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Reconsidering egalitarianism for archaeological interpretation*

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Abstract

After a hundred-years of archaeo-anthropological studies on non-state societies, there is still no convincing picture of ‘acephalous’ communities. These communities have long been approached through negation, through what they are not (non hierarchical, no social exploitation...), all the while expecting to find the factors that will convert them into “what they are not yet”, the seeds of inequality. They have been considered merely as basic human social forms, which frequently imply marginality and primitivism. This preconception is functionalist and evolutionary, and it has conditioned social interpretations of European Protohistory. In the most advanced period of Prehistory, the Iron Age, social complexity is a given, but only in the form of social centralisation or hierarchies. Whatever does not fit this model, commonly found in regions that are considered marginal, is labelled residual, primitive or “in transition”.

We propose a model based on egalitarianism as an historical construction. This model has been generated after a deep reflection on the renewal of segmentarian societies, on peasant studies and social resistance, and on social organisation of agrarian societies.

Keywords: anthropological theory, origins of inequality, primitivism, peasants.

Introducing remarks

The traditional archaeo-anthropological emphasis on understanding how hierarchy arose has lately been reconsidered. Wiessner synthesizes this change: “the key question for any students of complexity is not “Why did hierarchy replace equality? but rather “How was each force expressed in a society at a certain point in time, and how and why did the relation between the two change over time to create more complex societies?” (Wiessner 2009: 218-9). McGuire and Saitta critique the “tendency to frame questions in dichotomous “either-or” terms in societies that are neither egalitarian nor hierarchical, but are both” (McGuire and Saitta 1996: 197; see also Flanagan 1989: 261-2). And from top-down, political economy approaches, Earle and Spriggs emphasize that “in traditional societies independent commoner actions characterized

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most situations” (Earle and Spriggs 2015: 517). But these new approaches have not considered the concept of egalitarianism relevant. Although it can no longer be considered the “blank state of nature” of human condition, nor only a protagonist of the liberal-capitalist progress side by side with freedom and individuality -equality of all human beings; equality of opportunity; equality of outcomes... (Gellner 1984; Dumont 1986; Bêteille 1986; Robbins 1994)-, egalitarianism has not deserved attention.

This paper focuses on the concept of egalitarianism inside the complex relation between egalitarian and hierarchical tendencies: the conflictive or, conversely, systemic views that are used to frame these opposing trends, focusing on the negotiation of inequality (agency and individuals or collective actions) or the dismantling of egalitarian foundations (structural constraints) (Flanagan 1989: 247). The first part will explore the various proposals put forth describing the weaknesses and strengths of egalitarian societies. In the second part an analysis of the economic foundations of egalitarianism will assess their viability in contexts of stable productivity. This will culminate with some Iron Age examples which could correspond with egalitarian models.

Essential versus assertive egalitarianism.

The abundance of studies of equality and egalitarian models in anthropology is beyond the scope of this paper, hence the outstanding work of other authors is sufficient acknowledgement (Flanagan 1989; Ames 2010). Nonetheless, it is important to remember that, in general, these studies defend that “equality is indeed a social impossibility” (McGuire 1983:100). In fact “the anthropological concept of egalitarianism lacks precision” inasmuch as “archaeologists lack methodologies for establishing whether an ancient society was egalitarian” (Ames 2010: 37). Perhaps this is related to the widespread tendency to avoid the concept or to relegate it to a background against which inequality flourishes or is deferred. The interpretative efforts which struggle to understand egalitarian behavior in dominance models lead to ideas such as “reverse dominance hierarchy” (Boehm 1993) “counter- dominance” (Erdal and Whiten 1994), “transegalitarianism” (Hayden 2001: 232) or “anarchism” (which comprises egalitarian societies, but not only), avoiding the term.

Egalitarianism as an object of social research has normally been pushed into two corners: it is both the ‘natural’ state of Human origins, and it has been flatly denied in earlier stages of evolution. Conventional evolutionism holds closely the tenet that the progressive transformation of society changed the simple (egalitarian) for the complex (chiefdoms/states). Sahlins considered that the ‘strictly speaking segmentary’ tribal organizations were the cause of underdevelopment (Sahlins 1958: 38), with local groups wielding all the power, and a minimal cultural relevance of any supra-local entities. Historical progress, therefore, depends on the development of regional power networks. This is where the concept of ‘tribe’ takes root and ‘chiefdoms’ are established as a necessary pre-condition for the development of the state (Service 1975). Behind this association of non-hierarchical societies with underdevelopment is the understanding that the emergence of elites implies development and progress. Thus, social equality is a by-product of a natural society, in contrast to the political and historical character of hierarchization (Flanagan 1989: 245; Ames 2010: 15). This ultimately derives from the old vision of the ‘savages’ as people living in a ‘natural state’ (Bêteille 1998; Kuper 2005). This forms part also of the ideology of expanding states opposing ‘civilization’ (that is ‘state-subject’) against primitiveness, uncivilized, backward, archaic (that is to say, non-a-state-subject) (Scott 2009: 337). Haber has put forth another really interesting matter, regarding the colonialist ideological domination: the idea that “indigenous societies” are “travelling along a path towards ever-increasing social inequality [...] ending in colonial domination” and “became

passive or non-existent once colonial rule was established” (Haber 2007: 282). This reinforces the universal character of inequality and uses it for justifying colonial domination.

Marxist theory also shares this double paradigm. On one side, primordial egalitarianism: Marx saw in the ‘primitive communism’ a pristine phase of Human condition in which solidarity and cooperation, not inequality and exploitation, were the norm. Hence, social exploitation was historically constructed, not unavoidable or unassailable (Vicent and Gilman 2012). But many Marxist historians, nonetheless, put their emphasis on inequality (Lancaster 1999: 31), thereby denying the existence of egalitarian societies. Functionalist interpretations that rely on adaptive or systemic social mechanisms are rejected for hiding the evidence of exploitation (Nocete 1984). What’s more, many authors consider functionalism as complicit with social exploitation since it serves to conceal forms of inequality like gender or age, or even class conflict in remote history. Marxists emphasis on conflict and exploitation has considered “minimally the agency of general populace, although they assumed that people would, in principle, resist excessive demands” (De Marrais and Earle 2017: 186). Moreover, the dominant ideology thesis has forged an image of the subordinate classes as helpless and passive groups (Cascajero 1993; De Marrais and Earle 2017: 189). Both anarchist approaches and those based on cooperation and collective action have revised this inactive social role of commoners. The former emphasize conflict and resistance (Scott 2009). The latter theorize about negotiation, bargaining and compromise (Blanton and Fargher 2016; Carballo 2013).

In the mid-20th century Evans- Pritchard had established the models of ‘ordered anarchy’ and ‘segmentary lineage’, which were fecund for the interpretation of this primitive past. Soon, however, many researchers began to unveil the various inequalities that had been overlooked. Also some clearly hierarchical societies, even states, were considered to be also constructed on segmentarity (Middleton and Tait 1958; Southall 1956; Gellner 1969; Sahlins 1977; Terray 1985; McKinnon 2000). When ethnographic studies achieved historical depth, the concepts of Evans-Pritchard were thoroughly overhauled (Leach 1959; Fried 1966; Wolf 1982). State expansion, as witnessed during European colonialism, has become a prime explanatory factor for the ethnographic record studied by anthropologists. These societies, far from being still in earlier stages of human evolution, were in fact the result of intercultural contact (Béteille 1998; Spriggs 2008; Scott 2009). The ‘pre-‘ had become ‘post-‘; “tribes and ethnicity begin, in practice, where sovereignty and taxes stop” (Scott 2009: 335). If egalitarianism can, in fact, be the result of political choice in certain contexts of intercultural contact, then it is not just the ground level of evolution. Woodburn (1982) coined the term ‘assertive egalitarianism’, ratifying that equality could be a historical construction as well.

Woodburn’s concept was closely related with the hunter-gatherer societies he studied, in which a non-delayed returns productive system helped to systematically disengage people from property. The absence of close links to the land and the relevance of goods which are not able to be stored or hoarded are highlighted. The impossibility to accumulate made it also impossible to collect surplus. Egalitarianism, therefore, is usually related to mobile and sharing –versus stable and accumulating– societies without delayed-return systems. For this reason, some perspectives constrain the viability of actual egalitarianism to very specific circumstances, often of dramatic shortage. Different approaches and perspectives lead to very similar conclusions in this regard.

Spriggs considered that the Melanesian big-man was not an ethnographic model that could be useful for past societies, but rather the result of a dramatic demographic decline together with the peace imposed by colonial domination. This produced the democratization of “the social organization of once more hierarchical societies” (Spriggs 2008: 544).

Brunton went so far as to claim that “egalitarianism can be maintained by devaluing intellectual activity, and this seems to occur, to a greater or lesser extent, in most of the cases under discussion, accounting for the general indifference to matters other than those of immediate concern. But the outcome is cultural impoverishment [...] Societies that attempt to practise a thoroughgoing egalitarianism are just not viable. Their political and military weaknesses are

widely acknowledged. But just as important is their structural inability to mount a defence against the cultural subversion of their egalitarianism, or perhaps even to recognise that it may be taking place” (Brunton 1989: 279-80).

The reaction against egalitarianism is further fueled when it is found that the discourses on equality applied to certain societies are built on liberal-capitalist notions. Big-men were, for Sahlins, individuals who used their freedom and opportunities to overcome others in free competition (Jolly 1989: 173), like “economic entrepreneurs” (Roscoe 2000: 88). A further anachronism occurs when, in some cases, ‘human equality’ has been construed as a result of Western cultural influence (Jolly 1989: 179; Rio 2014), which implies the past projection of present motivations.

As seen above, egalitarianism is considered to require very specific circumstances, both historical and geographical. It is a social rarity. An anarchist perspective, however, helps to overcome this dead end. Societies that use the non-delayed returns economic system to resist accumulation are as common as expanding states. “Here it is worth recalling that most foragers and nomadic peoples –and perhaps swiddeners as well- were not aboriginal survivals but were rather adaptations created in the shadow of states. Just as Pierre Clastres supposed, the societies of many acephalous foragers and swiddeners are admirably designed to take advantage of agro-ecological niches in trading with nearby states yet manage to avoid subordination as subjects” (Scott 2009: 334). The “cultural instability” of egalitarian societies (Brunton 1989) is therefore a measure of successful state-evasion. It is a social model that does not exist only when no other is impossible, but rather because they chose to adopt it as a way of resisting state powers. “Their social structure as well is likely to favor dispersion, fission, and reformulation and to present to the outside world a kind of formlessness that offers no obvious institutional point of entry for would-be projects of unified rule” (Scott 2009: 329). Bern has also pointed out that, far from being isolated communities on the margins of states, “the traditional primitive societies of anthropology” maintain their “egalitarian social organisation through their ability to avoid coercive powers of both the government and of their pastoral and agricultural neighbours” (Bern 1987: 220). “The egalitarianism of these communities is supported by, if not premised on, both the dependence and separation entailed in their incorporation within societies that are technologically sophisticated, economically exploitative and socially and politically differentiated” (Bern 1987: 222).

A substantial problem stems from all these ideas: how to conceptualize the relation between ethnographic studies of hunter-gatherers –communities conformed by historical factors, and thus not more ‘current primitives’– and the archaeology of Paleolithic societies. The idea that egalitarianism is marginal in history and/or peripheral to states, has hampered its application to Prehistory at all: “particular forms of human social relations are impossible without colonialism” (Spriggs 2008: 545). This reasoning would conclude that egalitarian societies are exclusive consequences of state expansion. Hence, the “premise of egalitarianism” would appear to be “inequality” (Bern 1987). On the other hand, the archaeology of ‘complex hunter-gatherers’ has also brought into question the idea of universal egalitarianism in Prehistoric societies. To the point that recognizing institutions of rank among non-farming populations constitutes one of ‘the most significant advances in anthropological research in the last thirty years’ (Sassaman 2004: 228). Today the “simple” Paleolithic egalitarianism has been replaced by a varied landscape: “Perhaps over the much of the last 100.000 years the majority of human societies were small, with prestige competition and fluid rank orders, with a minority of formally egalitarian societies and another minority with stable, sometimes materially visible rank orders or perhaps formal ranking. Over the relatively short spans of centuries, societies shifted back and forth across these social forms” (Ames 2010: 36).

For some authors, primeval social organization was shaped by an innate predisposition –a primate heritage– towards inequality and prestige competition (Knauff 1994). This sets the context for the “aggrandizers”, individuals who strive to advance themselves, their close relatives and supporters (Ames 2010: 22; Hayden 2011). In contrast, others affirm that “a

counterdominant behaviour is a widespread characteristic of humans” (Boehm 1993, Knauff 1994; Erdal and Whiten 1994), revealed as the tendency to cooperate and reciprocate, plausibly as a form of risk reduction which had been found advantageous over many millennia, and which has resulted in an egalitarian “ethos”. As Stanish points up, the dichotomy of the inherent cooperative or conflictive nature of Human beings in many ways “has been the most significant concept looming behind discussions of the origin of complex societies in archeology and historical related disciplines” (Stanish 2017: 10). A natural trend, self-interest, is opposed to a cultural/social trend, the group-adaptive behavior, considering the second as more efficient from an adaptive point of view. The dominant behavior, however, was not entirely lost in evolution but was balanced by counterdominant tendencies which only evolved because they provided fitness advantages in the ecological and social environment of the time. Knauff presents this idea with a minor detail: “intentional aversion to submission” (Knauff 1994), its which sets Humans apart from other primates. Thus, the problem is polarized between an individualistic narrative (sometimes shaped by the present icon of the liberal self-made man), and the idea of culture as the way in which people adapt to the environment.

Going beyond biology or cultural determinism, these complementary, albeit opposing, tendencies entertain their own universality. It is considered that both are present in all societies. They have been applied in combination using mainly systemic approaches which situate equality as an ethos, a cultural value. This enables conceptualizing the existence of real/material inequalities within societies where equality is a cultural framework, an ideal. In fact, this blurs the distinction between an egalitarian ethos that may play an active role in reproducing a social model based on equality, and the egalitarian ideology in class societies (Roscoe 2000: 104-5). But this usually ratifies the preconceived notion that inequality is the norm, and even in the most apparently egalitarian societies there were hierarchical power structures.

In this way, one current flourishing approach is collective action. As DeMarrais and Earle explain, collective action theory, partially based on the “corporate power strategies” defined by Blanton *et al.* 1996, has refreshed the traditional top-down studies of social complexity (De Marrais and Earle 2017). This approach converges with the heterarchy proposal by Crumley, which considers that within a single social structure, some aspects are more hierarchical, and others more ‘democratic’ (Crumley 1995), and other theoretical reflections (McGuire 1983). Leaving aside that concepts like “individual self-interest” and rational actor models could be anachronistic and capitalist-loaded (Vicent 1991), we consider that collective action may be a clarifying tool for understanding commoners behavior if used to highlight “bottom-up efforts by politically and economically oppressed groups to resist the forces that produce their oppression” (Saitta 2013: 131), going a step further than mere factionalism. But sometimes the emphasis on “negotiation”, “consensus achievement” and “collective enterprises” obscures conflict and forms of social resistance against exploitation, and updated the traditional functionalist conceptualization of leaders as successful managers. “Emerging consensus”, “compromise” and “compliance” could be a soft way for explaining ideological domination. Corporate strategies, self-limiting autocratic expressions of power and measures improving living standards could be considered a result of negotiation and bargaining but also a symptom of successful resistance against exploitation. We wonder to what extent such ideas around common benefit are influenced by the liberal democratic ideology: “the delivering of public goods in response to taxpayer compliance with internal revenue demands” (Fargher 2016: 318).

The combination between equality and hierarchy can be also approached dialectically (see Angelbeck in this volume). The idea can be traced back to Leach. Alternating periods of equality and inequality is a real possibility: hierarchical structures are called on in times of emergency or when the cooperation of large groups is required (Wiessner 2009: 199). Wengrow and Graeber propose to link changes in social organization of Paleolithic communities to seasonal variations in climate and resources (Wengrow and Graeber 2015). Other authors have also developed interesting approaches in that way (McGuire and Saitta 1986).

Before delving any deeper into a dialectical approach to egalitarianism, it is important to clarify the terminology. Many concepts have been put forth: inequality, hierarchy, stratification versus communalism, commonality, communal solidarity, symmetry, undifferentiation, equalization of status... Terms as 'inequality', 'hierarchization' and, ultimately, 'social exploitation' are generally considered as self-evident, with no definition necessary. Many problems arise when different authors use the same term, mainly "hierarchy", in very different ways. At face value, hierarchical societies reveal the preeminence of hierarchal power structures, whereas egalitarianism is evidenced by ostensibly equal relations. This apparent truism, however, ultimately depends on the perspective imposed on the evidence. For example, according to Robbins, "the mere existence of inegalitarian elements in a society does not prevent us from studying it as an egalitarian one" (1994:43), notwithstanding the claim by Flanagan that even simple egalitarian societies had hierarchies (Flanagan 1989). To deny the possibility of egalitarian societies solely on the fact that people are individually distinct hardly provides any support when carrying out historical interpretations. Egalitarianism—that which asserts equality—is not exactly the same as equality (being equal) (Lancaster comment to Salzman 1999: 42).

Similarly, discussion may spill over into whether social differences based on gender and age can be construed as "hierarchies". Wiessner does believe that "all societies have age hierarchies, and most societies have institutionalized inequality between sexes" (2009: 199). Flanagan elaborates on the differentiation between "institutionalized categories of persons" (groups, classes, castes) which take roots in a 'social structure', and the "inequality between persons", that is firmly embedded in "social organization" (Flanagan 1989: 248). From our perspective, there is a fundamental element to be taken into account: social exploitation. This provokes the big historical break in social relations. Hierarchies are the result of social exploitation. This places them categorically aside from social differentiation based on various traits—age, gender, authority—(Galaty 1999, 48). Following Hayden, we assume that social inequalities refer to institutionalized hierarchies that go beyond age, sex, personal characteristics and family roles (Hayden 2001: 232). But this is not enough: we emphasize the notion of exploitation, that is, the extraction of surplus from the producers by those that do not produce it. Our egalitarian model does not oppose inequality, but rather hierarchization. "Just as we cannot deduce "inequality" from "complexity" (Paynter 1989: 370), neither can we deduce exploitation from inequality. Sex, gender, specific skills fall on the side of inequality. But, exploitation produces hierarchical social relations.

To summarize this part, current research considers egalitarian organizations as a cultural and historical construction, not just a primitive model or a pristine state. This is a daring leap from the traditional, and still hegemonic, evolutionary model. These changes, though potentially illuminating, still fall far short for us. The concept of "egalitarianism" is still related to non-delayed returns societies, or else to more Western ideologies which are focused on Human equality of rights, opportunities, etc. Moreover, the current perspective which considers the existence of egalitarian and hierarchical trends inside all societies tends to be based on systemic approaches in which internal social conflicts are overlooked. Many interesting approaches based on "cooperation" are clearly alien to conflict (not to mention exploitation), even in large-scale, hierarchical, societies. On the other side, political-economy approaches, by definition, emphasized the smallest hint of hierarchy. And almost always egalitarian trends are considered to play merely a secondary role in the social field.

Egalitarianism as political and economic dominance. Looking back at Leach.

Egalitarianism is a useful manner to refer to those cases in which the dominant social tendency is to keep egalitarian relationships without social exploitation. In a way, it is a specific form of anarchism. Not all anarchic societies are egalitarian: "the options ranged from remote, egalitarian, ridge-top swiddening and foraging- staying as far from state centers as possible- to settling in more hierarchical groups close to valley states to take advantage of the tributary, trading, and raiding possibilities" (Scott 2009: 325). "Virtually all hill societies exhibit a range

of state-evading behavior. For some, such characteristics are compatible with a degree of internal hierarchy and, from time to time, imitative state-making. For other groups, however, state evasion is coupled with practices that might be termed the prevention of internal state-making” (Scott 2009: 331). We focus now in this later option considering that the nature of egalitarianism is not solely based on an “ethos”, a cultural definition, moral sanctioning or a “context, scene or situation” (Flanagan 1989: 261). It requires a firm rooting in the way production is organized. How society accesses and distributes resources is the key criteria to ascertaining whether a society is egalitarian or hierarchical. And we understand “production”, following Vicent, as a geographical, political, social, ecological and psico-social concept, not as an isolated, only technical, process (Vicent 1991: 36).

As seen above, both anarchists authors –at least, in this case, Scott–, as well as other who have studied egalitarianism, have mainly focused on disintegration and fission, normally found in extensive and non-delayed-returns production systems, as methods for resisting the state. But other possibilities exist, and Leach mentioned it in passing in his work about Highland Burma, where he was examining communities with intensified production systems and a fixed territory (Leach 2004 [1959]).

Leach studied the Kachin as a social entity in constant flux between two ideal systems: *gumsa* and *gumlao*. These were, in practice, imperfect, so they tended to dialectically transform into each other (Leach 2004 [1959]: 204 ff.), all the while under the influence of state societies (*Shan*). Leach thus revealed the complex dialectic relations behind the conflictive interaction between the *Shan* (a society which resembles a feudal hierarchy) on one end, and the *gumlao* villages (anarchist and egalitarian) on the other. This supported Leach’s rejection of ‘society’ as a perfect and closed structure. There is also a historical vision which took into account the considerable role played by pre-colonial states such as the Kingdom of Burma –and even the European colonial powers- behind the transformations which were shaping social formations. Leach used a dialectical vision to understand these realities, flatly contradicting the equilibrium theory defended by Evans-Pritchard and the evolutionist typologies of fixed social systems. Leach introduces a fundamental novelty in turning *gumlao* egalitarianism into a reality immersed in social change.

Leach’s two antagonical models coexist and interact dialectically, and their imperfections impel them to transform into their one another. This does not happen mechanically, but because external state agents affect Kachin world and exacerbate the contradictions between the ideal models (which may be autocratic or democratic) and the daily reality of social relations.

Leach describes these “flaws” in Kachin communities thus:

“A *gumsa* political state tends to develop features which lead to rebellion, resulting, for a time, in a *gumlao* order. But a *gumlao* community, **unless it happens to be centred around a fixed territorial centre such as a patch of irrigated rice terraces**, usually lacks the means to hold its component lineages together in a status of equality. It will then either disintegrate altogether through fission, or else status differences between lineage groups will bring the system back into the *gumsa* pattern.” (Leach 2004 [1959]: 204, bold added).

Indeed:

“the most stable *gumlao* communities appear to be those in which lineage is virtually neglected and loyalty to a particular place is emphasised instead” (Leach 2004 [1959]: 206). And “ideally a *gumlao* community is endogamous” (Leach 2004 [1959]: 205). These communities are ruled by “councils of elders” representatives of lineages and a village headman whose position is not strictly hereditary (Leach 2004 [1959]: 206).

In the book about Pul Eliya village (Leach 1961), Leach argues for a local system based on the principle of “fair shares for all” in which traditional tenure system imposed social solidarity on village members. All his research is based on the idea that “kinship systems has not “reality” at

all except in relation to land and property” (Leach 1961:305). One of the main claims of Leach argument is the relevance of “locality structure” and not of “descent structure” (Leach 19 : 301). This peasant organization is diluted with the evolution of capitalism and the consolidation of an unequal access to the better lands (Leach 1961: 240). In his previous book (Leach 1959) emphasis has been put in the kinship system, and the *gumsa* model. The “more-stable *gumlao* communities” are very ill-defined. Nonetheless, these *gumlao* villages seem very similar to Shan peasants, who were tied to their lands: “a Shan’s first loyalty then is to a place not to a kin group” (Leach 2004 [1959]: 213). Meanwhile, Shan nobility holds patrilineage relations dear, because they are the support for the rank and power, and “the local community is often, to a considerable degree, an endogamous group of kinsmen” (Leach 2004 [1959]: 213). Leadership in a Shan village appears to depend mainly upon age and natural capacity. Sadly, Leach explores this no further, preferring rather to focus more on alliances and political rivalries relating to kinship. We, however, want to go deep with the similarities between two such opposed systems described by Leach bringing the forms of production organization to the forefront.

It seems clear that certain forms of production organization –be they in delayed-returns systems or not– facilitate egalitarian relations. Anarchist researchers as well as others, nonetheless, traditionally prioritize political, not economic, relations. The fierce opposition that Clastres had to historic materialism and that led to the famous clash with Godelier is mainly based on this question. Other scholars also highlight the political dimension, like Osborne: “people are equal if there has been a decision, collectively accepted it not collectively made, that they should be equal” [...] collective decision behind every case of empirical equality means that equality is always also a political matter” (Osborne 2007: 144). Lancaster, in his study of pastoral egalitarianism, flatly rejects any ‘economic reductionism’, claiming that “a major factor underlying the degree of egalitarianism is political” (Lancaster 1999: 40).

On the other hand, many scholars have criticized that the notion of “societies against the State” implies a sort of clairvoyance that must be supposed to social actors, who would thus be fully aware of social exploitation and stand up against it. Nonetheless, the acceptance of “purposeful behavior” as an explanatory factor, allows interpretations which break free from genetic or environment determinism or the dynamics of self-organizing systems (Boehm 1994: 179), and introduces a historical, “Boasian” point of view (Saitta 2013: 129).

It is pointless to enter a discussion on whether the organization of production or political relations are more relevant factors, but this question had to be at least mentioned. Egalitarianism requires both a “culture of equality” and forms of organization of production which are specifically designed to keep exploitation at bay. As Saitta has highlighted in his critical review of agency theory (Saitta 1994), productive processes are all too often considered a given, and not included in the considerations regarding power relations, even though these are based on the existence (or not) of surplus and on specific forms of organization of production. Scott affirms “usually, forms of subsistence and kinship are taken as a given, an ecologically and culturally determined. By analyzing various forms of cultivation, particular crops, certain social structures, and physical mobility patterns for their escape value, I treat such givens largely as political choices” (Scott 2009: xi). In this point the Marxist view seems to coincide, more or less, with an anarchist one. The main point for us, anyway, is that: in egalitarian societies, access to resources and power is not only guaranteed, it is equal. And we add: the production of surplus is minimized.

Peasants in Prehistory: organization of production against social exploitation.

Taking into account the relevance of the productive sphere, the role that the peasantry played in controlling the productive system warrants some attention. Peasants have normally been associated with tributary exploitation in sociology (Chayanov 1966), or with the integration of traditional communities in the expanding networks of capitalist economy (Wolf 1982). Similarly to what happens with modern hunter-gatherers when compared to the Paleolithic

societies (as seen above), the peasants are mainly considered as a product of the interaction with state structures, which integrate them in various subaltern roles. Once more, the question is if peasantry is only the result of this interaction in which producing tribute was a central pillar, or if the concept is applicable to Prehistorian stateless societies.

Some scholars consider that agriculture and hierarchy go hand in hand (Douglas Price 1995; Kohler *et al.* 2017). But others highlight the fact that the endogenous emergence of class societies is more the exception than the rule after the “Neolithic revolution”, and in the few cases in which a pristine “origin of the State” is documented, two or three millennia separate the state emergence and the beginnings of agriculture (Vicent 1998: 828). There is not a direct or single relationship between intensive agriculture, demographic pressure and hierarchies. The relation is multidirectional: “there are indeed ethnographic cases where the logic of permanent intensive agriculture in the context of dense sedentary populations has seemingly militated against the emergence of the state [...]. Evidence of intensive agriculture is therefore not diagnostic of the presence of supra-local polities” (McC Netting, 1990: 61). Plog (1990), using the record of the US Southwest and highland Mesoamerica, lists some characteristics of those sedentary communities such as “the development of a more restricted form of sharing, producing a smaller, more formalized social group composed of a limited number of households”, “an associated change from public storage of resources to private storage areas associated with individual habitation units and an increasing probability of land and resource ownership by smaller social units” and “the evolution of a group ideology consistent with increased territoriality”. That is, the existence of agrarian communities as corporate units apart from political centralization. Haber argues for social equality in agrarian societies marked for high intensive (irrigated) productive systems (Haber 2007: 287). Carballo and Feinman refer to other studies of irrigation agriculture related to communal or bottom-up management systems (Carballo and Feinman 2016: 290-1).

Peasant sociology has greatly enriched the social structures possible in agrarian societies, providing better interpretations of the forms of organizing production and defining social interactions in Prehistory. Moreover peasant models have also introduced a very relevant factor for social interpretation: resistance against social exploitation. Peasant societies actually take shape after an initial transformation from the earliest phase of agriculture. This change implies the emergence of the self-sufficient community with appropriation of land as means of production in an exclusionary way (Vicent 1998:829 ff.). These peasant groups host a characteristic tension between households and their community. A particular step further in the evolution of these communities occurred when control over workforce, cattle, produce and land was changed from the community to the household (‘particularization of the means of production’). In some of these cases, social differentiation began to appear between households, showing that the mechanisms of re-distribution of the community had disappeared (Zafra, Hornos, Castro 1999: 28). Vicent points to “kin-ordered forms of surplus extraction”, which can act “against the State” (Vicent 1998). Germanic societies are considered an example of these “pre-classist forms of exploitation” (Gilman 1995).

But this is not the only way of change possible. The emergence of classes is not an inevitable tendency of agrarian societies but a radical breakdown of agrarian communities than tend to be remarkably stable in the long term (Vicent 1998: 828-31). There are forms of agrarian organization of production which enable maintaining egalitarian relations within the community. It could be explained as an alternative process of change, divergent from the Germanic societies. Keeping surplus down to a culturally-set minimum and/or distributing any excess among all the households is one form of achieving egalitarianism. Naturally, the producers of this minimal surplus are also appropriators of it. As Gilman and Vicent have explained, the key element for understanding the emergence of exploitation is related to the breakdown of the peasant drudgery-averse mentality characteristic of subsistence economies: the level of culturally acceptable incomes is never surpassed, unless forces external to the peasant communities impose the surplus production (Vicent 1991; Gilman and Thornes 1985).

Limiting the size of settlements is another way (an aspect which has been covered elsewhere, Sastre 2008). Agricultural trends towards intensification of production and population growth are culturally established realities which require an historical explanation. They are decidedly not the result of an inertia initiated with agriculture itself.

Among the peasants studies, the notion of “closed corporate peasant communities” has received some attention. It was firstly proposed by Wolf in a comparative study of Mesoamerica and Java (Wolf 1957; Skinner 1964; Rambo 1976). This concept is taken up by Scott, who highlights that peasants “have developed routines to take advantage of favorable developments at the political center and to shield themselves from the worst effects of turmoil [...]. What is distinctive about these repertoires [...] is that they represent defensive measures by a peasantry that remains where it is and continues to practice sedentary agriculture. Following Skinner: “in periods of dynastic collapse, economic depression and civil strife and banditry, the local community withdraws increasingly into its own shell as a self-protective measure” [...]. When flight and rebellion apparently were not available options, what the local community did in the face of threatening external environment was to secede normatively, economically, and militarily. It tried, without budging, to create an autonomous, autarkic space –in effect declaring its independence from the larger society while the danger lasted...” (Scott 2009: 333).

Following Wolf, these closed communities maintain communal jurisdiction over land, in order to prevent the alienation of fields by outsiders and to avoid aliens from becoming members of the community. They discourage close participation of community members in the social relations of the larger society (Wolf 1957: 2). They put pressures on members to redistribute or destroy surpluses with strong attitudes against accumulated wealth (Wolf 1957: 5). The community is territorial, non kin-based (Wolf 1957: 3). Social and cultural isolationism is sought by limiting the flow of outside goods and ideas into the community (Wolf 1957: 5).

According to Skinner, when centralizing powers are in decline, and supra-local control is lost, that local confinement takes place. This phenomenon can occur in moments of anarchy, when centralizing hierarchical regional powers are non-existent. In our view this is not only a matter of state social formations. It can be supposed also for non-State, Prehistorian or Protohistorian, social contexts.

Iron Age European societies: egalitarian villages and households.

European Iron Age research has, since the 1980s, proposed an enormous variety of social organizations. Many of them questioned the traditional “warrior society” models, because they were insufficiently rooted in the archaeological record: “the common image of a Celtic warrior society led by a chief or king may have been the exception rather than the rule” (Hill 1996).

Aristocratic societies, chiefdoms or proto-states had been the most common models, but new alternatives have been developed. The notion of heterarchy proposed by Crumley has been applied successfully to the Iron Age. Her research has enabled a fresh approach to those decentralized societies that do not accommodate to pyramid models (Armit 2007; Dolan 2014). She proposed the idea of “democracy”, concurrently with heterarchy, for characterizing “Celtic” power relations –a question recently developed by Thurston (2010)–. This corresponds to a rural and dispersed archaeological landscape, which contrasts with the urban-based landscape after the Roman conquest. Consequently, the urban character of the large indigenous settlements (sometimes called *oppida* by researchers) is denied. These are defined merely as fortresses, and they are not considered population centers (Crumley 1995). Heterarchical Atlantic Iron Age societies are then characterized by a highly changing environment, flexibility, negotiation in power relations, and democracy. “Hierarchical socio-political organization does not necessarily imply a settlement hierarchy” and “complexity” is not necessarily synonymous with “hierarchy” (Crumley 1995: 29-30).

The most interesting proposals are those that emphasize the role of villages and households, not central places and aristocratic ideologies, as basic units in social organization. The closed peasant community model is easily applicable to Iron Age societies from the Iberian Northwest, (see Currás and Sastre in this volume; Fernández-Posse and Sánchez-Palencia 1998; Sastre 2008; Currás 2014). In this case, agrarian societies are organized in village communities with egalitarian relations among households, and no supra-local political entities. In addition, Thomas has focused his attention on the general relation between the generalization of enclosed settlements and agricultural intensification. The difference between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ seems relevant for the Iron Age societies, and it is perhaps closely related to this (Thomas 1997).

Another key proposal is the non-triangular society model developed by J.D. Hill in order to interpret the archaeological record of Wessex, which has always been a focus area of British Iron Age archaeology (Hill 1995; 2006). Hill has evidenced the inadequacy of the traditional models, and the heuristic futility of the concepts of “elite” or “hierarchy”; interpretations have to be more attached to the archaeological evidence, and not trying to impose pre-established social models on the record. Social articulation fell on autonomous groups which were in constant spatial opposition. Political entities are not documented. The household was the basic unit of reference within the community (‘atomized relations of production’; see also Kok in this volume). Power lies with communal institutions. There is no trace of chiefs or permanent leaders, but there is evidence of a constant instability, competition and inequalities that fostered the appearance of short-lived leaders who invariably did not last long in power. War was a constant, but it was not carried out by a specialist class, but rather by all able members of the community. Hillforts were places where a dispersed population, living in villages and farmsteads, opted to congregate. This approach is also interesting because it places strong emphasis in symbolic and ritual aspects of the material record.

A slew of regional studies –some of which are included in this book– have provided a strong archaeological base for a proper re-assessment of the Iron Age, and the theoretical underpinnings of the egalitarian model we propose.

In North-eastern England J. Ferrell defined regional systems of isolated independent groups with scarce integration between themselves and with no trace of social hierarchy (Ferrell, 1997). In the Cotswolds, around the estuary of the Severn, T. Moore has revealed a communal-based society. His contribution to the understanding of inter-community communications highlighted that common identities were based on fluid and dynamic social relations (Moore, 2006). In Scotland, monumental residences which were always associated with the elite, are now seen as the result of household identity manifestation (see Sharples in this volume) within non-hierarchical autonomous communities, in the absence of any regional structures (Hingley, 1992). The tribe and chiefdom model is rejected, as is all hierarchical pattern, in favor of the household and the community’s independence and control over their own land and resources (Armit 1997). In Ireland “society was probably made up of relatively independent, dispersed and mobile populations, living in ephemeral settlements [...] with individuals largely equal in both life and death (Dolan 2014:370). M. Köhler has proposed a dynamic, non hierarchical, relation between hillforts and open settlements during the Hallstatt period in Thuringia. There were no elite residences or central places (Köhler 1995). L. Webley (2007) has witnessed in Jutland a society based on the farmstead, which evolved from a single farm in open settlement to a more concentrated, yet isolated, community. The archaeological record reveals an increase in status and gender-based divisions within the household, but no sign of chiefs or warriors. For Scandinavia, L. Hedeagger proposed a “village society” model, whose impulse towards hierarchization “were kept in check by a strong collective tradition” (Hedeagger 1992: 241). In the northern Netherlands the differences in household sizes do not correspond with hierarchical models based on domination and dependence, but on other types of inequality. Thomas has also focused his attention on the connection between the generalization of enclosed settlements and agricultural intensification in Britain. The difference between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ seems

socially relevant and may be closely related to this (Thomas 1997). This is a pattern similar to the “closed corporate peasants communities” referred above, and similar dynamics have been documented in Northwestern Iberian Iron Age (Fernández-Posse and Sánchez-Palencia 1998; Sastre 2008; Currás 2014).

All these regional studies have different approaches and have brought up diverse forms of social organization. Yet they all have in common a bottom-up analysis, based on an archaeological record which elites are helpless to explain. We are persuaded that an egalitarian theory will shed light for a better understanding of European Iron Age in the future.

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