, ed. Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore (Chicago: Aldine, 1968).

9 Louis Figuier, *Primitive Man* (New York NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1871), 39.

10 Eric Wolf’s book *Europe and the Peoples Without History* (Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press, 1982) was a benchmark for the development of so-called hunter-gatherer studies. Afterwards, anthropologists become increasingly aware of the political consequences of their writing. See for example: Freed R. Myers, “The Politics of Representation: Anthropological Discourse and Australian Aborigines,” *American Ethnologist* 13/1 (February 1986), 138-53.

when there are so many mongongo nuts?¹¹ The Aboriginal Australians put it in similar terms.

*You people go to all that trouble, working and planting seeds, but we don't have to do that. All these things are there for us; the Ancestral Beings left them for us. In the end, you depend on the sun and the rain just the same as we do, but the difference is that we just have to go and collect the food when it is ripe. We don't have all this other trouble.*¹²

These quick forays into the historiography of our ancient past should remind us that even though we might today think that we have moved past centuries of biases, this is not the case. We might have removed some of the more obvious aspects of bias, but we have not removed our civilizational hubris. We have no shame in calling the !Kung hunter-gatherers, when even we do not spend all our time in the super markets and would find it laughable if Cambridge University Press was to write an encyclopedia entitled "Super Market People." And yet, in the 1980s, we placed our ancestors on an astonishingly low plane of existence at the very same time that the Linnaeans were elevating our intelligence to the point of absurdity. Just as it is a disciplinary disgrace to call the !Kung or for that matter any early society hunter-gatherers, I would prefer it if the scientists would not label us *homo sapiens sapiens*. We certainly haven't earned it.

The Precursor Paradox

Neither *Homo sapiens* nor "hunter-gatherers" are historical categories. Both are timeless conditions and it is thus easy to critique these concepts as falsifications. But the problem is not resolved if one turns to the question of history. The introduction of historical time was, of course, one of the great accomplishments of the Enlightenment; except that by the word history many meant ages. The idea of ages is itself old and derives from Hesiod's Five Ages: gold, silver, bronze,

11 Richard B. Lee, Irven DeVore, and Jill Nash, *Man the Hunter* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968). See also Jack R. Harlan, *Crops and Man* (Madison, Wisconsin: American Society of Agronomy, 1975); Richard B. Lee, "Subsistence Ecology of the !Kung Bushmen," (PhD Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1965); Grahame Clark, *The Stone Age Hunters* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Richard B. Lee, *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

12 Jack Rodney Harlan, *The Living Fields: Our Agricultural Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 26. See also: Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *Man, Land & Myth in North Australia: The Gunwinggu People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1970).

heroic, and iron. But Hesiod, a Greek poet who lived in the 8th century BCE, did not mean by these terms an archaeological description of history, but a cultural one that went downhill after the great Golden Age. Even when the poet Lord Byron wrote *The Age of Bronze* (1823), he meant it as a cultural descriptor where bronze was a euphemism for the present, *not* golden age. Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788-1865), head of antiquarian collections of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, is credited with defining the Stone-, Bronze-, and Iron Ages in the modern sense.¹³

The system emphasized progress, from stone to bronze to iron. The superiority of one age over the next was expressed in the writings of John Lubbock, a politician, banker and amateur archaeologist who helped bring the work of Thomsen into English awareness.¹⁴ Influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, he argued that as a result of natural selection, human groups had become different from each other not only culturally, but also in their biological capacities to utilize culture.¹⁵ In other words, humans evolve socially much like animals evolve biologically, with Europeans as the implied end-product of this intensive cultural and biological process. It was a rather typical Victorian-era argument that implied the supremacy of the fittest ends with the white man, and, for Lubbock, with the English Empire. "The study of savages," he argues was of particular importance to the English since the English have "colonies in every part of the world and fellow-citizens in many stages of civilization."¹⁶ In one of Lubbock's books, *The Origin Of Civilisation And The Primitive Condition Of Man; Mental and Social Condition of Savages*, he argued that the "inactivity of the savage intellect," belonging to "the lower races of men," was redeemed only with the awakening of "moral feeling," followed by the creation of mathematics, and finally the rise of law. "The whole history of man shows how the stronger and progressive increase in

13 William H. Stiebing, *Uncovering the Past: a History of Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

14 John Lubbock, *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), 3. See also Sven Lilsson and John Lubbock (ed.), *The Primitive Inhabitants of Scandinavia* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1868), p. v. For discussion see: Mark Patton, *Science, Politics and Business in the Work of Sir John Lubbock: a Man of Universal Mind* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

15 Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 173.

16 John Lubbock, *The Origin Of Civilisation And The Primitive Condition Of Man: Mental and Social Condition of Savages* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), 5.

numbers and drive out the weaker and lower races.”¹⁷ He was clearly trying to square the “scientific” definition of Europeans as “fair, sanguine and brawny” with historical reality.

Today, the use of the term Stone Age is now being debated by anthropologists and the use of the term ‘savages’ is a thing of the past, but the fact remains that the ‘ages’ have not been replaced, merely redesigned or camouflaged to appear more innocuous. Ages are now divided into ever smaller bits, usually, and obsessively, into threes: we have Early-, Middle- and Late Paleolithic; Incipient-, Initial- and Late Jōmon; Early-, Middle- and Late Woodland; Early-, Middle-, and Late Iron Age; Early-, Middle-, and Late Bronze Age, with Middle Bronze Age further subdivided into Middle Bronze Age IIA, IIB, and IIc and so on- relating to ever more specific geographical and temporal entities. In almost all cases, “late” is equated with “decline” having to do with things like population growth, ecological changes, or internal cultural weaknesses.

To navigate our ancient history these days is to navigate an alienating set of archaeological terms that drift ever closer into the realm of nonsense. One culture may be in the “Middle Iron Age” and another culture more than a few hundred miles away be in the “Early Iron Age,” and down the road there may be people living in the “Late Stone Age.” While this might do justice to localist narratives, the obvious fact, for example, that the pit houses of “Middle Jomon” are similar to those of the Yu’pik in Alaska and even to the Navajo in New Mexico, make it difficult for scholars to theorize cross-regional and cross-temporal tendencies. As far as I can see there is not a *single* archaeological study of this most basic and obvious circumstance, and the few studies that do exist are not by archaeologists.

The problem of abstraction also haunts the concept of pre-history, the brainchild of Daniel Wilson, a British-born, Canadian archaeologist and ethnologist. He was a scholar of Scottish history and as such was confronted with the standard image of Scotts as ‘barbarians.’ To counteract this, he devised the distinction in the 1850s between the ‘historical’ age and the ‘pre-historical’ age. One age had writing, the other did not, his point being that just because the Scotts did not have writing this did not mean that they lacked other skills, much less

17 Ibid., 3.

a culture.¹⁸ In shifting from anthropology, which at that time was primarily concerned with race, to ethnography, which addressed the question of culture and context, Wilson certainly moved in the right direction. And yet, as important as Wilson's attempt at parity between 'the historical' and the 'pre-historical' was, the difference had the negative effect of reinforcing rather than challenging the class distinction between the civilized and non-civilized. It placed the entire burden of civilization on writing and not on other innovations, such as weaving, animal tending, and boat building for example. And yet, today "prehistory" remains a relatively established, though sometimes contested, category of historical understanding, though in the Americas we see now the introduction of alternative concepts like 'pre-ceramic' and 'pre-cotton.'

If the nineteenth-century fascination with ages needs to be challenged – and its terminologies, in fact, abandoned – so too the late nineteenth and early twentieth century concept of the 'primitive.' Of the words discussed so far, this one is not used with any great frequency today. But that does not mean that its traces have disappeared especially since it was initially taken up among those who saw themselves as more progressive than those who liked to talk of savages and pagans. Edward Burnett Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1871), paved the way. Nonetheless, history is the story of how we developed from "the savage fetish worshiper" to the "civilized Christian," evolving from "lower tribes" to "higher nations."¹⁹ Despite this, or perhaps even because of it, the book was praised at the time as laying the "permanent foundations for the science of anthropology."²⁰

The difficulty of extracting anthropology from its civilization-centrism is equally apparent in the research of the German anthropologist Johannes Nickel (1863-1924). His work,

18 See for example, Daniel Wilson, *The Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Sutherland & Knox, 1851), xiv. Also, *Prehistoric man: researches into the origin of civilisation in the Old and the New World* (Cambridge, Eng., and Edinburgh, 1862).

19 Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958 (Originally Published: London: J. Murray, 1871), 501-2, 1 See also: Herbert S. Lewis, "The Misrepresentation of Anthropology and its Consequences," *American Anthropologist* 100 (1998), 716-731.

20 Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, Preface. The supposed primitiveness of primitive people was so widely accepted that in 1879 when paintings were found in the cave of Altamira, they were rejected as fraudulent and received no mention at the International Congress of Prehistoric Archeology and Anthropology held at Lisbon in 1880. Alexander Marshack, *The Roots of Civilization: The Cognitive Beginnings of Man's First Art, Symbol and Notation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 66.

as typical for German scholars of the time, was built to a large extent around the ostensible difference between *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, or people who live in nature and those who live in cities. *Kulturvölker*, though it included the Chinese, privileged mainly the Europeans and their urban ancestors. For Nickel, the difference hinges on the need for “*Arbeit*” or hard work. He begins one of his chapters thus:

*The first flowering of culture, the dawn of the material culture, begins with work (Arbeit). The words: “You shall eat your bread in the sweat of your brow” found its most evident application where nature did not offer its bounty in abundance.*²¹

Naturvölker languishing in the context of nature’s bounty did not do any “work” and thus, from Nickel’s perspective, had no history. History belonged to those who *did* engage the principle of work and who, as a result, became increasingly technologically proficient. History thus moved, according to him, to those who did increasingly *more* work, that is from China, India and the Greeks to the Europeans, leading inevitably to colonialism and its re-encounter with “*Naturvölker*.” This ‘contact,’ so Nickel concludes, means that the West has a moral obligation to the *Naturvölker* and so he ends the book by pointing to a Christian-Social idealism that is based on the principle of happy co-existence. Religion comes in through the back door even though he argued at the beginning of the book that history has to be taken out of the hands of the defenders of religion.

The person who finally took modern religion out of the concept of the primitive was Franz Boas (1858-1942). It was not just urban people who worked, so he argued, but all people, and the deeper we get into anthropology the more remarkable the nature of that work is.²² Differences between cultures came from historical accidents and local conditions. Boas thus emphasized the things that a society made—whether it be boats, weapons, baskets or living quarters – and that corresponded to a particular situation. He pointed to the Eskimo kayak, for example, as a sophisticated piece of equipment, even though the means by which it was made were ‘primitive.’ There is no such thing as a ‘primitive mind,’ he

21 Johannes Nickel, *Allgemeine Kulturgeschichte: im Grundriss Dargestellt* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1907), p. 35. See also: Alfred Vierkandt, *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker: ein Beitrag zur Socialpsychologie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1896)

22 Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 132.

concludes, only primitive technologies.²³

The consequences of Boas' thought, especially in the US, are clear.

Omaha Indians no longer built huts but were making "dwellings" filled with "furniture and implements."²⁴ Caves were now called "cliff castles," and the use of adobe as a building material was studied.²⁵ And there was more than just ruins that were at stake here. In the early decades of the 20th century, Indian-ness was fully embraced by the Boy Scouts, for example, as a necessary 'transition' into adulthood. And it was not just a culture of industriousness that was valued, but ritual-based, clan bonding. The Boys Scouts aimed to challenge what many pundits thought was the feminization of American boyhood. Beginning already in the 1920s, scouts were taught Indian lore to help them better "play Indian." In a few cases, Native American tribes colluded with this educational mission. The New York Governor, Al Smith received a ceremonial headdress from a Dokata chief at the 1926 Boys Scout demonstration camp at Bear Mountain.²⁶

Boas' argument about the worthiness of "primitive people" fits in well with the progressive engineering mentality of the age, which explains why Boas' paper *The Mind of the Primitive Man* was first given as a lecture at the Lowell Institute of Boston Massachusetts in 1910. The Institute was founded by the son of a noted industrialist Francis Cabot Lowell (1775–1817). Allied with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it had a Teachers School of Science and hosted lectures, like the one Boas gave, to members of the Boston public. 'Primitive' appealed in particular to the differences between the industrialized countries and the non-industrialized ones and was thus also obviously entangled in the rise of the modern nation-state. Boas may have wanted to elevate "the primitive mind" from the absurdities of racial arguments, but the word was nonetheless, a code-word for cultures which, though industrious, lived outside the technological and scientific jump that metal entailed. He expresses the opinion that the anxiety about "negro problem" in the United States

23 Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York, Dover Publications, 1955), 2.

24 James Owen Dorsey, *Omaha Dwellings, furniture and implements* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1896).

25 Neil Merton Judd, *The use of adobe in prehistoric dwellings of the Southwest* (Washington: United States National Museum, 1916); *Cliff castles and cave dwellings of Europe* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1911).

26 Jordan, Benjamin René. "A Modest Manliness": *The Boy Scouts of America and the Making of Modern Masculinity, 1910-1930* (University of California San Diego: 2009), 222, 223. Retrieved from: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/6s56c7cg>

is largely unwarranted since Africans are a "healthy primitive people," who exhibit "a love of labor and interest in the results of work."²⁷

By the 1950s, 'primitive' had expanded into a vast, unself-reflective, interdisciplinary project headlined by the reprinting of Boas' books *Primitive Art* (1925, 1955) and *The Mind of the Primitive Man* (1911, 1963).²⁸ Scholars by the dozens wrote books and articles with the word primitive in it, preserving the image of an ancient life that- even if it was industrious- was still crude, static, or childlike.²⁹ The first show on "Primitive Art" was held in 1940 at the University of Minnesota. The now defunct Museum of Primitive Art in New York was founded in 1957 and soon books appeared like *Primitive Art of the Pacific Islands* (1957), *Paul Klee and Primitive Art* (1962) *Primitive art: its traditions and styles* (1962) and, perhaps worst of all, *Primitive Architecture* (1975).³⁰ One art historian, none other than the formidable Anthony F. Janson claimed even in the mid 1980s that even though "primitive is a somewhat unfortunate word, ... no other single term will serve us better. Let us continue then, to use primitive as a convenient label for a way of life that has passed through the Neolithic Revolution but shows no sign of evolving into the direction of "historic" civilization."³¹

Today, few scholars would dare use the word 'primitive,' but that does not mean that its imaginary has been purged from our scholarly perspectives. In architecture it was

27 Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: E. Macmillan, 1911), 271, 270.

28 George Murdock, *Our Primitive Contemporaries* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1934); Paul S. Wingert, *Primitive Art: its Traditions and Styles* (New York: New American Library, 1962); Anthony Forge, Ed., *Primitive Art and Society* (London, Oxford University Press, 1973); Enrico Guidoni and Robert Erich Wolf (trans.), *Primitive Architecture* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1975); H. Gene Blocker, *The Aesthetics of Primitive Art* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America) 1994.

29 Some scholars have recently even tried to redeem the word by pointing to its Latin root, *primus* which means first or oldest, but the word's long entanglement with 19th century evolutionary ethnography makes such attempts unwise. Even if used in a "positive sense" a scholar can claim that "all primitive peoples are marginal to the mainstream of modern history, primarily because of such 'accidents' of habitat as removal from the developing centers of civilization." Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive: a Critique of Civilization* (New Brunswick: New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1974), 130-131. Okot p'Bitek (1931 – July 20, 1982) who was trained at Oxford as an anthropologist specializing in African oral literature critiques the attempt to sanitize the word. See: Jahan Ramazani. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 155.

30 The idea of "primitive architecture" was first produced by Barr Ferree (1862–1924), who point out that man moved from caves to wind shelters to huts.

31 Horst W. Janson, *History of Art*, (New York: Abrams, 1986), 35.

replaced by the word ‘vernacular,’ which appeared quite suddenly in the 1970s just as primitive began to be discredited. In the early nineteenth century the term was used by scholars to describe European languages that were not Greek and Latin. This coincided with an emerging Romantic-era fascination with the cultures, languages and even fauna of local regions. The word was never used in an architectural sense, which makes its expansion into that field all the more remarkable – and unfortunate – since the word derives from the Latin word *vernaculum*, a shack where slaves lived at the back of a garden in a Roman villa, which in turn comes from *verna*, ‘a slave born at home’ to distinguish slaves born from slave parents in a Roman villa from a slave bought in the market. Etymology alone should lead one to reject usage of the word, but it is too late, since the three volume *The Encyclopedia for Vernacular Architecture* (1997) is a leading reference book in the field.

The root of the problem is, however, a deep one since the high/low dualism that it embraces is built on the Renaissance-era elevation of architecture into a fine art, one that requires mental abstractions, drawings and the fulfillment of representational needs. Ever since, the discipline has more or less adopted the a relatively hard distinction between “architecture” and “building” – as it is characterized in the nineteenth century- or as it is now phrased, between “architecture” and “vernacular.” The Smithsonian Museum labels the Great Mosque of Djenne Mali as “vernacular” on its much-used web site, even though the building is designed according to a specific plan and is hardly shack-like.³² We do not know who the designer was, but by that logic, many of the European cathedrals could be called vernacular. Certainly the people in Djenne do not see their building as a ‘vernacular,’ but as an example of ‘high’ architecture.

“Vernacular” removes both agency and history from the equation. Bernard Rodofsky, for example, coined the phrase “architecture without architects” in the title of his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1964.³³ This was not based on any anthropological study what so ever. The exhibition was almost wholly based on photos taken from magazines and newspapers. Though it challenged the normative Eurocentrism of time, its purpose was to contrast the ostensible ‘humanness’ of primitive architecture against a culture of

32 http://sirismm.si.edu/siris/top_images/eepa.top.08_2007.htm

33 Bernard Rodofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: a Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (New York NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1965).

modernist alienation. Though today's architectural theorists will have nothing to do with Rudofsky, his name and work still resonate in the architectural design community.

Post-First Society People (I.E. You And Me)

Homo sapiens, hunter-gatherers, foragers, pre-history, stone age, primitive, and vernacular are commonly-found words in discussions of our early history. They and their associated proxies and avatars are toxic and need to be removed from our discourse. Clearly, post-structuralists have begun the process. Some talk of a polyphony of voices, others challenge the use of meta-narratives, and yet others remind us that cultural meanings are inherently slippery, and that they are negotiated by makers and users, and even by interpreters such as the anthropologists and historians themselves.³⁴ It is, however, obvious that such critiques have had only a limited impact. The concepts I discussed remain in one way or another firmly entrenched as disciplinary institutions.

I am concerned less with the paradoxes of ethnographic knowing than with the *trans*-disciplinary historiographic pattern created by our civilizational presumptions, for it demonstrates that we are still trapped in a desire to articulate the difference between our world and that which always seems to haunt it as a predecessor condition.³⁵ In the post-Enlightenment sense, being human pointed inevitably to something like a 'pre-human' non-*sapiens*, or to a 'just-before-human' or, if we think of the word vernacular, to a 'just-before-the-modern.' And in those terms, we were also quick to draw a hard line between our time and an earlier time.

Robert Keesing writes that radical alterity, as "a culturally constructed Other radically different from us fills a need in European social thought." We tend to "overstate Difference," he says in search for the "exotic" and the "other" as part of a

34 I am thinking here of the writings by James Clifford and Ian Hodder. James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988). Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past. Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Jacquetta Hawkes's 1968 essay in *Antiquity*, "The Proper Study of Mankind," was something of a touchstone in the science wars in archaeology. She was strongly critical of scientism and the faith in the universal application of scientific procedures and technical reason.

35 If we adopt a nominalist position and reject all the various abstractions that we have used to define this predecessor condition we might wind up 'losing' the gains, such as they are, that the disciplines insistently claim that they have provided. But to accept these abstractions is to more or less admit to the rather low, common denominator of intellectual pragmatism.

"Western cravings for alternatives.³⁶ I think Keesing overstates and understates the problem, for the question is bigger than even "European social thought" as it harkens to the philosophical foundations of the civilizational 'break' that occurred in several places in the world beginning around 6,000 BCE or so. It was not a European or Western phenomenon, but rooted in more ancient polarities of city people versus villagers, forest people, nomads. It was just as true for the Chinese as for the Romans. Even the ancient Sumerians, in the 3rd millennium BCE poked fun at forest people. Did not Eridu, once he himself became civilized, purposefully cut down the sacred forest, drive out their inhabitants and reduce the logs to timber for the city gate? It is a process that continues to this day in Brazil, Africa and in India, where forest people are officially labeled as "the Backward Classes."

One way to begin to solve the problem of theorizing our predecessor condition is to invert the lens. Suppose, for example, that we live in a condition that is post- or after-. That might at least correct the tendency to write history *towards* us, rather than to write history *away* from 'the earlier.' If we do not see "hunter-gatherers" as an alien social formation, but ourselves as the *later* formation of them, does that not change the security of our perceptions. In this respect, let me state an obvious fact. The age of "hunter-gatherers" is not over yet! They are still around, though nominally. Sadly, the "age of the hunter-gatherer" which began around a million BCE will probably end in the next decade (!), which puts a lot of pressure on us to awaken to this terrible fact. Is their ancestral history not in some ways (still) our history? Or are they just a set of people living in remote deserts and forests, subject to the terrors of mining companies even as they build with bamboo, use plastic plates and drink Coca Cola? What would a history from the !Kung perspective sound like? And, just as importantly, can we respect that history without anthropologists reducing it to "hunter-gatherer ethnography?" The point – to be clear – is not that a !Kung writer would produce an authentic or 'native' history free from the trappings of her encounter with "others" (namely us). On the contrary, to produce a history of the world outside them, the author would be in many ways modern, but it would be a different type of story than the ones we are familiar with. The absence of such voices except occasionally

36 Robert M. Keesing, "Theories of Culture Revisited," *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, Edited by Robert Borofsky (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 301-310.

in the field of literature means that we will always be on one side of the equation and never on the other.

A possible starting point would be to see people not as magically *sapien*, not as “hunter-gatherers,” not as “primitives,” or “prehistoric,” or as builders of some timeless “vernacular,” but quite simply as First Societies, of which there might be any number of variants. If that were the case, then we are post-First Society people – perhaps something like a Second- if not Third Society people. Can we write the history of who we are today from our post-First Society perspective? The answer from my historian colleagues will probably be no, but my response is that we are quickly coming to the end of what our various disciplines- be they anthropology, history or science- can say at least in the conventional sense, largely because these disciplines rely so heavily on terminological abstractions that by their very nature and connection to Enlightenment ideals privilege the principle of civilizational maturity. Perhaps there is, after all, a philosophical question around how we as humans exist(-ed) that trumps the pragmatic argument that abstractions of ourselves have to be accepted, if not as the privilege of disciplinary knowing then as practical necessities- the so-called professional standards by which we can measure our epistemological advances.