

How walls shape thought^{1,2}

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Peter Wilson develops here a fascinating perspective on human evolution that views the erection of permanent settlements at the end of the latest Ice Age as the most significant event in human history. The domestication of the human species with the erection of permanent shelters shifted our basic perception of the world, a shift with profound ramifications in all aspects of life. He has nearly convinced me that the Paleolithic-to-Neolithic transition may have had a larger impact on human society than the controlled use of fire, which I have regarded as the single most important event in the hominization process (Evolutionary Theory 9: 18).

Wilson stresses the importance of the senses in the shaping of human culture and claims that they have been taken for granted, i.e., they are seen as not having altered since the origin of our species. Wilson claims to the contrary that two major events in human evolution had considerable impact on the senses. The transition from arboreality to plains life favored bipedality, which intensified the use of the hand for grasping and manipulation. This in turn increased the cross-modal referencing between touch and sight, thereby requiring greater cognitive ability and thus favoring an increase in brain size. The adoption of the practice of living in permanent houses and settlements (his 'domestication') altered people's ability to pay attention to one another because of the barriers to the senses that were erected as a byproduct of the walls. But these walls in turn set the stage for the development of new ways of thinking and acting.

The fundamental difference in perception and thinking between hunting/gathering and domesticated people can be illustrated by their emphasis on boundaries. Without any permanently fixed place to return to each day, hunter/gatherers move widely over the landscape in flexible ways that map the vagaries of climate and availability of food. They do not defend boundaries to the area in which they roam, but they might have within this area a central core that is the focus of their activity and 'being', a familiar place to which they identify themselves. The structure and membership of the groups or 'cliques' that move together are unbounded and fluid, a clique being a collection of people who want to be together at this particular time. Independence and self-sufficiency are encouraged from an early age and power over others through accumulating obligations is minimized. They are held together by mutual attraction and a common focus. Their thoughts are as unbounded as their social organization, with

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¹The Domestication of the Human Species.

Peter J. Wilson. 1989 (18 January; stated 1988 in book.) Yale Univ. Press. Acid-free paper. xvi + 201 pp. ISBN 0-300-04243-4 hardbound, \$22.50; -05032-1 softbound (February 1991), \$11.00 (minus 5 cents).

²Contribution 109, Lothlorien Laboratory of Evolutionary Biology. Evolutionary Theory 10: 109-110 (December, 1991).

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individuals left to acquire much of their knowledge independently. Thus, individuals may differ in how they refer to the same animal.

In contrast, a permanent dwelling necessarily sets permanent boundaries to a person's movements and even attention. Walls hide one's own activities as well as one's ability to see another's. A difference could arise between private and public behavior. Boundaries are explicitly embodied in architecture, the adoption of which led to the acceptance of structure and constraint in one's activities and thoughts. Knowledge and behavior became institutionalized and children were not encouraged to be independent at an early age but had to learn the rules from their elders, often in the setting of a school. Boundaries prevail everywhere — from within the house, where each activity has its peculiar place to beyond the grave, to an afterlife as structured as the previous life. Hierarchy as in the social system was imposed upon the natural world, in which things were now seen as bounded and rigidly categorized. Scientists today still have difficulty accepting and working with fuzzy boundaries and variability.

Wilson's perspective on domesticated (i.e., tribal, peasant, rural, village, and Neolithic) societies derives from a somewhat novel attempt to view these societies as a member of a Paleolithic or hunting/gathering society looking 'up and around' rather than as a member of his own urban-industrial society 'looking back and down'. He has attempted to step outside his culture and embrace the thinking of another to gain this perspective. It is a tricky procedure but his 'Palaeolithic glasses' enabled him to see alternatives to present-day wisdom. His different perspective makes a lot of sense and one gains from it a better appreciation of the real contribution made by this stage of human cultural evolution.

The book is marred by a dense style of writing which I find difficult to follow, but the ideas contained within make it worth the effort.