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Comments

ON THE EVOLUTION OF "TRIBAL" SOCIAL NETWORKS

Dean J. Saitta

Braun and Plog's approach to understanding change in "tribal" social networks is critiqued with respect to (1) certain bridging arguments about the social meaning of particular evidential trends, and (2) certain conceptual biases regarding the nature of "tribal" social relations. Aspects of an alternative strategy for making sense of "tribal" social dynamics are discussed.

Braun and Plog (1982) have recently outlined a general model for explaining the evolution of intensifying regional integration within nonhierarchical or "tribal" social networks. The model explains this evolution—broadly characterized by the development of "cross-cutting pan-residential institutions"—as an organizational response to changes in the degree of local environmental "unpredictability." The authors elaborate bridging arguments connecting their theoretical model to archaeological data and evaluate the model's utility by referencing particular sets of material evidence from prehistoric North America.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge several aspects of Braun and Plog's approach to change in "tribal" social networks. Specifically, my comments address two areas: (1) methodological considerations, particularly the arguments concerning "style" in material culture; and (2) larger theoretical notions of social relations in "tribal" society. On the whole, I am sympathetic to what Braun and Plog are working to achieve—a coherent and testable theory of "tribal" evolution that overcomes the biases inherent in models derived from traditional ethnography. Nonetheless, their alternative approach manifests some logical ambiguities and conceptual biases of its own that beg further clarification and discussion. I hope that a probing of these problems will help move us further toward the general theory of "tribal" social process that Braun and Plog envision.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In evaluating their model of "tribal" evolution, Braun and Plog assume a relationship between the stylistic elaboration of material culture and the organization of regional social networks. The view of "style" taken by these authors draws from the work of Wilmsen (1973), Wobst (1977), and Conkey (1978). Stylistic behavior is recognized as an activity that communicates social information, particularly information about social group affiliation. The stylistic signaling of such information by members of a social group would serve to inform other parties of the amount of "social distance" existing between them. This would in turn make social interaction more predictable and reduce the likelihood of stressful encounters.

Under this "information exchange" theory of style, then, style is assumed to play an active role in processes of social boundary maintenance. Braun and Plog see this theory as relevant to studies of organizational change, since it implies that changes in stylistic behavior over time will reflect changes in the structure of social boundary conditions. Accordingly, Braun and Plog expect a process of increasing regional integration, involving the breakdown of subregional social boundaries, to be manifested materially in the following way. A condition of relative stylistic

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heterogeneity in a region should come to be replaced by one of greater stylistic homogeneity, as previously socially-distant parties intensify cooperative relations and begin decorating their material culture in similar ways. Trends toward increasing stylistic homogeneity on a regional scale are documented by Braun and Plog for assemblages of domestic ceramics from different parts of North America. These trends are used in conjunction with evidence of change in social exchange activity to support the general model of increasing regional integration.

This line of argumentation is problematic, however, in that Braun and Plog fail to justify fully why formal organizational change of the sort expected should appear on the ground in stylistically coded information exchanges. Even though style may indeed function in the way the authors suggest—as an active voice in social communication—it is unclear just how the stylistic behavior in question articulates with formal integrating processes. Consequently, the question arises as to why the stylistic trends identified could not simply reflect a change in social boundary conditions in the absence of formal organizational change. While Braun and Plog clearly do not expect organizational change to be implicit in every stylistic change (and they specify some conditions under which no relationship should obtain), they seem to hold fast to the idea that any stylistic change that indicates (from their perspective) a *relaxation* of boundary maintaining behavior *must* imply actual organizational change. If, as the authors note, questions regarding (1) processes of social boundary maintenance, and (2) the extent to which a region may be considered formally “integrated” are analytically separate, then the proposed connection between stylistic change and organizational change should be more carefully argued. Now, Braun and Plog do buttress their interpretations of the stylistic trends with complementary information on trends in exchange activity. I will argue in the next section, however, that their bridging arguments regarding exchange behavior in “tribal” systems are also problematic.

Alternatively, even if formal organizational change of the kind expected is actually occurring in the geographical areas of interest, then demonstration of increasing stylistic homogeneity in ceramic assemblages over time at best addresses the nature of such changes only indirectly. If we accept the traditional view (as Braun and Plog apparently do) that “tribal” integration is achieved via the development of “cross-cutting” institutions such as age-grades, secret societies, and other kinds of sodalities, then it is those items of material culture symbolizing and reinforcing such axes of differentiation that must be accounted for in order to support arguments for increasing regional integration.

In fairness to Braun and Plog, it was beyond the scope of their paper to provide specific predictions of change in organizational form relative to particular changes in environmental unpredictability. The authors do, however, intimate the feasibility of making such predictions. It seems imperative that these more specific hypotheses be developed, if their model is to permit analytical statements about social process. As it stands, Braun and Plog have provided little more than empirical generalizations about what *could* be happening in the study areas of concern. Even though they ultimately may be proven right about the occurrence of the social changes, at present their conclusions do not necessarily follow from the particular bridging arguments they employ.

One way to amend this situation would be to think more carefully about what changing integration means in social networks, particularly with respect to the range of behavioral realms in which it can manifest itself. It is conceivable that many different kinds of integration are possible within “tribal” networks beyond those traditionally theorized. The problem is thus one of underdeveloped theory: we need better control of the conditions under which *different sets* of “tribal” social relations might be affected by particular changes in environmental predictability, and what these interactions might imply for change in organizational form. Given such an understanding, we can then perhaps be more precise in our bridging arguments relating social process to changes in material culture, particularly in the stylistic patterning therein. I will continue this line of argument in the next section by considering several conceptual biases in Braun and Plog’s more general theoretical outlook which may need redressing if we are to reach this broader-based understanding of “tribal” social dynamics.

THEORY OF "TRIBAL" SOCIAL RELATIONS

I have argued that in order to make processual sense of "tribal" social change we need to theorize a range of alternative organizational possibilities for prehistoric "tribal" systems. Two conceptual biases, more or less explicit in Braun and Plog's approach, stand in the way of such theorization. These are (1) a view of "tribal" social networks as relatively undifferentiated and hence "nondecomposable," and (2) a relatively circumscribed notion of the spatial scale over which "tribal" social relations are transacted.

With respect to the first of these, Braun and Plog suggest that "tribal" societies lack the "concrete decomposability" (Braun and Plog 1982:506) that would allow assessment of the internal relationships between discrete institutional subsystems. Accordingly, this viewpoint leads Braun and Plog to consider the "tribal" network as a whole in relation to the outside: environmental unpredictability is seen to affect the *system*, rather than sets of individuals conceivably differentially related within it. In adopting this position, the authors deny a context for investigating those impulses to change that arise from individuals or groups of individuals pursuing different interests vis-à-vis the social productive process. It is not my intention to remind Braun and Plog that societies can change as a result of such internal dynamics. This point has been made frequently in the literature, and besides, Braun and Plog recognize that such a dynamic exists. What is disturbing, however, is their intimation that such dynamics are somehow beyond conceptual reach where "tribal" systems are concerned, and that we need to tailor our theory to get around the "nondecomposability" problem.

Alternatively, I would argue that confronting these internal dynamics is a potentially fruitful way to make sense of changing social integration in "tribal" networks. To do this we need to worry less about societies as sets of subsystems and a bit more about societies as sets of processes. One such set of processes demanding greater theoretical attention is that involving the production and distribution of social surpluses, in the form of goods and labor. In focusing on those phenomena, we have our eyes on a dynamic that directly relates to issues of social integration and differentiation (e.g., Wolf 1966). Moreover, inasmuch as concepts addressing flows of surplus in society are explicitly relational (linking, for example, performers, extractors, and other recipients of surplus labor) such a focus can potentially offer a broader understanding of what changes in social integration mean: i.e., their "adaptive" benefits as well as their social costs.

Several investigators have already begun work in this direction as a means of explaining change in prehistoric "tribal" systems (e.g., Friedman and Rowlands 1978; Lightfoot and Feinman 1982). Although these works are themselves problematic in that they rely excessively on models of surplus flows received from ethnologists, and make debatable assumptions about the expansionist nature of human social relations, they nonetheless point the way toward a useful conceptual orientation. The modeling of alternative arrangements for mobilizing social surpluses, and the working out of alternative "evolutionary" trajectories in different contexts of production, is one of the biggest challenges presently facing students of "tribal" society.

Finally, the modeling of alternative organizational possibilities for prehistoric "tribal" systems will require more careful thinking about the spatial scale over which "tribal" social process is transacted. Braun and Plog rightly point out that the received ethnographic image of "tribal" local autonomy is untenable, and that we should expect to find evidence for some form of cooperative network on every social landscape. Again, it was not Braun and Plog's purpose to consider in a substantive way the nature of the relations likely to be defining such networks at any given time. They note only that network integration will depend upon the "strength and diversity" of connecting links (1982:507). However, the way in which Braun and Plog utilize their second class of archaeological data—evidence for exchange activity—presupposes a view of "tribal" spatial relations that may be inappropriate when the goal is to explicate organizational variation and its articulation in sequences of organizational change.

This view is one which Sahlins (1968, 1972) captures in his "sectoral" model of tribe. For Sahlins,

the tribal plan presents itself as a series of concentric spheres [sectors], beginning in the close-knit inner circles of homestead and hamlet, extending thence to wider and more diffuse zones of regional and tribal solidarity, to fade into the outer darkness of an intertribal arena [1972:279].

Sahlins's model thus entails a rough inverse correlation between the sociability of "tribal" units and their separation in physical space: the social relations linking a given local unit with others in the network are seen to become increasingly weaker as one moves outward from that unit. Moreover, variation in network sociability is expected to be paralleled by variation in the kinds of materials exchanged among participating units (Sahlins 1972:185-314). The assumptions that Braun and Plog make about the exchange of valuables in "tribal" systems imply some measure of endorsement of this view. The flow of such items over wide regions is assumed to reflect interaction "across social boundaries or pronounced gradients" (Braun and Plog 1982:511), i.e., to indicate interaction between relatively socially distant parties for the purposes of, at best, only very short-term integration. This assumption in turn allows Braun and Plog to interpret decreases in the exchange of valuables over time as indicative of the replacement of short-term integrative mechanisms with more permanent panregional ones.

The sectoral model may not be the best one for interpreting material flows of this kind, however. This model has recently come under criticism on grounds that it cannot accommodate the larger-scale interactions that organize "tribal" systems. Studies of "tribal" networks by Paynter and Cole (1980) and Donham (1981), for example, suggest the importance of regional and even interregional socioeconomic processes for distributing labor power and organizing production. Full comprehension of the dimensions of such processes lies ahead; however, if we accept that these studies locate major deficiencies in traditional "tribal" models beyond those identified by Braun and Plog, then we will need to rethink our notions of social distance in "tribal" networks and its relationship to flows of material culture. The relationship between social distance, spatial distance, and exchange activity may be far more multifaceted than Braun and Plog admit, with changes in the content of exchange networks over time conceivably reflecting something other than the proposed changes in regional sociability. One alternative possibility is that the changing material flows considered by Braun and Plog reflect the impact, however underspecified these may be at present, of *extraregional* sociopolitical dynamics (e.g., Gledhill 1978; Bender 1981).

The development of theory that addresses large-scale processes in "tribal" systems and their material correlates, then, should be concomitant with efforts to decompose "tribal" social networks. In so doing, we might also look for ways in which the state of regional "tribal" networks creates uncertainty for constituent local units. The studies cited above point out that social stratification and household differentiation can be very real impulses in "tribal" society, and that some of these impulses are effects of the way labor is channeled through wider political and economic structures (e.g., Donham 1981). It is unclear how Braun and Plog's "living systems" approach can deliver useful theory in this direction, given its high level of abstraction and its emphasis on the generalized "response properties" of "tribal" networks (see also Wenke [1981], especially pp. 99-103). Such theory can be produced, I think, if we start with more limiting questions about how societies articulate processually. Questions relating to the production and disposition of social surpluses are one such starting point.

CONCLUSIONS

To a great extent, processual accounts of change in social systems depend upon anthropologists first asking themselves what it is they want to know about how the world is put together. Braun and Plog's particular explanations of change suffer processually because their overall approach lacks this basic self-consciousness about what "integration," and changes therein, mean in "tribal" social networks. It may be that more processual explanations will follow once Braun and Plog achieve that theoretical specificity that they acknowledge is lacking in their framework as it stands. However, I have also pointed out certain conceptual biases in Braun and Plog's approach

which might inhibit this fuller explication of process and change in "tribal" systems: a notion of "tribal" networks as nondecomposable and as organized by processes that are still relatively small-scale in scope. Minimally, the sheer variety of "tribal" sociocultural arrangements known to ethnographers—all of which have likely been shaped to some degree by an expanding world capitalist system (Paynter and Cole 1980)—compels us to ask about the *diversity* of the non-capitalist societies with which this expanding system has interacted. I have suggested that one way to open up the precapitalist "tribal" world is to think about alternative organizational possibilities for "tribal" systems, using the production and distribution of social surplus as the conceptual starting point. Work in this direction is still in its infancy, but one thing is clear—the development of a viable competing approach will have to manifest the same attention to theory and method that is nowhere better exemplified than in the work of Braun and Plog.

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