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Editor's Column: Introducing the Social Evolution Forum

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A central question of social evolution is elucidating the mechanisms and dynamics that resulted in the rise of large-scale complex human societies. How did *ultrasociality* (the ability of humans to cooperate in huge groups of unrelated individuals) evolve? Although much progress has been recently made in understanding the first phase of human social evolution, from ape-like ancestors to small-scale groups of hunter-gatherers, much remains to be discovered, and the area continues to generate considerable interest among researchers. Even more controversial is the second phase, the evolution of large-scale hierarchically organized societies with cities, states, extensive division of labor, writing, monumental architecture, etc. There is currently no consensus on the processes and mechanisms that are responsible for this major evolutionary transition.

We think that conceptual (e.g., mathematical models) and empirical (databases) tools are now sophisticated enough to make possible dramatic breakthroughs in this discipline. The stakes are enormous—not only because of the scale of the intellectual puzzle and intrinsic interest in the emergence of states, empires and civilizations, but also because of potential application in addressing such societal problems as war and failed states, and more optimistically trust, peace, and large-scale cooperation.

Currently, researchers interested in these issues work in highly diverse disciplines—anthropology, economics, sociology, political science, evolutionary biology, and mathematics—with little interdisciplinary contact. Periodically scientists from these different disciplines meet at conferences or workshops, and interact intensively, but durable projects rarely emerge. There are a number of challenges to fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and collaborations, including semantics and different conceptual models and approaches.

To remedy this situation we are launching a research network structured around an ongoing web-based seminar, the *Social Evolution Forum* (SEF). The activities based at the SEF will have three dimensions. First, in the Fall of

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2011 we have established a virtual seminar, that is, a website dedicated to promoting presentation and discussion of the most novel and important questions in social evolution theory.¹ Second, in the future we plan to make the seminar 'live,' that is, it will involve podcasts and congresses/meetings dedicated specifically to the aims of the SEF. And third, although fundamentally a communication network, the SEF will also provide the foundations for inter- and pluri-disciplinary—and, ultimately, *trans*-disciplinary—collaboration. This will take the form of adverts to international funding opportunities, and the posting or publication of interim reports for specialists and for the broader community interested in social evolution.

We see these milestones happening gradually and sequentially over a several year period. The first, which is already in progress, is the recurrent publication of short, self-contained discussion papers (1,500–3,000 words). Following publication, network participants can post commentaries on the lead article for a period of several weeks (suggested length: around 500 words). Currently, most commentaries have been actively solicited by us, but in the future, we expect that an increasing proportion of responses will be self-generated. At the end of the period, the discussion is closed (but maintained on the site), and the next discussion piece is posted. In addition to the formal commentary articles, there will be an opportunity for participants to engage in rapid and informal exchange of opinions using the LiveJournal format. The idea is to promote an exciting, diverse, and scholarly discussion, which will attract specialists in many disciplines to check the forum regularly both for reading and writing.

An important novel feature of the SEF is the possible publication of the resulting package (the lead paper, commentaries, and a response) in *Clodynamics*. Prior to publication, articles in the package are evaluated by anonymous reviewers for quality and suitability to the journal. We believe the potential for publication will motivate participation in the Forum, and elevate the scientific and scholarly quality of lead papers, commentaries and rejoinders. This issue of *Clodynamics* (2:2) presents the first Forum, featuring an article by Ian Lustick on institutional rigidity and evolutionary theory.

Acknowledgment

The Social Evolution Forum is a project of the Evolution Institute (<http://evolution-institute.org/>). We thank the Board of Directors of the Institute for their support and Robert Kadar for invaluable assistance with designing and maintaining the SEF website.

¹ The SEF is currently located at: <http://socialevolutionforum.wordpress.com/>