Understanding Early Civilizations

A Comparative Study

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1 Rationalism and Relativism

The most important issue confronting the social sciences is the extent to which human behaviour is shaped by factors that operate cross-culturally as opposed to factors that are unique to particular cultures. In part this debate addresses to what degree and in what ways human behaviour is influenced by calculations of self-interest that all human beings make in a similar manner as opposed to particularistic, culturally conditioned, and largely autonomous modes of conceiving reality. Marshall Sahlins (1976: ix) has labelled this confrontation the 'contest between the practical and the meaningful'. The debate goes beyond this, however, to consider to what extent humans may be biologically predisposed to understand reality and behave in similar ways. This debate has pitted materialists against idealists, behaviourists against advocates of cultural studies, processual archaeologists against postprocessual ones, and traditional cultural ecologists, as well as Darwinian archaeologists and sociobiologists, against neo-Boasian postmodernists. It has also split what remains of academic Marxism into two warring camps.

At the centre of this debate is a fundamental question: given the biological similarities and the cultural diversity of human beings, how much the same or how differently are they likely to behave under analogous circumstances? The answer to this question is crucial for understanding human behaviour and cultural change and for shaping the future course of human development (Trigger 1998a). In recent years theoretical positions have been elaborated with great subtlety and refinement, but there is no sign of consensus. As a contribution to this debate, this book seeks to establish empirically what features seven early civilizations, located on four continents, had in common and in what ways they differed from one another. I am assuming that, in the demonstrated absence of historical connections, shared features were either produced by patterns of thought and behaviour common to all human groups or shaped by similar environmental or functional constraints and therefore

constitute examples of parallel development or coevolution. Cross-cultural variation reflects the influence of cultural patterns that are free of such constraints. I hope that these case studies will reveal to what extent different sorts of explanations of human behaviour are useful for explicating particular data.

Anthropology, as a product of Western civilization, has simultaneously pursued two antithetical but complementary goals: to demonstrate that people everywhere are biologically much the same and to celebrate the extent of cultural variation found throughout the world. Both of these concerns can be traced back to the eighteenth century, the first being linked to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the second to Johann Herder and the romantic reaction against the Enlightenment. These two positions have continued to dominate Western politics and intellectual life and have influenced the development of Western civilization in many ways.

RATIONALISM

Rationalists stress the features that all human beings share as members of a single species. They maintain that, despite cultural differences, human needs, drives, motivations, desires, feelings, and sentiments are everywhere much the same. They define culture as humanity's learned modes of thought and behaviour, and they understand such learned behaviour as a far more efficient and therefore evolutionarily superior way for humans to adapt to changing conditions than natural selection (Boyd and Richerson 1985). Travellers often remark that it is possible for people from radically different cultures to understand most aspects of each other's behaviour even when they cannot speak one another's language (D. Brown 1991: 3). Dan Sperber (1985) argues that ethnographic research is possible only because behavioural differences are not very great. The primary role of reason is thought to be to enable human beings to satisfy biological and psychological needs that are fundamentally the same everywhere. Sahlins's (1976) distinction between this sort of 'practical reason' and 'cultural reason', by which he means decision making constrained by the idiosyncratic values of specific cultural traditions, is somewhat problematical. All human thought is symbolically mediated, and therefore practical reason is culturally encoded and generally transmitted from one generation to another in the form of unquestioned norms of behaviour. In this respect it is no different from cultural reason. The crucial distinction between practical and cultural reason is the capacity of practical reason to transcend individual cultures by serving interests that are grounded in panhuman traits.

Rationalists also view culture as adapted to the practical needs of everyday life rather than shaped by beliefs that are independent of such constraints. They treat the past not as a source of enduring identities, ideals, and models for action but as something to be transcended by creating ways of doing things that are better suited to changing circumstances and represent a fuller realization of human potential (Peel 1983: 7). Religious beliefs, values, and cultural traditions they tend to view as epiphenomenal. Thus they consider consciousness and ideas to be shaped by material calculations and to serve principally as a way of encoding and reinforcing practical behaviour.

From the rationalist perspective, the behaviour of any individual largely resembles that of all humans, and social processes are the collective outcome of innumerable individual decisions relating to personal status and well-being that are based on available knowledge and experience. In general, rationalism values the study of behaviour, especially adaptive behaviour, more highly than the study of beliefs and consciousness. This is often justified by advocating a positivist epistemology. It also privileges the study of cross-cultural similarities and sometimes dismisses 'unique, exotic, and non-recurrent particulars' as the result of historical accidents and therefore of no scientific interest (Steward 1955: 209). This emphasis on cross-cultural recurrences and rational explanations of human behaviour does not encourage an interest in cultural traditions. It does encourage an interest in sociocultural evolution.

Rationalist explanations of the uniformities in human behaviour assume a variety of forms. One of the most popular is that ecological or economic factors determine or at least severely constrain the development of sociopolitical organization and belief systems. Factors such as least effort, relative scarcity, and individual or collective security are invoked to explain why people behave the way they do. This approach generally minimizes the importance of human agency and accounts for change in terms of the rational calculation of the relative selective advantages of different strategies – in Sahlins's (1976: 89–90) words, displacing mind from human beings to the ecosystem. It also minimizes the consideration of what is specifically human about human behaviour. A second type of explanation, most closely associated with classical Marxism, sees intrasocietal competition for power and control of material resources as the principal factor bringing about change in human societies. In its original form this explanation was restricted to class societies, but in recent years neo-Marxists have attempted to extend it to preclass societies by postulating analogous forms of competition among lineages, genders, and age-groups (Bloch 1985).

Many rationalists accept that, while reason facilitates and helps to control human behaviour, it does not motivate it. Reason has evolved to serve drives

that are rooted in human nature. Human nature, in turn, is grounded in a common biology that expresses itself in similar organic needs, forms of intelligence, and psychology that generate similar impulses and drives. (Debates continue as to whether biological factors produce significant behavioural differences between males and females, but racist attempts to establish biologically grounded differences among various ethnic groups have foundered.) The assumption is that, because of their biological similarities, human beings living under analogous conditions will respond in much the same way to similar problems. Bronislaw Malinowski (1939), for example, attempted to ground social institutions in biological and psychological needs, and George P. Murdock (1945) and Donald E. Brown (1991) identified universals in human action, thought, feelings, statuses, social roles, the division of labour, the underlying structure of language, reasoning, classification, psychological predispositions, and symboling. Brown (1991: 55–60) points out that even historical particularists such as Franz Boas and Clark Wissler acknowledged the existence of behavioural universals rooted in a common human nature. Boas (1963 [1911]: 154) observed detailed, far-reaching, and numerous similarities in thought and action among the most diverse peoples.

According to many rationalists, the existence of these universals refutes the behaviourist view of the human mind as a *tabula rasa* on which experience is objectively recorded and rationally analysed. Early social philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke attributed specific (though differing) natures to human beings. Karl Marx also assumed that an underlying sociability and generosity were reflected in hunter-gatherer societies and would be reflected once again in the socialist societies of the future. At the same time, in his desire to avoid supporting conservative ideas that human behaviour was biologically determined and immutable, he contrarily asserted that human nature was not innate but determined by the types of societies in which human beings lived (Fuller 1980: 230–64; Geras 1983).

Rationalists now tend to assume that basic human behaviour has been shaped by millions of years of hominid evolution, during which natural selection has 'wired' the human brain to cope with various specific as well as general problems (D. Brown 1991: 85; Mithen 1996). Much of this selection is thought to have been related to the problems of living in small social groups, which involved intragroup status competition as well as the need for cooperation to cope with both internal and external problems. It is argued that their living under these conditions until just a few thousand years ago accounts for the behavioural similarities shared by all human groups (Carrithers 1992).

Individual interests are complex and cannot be reduced to rational calculations relating only to personal benefits or the ecological adaptation of groups.

Individuals rank the objectives they wish to pursue differently, and their differing understandings may lead to different strategies for achieving the same goals. They may sometimes decide that their personal goals are best served in ways that accord with social objectives (Hardin 1968). Under these circumstances, even in small-scale societies, behaviour can be highly diverse, and varied individual decisions may play a significant role in the formulation of social strategies. Individual goal-driven behaviour may combine with ecological and other external constraints in complex ways. In an attempt to deal with this diversity, those who believe that sociocultural phenomena are shaped most powerfully and directly by ecological or economic factors frequently assert that the greatest degree of cross-cultural regularity among societies at the same level of development is associated with their economic institutions. They also assume that more cross-cultural diversity will be found in social and political institutions, because these institutions are less directly constrained by environment and technology, and still more diversity in art, philosophy, and religious beliefs, which are the aspects of behaviour most likely to be influenced by historical idiosyncrasies (Friedman and Rowlands 1978*b*: 203–5; Gellner 1982).

ROMANTICISM

Romanticism began as a protest against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which many intellectuals believed ignored the importance of emotions and sensibilities and of attachments to friends, families, religions, communities, regions, ethnic groups, and nations. More generally, romanticism celebrated the cultural diversity that characterizes human societies. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it became identified with the conservative reaction against the French Revolution, which, in accordance with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, had demanded that all human beings should stand equal before the law, enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities for self-development, and share responsibility for promoting the common good.

The most recent expression of romanticism in the social sciences is the postmodernist view of cultural traditions as historically constructed 'sense-making systems' that shape people's perceptions and values and their reactions to new experiences. Postmodernists view cultures as highly diverse and idiosyncratic, and through the advocacy of anthropologists such as Victor Turner (1967, 1975), Marshall Sahlins (1976; 1985), Clifford Geertz (1979; 1984), and James Clifford (1988) their ideas have acquired enormous influence. Embracing cultural relativism and historical particularism, modern cultural anthropology once again has much in common with that of Boas.

Cultural relativists assert that human beings live within meaningful schemes of their own devising, which are contingently constructed and therefore never the only ones possible. While many of them recognize that material factors exert real influences on the cultural order, they reject the suggestion that any particular cultural form can be read from a given set of material forces (Sahlins 1976: 206). Which animals are considered appropriate to eat in a particular culture is determined historically rather than rationally (171). Economic necessity can never account for the forms assumed by cultural change, which are invariably constrained and shaped by established but purely conventional ways of doing things. Such conventions are subject only to the endless modifications brought about by individual decodings and re-encodings of knowledge. The resulting idiosyncratic diversity of understandings within each culture makes cultural change complex and unpredictable. Because relativists ascribe such great importance to ideas, they accord only minimal influence to biological constraints; both human behaviour and human nature tend to be viewed as culturally determined.

Extreme forms of relativism minimize the adaptive role of cultures and embrace an idealist cultural determination. Clifford Geertz (1965: 101) maintains that the human essence is manifested in variation rather than in universal characteristics. The only governance of human behaviour is provided by 'systems of significant symbols'. This cultural variability makes interethnic understanding very difficult. In one culture avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect; in another it may indicate insecurity or unreliability. White signifies mourning in one culture and black does so in another. While classical economists, as rationalists, consider the profit motive a human universal, cultural relativists maintain that the production and distribution of goods are determined by concepts that are highly variable from one culture to another.

Carried to its extreme, cultural relativism encourages the development of a radical subjectivism in which every decoding of a message becomes another encoding and it is impossible to comprehend fully what goes on in the mind of a close relative, let alone that of someone from a different culture. Ideas and beliefs, rather than the material conditions of life, are of overwhelming importance in determining behaviour.

Many cultural relativists attribute the determining or constraining power of culturally transmitted behaviour to a generally uncritical acceptance of what is learned, whether conscious beliefs or unconscious habits. Practical considerations or universal self-interest are generally considered insufficient to alter the beliefs and habits that control what people perceive, believe, and hold to be appropriate. In short, people adapt to the world not as it is but as they perceive it to be. Beliefs guide behaviour along culturally specific trajectories,

as a result of which peoples with different cultures behave differently even in essentially similar circumstances. This is the essence of Sahlins's (1976) cultural reason. Such views are of considerable antiquity. The seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon maintained that 'custom is the principal magistrate of man's life' (quoted in Boyd and Richerson 1985: 81), while the American sociologist William Sumner (1906) argued that humans for the most part inherited rather than chose their beliefs.

Others attribute the determining power of culture to deep structures that unconsciously shape the development of beliefs in much the same fashion as grammar implicitly patterns speech. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) has emphasized universal structuring principles of the mind that realize themselves in a series of binary oppositions by means of which culture is created and can be understood. He views cultures as unconsciously utilizing different sets of oppositions that encourage their elaboration along distinctive lines.

Still others have argued that the deep structures of languages, particularly as these are expressed in grammars, encode and thus emphasize different aspects of reality. Indo-European languages, for example, stress concepts of time by incorporating elaborate tense indicators into their verbs, while in Semitic languages verbs are used to distinguish whether actions are completed or still in progress. Linguists such as Edward Sapir (1921) and Benjamin Whorf (1956) have proposed that such differences among languages make their speakers think and behave differently, even though such speakers are not consciously aware of them. Others deny that such differences are of major significance, arguing that anything that can be said in one natural language can be said in all others, even if it may be much harder to do so in one language than in another. A similar objection may apply to the relation between cultural structuralism and what people think.

Christopher Hallpike (1986: 288–371), although not a cultural relativist, argues that historically related cultures are guided by inflexible core principles or key ideas that are not functionally related to particular subsistence patterns. These core principles – general beliefs about the nature of the cosmos and social organization – supply patterns that shape the development of cultures and social behaviour. Hallpike maintains that, because peoples tend to accept particular core principles as givens, such propositions can influence the development of historically related cultures for millennia.

Karl Marx and other materialists have objected that a theory that treats culture as an independent variable and assigns ideas a primary role in influencing behaviour is incapable of accounting for change (Bloch 1985: 31). Change requires either external pressures on individuals or goal-directed individual action upon society or the natural environment that alters social relations. For

such purposive action to occur, material interests that are external to culture must be brought into play. The alternative approach, championed by extreme relativists, is to treat culture as an indeterminate script that slowly changes as a result of largely unintended transformations that occur in the course of individual decodings and encodings of information. This implies that cultural change has no inherent direction, except perhaps that brought about by the greater survivability of some forms of behaviour in direct competition with other forms. The latter sort of cultural selection is, however, of little direct interest to extreme relativists, since it suggests unwelcome limitations on cultural variability.

Postmodernism has encouraged a revival of the Boasian position that, while each culture can be studied and understood on its own terms, individual cultures cannot legitimately be evaluated against any absolute criteria. Ian Hodder (1986; 1987) maintains that, because each culture is a system of meaning that is the product of its own history and is based on unique assumptions, different cultures can be understood and evaluated only on their own terms. Moreover, he argues, because of the intervention of frameworks of culturally specific meaning there is 'no direct, universal cross-cultural relationship between behaviour and material culture' (Hodder 1986: 12). Rather than seeking to understand one aspect of a culture in isolation from the rest, he maintains, anthropologists must try to discover how the different parts of a culture are cognitively linked to form a meaningful whole. To understand the principles that guide agricultural production, for example, it is necessary to study the specific cultural context in which such production occurs. Comparing agricultural production in different societies in isolation from other features of these societies is bound to be misleading and imposes an erroneous materialistic interpretation on human behaviour. Agricultural production may be guided primarily by religious beliefs in one culture and by calculations of monetary profit in another – or, as Maurice Godelier (1978) put it, any aspect of culture can potentially serve as infrastructure. To address this argument it would have to be determined to what extent agricultural production primarily guided by religious concepts would differ from production based on calculations of monetary profit. Some materialists argue that such differing approaches to food production would simply be alternative devices for culturally encoding the same rational principles of ecological adaptation (Rappaport 1968).

Extreme cultural relativists deny that any effective form of cross-cultural comparison is possible – a position that essentially eliminates the basis for anthropology as a comparative study of human behaviour. Others, Geertz among them, argue that comparison is possible provided that it is an exhaustive, hermeneutically driven translation of the ideas of one culture into the thought

patterns of another. This is such a difficult, time-consuming enterprise that no more than two cultures can be effectively compared. In general, because they view cultures as systems of knowledge transmitted from earlier periods, relativists prefer to understand them historically.

CONFRONTATION AND ACCOMMODATION

The dichotomy between rationalism and relativism poses many problems for anthropologists. Relativism encourages an interest in culturally specific habits, religious beliefs, art, values, and conceptions of the self that rationalist approaches tend to view as of minor importance. At the same time, it devalues an interest in the search for cross-cultural regularities in human behaviour which is central to a rationalist approach. If a rationalist approach by itself were capable of explaining all aspects of human behaviour, all cultures at the same level of development would closely resemble one another, any differences being attributable to environmental variation. If the range of variation in learned behaviour were limited only by cultural factors, every culture would be different except insofar as they were historically related.

The actual range of cross-cultural similarities and differences does not correspond with an extreme version of either of these scenarios. There is far more cross-cultural uniformity than extreme relativism would allow but less than a purely rationalist explanation would indicate. Even the most extreme relativists admit that universal prerequisites relating to biological necessities such as food, shelter, and biological reproduction impose limitations on cultural variation. Likewise, most rationalists allow that idiosyncratic cultural variation occurs but distinguish between the cross-culturally recurrent, adaptive features of culture, which are believed to be most evident in subsistence patterns and other forms of economic behaviour, and more variable cultural features such as art styles and religious beliefs. Behaviour in the former sphere is seen as restricted by the inflexibility of natural laws and the scarcity of natural resources, while cultural variation reflects the relative freedom of the human imagination. Marvin Harris (1974; 1977; 1979) has gone the farthest in trying to demonstrate that what appear to be cultural idiosyncrasies are adaptively determined, but his case studies remain more polemical than convincing. The challenge is to stop simply supporting one or the other of these alternative positions in a partisan manner and examine in greater detail the nature of cultural similarities and differences as the basis for constructing a more realistic theory of the factors shaping human behaviour and cultural change.

Rationalists and relativists agree that all human behaviour is culturally mediated and that such mediation defines a uniquely human form of adaptation.

Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson (1985) have demonstrated that most beliefs and behavioural patterns that have been culturally transmitted for long periods are superior to recent innovations, both because they have been tested longer and because during that time they have been selected to serve the interests of societies as well as of individuals. Rationalists and relativists do not agree, however, whether culture is phenomenal or epiphenomenal. This debate centres on the extent to which the factors that influence human behaviour are determined primarily by culturally transmitted beliefs or by panhuman drives and aspirations and on the extent to which personal experience can reveal the limitations or inappropriateness of traditional beliefs. As Childe (1956b: 59–60) once asked, how, and under what conditions, does a society decide that burning garbage is a more effective way to stop cholera than burning witches?

Today it is fashionable to argue that all so-called scientific interpretations are subjective and inevitably underdetermined by the available evidence (B. Barnes 1974). In the social sciences most interpretations are provisional and usually vigorously contested, while high-level theories are generally understood to lie beyond the realm of direct proof. There is no conclusive evidence that a materialist, behaviourally oriented approach is any more or less objective than an idealist, culturally oriented one. Yet some evidence is better than no evidence, and imperfect theories are stepping stones towards a better understanding. Cultural and ecological determinism are equally pernicious. Cultural determinism excludes in advance the consideration of cross-cultural regularities, while ecological determinism rules out the consideration of cross-cultural idiosyncrasies.

To circumvent this dilemma, I propose to undertake a comparative examination of similarities and differences in seven early civilizations. My aim is to determine to what extent and in what ways these cultures were shaped, on the one hand, by cross-culturally operative factors such as calculations of self-interest that are grounded in human nature and, on the other, by highly variable, culturally constituted, and hence historically specific and irreplicable modes of thinking. I am assuming that, if behaviour is determined by culturally inherited beliefs that are not subject to evaluation on the basis of panhuman criteria, it will tend to vary idiosyncratically from one early civilization to another. If behaviour is shaped by tendencies that are rooted in human nature, it will tend to display cross-cultural uniformities.

It is also necessary to investigate the constraints imposed by functional limitations. There appear to be only a limited number of ways in which societies at a particular level of complexity can function well, or even function at all.

Hallpike (1986: 141–42) has argued that such functional limitations become more restrictive as societies grow more complex and competition among societies at both the same and different levels of complexity increases. The convergence that comes about as a result of functional limitations suggests that processes of social and cultural change may be more variable than their outcomes. Childe (1958) argued that underlying the vast array of prehistoric European Neolithic cultures was a strictly limited number of forms of social and political organization. More recently Kent Flannery (1972) maintained that the factors leading to the development of complex societies are far more varied and idiosyncratic than the structures they produce. George P. Murdock (1949; 1959b) demonstrated that only a limited number of systems of kin terms possess sufficient logical coherence to survive as stable structures. He also documented that there were many more ways to shift from one kinship system to another than stable outcomes. The main difference among functional limitations appears to be that in the social and behavioural realm they relate mainly to making efficient use of limited resources, while in the cognitive sphere they have to do with limiting the production of a debilitating degree of symbolic variation (Gellner 1982).

If social organization and cultural coherence exhibit more order than processes of sociocultural change, functional studies may be more important for understanding regularities in human behaviour and for addressing what are often viewed as evolutionary as opposed to historical processes than many neoevolutionists have believed. This constitutes a strong argument that the synchronic-comparative approach adopted in this book may in some respects be even more useful for understanding sociocultural evolution than the study of actual sequences of change. It can also be argued that anthropological archaeologists have erred in trying to explain changes without first seeking to understand how what is changing functioned.

Constraint can be viewed as imposed on human behaviour by ecological and biological factors (as the latter constitute human nature), functional limitations, and cultural patterns. Ecological uniformities and functional limitations promote various kinds of cross-cultural convergences and uniformities, while ecological variations and divergent cultural patterns promote and sustain cross-cultural variation. Ecological factors and functional limitations encourage rational, conscious and individual responses to situations, while cultural patterns invite passive acceptance or active elaboration of established trajectories. It is evident that to some extent individuals and groups are able to reinterpret and alter cultural patterns for their social and material advantages and so that they can interact more effectively with the natural environment.

THE PROPOSED STUDY

Unlike most anthropological analyses, this study focuses not on how seven early civilizations evolved but on what their similarities and differences can tell us about factors that influence human behaviour. This requires determining what kinds of similarities were shared by all seven early civilizations, whether these similarities were general or specific, and whether some early civilizations shared certain features but not others. To what extent were specific sets of features shared by the same civilizations, making it possible to define subvarieties of early civilizations? What features varied idiosyncratically from one early civilization to another? How were these various types of features functionally correlated? My goal is to subject theories of sociocultural change to empirical testing.

The study I am undertaking is the sort of comparison that extreme relativists maintain is impossible. No one, they claim, can understand one or more other cultures sufficiently well to make comparisons that are more than projections of ethnocentric fantasies. To abandon an effort to understand patterning in human behaviour on the grounds of such dogmatic and unsubstantiated assertions would be a shameful act of intellectual cowardice.

In the next three chapters, I will assess comparative research, define early civilizations, and discuss some of the problems I have encountered in my research and how I have dealt with them. This will be followed by the examination in turn of the sociopolitical organization, the economy, and the beliefs, knowledge, and values of the seven early civilizations in order to ascertain the extent of their similarities and differences. This survey will differ from many previous ones, which have generally privileged the investigation of similarities or differences according to the theoretical preconceptions of the researchers. In three sectional summaries and an integrative chapter, I will assess the theoretical implications of my findings.