

Book Review

Bruce Knauff
The Gebusi: Lives Transformed in a Rainforest
NY McGraw-Hill
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by

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Technological changes in human communication, as Marshall McLuhan (and Harold Innis before him) strove to tell us, profoundly alter social relations. Likewise, innovations in the mode of material production, as Marx and others informed us, make for equally if not greater modifications in all other aspects of society. Despite our familiarity with ostensibly revolutionary changes in medicine, military weaponry, manufacturing, education, commerce and, of course, public service, it is difficult for most societies to appreciate fully the importance and the profundity of social transformations as they are happening around and to them. In the larger sweep of human history and prehistory, change was not noticed because it was usually subtle and often negligible; anything dramatic was probably to be feared. In pre-modern societies, slow, gradual changes may be more evident to outsiders who are able to discern modifications in social structure, attitudes and actions. Fish, they say, are unaware of water.

Even in contemporary societies, which seem devoted to novelty and which encourage revolutionary new designs in everything from computer software to laundry detergents, change is poorly understood. Though we sometimes use the language of psychological disorientation to describe our reaction to social and technological innovations in our communities, it is rare that our understanding of such phenomena as “culture shock” and “future shock” go beyond the realm of clichés and buzz words. Instead, we tend to disdain those who resist what is new, mistakenly calling them “Luddites” and dismissing them as unrealistic or, worse, unprogressive. To capture to essence of change and to appreciate its effects, we are well advised to listen to the voices of earlier generations. The awareness of seismic shifts in symbolic and material culture was deeper or, at least, more eloquently expressed in writers from Edmund Burke and William Blake to Karl Marx and Max Weber. Their responses to the French and the Industrial Revolutions were rendered in compelling prose that mocks our current discourse.

Those unwilling to search through nineteenth-century literature to grasp what it is for social change to be fully experienced and properly understood may find it helpful to visit, at least vicariously, exotic societies as they are transformed by what is euphemistically called “contact” with more powerful and vastly more technologically advanced peoples. Where history leaves off, anthropology enters in. From an awareness of what it is to have a subsistence economy and a pre-literate, tribal culture wrenched from the stability of traditional ways of life and inserted almost instantaneously into the electronic, computerized twenty-first century, we can perhaps win some insight into the processes that are at work in our own.

That, at least, is one interpretation of the importance of observing the processes and effects of tumultuous technological, economic, political and religious changes in other lands. Having precipitated what is sometimes called social development and sometimes labeled cultural collapse, we are uniquely placed to analyze development and to perform autopsies on societies that have been unable to withstand the impact of external forces upon them.

More than any other form of human studies, cultural anthropology has proven itself able to analyze and assess the reorganization of social relations as societies try to cope with externally imposed modifications and mutations of ways of life. From anthropological inquiry, we are able to acquire a rich appreciation of what life was like in what one Polynesian language called the era before contacts with Europeans — the “time when the earth was steady.”

Far from living precariously on the edge of extinction, most prehistoric societies enjoyed what modern (and postmodern) people cannot — abundant leisure time. Though “low tech” societies did not possess the material luxuries commonly available to “high tech” cultures, neither did they miss what they had never had. Without indulging in a romantic fantasy about human relations in tribal settings, it is safe to say that many of the repressive, oppressive and suppressive practices that we deem somehow necessary to civilization (formal education, penitentiaries and mental hospitals) were unknown and unnecessary. And besides, most students of “stone age” peoples have come to realize that the amount of time devoted to production and the reproduction of the means of production was trivial by today’s standards. They worked (usually at obtaining food) until the job was done. Hunting and gathering took tribal cultures a remarkably small amount of time, a few hours a day. Once dinner was provided, it was time to relax, to dance, to tell stories.

These insights, won from both archaeological and anthropological inquiry, are rarely well expressed to the intelligent laity. This happens for one of two very different reasons. Some accounts amount to little more than travelogues into exotic lands where the strange and the curious are described but not explained. More often (at least in the formal anthropological literature) texts are filled with dense academic terminology that is too technical or too arcane for most of the uninitiated. Efforts to cram ethnographic data into some sort of scientific or scientifically sounding disquisition commonly fall flat. Elegant exercises in structuralism, functionalism or even currently fashionable sociobiology make it hard to believe that the author is discussing real people.

Bruce Knauft’s book, *The Gebusi* is different. His account of this one tribal society is not only an excellent exposition of the community that he has studied, but is also a solid commentary upon which to come to terms with rapid social change in general, and in our society in particular. As a bonus, it is a revealing memoir of the experience of encountering an alien culture and having one’s own intellectual assumptions challenged.

The phenomenon of rapid social change is common in the contemporary world, but its meaning eludes us. For the most part, we “cope” with technological innovations on the presumption that they enhance our material prosperity. We experience, of course, the frustrations of long work days, alienation from the process and products of our labour and dissociation from friends and family. We live ersatz lives in front of television screens that reassure us that stories have proper beginnings and endings and, generally speaking, the good guys defeat the bad guys. Most problems, we are told, get resolved.

What Knauft's book shows us is how profoundly modern societies have altered the way in which people experience affluence, "original" affluence. The nature of this experience, of course, shapes the social definition of problems and of their solutions. In modern society, problem solving requires attention, energy and innovation. In Gebusi society, people regularly enjoy nine hours sleep a night. When awake, no one is in much of a rush to do much of anything. Pressure is off. Work, of course, needs to be done. Food must be acquired, a leaking roof must be fixed and tools must be made. But, says Knauft, "effort ebbs and flows not so much as a struggle against nature but in relaxed harmony with the environment." Leisure itself is an adaptation to the environment.

The Gebusi, who are especially susceptible to malaria, live mainly on a low protein, high starch diet. With such a threat and such victuals, it is important to conserve energy. Thus, as Knauft disarmingly puts it: "laziness" has become "a survival strategy."

Knauft decorates his book with the easily recognized ornaments of professional anthropology including kinship diagrams and the like. They do not, however, get in the way of an engaging story. While modern societies, particularly in North America, anguish over such alleged problems as "same-sex marriage," the Gebusi appear content with sexual diversity including ritual homosexuality. Moreover, while modern cultures insist on setting down regulations with legalistic precision in tax codes, criminal codes, licensing agreements, and cookbooks, the Gebusi do things differently. They have rules, of course, though they are rarely articulated with the sort of exactitude that we prefer. The rules, however, are somewhat less obligatory.

In the modern world, no one would deny, rules are also regularly broken. Americans, for example, are beginning to notice that corporations systematically violate employment, environmental and even criminal laws. Some three million illegal immigrants cheerfully scamper across US borders and are routinely issued drivers licenses and other state documents while their children enrol in schools and employers are quick to give them jobs. In the US and elsewhere, marriage vows are customarily broken and marijuana is happily smoked. Our reaction to such evident calumnies, however, is to experience guilt and/or to cry out for harsher punishments. Among the Gebusi, there are also plenty of instances in which apparently important regulations are violated; however, there is a greater tendency to create ad hoc explanations that successfully rationalize the gap between general rules and social realities.

Above all, according to Knauft, a culture of humour prevails and the kind of repression that we believe is essential to civilized life is largely absent. We may, of course, be right; it depends very much on what we choose to call civilization.

When he first visited and lived among the Gebusi in the early 1980s, Bruce Knauft witnessed a community that did not possess material goods in any great supply; yet, they considered themselves prosperous. They demonstrated a "celebration of life, spirituality and sexuality." For Knauft, they displayed a highly successful set of social arrangements. They were also dying examples of a way of life that would soon perish. Knauft was aware that he was being let in on the tail end of anthropology's intrusion into remote and so-called primitive societies. Along with anthropologists come missionaries, traders, developers, government agents and police or military forces.

When he returned in 1998, he was jolted by how much and how quickly the people had changed. They had moved away from a society based “kinship, common values of community and tradition (what, almost sixty years ago, Robert Redfield had famously called a “folk society”) to a new and far less humane transitional culture that mimicked the modern. In the past, says Bruce Knauft, an insight in Gebusi social relations could be had by paying attention to how they played their games. They “played until the score was tied or until everybody had lost track,” he recalled; now they “play to win.” More abstractly, the concept of time had been altered. It had “shifted from a circle of repetition to an arrow of anticipated progress.”

Assisting in the metamorphosis of values were new institutions that had insinuated themselves into the community. Christianity was available in full evangelical force with representation from Seventh Day Adventists to Roman Catholic. Money was now available as well.

“If Gebusi culture had been hard for me to learn in 1980,” Knauft reflects, “its changes were now chewing up all my seasoned understandings – with plenty of spit left over.” The sounds of the jungle were obliterated by disco music from a boom box. The Gebusi people now crave modern goods and, once self-confident and independent, they are, he continues, “surprisingly subordinate to outside authority figures.”

Bruce Knauft makes no strident case for simple societies as idyllic, bucolic Edens. There is no attempt to follow in the paths of Rousseau or Margaret Mead. Every community has its problems, and it is a sort of reverse moral conceit to attach guilt to serpentine outsiders with promises of transformative knowledge. Knauft is a successful anthropologist with twenty books and major articles to his credit in the past two decades. His work promotes no anti-materialist or anti-modernist ideological agenda. He describes what he has seen in a clear, evocative style that neither preaches nor condemns. Thus, *The Gebusi*, deserves a much wider audience than is usually won by anthropological texts. Though the basic story of lost innocence has been with us since *Genesis*, Knauft tells it in a compelling way that not only discloses the fate of yet another tribal culture, but — if read perceptively — affords a disconcerting mirror in which to recognize our own.

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