October 2: **"Top down" and "bottom up" approaches in social science (and Historical Ecology)**

This is an example of the “jigsaw” large-discussion method that we will be employing in some of our classes this fall. After you have done it once or twice, you’ll get the idea, and we will not be presenting each session’s plan in such excruciating detail after this.

So, here’s the plan:

Steve and Ben will circulate between the discussion groups, eaves dropping, providing - at most - short clarifications if necessary. Our job however will NOT be to take over discussion or even to 'answer' questions. There is no correct answer to these questions (there are more and less insightful ones, of course). The purpose is to get you */thinking/* and working together.

Stage 1: Peer Scaffolding *Break into groups to discuss your article with others who read it. Your goal is to be able to explain the main points of the article and to be able to explain how your article relates to the following questions:

a. Social scientists/ecologists differ in the extent to which they seek explanations for social institutions/ecosystems at the level of the institution, group, culture, society or ecosystem (i.e. at the level of the system being explained) compared to those who seek explanations at the level of component parts of the system (organisms, individuals, even genes), assuming (with or without strong theoretical justification) that aggregate structural properties are the result of lower level phenomena. *Where does the author of your article stand in this debate? What are they trying to explain and where do they see the explanation being most powerful?*

b. To one degree or the other, these articles all focus on questions of how it is groups manage collective decision making and therefore come to be organized the way they are (in the context of resource management decisions: resource sharing, managing for system resilience, etc). This theme is at the center of anthropology (indeed all *social* science). While humans are not the only social or even the only "cultural" animal on earth, we are unique in the extent to which we integrate socially, coordinate collectively, and reorganize ourselves, often well beyond the ties of kinship. In what way does your article address this fundamental question about how humans manage collective action/ social coordination? What are some of the fundamental challenges to doing so? How far does your article come in providing an understandable account of either the problems or possible solutions that allow us to form such complex and more or less coordinated groups?

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c. Discuss your questions about the article with others who read it. See how well your reading questions fit with the themes discussed above? What new dimensions to these question do your questions bring? What questions in your group seem important to bring forward to the next group discussion?

Stage 2 Jigsaw: Once all the groups have discussed their articles deeply and feel like they have squeezed the essence of these articles out as relates to these questions, we will reorganize into different groups in which all articles are represented. A minimum of two students from each article will meet together with representatives of the other articles.

1. You should start your discussion here by going around the group and summarizing each paper that was read. Remember that most of the others in the group did not read

your paper, and they need to have a relatively clear idea of what it was about, what its main assumptions were, and the point of its argument.

2. Next you should draw from each article to answer the following questions. Some of the questions relate to only some of the articles, but the entire group needs to develop an understanding of how appropriate articles relate to the question.

a. What different kinds of bottom-up or */reductionist/* accounts have been explored in this set of readings? What do they seek to answer? What assumptions do they make about human nature, and why? Do these approaches seem sufficient to account for the persistence of collective/coordinated behavior and social institutions?

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b. What different kinds of top-down or *emergentist* accounts are offered and by which authors? Are these compelling? Why or why not? What are they seeking to understand and what assumptions are they making? Do these approaches seem sufficient to account for the persistence of collective/coordinated behavior and social institutions?

c. What is *methodological individualism* and why do some people find it a useful approach to accounting for collective action? Is it justified, and if so how? Do you agree with the author's position on this approach?

d. What might be the meaning of *methodological collectivism?* Which authors could be said to take this approach? What must they assume to do so?

e. How might we rectify the divide between reductionist and emergentist accounts of social processes? Are these two sets of approaches insurmountably different, or might they

brought together in some way to generate a more compelling “bottom to top” or “top to bottom” explanatory framework?

3. How do these authors mobilize the concepts of “culture”, “society”, “group”, “community” “population”, “species”, and “individual”? What role is assumed for each in arguments?

4. What is the role of selfishness in each article? Does it make sense to make self- interest a key to the explanation of collective phenomena? What might be some theoretical justifications for this assumptions?

5. How might collective interaction and common interest produce community? How might communal interests come to dominate individual interest?

6. In addition to the ways these articles approach social phenomena from “top down” vs. “bottom up” approaches, all of these papers in different ways are attempts to better understand ways that social systems, ecosystems, groups of people, and/or individuals are affected by with risk, unpredictability, perturbation, and/or scarcity in the environment and the extent to which they may be or may not be suited to “buffer”, “weather”, or “rebound” from fluctuations or perturbations in the system. The capacity to insulate or recover from environmental perturbations is what is often referred to as “adaptation” or "resilience." How do these articles suggest we understand “adaptation” to such environmental challenges?

Stage 3: Plenary Session: After chewing on these very difficult questions, we will reconvene as a class to discuss the topic approached by these articles as a whole.

1. Each coordinated group will report on some of the key conclusions their group developed. We will be interested in learning what kinds of consensus, if any, came out of your

discussions.

2. In your opinion what is the most interesting or compelling point or argument that emerged from your reading or from the discussion?