# DOMESTICATION AND HISTORICITY:
## IN MEMORY OF PETER J. WILSON

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ABSTRACT

*In this paper, dedicated to the memory of Peter Wilson, I take as my starting point his last book on cultural evolution – The Domestication of the Human Species – and propose a way in which its thesis might be elaborated and extended. Briefly, I argue that if, as I think Wilson has shown, domestication coincided with the appearance of society as explicit, objectified structure, then this had significant implications for the nature of domesticated historicity. Domestication was not only an epochal break in human history, but it also made possible new modes of social transformation.*

When, in 1988, Peter Wilson gave me a signed copy of his latest book, *The Domestication of the Human Species*, he did so on the condition that I read it and discuss it with him at one of our twice-weekly 'seminars' in the snooker-room at the University of Otago. I must have fulfilled my side of the bargain because there are comments scribbled in pencil throughout – most of them, I must confess, critical. Re-reading *Domestication* 17 years later, however, I am struck by its boldness and originality and I have become convinced that it has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves. Tim Ingold, for example, dismisses its entire argument in little more than a page, claiming that it is based on a false opposition between a 'natural' hunter-gatherer environment and a 'cultural' domesticated one (Ingold, 2000: 179–80). In fact, *Domestication* proposes a sophisticated evolutionary argument about the social and cultural consequences of permanent settlement, premised on an original distinction between relatively 'open' hunter/gatherer and relatively 'closed' domesticated societies – the relative 'naturalness' of their environments not being at issue. As an ambitious attempt to bring together human biology and human cultural history, Wilson's book embodies a generalising and comparative spirit that is now too rarely evident in anthropological writing. *Domestication* takes its reader far beyond ethnography to a largely speculative anthropology of hu-

man history that, nonetheless, remains true to the most fundamental objective of anthropology – the production of new generalisations about society and culture.

I say 'production' rather than 'discovery' and 'generalisations' rather than 'universals' because, unlike Maurice Bloch, who has also recently bemoaned the current dearth of anthropological generalising, I do not view our project as a positivist one (Bloch, 2005). Bloch argues that the current problem can be attributed to cognitive (as distinct from moral) relativism which is fundamentally antithetical to generalisation. According to Bloch, generalisations are, from the perspective of cognitive relativism, 'felt to be nothing but mere products of the particular cultural configuration of the ethnographer' which in turn leads to the view that 'anthropology as a generalising science about human beings is a mere illusion of particular cultures' (Bloch, 2006:12). Bloch insists that anthropologists must recognise that their ultimate aim is the study of human nature, not least because answers to questions about human nature (however provisional they may be) are of most interest to our informants and our colleagues in other disciplines.

But if you believe, as I do, that human nature is inherently social and the result of historical processes then there can only be generalisations about a socially and historically situated human nature. One of the great strengths of *Domestication* is that it links generalisations about human biology, especially the importance of vision to primate sociality, with generalisations about human history. More than this, I propose that Wilson's argument lays the foundations for an anthropology of historicity that begins with the insight that domestication was not only an epochal break in human history, but that it also made possible new modes of social transformation.

Wilson argues in *Domestication* that the most profound cultural changes associated with the adoption of permanent settlements were those that arose directly and indirectly from the creation of neighbourliness. Relationships between neighbours became mediated by architecture and fixed settlement patterns, a mediation that radically altered the possibilities for, as well as barriers to, human sociality. I extend this argument here by suggesting that domestication also radically altered the possibilities for, and barriers to, social transformation in that subsequent human history would now entail multiple re-domestications.

Could it be that since initial domestication all radical social change has required re-domestication? The massive changes in settlement patterns that have

accompanied such radical social transformations as industrial class forma-
tion in Western Europe, European colonialism, Soviet Communism, Khmer
rule in Cambodia and colonial and neo-colonial resettlement programmes for
nomadic and forest-dwelling peoples all suggest that the idea is not that far-
fetched. The most dramatic and morally outrageous re-domestications have
entailed the use of force and have even involved genocide in order to bring
about resettlement. But there have been many other re-domestications, equally
dramatic if more morally defensible, where people have voluntarily resettled
themselves in pursuit of re-imagined futures. Examples include the creation
of bourgeois suburbs in England (Fishman, 1987), the building of millennial
communities under the guidance of prophets and the formation of Christian
settlements in the Pacific. I will discuss examples of the latter forms of volun-
tary resettlement below but firstly, let me briefly highlight and expand upon
what I take to be the main points of Wilson's original argument.

DOMESTICATION

For Wilson, domestication involved the human adoption of a built environ-
ment, central to which was the house. Domesticated people are essentially
village people whose lives are organised in terms of neighbourliness and neigh-
bourhood. As such, they are distinct from hunter/gatherers, for whom social
relations are not grounded in the spatial relationships between dwellings. With
domestication, social structure assumed an external, objectified form through
settlement pattern and architecture. Whereas in hunter/gatherer societies the
sense of structure was (and is) 'tacit, subjective, personal and focussed', in do-
mesticated societies, structure is explicit, embodied, objective and externally
bounded (Wilson, 1988: 77–78). Classic anthropological accounts of such ob-
jectification through architecture are the Kabyle house described by Bourdieu
(Bourdieu, 1977) and the Atoni house described by Cunningham (1973). In
both cases, house-forms materialise social structures in relation to totalising,
'closed' cosmologies, in terms of which everyday social relations are organised
(see also Waterson, 1997).

One of the most striking anthropological examples of the organising force of
settlement and neighbourliness is the pre-missionary Bororo village, described
by Lévi-Strauss in his *Structural Anthropology* and *Triste Tropiques*. At the cen-
tre of a circle of dwellings was the men's house, a home for unmarried men and
a meeting place for married men. Men moved frequently between this house
and their dwellings along pathways that Levi-Strauss likened to the spokes of
a cartwheel (1973: 220). He continued:

> Bororo society offers a lesson to the student of human nature. If he listens to his native informants they will describe for him, as they did for me, this ballet in which two village moieties strive to live and breathe each through and for the other; exchanging women, possessions and services in fervent reciprocity; intermarrying their children, burying each other's dead, each providing the other with a guarantee that life is eternal, the world full of help and society just. To provide evidence of these truths and to foster these beliefs, their wise men have worked out an impressive cosmology and embodied it in the plan of the villages and layout of the dwellings (1973: 245).

For the Bororo, their social structure was so firmly grounded in this settlement plan that when, at the insistence of Salesian Missionaries, they rebuilt their villages as parallel rows of houses people lost interest in maintaining many traditional practices:

> It was as if their social and religious systems … were too complex to exist without the pattern which was embodied in the plan of the village and of which their awareness was constantly being refreshed by their everyday activities (1973: 221).

If Levi-Strauss sounds like Bourdieu in the above passage he is also already going beyond him in suggesting that when people transform the material structures through which their social relations are objectified, what Bourdieu would later call 'habitus' comes into contradiction with constructed habitat, producing a physical sense of disorientation.

Wilson links human biology with human history by arguing that the construction of domestic walls dividing public and private had significant consequences for human motivation – on the one hand, the motivation to exploit the possibilities for displays of hospitality and power and on the other by creating opportunities for the concealment of personal actions.

Large-scale feasts and exchanges in domesticated societies are highly visible exchanges of labour for prestige or respect. As Wilson writes:

> The objects that change hands are mere indicators of the real 'goods' – labour, effort, ingenuity, talent and skill. And these are exchanged for commensurate goods – prestige, reputation, esteem, rank and so on (1988: 81).

Domesticated economies are, therefore, founded on highly visible expressions of hospitality; exchange partners are guests who, in return for a visual feast of impressive skill and talent, grant or confer reputation and esteem. Going characteristically out on a limb, Wilson suggests that production in domesticated societies is aesthetically motivated and that beauty, especially visual beauty, is the 'added value' put into feasts and displays (1988:114).

Wilson argues that in domesticated societies houses and graves become the technical and symbolic stimuli for an expansion of social power, which Wilson defines as 'the production of intended effects'. Expansion of the house into the palace and the small grave into the elaborate tomb involved a movement towards a 'surreality' of power, made visibly manifest in structures of permanence and perfection. Grand public structures built with organised labour under the direction of leaders visually testify to and legitimise 'the right of some people to be empowered by others so that they may assume all power, divine power' (1988:135).

The dark side of this new domestic visibility is the hidden force of witchcraft – something most often directed against neighbours. Neighbours in domesticated societies are visibly linked by mutual obligation – hospitality, co-operation, lending – and yet they are also separated and partially hidden from each other by walls. Domestication therefore created suspicious neighbours. Wilson writes:

> Neighbours, just by being themselves, seem to have an effect on one another, and when the effect is felt, when someone's emotions are triggered into suspicion, envy or frustration, they feel as if a hidden power is at work on them and in them (1988:141).

While Wilson shares with Bourdieu and Levi-Strauss an interest in the ways that material forms participate in the reproduction of social practice and serve as technologies for thought, I suggest that the great advance in his argument is that it is premised on the historically transformative, as opposed to the reproductive, qualities of space and material forms. In the remainder of this article I want to build on Wilson's argument by proposing that domestication not only established the foundations for a new form of sociality but that it also created the possibility for a radically new historicity. Wilson does not make this point explicitly, but it is anticipated in his discussion of the historical emergence of the 'surrealities' of power founded on the developments of house into palace and grave into tomb. Wilson's argument implicitly recognises that, after domestication, the expansion and transformation of power through architecture

and monuments altered the nature of historical change.

If, as Wilson argues, domestication produced a more objectified, externalised, visible social structure then it also created the possibilities for this society and power to be transformed in more conscious, deliberate ways. With domestication it became possible to envisage – and to literally have visions of – new forms of neighbourliness and new forms of distinction through social separation. Indeed, as I have already suggested, after domestication radical social transformations have probably always entailed forms of re-domestication impelled by visions of a new social order. Because re-domestication always entails new ways of being together and of being apart, domestication establishes the possibility of utopianism – the deliberate building of new ideal communities and societies based on ideas of a new humanity, a new human nature through resettlement. Such utopian efforts are often connected with messianic visions and desires. Let me briefly expand upon this point with two striking examples from my own research: the building of a 'city of God' by the Tuhoe prophet, Rua Kenana (Sissons, 1991) and the creation of a united Christian settlement in 1820s Rarotonga (Sissons, 2007).

Rua Kenana was a Maori visionary living in the Urewera district of the North Island of New Zealand at the turn of the twentieth century. According to accounts by Rua's followers, an angel revealed to their leader an enormous diamond hidden by his predecessor, Te Kooti, on the top of Maungapohatu, the sacred mountain of Rua's tribe, the Tuhoe. In 1907, Rua called upon his followers to leave their homes in the valleys and move inland to Maungapohatu where they were to build a city of God and await the expected millennium. The 700 people who joined Rua at Maungapohatu called themselves Iharaira (Israelites) and their city of God also had Biblical precedents. In the centre of the settlement they built a large, round, two-storied courthouse named Hiona (Zion), modelled on a temple built by Solomon of the Old Testament. Hiona stood within a sacred (*tapu*) enclosure that also contained the houses of Rua and his wives, while most of the Iharaira dwellings stood outside, beyond the palings of the enclosure fence.

Physically separated from the rest of New Zealand in the middle of the rugged Urewera ranges, this new city of God materialised a new social order centred on a prophet, his laws and ultimately the will of God. It involved a re-domestication with a new sense of neighbourliness among Iharaira, formerly separated by ancestry and land-rights, and a new physical separation between

the prophet and his followers. This re-domestication was a precondition for a new sense of being human. Ancestry and its associations with land and chiefly power (*mana*) would no longer be the foundation of personhood and community. Instead, people were to be members of a single, Biblically sanctioned community living according to the Word of God as communicated by Rua. Rua is said to have communed with God while standing on a platform that extended outwards from the side of the second story of Hiona (Sissons, 1991: 184–200; Binney et.al., 1979: 45–61).

The beginnings of Christianity in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, also, I would argue, involved a radical re-domestication entailing new visions of humanity. When, in 1823, the London Missionary Society missionary, John Williams, left a Tahitian convert, Papeiha, on Rarotonga he could hardly have dreamed of consequences more dramatic. Within six months, the three district chiefs (*ariki*) of Rarotonga had burned all of their god-houses (*'are atua*), destroyed their ritual enclosures (*marae*) and, with around 3000 of their people, had begun to construct a new settlement at Avarua, the site of the present capital of the Cook Islands. At the centre of this new settlement was to be an enormous church, originally intended to be 600 feet in length, larger than Winchester Cathedral in England and thus able to accommodate the entire Christian population of the Island. In the end, the building was only 250 feet in length, but still huge by Rarotongan standards – even by world standards of the time.

The church and settlement materialised a new social order centred on the three district chiefs and their privileged relationship to a Christian God – albeit one that was mediated by their new Tahitian priest (*ta'unga*), Papeiha. While previously the Rarotongan people had lived in three districts (*vaka*/canoes), each sub-divided into sub-districts under the day-to-day leadership of local chiefs (*mata'iapo*), now, approximately half the population had thrown in their lot with their *ariki* and Papeiha. Many *mata'iapo* considered that this amounted to a form of disempowerment – *ariki* had, up until then, been viewed as firsts among equals, but now they sought to position themselves at the ritual and political centre of a new social order that had no legitimate place for *mata'iapo*, their priests and their pre-Chrisitan gods. A violent conflict between *ariki* and a significant group of local chiefs ensued, the latter basing their resistance movement in inland settlements where their ritual enclosures were defended against Christian iconoclasts. On the coast, *ariki* and their people built new houses for themselves near the church. In what amounted to a mass re-domestication, a conflict between two visions of Rarotongan society, one utopian the other conservative, was given dramatic spatial and architectural form (Sissons, 2007).

Wilson's argument that domestication creates the conditions for an emergent surreality of power is clearly evident in the construction of Hiona by Rua's people and of the church built by Rarotongans at the request of their *ariki* . But it is equally clear that in both cases the leaders' dramatically new architectural statements assumed significance in terms of a wider process of re-domestication that Wilson left unexamined. These re-domestications were motivated by visions of radically new social relations between leaders and people and between the people themselves. These also involved new understandings of human nature. The realisation of these visions and understandings required new architectural forms and new patterns of settlement.

But re-domestication implies more than re-settlement. If, as Wilson insisted, domestication entailed a heightened social visibility manifested in public display and feasting, re-domestication is also a transformation of this social visibility as new social structures are objectified and externalised. When the Iharaira left their clean and regularly inspected houses and walked in their clean clothes into the sacred enclosure in order to pray to God and be with Rua, a new form of community and a new personal identity were displayed. Similarly, when Rarotongans, dressed in new clothes, assembled in their new church a different society was enacted in the presence of their *ariki.*

It is also likely that the re-domestications of the Iharaira and the Rarotongan Christians sought to transform the darker side of social life, creating conditions in which sorcery – *makutu* in New Zealand*, purepure* in Rarotonga – could no longer flourish. Increased sickness, in the case of the Iharaira, and sickness in the aftermath of violent conflict between people of different districts in Rarotonga, had been attributed by some to sorcery. The creation of new forms of neighbourliness would, it was believed, help heal social divisions and their evil consequences.

I have discussed the re-domestications of the Iharaira and the Rarotongan Christians in order to make a general anthropological point: domestication created the possibility for radical social change through the process of resettlement. 'Millennial' and 'missionary' re-domestications represent extreme cases of intentional social transformation impelled by new visions of societies both lived and objectified. However, I also want to suggest that in domesticated societies, as opposed to hunter/gathering societies, resettlement always involves deliberate social transformation impelled by a vision, religious or otherwise, of a possible new social order. If Wilson is correct, this form of consciously directed social transformation is only possible after domestication. In other words, relatively open, hunter/gatherer and relatively closed, domesticated

societies have distinct historicities – they change in broadly different ways.

Differences in historicity arise from differences in the material constraints that act upon, and create possibilities for, social praxis – thought and action upon the social world in order to transform it. The ability of people in domesticated societies to literally and figuratively 'see' their society as structure, externalised and objectified, is a pre-condition for planned social transformation. And when material structures exert a profoundly conservative effect, constraining social life, the destruction of such structures becomes a precondition for new forms of society. Whether buildings and fences are made of wood, stone or concrete therefore becomes a matter of considerable historical importance.

In *Domestication*, Wilson attempted to view domesticated societies from a 'Palaeolithic perspective' – as a hunter/gatherer might see them. We can adopt the same approach in relation to the *historicity* of domesticated societies. Regarded from a Palaeolithic point of view, domesticated societies appear obsessed with boundaries, regularity and the surrealities of power. They appear animated by conflicts over space, conflicts that frequently entail invasions, conquests and the destruction of the very material forms that objectify the social order. History appears to correlate with periods of settlement followed by periods of disturbance or destruction, followed in turn by re-settlement.

This perspective can be reversed: Hunter/gatherer society can be viewed from the point of view of domesticated life. From this point of view hunter/gatherer history appears to consist almost entirely of continuous social reproduction. But it only appears this way because the material indexes of domesticated historical change – settlement pattern and architecture in particular – are largely absent. This is not, of course, how it looks from the inside. Lourandos (1988) has proposed, for example, that a distinctive historicity within Australian Aboriginal societies involved an expansion of alliance systems deliberately created through the use of surpluses for ritual and ceremonial purposes. These surpluses were not merely seasonal, but were also 'actively managed and manipulated' (1988:156). He further argues that these societies – and by implication other 'open' societies – are therefore characterised by a social dynamic and a distinct historicity that is independent of environmental and demographic factors. I am not suggesting that such ritualised and ceremonial expansion of alliance networks lies at the heart of all hunter/gatherer history – obviously, a great deal more evidence would need to be marshalled before such a claim could be made – but it is likely to be more widespread than Australia. And where such cases do occur they constitute, I suggest, a distinctive form of 'open' historicity embedded in a landscape which is thereby culturalised and

historicised – it is a historicity of alliance represented through connections between sacred places of ceremonial, ritual and/or ancestral significance. In more closed, domesticated societies, social relations are rendered visible in settlement patterns and architecture; in more open, hunter/gatherer societies they are visible in the land and landscape. Domesticated space can be radically redefined as villages and houses are destroyed and rebuilt; the land and landscape cannot be so transformed but instead endure to take on new layers of meaning.

While Wilson builds his argument exclusively on such implicit and explicit contrasts between hunter/gatherer and domesticated societies, urban society is excluded from his analysis because it is assumed to be such a radically different order of settlement pattern to that of the village. However, I think there are serious difficulties with such a tripartite view of hunter/gatherer-village-city. How big does a 'village' have to be before it is no longer considered the setting for studies of domesticated society? Are small towns still domesticated settings? What about the development of suburbs in urban situations? The exclusion of larger, more complex, settlements from consideration would only be acceptable if Wilson was just making a case for the social and cultural transformations that accompanied the transition from pre-domesticated to domesticated society. But because Wilson also seeks to develop new generalisations about later transformations of domesticated societies – the developing 'surrealities' of power, for example – a distinction between domesticated and urban societies may be unwarranted. Certainly, in relation to historicity, village and urban societies may share more than Wilson assumed. In fact, processes of re-domestication in urban contexts have frequently followed the 'millennial' model, outlined above.

In a brilliant comparative study of the birth of suburbs in England, France and the United States, Robert Fishman (1987) shows that suburbs had their origins in efforts by the London bourgeoisie to differentiate themselves from the less Godly (and increasingly smelly) masses with whom they had previously shared their living space. Influenced by the late eighteenth century evangelical movement that extolled the virtues of clean air, female domesticity and religious piety, the bourgeoisie transformed their weekend villas on the outskirts of London into family homes. Later, in Manchester in 1844, an entire middleclass suburb was created, fenced and gated to keep out the poor. This was clearly an objectification of emerging class relationships in the industrial revolution through re-domestication. And it is probably no accident that Marx and Engels, the latter who owned a factory in Manchester, developed the modern idea of class around this time; they could literally see its emergence. But most

importantly for my argument, these idealised bourgeois suburban settlements were partly millennial in their conception. Fishman stresses:

> The city was not just crowded, dirty and unhealthy; it was immoral. Salvation itself depended on separating the women's sacred world of family and children from the profane metropolis. Yet this separation could not jeopardize a man's constant attendance at his business – for hard work and success were also Evangelical virtues … suburbia was to be the ultimate solution (Fishman, 1987:38).

Dolores Hayden has recently pointed out that developers in Britain and the United States continued to extol the moral advantages of suburbia well into the Twentieth Century. In 1921, an editorial in the *National Real Estate Journal* argued that the first sub-division was the Garden of Eden, while in 1946 the cover of *The New Yorker* featured a new house floating on pink clouds above a couple and child holding their house plans, ascending into the heavens (cited by Hayden, 2003:6).

In most Western cities there has since been a significant blurring of the boundaries between bourgeois and working class suburbs as proletarian areas have become gentrified and former family homes have become rental propositions. Unlike the pre-missionary Bororo, who could not have possibly denied the existence of their society's moiety structure so clearly visible in the plan of their villages, contemporary urban dwellers readily deny the existence of their society's class structure. However, countless 'urban development' schemes continue to promise social and moral renewal through the construction of new forms of settlement. It would seem that the 'millennial' historicity, born with domestication, is as alive in contemporary cities as it was in nineteenth century Rarotonga or early twentieth century Maungapohatu.

I am conscious that I am painting here with a very broad brush. But I have been emboldened to do so because this is the kind of anthropology Peter Wilson most relished. Not least for this reason, Peter's death in 2005 was a huge loss to anthropology in New Zealand and internationally. He brought to his teaching, writing and relationships with colleagues an engaging wit, a sparkling intelligence and a profound grasp of anthropology's deeper questions. Ours is a discipline that needs big thinkers who are able to direct our attention beyond this immediate world of too many managers and too few snooker tables towards those wider and wiser humanities in the making. Peter Wilson was one of these thinkers.

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