

Voices from the Past: Conceptualizing a “Fifth World”

Mark Q. Sutton¹

Introduction

There are thousands of extant indigenous societies in the world today whose voices are faint, garbled, and too often suppressed. These societies are seen as constituting a “Fourth World,” generally small separate societies living within the boundaries of larger contemporary states. A similar situation exists for the uncounted tens of thousands of past societies, most of whom had small populations about which we know little to nothing.

Here it is proposed that these past societies constitute a “Fifth World,” defined as groups that remain undiscovered or unrecognized and so have virtually no voice in the contemporary world, or in a best case scenario, whose voices can only be discerned as indistinct and distant echoes. The purpose of this proposal is to remind archaeologists and others that such past groups are not just collections of traits identified over geographic areas or spans of time but were once living and vibrant societies, each with a unique culture that deserves to be included in our understanding of the human experience.

The Fourth World

Contemporary nation-states are loosely divided into “worlds,” terms developed during the Cold War. The “First World” is that of developed western democracies; the “Second World” is (was) that of the Communist bloc; and the “Third World” was (is) that of poor developing countries unaligned with the first two, now commonly called the developing world. The “Fourth World” consists of indigenous people and societies living within larger nation-states, such as Native people in the United States and Aboriginal people in Australia (Neeley 2017; also see Manuel and Posluns 1974). It is these “Fourth World” groups that are often studied by cultural anthropologists.

As Fourth World groups are contemporary, they have active identities and voices. Through political struggles, and sometimes with the help of anthropologists, some of these groups are gaining influence within their various countries. Thus, the overall situation of Fourth World groups appears to be improving, with some major exceptions (e.g., indigenous people in Brazil; Santos 2016).

A Fifth World

There are probably tens of thousands of past groups represented in the archaeological record. Of the relatively few groups of which we are aware, most are known only as archaeological cultures, theoretical models of societies based on the partially understood patterns of their material and mortal remains. In most cases, just the barest framework of these archaeological constructs is known, focused primarily on technology and subsistence activities, such as hunting. Even less is known about their major cultural institutions such as social structure, political system, or religion. More esoteric aspects of their societies, such as philosophy and cosmology, remain virtually invisible. Here, it is proposed that these past groups constitute a “Fifth World,” peoples with little visibility and virtually no voice in the modern world. The stories of many millions of people, ancestors we do not even know we have, are unknown to us.

¹Department of Anthropology, University of San Diego, San Diego, California, United States.

A number of issues contribute to why there is so little visibility of these past groups. As Europeans expanded across the globe beginning in the fifteenth century, they took control of large regions and imposed their culture and values on the indigenous inhabitants. Most Europeans viewed such peoples as savages or barbarians and saw themselves as civilized. Archaeologists working in those regions during those colonial times were themselves part of the colonial regimes and often viewed "other" people in the same way. Thus, the ethnocentric view of living peoples held by Europeans was extended to the ancient groups of those same regions, a past seen as inferior to that of Europeans. This racist view persisted well into the mid-twentieth century. Colonialism has had a significant and direct impact on many indigenous societies, which led to major demographic declines, loss of traditional practices, and even the disappearance of entire societies. In some cases, fragmented groups recombined to form new groups (ethno genesis), resulting in an amalgamation of various groups over time.

Further, many people, perhaps even some archaeologists, look at the past in a sort of generic way combining diverse heritages into a generalized "pan-cultural" prehistory, thus creating an inferior, second-class past of seemingly dispensable cultures. An additional issue is the creation of politically or nationalistically motivated prehistory's. In such cases, archaeological groups were linked to contemporary ones to create explanations of national origins (as was done in Nazi Germany to justify expansion), even when they had no real bearing on that issue (Kohl 2012:231; also see Childe 1933). In essence then, these prehistoric groups had a false voice forced upon them.

The discovery of these past peoples is not an easy task, partly due to the difficulty of obtaining and interpreting archaeological data and partly due to the large number of such societies and the small number of archaeologists investigating them. Nevertheless, archaeology is the primary vehicle through which we can learn about them, learn from them, and hear their voices again.

To be sure, some ancient societies do have some visibility, so they do have at least some voice, albeit spoken by archaeologists interpreting their remains. Such visible and acoustic societies are generally those considered by contemporary people to be spectacular, such as Pharaonic Egypt or Imperial Rome, groups whose cultures influenced western culture to the degree that most people are at least aware of them. Most past societies are far less visible and made even less so by the use of terms such as "primitive" and "Stone Age" to describe them. Such characterizations separate them from the rest of humanity and serve to further mute what voice they may have had.

Some archaeology is done on the prehistory of known extant groups, linking the past with the Fourth World. Such groups are visible and have active voices, although archaeological interpretations may conflict with the beliefs of those groups (e.g., Echo-Hawk 2000). In such cases, there may be multiple voices about and from the past and it is important that both are heard.

Final Thoughts

For archaeology, the illumination of past cultures and societies is a long-standing goal but in reality, the Fifth World is only dimly perceived. Thus, archaeologists serve—if only by default and however imperfectly—as advocates of those societies. We should strive to not only learn about past groups but to also make them relevant to the contemporary world. It is hoped that the concept of a "Fifth World" to symbolize the invisible and voiceless societies of the past can make them appear a bit more human and can serve to associate them with the issues facing Fourth World groups of the present so that people might better listen to both.

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