Stexit?

South East Asian pluralism, statelessness and exclusive identities

Hjorleifur Jonsson

Hjorleifur Jonsson is Professor of Anthropology at Arizona State University. He studies play and politics in South East Asia. His email is hjonsson@asu.edu.

Acciaioli, G. et al. 2017. Foreigners everywhere, nationals nowhere: Exclusion, irregularity, and invisibility of stateless Bajau Laut in eastern Sabah, Malaysia. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 15(3): 232-249.

Andaya, B.W. & L. Andaya 2015. *A history of early modern Southeast Asia, 1400-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Anderson, B. 1978. Studies of the Thai state: The state of Thai studies. In E.B. Ayal (ed.) *The study of Thailand*, 193-247. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies.

— 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

Bernatzik, H.A. (1937) 2005. *The spirits of the yellow leaves*. Bangkok: White Lotus.

— (1947) 1970. *Akha and Miao: Problems of applied anthropology in farther India* (trans.) A. Nagler. New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files.

Bouté, V. 2015. An ethnohistory of highland societies in northern Laos. *Journal of Lao Studies* 5(2): 54-76.

Clastres, P. (1974) 1989. *Society against the state*. New York, NY: Zone Books.

Drakard, J. 1990. *A Malay frontier: Unity and duality in a Sumatran kingdom*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.

Ellen, R. 2017. Rethinking the relationship between studies of ethnobiological knowledge and the evolution of human cultural cognition. In C. Power et al. (eds) *Human origins: Contributions from social anthropology*, 59-83. New York: Berghahn.

Roughly a quarter of a century ago, it was generally assumed (judging from advertising as much as scholarship) that globalization would be the kiss of death for exclusive national identities and even for the nation state as such. But nothing of the kind ever happened. Instead, the recent electoral success of the Brexit campaign in the UK and Donald Trump in the US suggests a strengthening of national ideologies of mistrust across ethnic, economic, religious and other social boundaries, both locally and globally. Scholarship offers a range of frameworks for comprehending such dynamics.

Benedict Anderson's (1983) celebrated study of nationalism as a specifically modern phenomenon was triggered by late Cold War events in South East Asia. Much to the apparent shock of leftist Western academics, international communist solidarity melted into thin air in 1978 with border wars among China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Nationalism, as a uniquely modern phenomenon, offered an explanation for such political misfortune (the erosion of international leftist unity), perhaps similar to the way witchcraft allegedly 'explained' misfortune for the Azande of Sudan in the 1930s (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Anderson suggests (1978, 1983) that in contrast to their historical precursors, modern nations are uniquely chauvinist across ethnic frontiers; their ideologies fuel and sustain exclusive communities.

More recently, James C. Scott (2009) has offered another view of exclusive identities by drawing on South East Asian examples from the tribal zone. Scott suggests that states in general are uniquely homogenizing, extractive and oppressive. Thus, he argues, ethnic and other diversity in Asia over the last 2,000 years has been primarily a feature of peoples who have managed to escape the state's clutches in the remote hinterlands. From Scott's perspective, what to anthropologists and others looked like tribal peoples in the hinterlands were instead successful escapees, 'barbarians by design', who gained freedom and egalitarianism through strategies – of culture, agriculture, kinship, religion, and more – that repelled the state and resisted the emergence of local hierarchies. This notion of leaving the state behind suggested the title of this article: stexit.

Scott's notion of state-repelling strategies is borrowed from Pierre Clastres' ([1974] 1989) revisionist look at the tribal zone in Latin America. A student of Claude Levi-Strauss, Clastres originally set out with a focus on American Indian tribal peoples as being endangered by modernity and the state, but later proposed that the peoples who looked tribal were not holdouts from the evolutionary past but instead were those whose culture actively resisted hierarchical social relations. Thus, real American Indians had no chiefs, and their distinction from mainstream national societies was not a matter of their 'primitive ways' or of recent acts of dispossession. Instead, it was a result of certain people's deliberate strategies of political purity (or so it seems to me) through egalitarianism.

Ostensibly, Scott's case suggests that real South East Asian highlanders ('Zomians') managed to maintain their egalitarian settlements until soon after the Second World War. But since then, new technologies of national surveillance, transportation, communication, integration and control have eroded any chance of autonomy and egalitarianism in the hinterlands. National chauvinist intolerance is made to seem like no surprise in Scott's work – it is simply the hand of history. In a recent issue of AT, Jean Michaud (2017) reframed Scott's egalitarian Asian highlanders as comprehensible in terms of the characteristics of lineage societies. In my reading, Michaud wants to sustain or revive old anthropology's tribal slot without ever using that discarded category.

South East Asia's highlanders are made to seem squarely incompatible with modern national realities, whether the analytical perspective concerns nationalism, the state or lineage societies. Against such convictions, I suggest that South East Asia has a compelling record of inclusive identities and of the negotiation of diversity that is not intrinsically threatened by either the state or nationalism.

Ethnologists, states and statelessness

Historian of anthropology, Henrika Kuklick (1991), suggests that anthropologists have attributed egalitarianism to certain societies in ways that have erased the presence of inequality and strong leaders in social life:

> Evans-Pritchard had cast his descriptions of the Nuer in the stylized form of the archetypal democratic polity envisioned in the British tradition of political argument. Perceived in terms of this tradition, Nuer society is the democratic order of natural

Fig. 1. Expressing a claim to national belonging. Portraits of Thailand's king and queen in a highland minority village, Chiang Dao District, Chiang Mai Province, 2014.

HJORLEIFUR JONSSON

3

Enfield, N.J. 2011. Linguistic diversity in mainland Southeast Asia. In N.J. Enfield (ed.) *Dynamics of human diversity: The case of mainland Southeast Asia*, 63-79. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.

— & S. Levinson (eds) 2006. *Roots of human sociality*. New York: Berg.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Feit, H.A. 1991. The construction of Algonquian hunting territories: Private property as moral lesson, policy advocacy, and ethnographic error. In G.W. Stocking (ed.) *Colonial situations: Essays on the contextualization of ethnographic knowledge*, 109-134. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Fortes, M. & E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds) 1940. *African political systems*. London: Oxford University Press.

Izikowitz, K.G. 1951. *The Lamet: Hill peasants of French Indochina*. Gothenburg: The Ethnographic Museum.

Jonsson, H. 2005. *Mien relations: Mountain people and state control in Thailand*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

— 2014. *Slow anthropology: Negotiating difference with the Iu Mien*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.

— 2018. States. In H. Callan & C.J. Greenhouse (eds) *International encyclopedia of anthropology*, vol. 9. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Kirsch, A.T. 1982. Anthropology past, present, and future: Toward an anthropology of anthropology. In E.A. Hoebel et al. (eds) *Crisis in anthropology: View from Spring Hill, 1980*, 91-108. New York: Garland Publishing.

Kuklick, H. 1991. *The savage within: The social history of British anthropology, 1885-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— 2008. The British school. In H. Kuklick (ed.) *A new history of anthropology*, 52-78. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Kuper, A. 1983. *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British school*. London: Routledge.

— 1988. *The invention of primitive society*. New York: Routledge.

Le, J.T. et al. 2016. Highland chiefs and regional networks in mainland Southeast Asia: Mien perspectives. *Southeast Asian Studies* 5(3): 515-551.

man, akin to that of the ancient Anglo-Saxons. Furthermore, Evans-Pritchard's Nuer are as admirable as Locke's Native Americans (Kuklick 1991: 275-276).

The idea that a people (an ethnic group or otherwise) are kin-based and egalitarian rests on often unstated evolutionary premises. Some scholarship has charted a ladder, with particular steps from simplicity to complexity (band, tribe, chiefdom, state; egalitarian, ranked, stratified). Other work has assumed a binary such as that found in *African political systems* (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940) which suggested there were two kinds of societies in Africa: stratified and territorial societies that constituted states and lineage societies that tended to be leaderless or acephalous ('head-less').

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown wrote the preface to *African political systems*. As the ostensible architect of structural-functionalism, his line would seem quite predictable. But therein lies a surprise that no history of anthropology could prepare one for. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) fundamentally undermines and challenges the premise of the book and each of its chapters:

> Every human society has some sort of territorial structure [that] provides the framework, not only for political organization whatever it may be, but for other forms of social organization also, such as the economic, for example. The system of local aggregation and segregation, as such, has nothing specifically political about it; it is the basis of all social life. To try to distinguish as Maine and Morgan did, between societies based in kinship (or, more strictly, on lineage) and societies based on occupation of a common territory or locality, and to regard the former as more 'primitive' than the latter, leads only to confusion. (ibid.: xiv)

This statement completely erases any justification for the idea of 'primitive society' and it is remarkable that Kuper (1988), Trouillot (1991) and other scholars wishing to undo that idea do not appear to have noticed. Emile Durkheim's notion of mechanical and organic solidarity distinguishes simple from complex societies. Radcliffe-Brown completely refuses any such distinction, refuses any truth to an evolutionary shift from kinship to territoriality, and, further, refuses any validity to a binary distinction between states and non-state societies. There is only society, and human societies have much the same features and issues anywhere.

It is possible that anthropologists' ideas of Radcliffe-Brown's scholarship and of their discipline's history (Kuklick 2008; Kuper 1983; Stocking 1984), as much as their ideas about states and non-state societies preclude any recognition of Radcliffe-Brown's challenge to the analytical consensus. Sometime in the 1930s, anthropologists made a general move from ethnology to ethnography, which involved a shift from comparative analysis to the fieldwork-based description of a culture or social organization in terms of ethnic labels (Stocking 1992). One part of this change was temporal and involved a shift from the evolutionary and historical reconstruction of the past towards a focus on the ethnographic present (Kirsch 1982).

Radcliffe-Brown implies that states are not a distinct evolutionary stage for human societies. Robert H. Lowie (1920, 1927) made this argument more clearly. Lowie is known as one of the early Boasians, and perhaps our convictions regarding what a US historical particularist can think and write interfere with our ability to sense alternative histories and anthropologies. Lowie fielded the question of the psychic unity of humankind to ask if there was any cognitive basis for distinguishing different kinds of peoples or societies. He found no marked cognitive difference in human types. Regarding social evolution, Lowie is unambiguous and interesting: organization through kinship and territoriality has always been co-present in any society, and there is usually also alignment and grouping based on some third premise (gender, age, craft, trade, voluntary

association, etc.). Any human society is already complex at the level of a village and in terms of the ways households, villages, kin groups, towns and interest groups intersect.

Lowie challenges and refutes each and every criterion for distinguishing states from non-state societies. He maintains that any social group will come up with norms of behaviour and ways of monitoring and enforcing them. Further, even the most apparently egalitarian peoples can produce mechanisms of coercive power and in any ostensibly simple society people wield notions that are associated with sovereignty. The Boasian ethnological tradition rests on notions of fundamental human equivalence past and present, and in cognitive and social terms, the question is in part about the evolution of human society. Judging from recent work on cognition and sociality (Ellen 2017; Enfield & Levinson 2006; Tomasello 2014), humans have been 'politically modern' for perhaps 100,000 years. Cognitively and socially, modern humans organized and engaged with the world along intersecting but alternative lines of territory, kinship and associations. The ethnographic notion that ethnic identity brings with it a singular culture and social organization falls apart against the ethnological evidence.

In contemporary South East Asia and elsewhere, statelessness is not the accomplishment of freedom and egalitarianism through isolation from regional society. Instead, it is a condition of having no claim to belonging and thus no basic rights. Often enough, it is about being actively denied rights, as has happened recently with Myanmar's Rohingya (Oh 2013) and Malaysia's Bajau Laut (Acciaioli et al. 2017). A century ago, Robert Lowie and Frank Speck argued against the common notion that Indians in the US and Canada (Native Americans, First Nations) lacked a sense of territoriality. Lowie and Speck's studies were tied to advocacy for basic rights and recognition, and can thus be tagged as politically motivated (Feit 1991). But the predominant alternative view, often anchored to the work of Lewis Henry Morgan (1877), was equally politically motivated. The latter implied that ostensibly non-state and non-territorial peoples had no claim to land, rights, equality or anything else within the modern world. Attributing deliberate statelessness to certain peoples makes them seem willing participants in their own dispossession.

In their recent reconsideration of the evolutionary, archaeological and anthropological record, David Wengrow and David Graeber (2015) argue that the association of conditions of egalitarianism with 'the childhood of man' is unfounded. They suggest that between 100,000 and 20,000 years ago, people were already complex and populations showed many signs of alternating among different forms of social organization (egalitarian, hierarchic, etc.) by season and other factors. I find many reasons to agree with their case. There is some overlap with Lowie's case regarding the inherent diversity and complexity of social organization that counters expectations of societies ever having been 'simple' or of identities ever having been unproblematically singular and exclusive.

Where is the evidence?

There are essentially two perspectives on the South East Asian past (see White 2011). The first view posits the spread of ethnolinguistic groups in relation to tool technologies, livelihood and social organization. This perspective assumes ethnic divisions and competition, if not separatism. The second view suggests that diversity was a starting point and that it has been repeatedly harnessed for projects of reciprocal benefit across difference. Recent work in linguistics (Enfield 2011) and archaeology (White 2011) suggests that diversity was foundational and that people made and maintained ethnic and other differences through exchange networks across such lines. However,
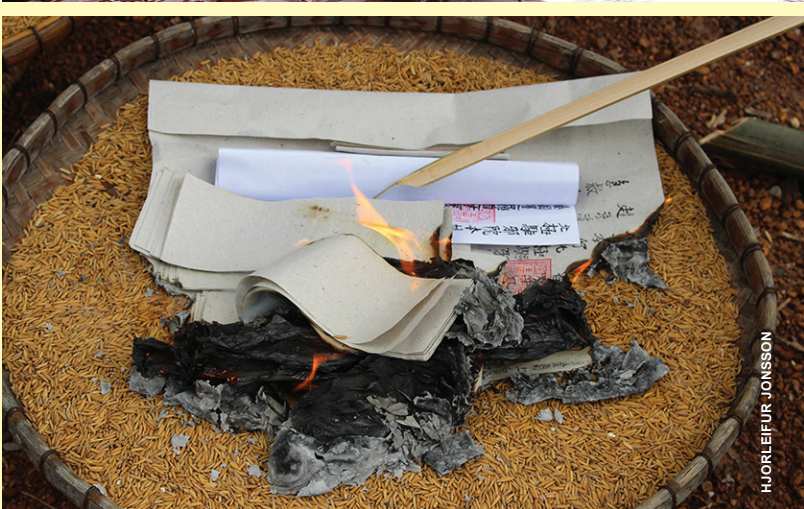
HJORLEIFUR JONSSON

(From left to right, above to below)

Fig. 2. *A woman spirit medium at a King Pan temple explains to a visiting Mien researcher (Dr Ratason Srisombat) how women have become active in ritual practice, Chiang Rai Province, 2015. King Pan is the ultimate Mien ancestor and in the last 20 years has become a focus of Mien ritual activity in China, Thailand and the United States.*

Fig. 3. *Mien villagers, listening to digitized recordings from 1972, the heyday of hill tribe research. Lampang Province, 2015.*

Fig. 4. *A Buddhist temple in the city of Chiang Rai, 2015. In formal terms, Buddhism marked the ethnic frontier between highland and lowland societies, but it was also part of informal interethnic networks and cultural borrowing.*

Fig. 5. *Spirit money and a written petition in Chinese/Mien characters are transferred to the spirit world through fire. The payments and the bureaucratic formalities are indications of participation in diverse and interethnic networks where Chinese writing bridged many mutually unintelligible spoken languages. Kamphaeng Phet Province, 2015.*

Fig. 6. *From the same ritual, a bridge ceremony that is an elaborate form of soul calling.*

Fig. 7. *From the National Museum in Kamphaeng Phet, a town that historically was a vector in relations between Thailand and Burma. The museum shows many signs of interethnic networks and an inclusive Thai identity that is otherwise rare in national museums.*

Fig. 8. *Illiterate farmers give thumbprints to sign for a monthly payment to a rotating credit association run by a fellow ethnic staff member of the subdistrict administrative council, Chiang Mai Province, 2014.*

Leach, E.R. 1954. *Political systems of highland Burma*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Lee, M.N.M. 2015. *Dreams of the Hmong kingdom: The quest for legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Lowie, R.H. 1920. *Primitive society*. New York: Harper & Row.

— 1927. *The origin of the state*. New York: Russell & Russell.

Maier, H.M.J. 1997. 'We are playing relatives': Riau, the cradle of reality and hybridity. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 53(4): 673-698.

McKinnon, J. & W. Bhruksasri (eds) 1983. *Highlanders of Thailand*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Michaud, J. 2017. What's (written) history for? On James C. Scott's Zomia, especially Chapter 6½. *Anthropology Today* 33(1): 6-10.

Morgan, L.H. 1877. *Ancient society*. Clouchester, MA: Peter Smith.

O'Connor, R.A. 1995. Agricultural change and ethnic succession in Southeast Asian states: A case for regional anthropology. *Journal of Asian Studies* 54(4): 968-996.

— 2000. A regional explanation of the Tai *muang* as a city-state. In M.H. Hansen (ed.) *A comparative study of thirty city-state cultures*, 431-443. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters.

— 2003. Founders' cults in regional and historical perspective. In N.B. Tannenbaum & C.A. Kammerer (eds) *Founders' cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, polity, and identity*, 269-311. New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series.

Oh, S. 2013. Rohingya or Bengali? Revisiting the politics of labelling. *IIAS Newsletter* 66: 36.

Poole, D. & V. Das (eds) 2004. *Anthropology in the margins of the state*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1940. Preface. In Fortes & Evans-Pritchard (1940: xi-xxiii).

Reid, A. 2015. *A history of Southeast Asia: Critical crossroads*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Scott, J.C. 1998 *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

— 2009. *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Scott, J.W. 1988. *Gender and the politics of history*. New York: Columbia University Press.

while such diversity enabled the utilization of a range of environments through exchanges, functionalist explanations have their limits. In many cases, diversity appears to have been its own reward and to have been maintained by a custom that may be called civil pluralism (Jonsson 2014; O'Connor 1995, 2000).

Generally, historians of the region have considered hinterland peoples rather insignificant (Jonsson 2014: 8-10; Reid 2015). But a recent overview of the region over the period 1400-1830 CE reveals a pattern of state centres being shaped in relation to international trade, and of state leaders making extensive contacts and contracts with ethnically 'other' sea peoples and forest/mountain peoples to procure some of the most valuable trade items (Andaya & Andaya 2015). In many cases, highland or island leaders received titles and settled permanently in certain areas, but most state records make no admission of this.

The representation of state society in archives and ceremonies generally expresses an exclusive and singular identity. The idea of a match between ethnicity and society would make unthinkable the arrangements that have been characteristic of South East Asia for the last few millennia – of inclusive identities and interethnic networks that were shaped in relation to regional and international trade. A diversity of ecological zones and adaptations appears to have been repeatedly harnessed in relation to specific markets, and there was generally considerable competition among a range of players. Central to these dynamics were chiefs, titled leaders of forest peoples, sea peoples and others, who connected different peoples in exchange for recognition and rewards (Andaya & Andaya 2015; Bouté 2015; Drakard 1990; Jonsson 2005: 16-43, 73-98, 2014: 50-61; Le et al. 2016).

When ethnographers studied highland Burma and Laos during the 1930s they seem to have disapproved of interethnic mingling and also of highland chiefs. Edmund R. Leach (1954) bracketed upland Kachin chiefs in Burma as emulators of lowland Buddhist Shan state peoples who would turn their kin-based Kachin societies toward stratification. Karl Gustav Izikowitz (1951) dismissed upland Khmu chiefs in Laos as having been duped into buying fraudulent titles from scheming Tai Lue lowlanders. Neither scholar appears to have imagined that interethnic brokerage had been central to societal dynamics for millennia. The ethnographic orientation encouraged the search for ethnic groups as particular cultures, societies, adaptations to the environment and the like.

During the late 1930s, Hugo Adolf von Bernatzik did research in northern Thailand. He learned from one monk that the area's hunter-gatherers were 'subjects of the king of Nan, to whom they paid an annual tribute in honey, rattan, and wax' ([1937] 2005: 43). Equally importantly, he documents ([1947] 1970: 697-699) how the governors of northern provinces (where most of the hill tribes lived) started to criminalize highlanders' livelihoods and to establish punitive measures by 1915, which served to make the highlanders stateless and to create pervasive mistrust across the upland-lowland divide. This did not happen in neighbouring countries, but in Thailand it was perpetuated until the late 1980s.

The evidence for James Scott's Zomia case comes primarily from ethnographers in Thailand after 1960, and from Burma, where various groups have been locked in a civil war along ethnic lines since the 1950s. It is curious that such highly particular, contemporary sites of social breakdown are considered to be telling of the character of interethnic political relations for 2,000 years, as Scott supposes. An ethnologist might suggest that our expectations regarding the state and the margins (Jonsson 2018; Poole & Das 2004; Scott 1998; Sharma & Gupta 2006) don't allow for inclusive identities, negotiation, mutual interest and benefit, and some foundational human equivalence.

The civil pluralism which seems to characterize most of South East Asian history and prehistory (Maier 1997; O'Connor 2003; White 1995) does not emerge as a possibility in conventional contemporary anthropology. Therein, in the expectation of exclusive and antagonistic identities and politics, lies the credibility and resonance of the case for Zomia. My reason for questioning the prevalent understandings of ethnic identity as singular or exclusive is twofold. Lowland national society in Thailand and neighbouring countries plays on exclusive identity in ways that deny entanglements and rights to ethnic minorities such as highland peoples. Also, highland expressions of exclusive identity can be overinterpreted to suggest an indigenous justification for separatism and a denial of the civil pluralism that was foundational to South East Asian societies and interethnic networks.

Who are the real Asian highlanders? In Laos and Vietnam during the early 20th century, some highlanders owed loyalty to the French and their national allies, and the disaffected other highlanders were eager recruits to opposition forces. This diversity of political leanings internal to highlands and lowlands has many historical parallels, but anthropologists and others have instead conveyed highlanders as uniformly either (a) admirable freedom-fighters, or (b) despicable mercenaries. These rival characterizations have been applied to the same peoples, especially the Hmong of Laos (Jonsson 2014: 83-87). But it has been even more common for ethnographers to look the other way and describe an imagined traditional society and culture, as if war and history were not part of the scene (McKinnon & Bhruksasri 1983).

Expecting ethnic labels to imply communities that are inherently limited, sovereign and marked by relations of horizontal comradeship – whether through Evans-Pritchard's Nuer, James Scott's Zomians or Benedict Anderson's modern nationalists – scholarship offers ample affirmation of exclusive communities and of the intolerance of diversity. In searching for something matching South East Asia's tradition of civil pluralism, about the only academic resonance I found was in a certain feminist historical critique. Joan W. Scott (1988: 177) refuses any suggestion of 'women' or 'men' as stable categories or positions. Instead she:

> [insists on] equality that rests on differences – differences that confound, disrupt, and render ambiguous the meaning of any fixed binary opposition. To do anything else is to buy into the argument that sameness is a requirement for equality. ●

Sharma, A. & A. Gupta (eds) 2006. *The anthropology of the state: A reader*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Stocking, G.W. (ed.) 1984. *Functionalism historicized: Essays on British social anthropology*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

— 1992. *The ethnographer's magic, and other essays in the history of anthropology*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Tomasello, M. 2014. *A natural history of human thinking*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Trouillot, M. 1991. Anthropology and the savage slot: The poetics and politics of otherness. In R.G. Fox (ed.) *Recapturing anthropology: Working in the present*, 17-44. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Wengrow, D. & D. Graeber 2015. Farewell to 'the childhood of man': Ritual, seasonality, and the origins of inequality. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21: 597-619.

White, J.C. 1995. Incorporating heterarchy into theory on socio-political development: The case of Southeast Asia. In R. Ehrenreich et al. (eds) *Heterarchy and the analysis of complex societies*, 101-123. Arlington, VA: American Anthropological Association.

— 2011. Emergence of cultural diversity in mainland Southeast Asia: A view from prehistory. In N.J. Enfield (2011: 9-46). Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.