

Complexity and Cultural Transitions 100,000 BP to the Present

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Abstract.

Over the past hundred thousand years four major cultural transitions have occurred in human settlement patterns of which the first is only partially known and the other three are very familiar. The three familiar ones are the development of sedentary communities, some time after about 10,000 years ago; the second is the formation agrarian-based urbanism after about 5000 years ago; and the most recent, the formation of industrial-based urbanism in the past two hundred years. The pattern of these great transitions has been logically organised by a progressivist Stage Theory model since the 19th century in which each stage is characterised by cultural type fossils eg writing and initial urbanism. Though this model is now understood to be problematic, it has not been replaced and in actuality still dominates the large-scale, long-term perspective which we use to comprehend cultural behaviour. Conventional definitions of sedentism and urbanism have become increasingly vague and inclusive. The cultural type fossils are known from context other than the ones for which they are supposed to be stage diagnostic. What is required is to replace the progressive model in which change is indicative of and due to a trend to advancement by a model of transitions for which the “type Fossils” are actually antecedent prerequisites ie are operational requirements which must come together as sets of material characteristics to enable major transitions in settlement size to occur. Critically, economic transformations are also required but do not seem to occur just because cultural, material prerequisites come together. The “Industrial Revolution” is a singular case. Crucially, changes in the material assemblage are essential; the characteristic social organisation of each “stage” derives from the material changes and social and material conditions can be at odds with each other. The path to these large, long-term emerging patterns is not deterministic.