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2

Not knowing as knowledge: asymmetry between archaeology and anthropology

Thomas Yarrow

Asymmetry

This paper explores the widespread understanding that archaeology and anthropology exist in an asymmetrical relationship to one another characterized by an archaeological theoretical 'trade deficit'. While the paper questions the basis on which this asymmetry has been imagined, it also explores the effects that this has had. Through examining how archaeologists and anthropologists have historically imagined the relationship between these disciplines, the paper sets out to understand the implications of this asymmetry for both. Rather than seek to redress this asymmetry, it demonstrates how asymmetry has in fact been archaeologically productive, leading to an explicitness about archaeological procedures and their limits and concomitantly to an openness to other disciplinary insights. On the other hand, for anthropologists the perception of asymmetry simultaneously arises from and leads to assumptions that have foreclosed certain lines of enquiry, relating to a disciplinary narrowing of horizons.

In the introduction to *An Ethnography of the Neolithic*, Tilley starts by describing an archaeological fantasy that is revealing of wider assumptions both about the kinds of knowledge that archaeologists and anthropologists produce and about the relationships between these disciplines:

> I have sometimes imagined what it might be like to be transported back into the past in a time capsule, to arrive somewhere in Sweden during the Neolithic and to be able to observe what was really going on, stay for a couple of years and then return to the late twentieth century and write up my ethnography. I have thought how much richer, fuller and more sophisticated the account would be. I would actually know who made and used the pots and axes, what kind of kinship system existed, how objects were exchanged and by whom, the form and nature of ethnic boundaries, the details of initiation rites, the meaning of pot designs and the significance of mortuary ceremonies (Tilley 1996: 1).

Tellingly, whilst such archaeological fantasies of time-travel are common, the corresponding fantasy does not seem to capture the anthropological imagination: anthropologists, to my knowledge, do not often fantasize about the possibility of travelling forwards in time and viewing their own field-sites through the material

remains of the people who once lived there. Why might this be? My suggestion is that the asymmetry is indicative of a wider perception, shared by archaeologists and anthropologists alike, that the 'partial' and 'fragmented' nature of archaeological evidence leaves archaeologists with less to say about the issues of social life taken to be at the heart of both disciplines (see also Lucas, and Filippucci, this volume).

Tilley himself deconstructs aspects of this common archaeological fantasy of time travel, arguing that archaeological and anthropological accounts are both constructed from different elements that need to be interpreted and made sense of in similar ways (cf. Lucas 2005). However, as he rightly points out, such fantasies are indicative of a wider *perception* of disciplinary asymmetry, that underscores the theoretical 'trade' between archaeologists and anthropologists: archaeologists commonly imagine themselves to lack the kinds of theories and insights that anthropologists can provide, and routinely draw on these in their descriptions and analyses of the past. Despite some notable exceptions (e.g. Ingold 1992, Layton 2008) anthropologists rarely seem to incorporate the ideas, theories or descriptions of archaeologists in their own accounts.

In pointing to the mutual entanglements of archaeology and anthropology, the archaeologist Gosden (1999) argues that it would be impossible to imagine the discipline of archaeology in the absence of anthropological writing on subjects such as gift exchange, kinship, symbolism and gender. By the same token he also suggests that archaeological writing has contributed to the discipline of anthropology in terms of an understanding of long-term chronology. Yet even if we accept that this is the case, an almost total lack of any explicit anthropological acknowledgement of this 'debt' remains puzzling.

Despite a long history of archaeological claims for the potential theoretical and substantive contribution of the discipline, a disciplinary 'trade deficit' (Gosden 1999, Tilley 1996) therefore seems to persist. As Tilley has noted, a concern with the 'mutual relationship' has taken place almost exclusively within archaeological discussions, suggesting that 'while most archaeologists read some anthropology, few anthropologists seem to read any archaeology' (1996: 2). Some time ago Rowlands and Gledhill similarly described this imbalance of interest, suggesting that Childe was 'the only archaeologist that many anthropologists in this country ever admit to having read' (1977: 144). Tellingly, archaeologically authored introductions to anthropology such as Orme's (1981) *Anthropology for Archaeologists*, Hodder's (1982a) *The Present Past* and more recently Gosden's *Archaeology and Anthropology* (1999), do not have their counterparts within anthropology.

Interestingly the recent theoretical convergences that have taken place around areas such as material culture, gender and the body do not seem to have fundamentally altered this relationship. While Hodder points to the origin of many of the theoretical frameworks that have informed these developments in disciplines such as philosophy and sociology, he notes that within archaeology '...there was still a "looking over ones shoulder" at cultural anthropology to see how translations and applications of the ideas had been made in a related discipline' (2005: 132).

The fact that anthropological accounts of the disciplinary relationship are rare is itself symptomatic of a perceived asymmetry on the part of anthropologists. Until recently, Ingold has been a notable exception in his insistence that 'anthropology needs archaeology if it is to substantiate its claims to be a genuinely historical science' (1992: 64). In the wake of the 2009 Association of Social Anthropology conference on 'Archaeological and Anthropological Imaginations: past, present and future', this may be set to change. Calls during this conference, by archaeologists and anthropologists, for an increasing anthropological sensitivity to archaeological thinking are clearly to be welcomed. Nonetheless, it is important to be sensitive to the terrain in which such exchanges take place and the asymmetries – actual or perceived – that have attended these.

Taking up one of the central themes of the volume, this paper explores the question of why this perception of asymmetry persists and asks what this might reveal about the disciplinary theories and practices of archaeology and anthropology. In pursuing this line of enquiry my intention is not to 'overcome' this asymmetry. Rather I want to examine its theoretical and practical consequences. This entails considering the possibility that an archaeological perception of absence – whether of data or theory – is itself constitutive of a distinctive disciplinary ontology and that as such it need not be considered in negative terms. Thus my aim is not simply to put 'the other side', by showing how archaeological concepts or findings may be of use to anthropologists. Instead my analysis highlights how archaeologists and anthropologists have imagined how 'sides' are drawn up in the first place. Rather than pre-suppose a distinction between 'archaeology' and 'anthropology' as the self-evident starting point of analysis, I suggest that this distinction is itself an artefact of various debates within and between these disciplines; as such it has taken a variety of different forms.

My own interest is not to highlight where archaeologists might fruitfully contribute theoretical or substantive insight (as other contributors to this volume do convincingly). Rather I want to argue that successive theoretical developments have been driven by a perception of disciplinary asymmetry with regards to anthropological knowledge practices. To borrow again from the imagery of theoretical 'trade', my intention is not to engage in this trade but to try to understand the underlying ideas and assumptions that have driven it.

In this way, I hope to contribute to a 'symmetrical' (Latour 1987, Latour 1993) understanding of the issue of asymmetry. Rather than take asymmetry as the taken for granted starting point of analysis I suggest that it needs to be accounted for in terms of an analysis of the practices, relationships and ideas that produce it. This entails an attempt to understand the ways in which a disciplinary sense of deficiency is itself constitutive of particular forms of interpretation and analysis and how a *perception* of absence has proved a stimulus to very different kinds of theorising.

Connections and disconnections

Through an exploration of the shifting ways in which the relationship between archaeology and anthropology has been understood, I seek to highlight the different theoretical positions that have variously been used to explain and redress a sense of theoretical 'deficit'. In doing so, I do not propose to provide a comprehensive historical overview of disciplinary trends (see Gosden 1999, Hodder 1982a, Orme 1981, Trigger 1989) but rather seek to shed light on the *terms* within which the relationship between archaeology and anthropology has been explicitly conceived within archaeological and anthropological debates.

As a number of authors have argued (Gosden 1999, Ingold 1992, Orme 1981, Wylie 1985), the social evolutionism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided a theoretical context in which the study of past and present societies were seen to be inextricably linked. In attempting to account for contemporary cultural and biological diversity archaeological and anthropological material was treated equally, in the sense that both shed light on the common processes of evolution by which that difference came about. In other words a single theoretical framework both necessitated and enabled the collection of different kinds of data. Because archaeology and anthropology were not at this point institutionalised as distinct disciplinary endeavours, the issue of their 'relationship' did not explicitly arise.

The formal distinction between archaeology and anthropology can be seen to arise from a set of methodological and institutional changes that took place during the beginning of the twentieth century: the creation of distinct departments and the formalization, differentiation and specialization of different fieldwork techniques acted as processes of 'mediation' and 'purification' (Latour 1993) through which the disciplinary distinction between archaeology and anthropology became increasingly solidified (Lucas in press).

As others have suggested, these distinctions were institutionalized and theoretically elaborated in different ways within North American and British traditions. In North America there has tended to be a closer relationship between archaeology and anthropology, a fact that Hodder (1982a: 38) attributes in part to the ways in which the presence of native American societies created awareness of the potential for using ethnographic analogies to explain archaeological phenomena. In this way the 'direct historic' approach developed in the 1930s and 1940s, based on the assumption that the accounts of ethnographers and ethno-historians could be fruitfully employed as a way of understanding archaeological remains within the same area (see also Robinson this volume). From this perspective Taylor claimed that the archaeologist was 'Jekyll and Hyde, claiming to 'do' history but 'be' an anthropologist' (1948: 6). Archaeology was squarely defined in anthropological terms, as part of the four-fold approach that persists today (Segal and Yanagisako 2005).

In the UK, by contrast, the functionalism of anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown

and Malinowski led to the increasing institutionalization of disciplinary difference in ways that mitigated against collaboration. In the wake of Radcliffe-Brown's rejection of 'conjectural history', Childe (1946) sought to reinstate a sense of archaeology's distinctive contribution to the study of humanity, arguing that an understanding of the contemporary functions of particular social institutions has to be complemented by an understanding of their historical evolution in order to move beyond a descriptive technique to the classificatory science that he proposed should be the common aim of both. In this way the essential parity between archaeology and anthropology was seen to derive from methodological differences that acted to define a particular kind of collaborative relationship. Anthropological participant observation led to an integrative model of society that archaeologists could not hope to replicate on the basis of the archaeological record. Nonetheless, archaeological evidence was seen to enable an historical analysis of the development of social institutions that would provide 'a valid clue to the rank of a contemporary culture and its position in an evolutionary sequence' (Childe 1946: 250). Archaeology and anthropology were seen as 'complementary departments of the science of man related in the same way, as palaeontology and zoology in the science of life' (1946: 243).

In a similar vein the British archaeologist Hawkes (1954) proposed a form of collaboration that depended on the pursuit of common aims and objectives through complementary and distinctive forms of theory and methodology. Hawkes' famous 'ladder of inference' points to the paradox that whilst archaeology is defined in terms of the study of people in the past, the ideas, beliefs and social and political arrangements of these people have to be inferred in their absence. While he suggests that it is relatively easy to infer the techniques by which archaeological artefacts are produced and even the subsistence economies that would have prevailed, he is more pessimistic about the possibility of inferring information about social and political organisation on the basis of the kind of information that prehistorians have access to. Thus he asks rhetorically:

> If you excavate a settlement in which one hut is bigger than all others, is it a chief's hut so you can infer chiefship, or is it really a medicine lodge or a meeting hut for initiatives, or a temple? [...] How much could the archaeologist of the future infer, from his archaeology alone, of the Melanesian institutions studied by Malinowski? (1954: 161–162).

Hawkes' recognition of the limits of archaeological evidence led him to suggest that anthropologists could provide information on non-material aspects of culture that the archaeological record does not preserve. Anthropology, in other words, provided the means by which 'gaps' in the archaeological record could be 'filled in'. In this view anthropology not only provided information of use in the reconstruction of past societies, but also, by implication, a *model* of society and in this sense 'the making more fully anthropological' of the past was taken as the goal of archaeology.

In different ways, the accounts of both Childe and Hawkes thus locate an underlying asymmetry between archaeology and anthropology in the unequal access that these

disciplines respectively have to 'society'. In the light of subsequent critiques, it could rightly be objected that this apparent asymmetry rests on a misunderstanding in so far as both these theories reify and objectify society as a knowable, tangible and holistic entity (see Holtorf 2000, Van Reybrouck 2000). Not only does this negate the theoretical and ethnographic work of anthropologists in making this entity appear, it also effectively places ethnographically informed knowledge beyond critical scrutiny as a form of 'information' or 'data'.

Whether or not we agree with the theoretical positions adopted by these archaeologists, however, is not really the point. Rather I want to direct attention beyond their own explicit understandings in order to suggest that this *perception* of asymmetry in fact had productive effects. In particular, the understanding that archaeological data was in certain respects deficient stimulated archaeologists to look beyond the discipline in search of new ideas and theories. In doing so, the understanding was that knowledge could be 'applied' from anthropologically 'known' contexts, to archaeological contexts that were less well known. Yet this language of 'application' conceals the extent to which archaeological borrowings of anthropological ideas change and extend them. Regardless of the view one takes of Hawkes' 'ladder of inference', it makes explicit limits to archaeological data and the interpretations these give rise to. By contrast, during the same period, anthropological faith in functionalist models and methods tended to preclude understanding of the limits to interpretation and analysis. Consequently both Hawkes' and Childe's assessment that these limits lay in the absence of historical consideration, went largely unheeded. A holistic vision of society had its counterpart in a holistic vision of the discipline of anthropology, in ways that precluded the historical dimension that archaeological accounts could have helped provide.

With the advent of 'processual' or 'new' archaeology during the 1960s, a rather different conception of the relationship between archaeology and anthropology developed. By contrast to the 'culture-history' approach of archaeologists such as Childe, processual archaeologists responded to a perceived disciplinary asymmetry by arguing that rather than simply contribute to the explanation of difference within particular locales, archaeologists should seek to generate general laws to explain broader processes of cultural evolution. For Binford, the North American archaeologist at the forefront of this approach, processualism was explicitly seen to provide a framework within which archaeology could make a more significant contribution to anthropology. In outlining his vision of 'Archaeology as Anthropology', Binford aimed, 'to escalate the role which the archaeological discipline is playing in furthering the aims of anthropology and to offer suggestions as to how we, as archaeologists, may profitably shoulder more responsibility for furthering the aims of our field' (1962: 217). In this view, anthropology was defined as the attempt to explain the total range of physical and cultural similarities and differences within the entire temporal span of human existence. Since most of the evidence for this difference was understood to be available only

through an examination of archaeological material, this was seen to give archaeology an advantage in one key respect:

> We as archaeologists have available a wide range of variability and a large sample of cultural systems. Ethnographers are restricted to the small and formally limited extant cultural systems (1962: 224).

While Binford argued that archaeologists could not dig up social systems or ideology, he saw these limitations to be offset by the extensiveness of the archaeological record and its ability to enable examination of long-term processes of cultural change in ways that the ethnographic record does not allow. Moreover he was far less circumspect about the possibility of inferring reliable information about the functioning of extinct cultural systems on the basis of archaeological remains than many of his archaeological and anthropological contemporaries, suggesting that:

> Granted we cannot excavate kinship terminology or a philosophy but we can and do excavate the material items which functioned together with these more behavioural elements within the appropriate cultural sub-systems. The formal structure of artefact assemblages together with the between element contextual relationships should and do present a systematic and understandable picture of *the total extinct* cultural system (1962: 218–9).

Within America this processual or 'new' archaeology paved the way for increasing collaboration between archaeologists and anthropologists. In particular evolutionary anthropologists such as Lee and DeVore (1968) saw the potential for synergy in terms of their aims of understanding processes of cultural development through the generation of generalized laws. Thus in the introduction to *Man the Hunter* Lee and DeVore's (1968) proposition that the emergence of economic, social and ideological forms is as much a part of human evolution as developments in human anatomy and physiology, provides the context in which archaeological and anthropological approaches are seen to provide different forms of data on the same basic problems.

Within the UK, by contrast, the advent of the 'new' archaeology was accompanied by a conception of the relationship between archaeology and anthropology in rather different terms (cf. Gosden 1999, Hodder 1982a). While Clarke's 'analytic archaeology' shared many of the aims and objectives of Binford's processualism, his assertion that 'archaeology is archaeology is archaeology' (1968: 13), contrasted with Binford's view of 'anthropological archaeology'. Renfrew's 'social archaeology' (1984) was heavily influenced by American processualists such as Binford but also differed in highlighting the distinctiveness of an archaeological approach in terms of an emphasis on material culture. While Renfrew's (1973) edited volume *The Explanation of Culture Change* sought to bring archaeological and anthropological perspectives to bear on a set of common issues, the concluding remarks written by the structuralist anthropologist Edmund Leach serve to highlight how far apart – from an anthropological perspective, at least – these disciplines were imagined to be.

For Leach the search by processual archaeologists for general laws of cultural and social behaviour directly contradicted anthropological evidence for the infinite variability of social and cultural life, a view reflected in his candid assessment of the conference from which papers from the volume were drawn:

> All along contributors were making remarks that could only make sense if you were to take as given a unilinear theory of social development of a kind which the social anthropologists finally abandoned about forty years ago. As far as social anthropology is concerned, I appreciate your difficulty as archaeologists; you would like to use the data of ethnography to give fresh blood to your archaeological remnants. Used with great discretion I believe that ethnographic evidence can in fact help you to do this; but far too many of the participants at the seminar seemed to think that the analogies between ethnographic society and archaeological society are direct ... i.e. that 'primitive' societies from the 20th century can be treated as fossilized survivals from proto-historical or even palaeolithic times (Leach 1973: 761).

In this vein he denigrated the functionalism of such 'new' archaeology and the concomitant emphasis on economic subsistence, settlement patterns and demography, arguing these overlooked the more fundamental issue of what was 'in the minds of the actors' (1973: 769), namely, religion and politics.

Leach's critiques of the processual archaeology of the time were in many ways pertinent and despite his own assessment of the barriers to meaningful dialogue, his intervention was important in helping to push archaeological theory in new directions. Foreshadowing later post-processual archaeological critiques, he highlighted the problems of treating the ethnographic record as 'information' and of reducing 'primitive' contemporary societies to the status of fossilized survivals of an archaeological past. However in overstating the theoretical and methodological scope of anthropology (a point to which I return below), I suggest that Leach mistook the *perception* of deficit that archaeologists themselves articulated, with a literal absence of insight or understanding. Taking archaeological assessments of the 'partiality' of their data at face value, he overlooked the space that this *perception* creates for archaeological theorisation and imagination.

Whether or not we find the theories of processual archaeologists convincing is not really the point. What I want to highlight is rather the way in which an archaeological perception that kinship and philosophy are 'missing', opens up a space for ideas and data beyond the discipline. The middle range theory of processual archaeologists departs from earlier archaeological formulations such as those proposed by Childe and Hawkes in imagining ethnography not as a source of 'direct' analogies but as the basis upon which cultural universals could be derived. Nonetheless both constitute theoretical and analytical frameworks that effectively account for what archaeology is imagined to lack. Although the theoretical context had changed considerably, a holistic and systemic vision of society opened up archaeological interest in anthropology, whilst closing down anthropological interest in archaeology. Understanding society as a holistic entity, albeit one that was symbolically rather than functionally integrated, led to the anthropological perception of disciplinary self-sufficiency, leaving little space for archaeological ideas.

Against this backdrop, contributors to a conference that later appeared as a volume edited by Spriggs (1977a) sought to build a theoretical 'bridge'. Although different contributors had a range of perspectives on the form that this might take, the reconciliation of structuralism and Marxism was seen by many to provide a theoretical framework within which archaeological and anthropological perspectives could be reconciled. Spriggs, for example, advocated a form of structural Marxism suggesting that in contrast to the ahistorical structuralism of anthropologists such as Leach and Levi-Strauss this would create a more comprehensive theory, allowing the explanation of socio-cultural change in ways that 'could provide a useful framework for archaeologists, anthropologists and historians' (1977b: 5). In a similar vein Rowlands and Gledhill argued that in anthropology history was treated at best as 'background' and analysis of more dynamic social processes remained limited, and hence:

> At the present time ... the responsibility lies with archaeologists to develop theoretically the structural models that will be required to achieve recently stated aims concerning the explanation of long-term processes of change (1977: 155).

Marrying structuralist concerns with socially and culturally embedded systems of symbolisation and meaning with a Marxist concern with historical transformation, was thus seen by a number of British archaeologists of the late 1970s to create the theoretical context in which both archaeology and anthropology could contribute to the elucidation of long-term cultural change on the basis of equals. As with earlier paradigms, the development of a new theoretical framework came largely from within archaeology and was concerned to redress an existing relationship of theoretical inequality.

While Hodder's 'post-processual' or 'contextual' archaeology (1982a, 1982b) arose in a similar theoretical context, it took a rather different form. In critiquing the processual concern to develop universal laws of cultural change, Hodder drew extensively from anthropological theory and description. Yet anthropology was not seen (as it was for Binford) as a source of information from which to formulate empirically testable hypotheses relating to processes of cultural evolution. Rather ethnography was taken to constitute a heuristic resource, enabling archaeologists to step outside the western frameworks within which archaeological interpretation otherwise proceeds. In proposing that all interpretations of the past necessarily draw on theoretical and common sense assumptions of people in the present, Hodder implicitly recognised a disciplinary asymmetry: the present was knowable in ways that the past was not.

This provided the rationale for drawing on ethnographic analogies and undertaking ethno-archaeology 'in order to clothe the skeleton remains of the past in the flesh and blood of living, functioning, acting people' (1982b: 12). As such, Hodder continued to define archaeology partly in terms of anthropologically derived models of society,

by which archaeological data was seen to offer less than the complete picture. This perception of the missing subject (see Lucas, this volume) stimulated a renewed interest in the conditions under which analogies could legitimately be asserted between past and present societies. In contrast to earlier theorists, Hodder also highlighted the possibilities of such absences and gaps in their own right. In particular he argued that lacking direct access to people, archaeologists are forced to concern themselves with the non-discursive aspects of culture, leading to a unique perspective on social and cultural processes: 'material things can say things which words cannot or do not' (1982b: 207), Hodder suggested, arguing in a related way that, 'As archaeologists we are not digging up what people said and thought but we are digging up a particular type of expression, which, through its ambiguity and subtlety, is powerful and effective' (1982b: 207).

Archaeological understandings of the relationship between archaeology and anthropology have therefore taken a variety of forms, reflecting different perspectives on what the aims and theoretical objectives of these disciplines should be. This account provides an admittedly partial view that is intended to illustrate some of the assumptions that have informed the ways in which archaeologists and anthropologists have imagined their relationships to one another. While different theorists have located this difference in a range of ways, my suggestion is that archaeology has tended to be defined (by archaeologists as well as anthropologists) in terms that make it appear to lack the kinds of insights, knowledge or data that anthropology can provide. I am not proposing that there is any inherent reason why this has to be the case, nor am I suggesting that it could not be otherwise. Nonetheless the account highlights how the perception of archaeological deficit has acted as a stimulus to make explicit the distinctive nature of archaeological theories and practices.

Asymmetry re-considered

In his 'concluding remarks' discussed above, Leach (1973) explicates what he sees as some of the key disciplinary differences between archaeology and anthropology, in terms of a set of asymmetries. In particular he suggests that whilst anthropologists can observe the workings of social systems 'first hand', archaeologists are only capable of observing these on the basis of 'patterned residues' and hence their meaning must 'forever remain a mystery' (1973: 767). Archaeology, he suggests, is properly about the study of people, yet the nature of the archaeological record is such that most aspects of human behaviour remain absent: things may reflect the meanings that people give them but are not the meanings themselves; moreover since archaeological evidence is necessarily 'partial' many of these are lost. Thus archaeology's absence of people is seen as the basis of a theoretical asymmetry between the two: whilst anthropologists can study people directly, archaeologists can only study them on the basis of the things they left behind.

In the light of subsequent theoretical discussions, this view can be called into question on a number of different levels. In particular archaeologists, anthropologists and social studies of science have questioned both the absolute ontological separation of people and things (e.g. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, Ingold 2000, Latour 1999, Law 1994, Strathern 1988, Strathern 1990), and the idea that the material world simply reflects passively the meanings and ideas of society (e.g. Gell 1997, Miller 1987, Miller 1998). If the thoughts and ideas of people do not end at their corporeal limits (Bateson 1972, Ingold 2000) then Leach's characterisation of the distinction between archaeology and anthropology as that between the study of people and the study of things, seems problematic. And if the material world actively participates in the construction of meaning and the distribution of agency (e.g. Holtorf 2002, Knappett 2002, Latour 1993) then a methodology that focuses on material culture seems at least in theory to have as much to say about that meaning as one that focuses on the spoken words and actions of 'people' (Hicks in press). Recent calls for a 'symmetrical' archaeology (Shanks 2007, Webmore 2007, Witmore 2007) make precisely this point.

Moreover, whilst Leach characterises the archaeological record as 'partial', subsequent theoretical discussions call into question his assumption that anthropologists themselves have access to the kinds of social 'wholes' that his account seems to presuppose. If, as a number of anthropologists have argued (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Marcus 1998, Thornton 1988, Tyler 1986) the social 'whole' is an artefact of ethnographic description, as opposed to an actually existing empirical reality, then it would seem that Leach is guilty of conflating anthropological models, descriptions and theories with 'the people' these purport to explain. The archaeologist Groube (1977) makes a similar point about the abstraction necessarily entailed in ethnographic description, suggesting, after Durkheim, that 'the immobile man he studies is not man'. Seen in this light, anthropologists do not straightforwardly study 'people': they study the societies and cultures they belong to. As a comment on the process of synthesis and abstraction entailed in arriving at these analytic entities, Wagner suggested some time ago that in their representations of 'culture', anthropologists, 'keep the ideas, the quotations, the memoirs, the creations, and let the people go' (1975: 26).

Seen from this perspective it could be argued that anthropologists do not have a privileged position when it comes to studying people; they simply face a different set of interpretive issues. Whilst archaeologists may lament an absence of 'people', the presence of living, talking humans simply brings to light a different set of methodological and interpretive problems. Indeed the (broadly post-structuralist) writing of a number of anthropologists (e.g. Clifford 1986, Fortun 2001, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Rabinow 1986) has increasingly made some of these evident, through calling into question the means by which anthropologists elicit and represent the meanings and beliefs of those they study. In place of the image of the social 'whole', anthropologists have pointed to the partial and selective view that ethnographic fieldwork necessarily entails, to the ways in which the subjectivity of the fieldworker conditions the nature of his/her findings,

and to the necessarily selective process by which disparate utterances, situations and acts are pieced together through writing and analysis. From this perspective it would seem that rather than a relationship of asymmetry there in fact exists one of difference. Yet to argue in this way that disciplinary imbalance is illusory, is to fail to account for the importance of this *sense* of imbalance and the theoretical and practical consequences this has had (and arguably continues to have) for archaeologists and anthropologists respectively.

If archaeologists confront a different set of interpretive and methodological problems then they have also developed a distinct set of theoretical 'solutions'. Over the years, archaeologists have made these explicit in a variety of different ways, suggesting for example, that an archaeological perspective leads to a unique understanding of processes of social evolution (e.g. Binford 1962), long-term change (e.g. Rowlands and Gledhill 1977), and material culture (e.g. Hodder 1982b). In these various ways, archaeology has brought unique insights on the wider issue of what it means to be human.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that these ideas are inherently less interesting, significant or valid than the kinds of theories produced by anthropologists. Rather my suggestion is that many of these developments have been driven precisely by the *sense* that archaeology lacks certain kinds of knowledge. This sense of deficiency or lack has taken a variety of different forms. Clearly not all of these are equally useful and I am not straightforwardly advocating any one of them. My point is that much archaeological thinking constitutes a particular knowledge of absence, that is not the same as an absence of knowledge.

In making this point I wish to draw an analogy between archaeologists and the Baktamin of Papua New Guinea, for whom Strathern (re-interpreting the work of Frederik Barth) has suggested: 'the knowledge that they are lost is not, so to speak, lost knowledge, it is knowledge about absence, about forgetting and about an unrecoverable background' (1991: 97–8). Confronted by a sense of loss, Baktamin initiators, she suggests, are forced into making the knowledge that they retain work, not by filling in the gaps, but by borrowing from the knowledge of their neighbours and by making that which remains do the differentiating work it has to. In this way they are forced to make what is to hand carry the marks of a lost complexity:

> Perhaps seeing their own activities like so many particles of dust against a huge background of ignorance is what spurs their efforts. This ignorance is not of the unknowable: it is of what has been dropped from their repertoire, the intervening particles that once completed what is now left (1991: 98).

With this image of knowledge in mind, we might seek to reappraise the idea that the 'partiality' of archaeological data is the problem that many have imagined it to be. Although archaeological thinking has often been premised on an illusory conception of the 'completeness' of anthropologically informed models of society, the attendant sense of archaeological 'partiality' has been productive. As the preceding account demonstrates,

it has acted as a wellspring for theoretical innovation, prompting archaeologists to re-imagine their own discipline in new terms and to critically appraise archaeological practices and assumptions; it has led to forms of analysis and theorising that are explicit in the acknowledgement of their own limits; and it has led to a focus on aspects of social life that are often overlooked.

As such, the *perception* of theoretical deficit has led to a kind of disciplinary reflexivity that anthropology has tended to lack. While many anthropologists would argue that the very strength of the discipline lies in its capacity to use other people's views of the world as a way of unpicking its own epistemological foundations, such openness has been largely absent in anthropological engagements with archaeology. Going against the grain of prevailing thought in both disciplines, my suggestion is that the perception of disciplinary asymmetry has actually been far more of a problem for anthropology than it has for archaeology.

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3

Triangulating absence: exploring the fault lines between archaeology and anthropology

Gavin Lucas

The cracks beneath the surface: inter-disciplinary fault-lines

Archaeology is a new discipline at the University of Iceland; when the programme was started in 2002, archaeology was placed with the Department of History in the Humanities Faculty. Recently, the university was in the process of re-structuring its academic divisions and in this re-organization, archaeology considered moving to join anthropology in the Social Sciences. I mention these events because the institutional location of archaeology raises issues of disciplinary affiliation for any university, even if other, totally unrelated reasons might weigh equally or more so in such contexts. In our discussions in Iceland, opinions varied on the intellectual kinship of archaeology, but mostly they were drawn towards three predictable options: history, anthropology/ethnology or geology/geography. In practice, the responses were strongest from the first two, one person arguing that archaeology *is* history, and another suggesting that archaeology is part of the fourfold field of anthropology. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the proponents of these extremes were not archaeologists, but a historian and anthropologist respectively.

In many ways such debates profit us little because disciplinary connections (or boundaries for that matter) are multiple and shifting; besides which, at the end of the day, most of us like to think that 'archaeology is archaeology is archaeology', in the oft-cited words of David Clarke (1973). It is always a dangerous game to define what distinguishes one discipline from the next – exceptions can always be found, and in these times of dismantling disciplinary borders, such attempts are doubly problematic. Throughout this paper I have largely chosen to keep the language of disciplinary identity but I would hope the reader will see that the issues are really about different modes of scientific operation; as a generalization, different disciplines have different modes of operation and if I use disciplinary labels as shorthand for these modes, this in part reflects the historical traditions of the disciplines. In this paper, I want to explore a few of the connections between archaeology and anthropology along a very specific path; a similar discussion could be had about archaeology's relationship to history which would raise other issues, but that is another story.

It would be difficult, even foolish to deny the extensive overlap between many of the

goals and broader theoretical frameworks of archaeology and anthropology. However, I would like to suggest that such broader conceptual similarities – which indeed have a long history – conceal a troubling rift between the two disciplines at an empirical level: the differences between ethnographic and archaeological contexts. My argument here is fairly simple: by stressing the broader conceptual similarities while ignoring the empirical differences, one is faced with precisely a situation where archaeology can appear unequal or asymmetrical with respect to anthropology, simply because the archaeological record is encouraged to do work it is not up to. I have no wish to erect a barrier between archaeology and anthropology. Rather I examine the nature of the possible bridges – and blockages – that exist between the two disciplines. Yet, I would suggest that such similarities between the subjects have been forged largely in the context of abstract, over-arching perspectives (which doubtless extend beyond archaeology and anthropology to encompass all the human and social sciences) in a top-down approach. This ignores the empirical nature of each discipline and favours homogenization, even conventionalization (Murray, in Lucas 2007: 162–3). In contrast, a bottom-up approach maintains the heterogeneity of each subject while creating the possibility of empirically traceable connections; following Latour, one could also characterize this as an attempt to 'flatten' the discourse between the disciplines in order to avoid easy abstractions that paste over the empirical rifts, rather than work at suturing them (Latour 2005).

I call the differences between the archaeological and ethnographic contexts rifts or fractures because it is the discontinuities that I want to emphasize here rather than the continuities. By stressing discontinuity, it is hoped that any links can be given a more secure hold. While the sections below discuss the fractures, they equally attempt to find ways to repair them, producing a creative tension. My aim is to avoid a situation where such discontinuities are transformed into an asymmetry, by keeping my discourse as 'flat' as possible. These fractures are manifold but in order to put some kind of limits to this discussion, my focus here will be specifically on the differences between archaeology on the one hand and on the other, the branch of anthropology concerned with material culture. This is simply because this is the sub-field of anthropology which is the closest, empirically, to archaeology. Both share the same ostensible object of study, i.e. material culture – and it is the empirical differences that concern me here. Wherever I refer to the terms anthropology or ethnography in this text, I will therefore be primarily referring to an ethnography of material culture, unless otherwise stated. This latter should not necessarily be equated with the general inter-disciplinary field of material cultures studies (as centred at UCL; e.g. see Miller 1998; Buchli 2002), for in many ways the point of this paper could alternatively be defined as an exploration into the discontinuities of such a broad field as material culture studies. In the following three sections, I will examine the sites of three fractures between archaeology and ethnography as they concern material culture.

Missing persons: the absent subject

One of the experiences one has when excavating a well-preserved site is the feeling of emptiness – even though you may be surrounded by fellow diggers, to work in a space with high standing walls, floors and internal features engenders an impression of being in someone else's space, where that someone is absent – that is, the people who once built and inhabited this space however many years ago. One gets the same feeling as a tourist walking around sites like Pompeii or Herculaneum or even more recent ghost towns of the 20th century like Chernobyl or Oradour. With varying degrees of effort however, the feeling can be elicited from almost any archaeological site or find, such as holding a 10,000 year old flint axe that was made by another person and is the only testament to their existence. This experience of emptiness, of lack, becomes articulated into the more dispassionate, conventional goal of archaeology: to get at 'the Indian behind the artefact' (Braidwood 1958: 734).

Perhaps the first and most apparent difference between archaeology and an ethnography of material culture is this question of the missing person. This creates something of an ostensible reversal of goals: while archaeology conventionally tries to get to people *through* things, an ethnography of material culture, superficially at least, tries to get to things *through* people.[1] This reversal of the proximate and ultimate subjects of archaeology and ethnography has a certain irony but also a certain asymmetry; for the ethnographer, both terms (people and things) are present, but for the archaeologist, the ultimate term (people) is always missing. One of the ways, in fact probably the most common way archaeologists have dealt with this absent subject is to conflate it with another, equally absent but also abstract subject where the goals of archaeology and ethnography converge: Culture, or Society (or any variation thereof such as Identity, Consumption, etc). As Kent Flannery put it, the aim of archaeology is to get at the *system* behind both the Indian and the artifact (Flannery 1967: 120). In this sense, both archaeology and ethnography are chasing abstract subjects, entities that occupy a different ontological plane to their empirical field of people and things (Figure 3.1). Whether one agrees that there is a final, shared goal where the two disciplines converge or not is not the primary issue here; rather it is the fact that for archaeologists, the absence of people is somehow rescued (and thus its relevance suppressed) by this ultimate reference, a social or cultural abstraction.

So what are the consequences of the absent subject in archaeology? In some ways, the answer to this question can be found in the history of theoretical debate in archaeology since the 1950s. Writing in 1954, Christopher Hawkes' 'ladder of inference' linked the opposition of materialism and idealism to the distinction between things and people creating an epistemological scale, where knowledge about past peoples through things was most secure at the bottom of the ladder with materialist explanations such as economy and technology and least viable when it came to understanding past ideas and beliefs (Hawkes 1954). Another way of framing this problem in North America was in

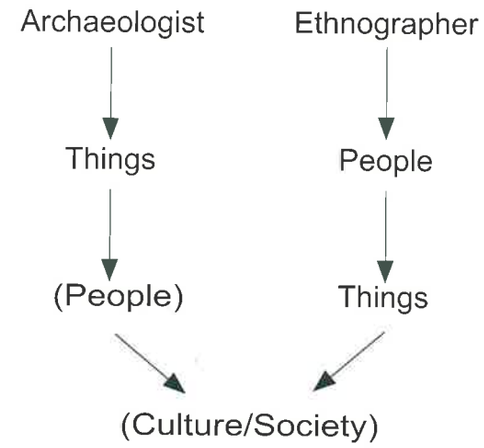

Figure 3.1. The intentional structure of archaeology and anthropology; bracketed terms denote empirical absence.

terms of an interpretive dilemma: archaeology performs best when it is exploring the formal and physical properties of objects through typology and material science, but this also says very little about the people who made these things. Yet as soon as one wants to go beyond this kind of 'artefact physics', one also loses any firm ground to validate interpretation (DeBoer and Lathrap 1979: 103; Wylie 1989). Despite these doubts over the limits of archaeological inference, since the 1960s archaeologists have been pushing ever wider the horizon of what things can reveal about people, scaling and ultimately discarding Hawkes' ladder. In this respect, a number of critical ideas emerged which restructured the disciplinary intentions, as depicted in Figure 3.1.

The first idea is crystallized in the work of Hodder in the 1980s with the notion of material culture as both meaningfully constituted and active. Hodder helped to develop the 'linguistic turn' within archaeology, arguing that ideologies or cosmologies can be read from material culture; he also stressed that things are not simply inert matter, reflecting the intentions and actions of people but mutually constitutive of such actions and intentions (Hodder 1982). Objects become agents. The second idea, largely coming through gender and queer theory, is almost the inverse – turning people into objects, by focusing on the embodiment of people, and how their identity and actions are inextricable from their physical form – and how the boundaries between the body and material culture are fluid and transgressive rather than stable and fixed (e.g. Meskell 1996). The third and final idea is the most recent, and comes through the development of symmetrical archaeology by Shanks, Olsen and others, influenced by Latour, where the very distinction between people and things is challenged and in its place, more

hybrid collectives are proposed (see the recent collection of papers in the journal *World Archaeology* volume 39(4)). If one accepts these arguments, then clearly the articulation expressed at the beginning of this section is misleadingly simplistic; archaeologists do not aim to get at people *through* things any more than ethnographers try to get at things *through* people, since the very separation is dubious if not false. The absence of people is then, in itself, not damning – in the first place, people are present (as bodies or remnants of bodies), but more importantly, the absence of people is *potentially* no different to the absence of any thing which does not preserve, such as organic materials and so on. The fragmentary nature of the archaeological record should not overstate the absence of people over the absence of other things. Symmetry is restored – not just between people and things, but between archaeology and ethnography. Or is it?

From statics to dynamics: what happened in prehistory

The notion that both people and things share agency and embodiment, that what really matters is the way in which agency is distributed within collectives or how people and things constitute each other in practice are ideas eminently suited for exploration in ethnographic contexts. The ethnographer can observe such interactions, can observe the performativity of people and things; if performance or practice is the site where people and things are constituted, then ethnographers have a front row seat. The archaeologist on the other hand, is not only not in the front row, she or he is not even in the theatre; they do not observe practice or performance, they have to infer it from the arrangement of things and bodies left lying on the stage which constitute the archaeological record. They arrive after the performance is over. There is a real difference between a skeleton and a living human being, between objects in action and objects lying inert, buried under the soil. It appears as if we have just substituted one absence for another – performance for people.

This second fracture is a traditional one for archaeologists insofar as it can be mapped onto the classic distinction of statics and dynamics articulated by Binford (1981; 1983). Binford argued that the principal problem facing archaeologists was how to infer dynamic processes from a static archaeological record; his solution, the Rosetta Stone of archaeological translation, was middle range theory which uses actualistic studies, particularly ethno-archaeology, to create bridges between dynamics and statics. However one judges the merits of middle range theory – and it has been hotly contested (e.g. Kosso 1991; Tschauner 1996) – it does not alter the basic temporal relation of the archaeologist to their data. Ethnography and even ethno-archaeology observe events in motion – observe change – while archaeologists can only infer it from spatial configurations of matter. If we want to find a way to cross the divide between the ethnographic and archaeological records, we have to deal with this problem of change.

One solution is to argue that the rate of change inferable from the archaeological record is quite different to that in ethnography, because of the different tempos – archaeology deals with slow or long-term processes often imperceptible at the level of human experience. Indeed, it has been argued that the nature of the archaeological record is such that it necessarily entails such a conclusion (Bailey 1981). Such a solution then, questions the idea that archaeologists and ethnographers are looking at the same kinds of phenomena; if they are not, then the ostensible asymmetry between archaeology and ethnography indicated in the theatrical metaphor which opens this section is open to doubt (see also Yarrow, this volume). The lateness of archaeologists to a performance is not so much an obstacle to understanding but is an advantage, insofar as it allows one to have a different temporal perspective, which is impossible for the ethnographer. For even though the ethnographer can directly observe change, this is confined to a comparatively small temporal frame; traditional ethnographies accentuated this with an emphasis on synchronic studies, but even the more diachronic or historical ethnographies which emerged in the later twentieth century are still relatively restricted in time scale, compared to archaeology.

However, even if such arguments are plausible, they do not resolve the original problem. In fact they accentuate it: archaeology, unlike ethnography, does not observe change, it only infers it, at whatever scale it happens to unfold. The first step towards a realistic resolution to this problem is to abandon the original distinction between statics and dynamics. It takes little imagination to realise that the ethnographic record is not exclusively defined by things happening – just as often as not, there is stasis. Nothing happens in a locked store room. To be sure, this is partly a question of perspective – some things happen much slower than others, often too slow to be perceived and of course periods of stasis are always temporary, even if they can last a relatively long time. But then the same applies to the archaeological record – it is never static, as Schiffer reminds us, but always undergoing transformation of some kind (Schiffer 1987). If the static-dynamic distinction is no longer helpful, especially in distinguishing the archaeological from the ethnographic context, then it opens the way for a new rapprochement between archaeology and ethnography. This comes by re-considering the nature of material collectives. Not only should we break down the distinction between people and things (as discussed in the last section), we also need to break down the distinction between objects and events.[2] This separation of object and event lies at the heart of our conventional characterization of archaeological inference, which depends on the distinction of static objects from their dynamic context. The one has survived (static object), the other has not (dynamic context). If however, one argues for the inseparability of objects and events, then the issue is not about how objects act/perform, but rather about the distribution of the *power* to act/perform within and between collectives. It is more like exploring the entropy or inertia in material organizations, the *latent* rather than manifest side of action or performance (Lucas 2008).

A room, with nobody inside and where nothing happens, is still actively charged – its material configuration gives it certain propensities for resisting or engendering change,

which is not simply about the physical properties of entropy (i.e. decay or preservation) but cultural properties too. To re-align the British traffic system or electrical system to continental configurations would meet resistances of quite a different scale to re-aligning shoe or clothing sizes. These propensities are, in principle, just as observable in the archaeological record as in the ethnographic present, and reinforce symmetry between material culture in the archaeological and ethnographic records. Rather than inferring dynamic events from static things, archaeology can explore the latent forces that bind things into material assemblages or collectives.

Doubling the present: the archaeologist and their object

However, while this may have removed the problem of observing events or change as a site of difference between archaeology and ethnography (or at least relocated it onto another distinction, that between latent and manifest agency), it does not remove the problem of a temporal fracture between present and past. If the last section partially sutured the rift between the temporalities of material culture in archaeological versus ethnographic contexts, in this section one faces the temporality of the relationship between the respective disciplines and their subject. Ethnographers exist contemporaneously with their object while archaeologists are always out-of-phase, existing in an anachronous rather than synchronous relationship to their object. As Edmund Leach once suggested, archaeologists are always too late (Leach 1973). To continue with the theatrical metaphor of the last section, while both an ethnographer and archaeologist can study the latent performance of an empty stage, the difference is that the ethnographer knows that someone will or might be coming on to stage any minute, whereas the archaeologist knows that everyone has already left the building. This might seem contradicted in archaeologies of the contemporary past where archaeologists study contemporary society (the classic example being Rathje's Garbage Project – see Rathje and Murphy 1992; also Buchli and Lucas 2001), but in a sense this temporal anachronism is essential to the archaeological process. Indeed, the very act of archaeological intervention guarantees this insofar as the site is put under a form of temporal quarantine. This is why such archaeologies of supermodernity work best on sites of disaster – sites which have undergone a sudden and rapid change leading to abandonment, catapulting them into a past which is yet still contemporary (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008). But such archaeologies of the contemporary past are largely archaeologies of destruction not because destruction is a condition of supermodernity, but because such archaeologies can only effectively operate where a sudden and rapid abandonment of a site has happened. Disaster is not a characteristic of 'our time', but rather defines the possibility of an archaeology (as opposed to ethnography) of 'our time'.

The difference between material culture in an archaeological as opposed to a strictly ethnographic context, revolves around this issue of temporal fracture between researcher

and their subject. However, even this is not quite so simple, for in fact an archaeologist is a contemporary of their object of study as much as the ethnographer – these remains, these artefacts exist in the archaeologist's present, otherwise the archaeologist could not study them. Binford said as much, many years ago (Binford 1983: 19). The difference lies not so much in the temporal fracture between the researcher and their object, but in the temporal fracture within the object itself in archaeology: these remains exist in the present but they are also of the past. This fracture creates something of a paradox for archaeology but also one that has obvious parallels in everyday life: memory objects (e.g. see Olivier 2008 for an interesting discussion of this theme). Souvenirs, keepsakes, mementoes – in fact almost any object – have memories attached to them: they exist in the present but are of (and hence evoke) another present, an absent present we call the past. The same is true of archaeological finds. Can archaeology be likened to an ethnography of an absent present?

Ironically, this recalls Fabian's charge against traditional ethnography and its 'denial of coevalness'; that is, a refusal to see the ethnographic subject as existing in the same time as the ethnographer (1983: 31). While ethnography may have moved on, with archaeology this separation of two presents – the archaeological present and past present – remains a fundamental premise. The troubling implications of this 'doubling of the present' are brought out when we look at the respective modes of operation for archaeology and ethnography. The two disciplines used to share a similar practice, that of collecting things. However, in the transition towards a professional and academic discipline over the late 19th and early 20th century, the two subjects diverged; ethnography became defined primarily by a mode of intervention called participant observation, while archaeology developed principles of stratigraphic excavation (Lucas 2010). Where ethnography dropped its interest in things, archaeology continued to collect, only under increasingly more rigorous and systematic conditions. What is significant is that even with the return to material culture within anthropology since the late 1980s, it has maintained its distanced position with respect to things, studying material culture through participant observation rather than collection. The reasons for this divergence in modes of intervention are complex (see Lucas 2009), but not of immediate concern; more relevant are the questions of what this difference means and how it is significant.

If one looks at collecting in the context of early ethnography, what is interesting is how conflicting value systems created tensions for the proto-ethnographer. Objects became ethnographic artefacts primarily through an act of exchange – commonly but not exclusively a commodity transaction. This set up potential conflicts of meaning around objects as they embodied multiple values according to the contexts they circulated in prior to becoming ethnographic artefacts (e.g. see Thomas 1991; Gosden and Knowles 2001). The same problematic status now attaches to archaeological objects that may have come through the (illicit) antiquities trade and there is an explicit ambivalence about how an archaeologist should respond to such artefacts. Now it may be that ethnographers

simply do not need to collect objects to conduct the kind of material culture studies that thrive today, but this does not negate the fact that collecting would still be highly problematic. Issues of ownership and appropriation weigh much more heavily on objects given/received through an act of exchange, than objects found through an act of excavation. This is not to ignore the fact that even within archaeology, questions of ownership are not at stake; they clearly are, but this operates in a different sphere. Because by and large, ethnographic objects are acquired through acts of exchange while archaeological objects are acquired through acts of discovery, it sets up a very different chain of relations between people and things.

It is difficult to reconcile this difference. The only way one could do that, is to argue that the archaeologist, in the act of discovery, establishes some kind of posthumous relationship to the long dead people of the culture or society under investigation, so that discovery is in fact, a concealed or special form of exchange. In terms of the social function of archaeology, this is not so strange – even if the objects have been forgotten in an absolute sense, the archaeological operation can be viewed as a form of memory work nonetheless, a redemptive act on behalf of the dead (Tarlow 2006). But in arguing this – a not implausible case, since the issue meets concrete expression in the context of unearthing the skeletons of these same people – we are forced to re-introduce the concept of the absent subject with which we started this discussion and as a consequence, we are locked in a circle.

This circularity is reinforced theoretically when considering the nature of archaeological objects as memory objects. Any memory-object, because of its split temporality (existing *in* the present but *of* the past), is also ineluctably linked to a split subject – either the same subject as they once were and as they now are (e.g. mementos from my childhood), or different subjects such as dead ancestors and living descendants (e.g. mementos of my dead father). Now in most cases, archaeology is not an excavation into one's own past, though in principle this is perfectly feasible; so with archaeology, the artefact as a split memory-object also entails a double subject – the archaeologist in the present and the people in the past. While the one is indeed contemporary with the object of archaeology, the object itself surely implies another, missing subject; in short, an absent present entails an absent subject.

Triangulating absence

In exploring the empirical differences between the archaeological and ethnographic contexts, I have pursued the sites of three fractures: the absent subject, the problem of change and anachronism. As this discussion has unfolded, these three fractures appear to be interlinked in important ways, and in fact may even be locked into a triangular relation to each other. In stepping back, these three fractures could be redefined as variations on a single theme: absence. The absent subject, the absent event and the

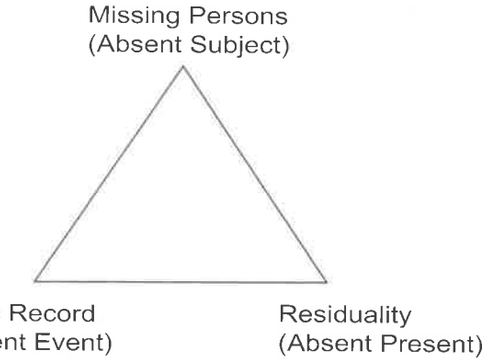

Figure 3.2. Triangulating Absence: the threefold fracture between archaeology and anthropology.

absent present, each term dialectically unfolding from the previous one (Figure 3.2). The absent subject referred to the missing people in archaeology and how conventionally, archaeology tries to get at the 'Indian behind the artefact'. The absent event refers to the fact that archaeologists do not observe change or things happening in time, they have to infer it – infer events from material residues of events, infer time from space. Finally, the absent present refers to the fact that the archaeologist is only partially a contemporary of the object of her study – that in fact, this object, as a residue, has a split temporality which entails an absent present, which we conventionally call 'the past'.

This absence, which lies at the heart of archaeology, is in a way what will always separate it from ethnography. But such differences should not be read as asymmetries; in a way, the problem of asymmetry emerges precisely when archaeology tries to mimic other disciplines such as anthropology as if the empirical and operational differences were unimportant. One cannot escape these absences which haunt archaeology, and rather than deny them or downplay them, archaeology needs to seriously engage with what they mean for the discipline. For they surely suggest important ontological differences between the archaeological and ethnographic records, which must impact on the sorts of narratives and interpretations the two disciplines can present. The first place to start might be to jettison the very term 'absence' which in itself conceivably adds to this perception of asymmetry. It served a useful purpose in this paper by highlighting distinctions, but new terms may come to take on more relevance, such as those of latent and manifest agency. If there is one point I would like to repeat in ending this paper, it is that for all the shared aims and ideas drawn from a broader body of social theory, each discipline has different modes of operation, which relate to the nature of their immediate subject. While the cross-disciplinary rise of material culture studies has been intellectually important, the field is not homogeneous. The practical and empirical differences between two disciplines like archaeology and ethnography should not be

overlooked and in fact, in paying closer attention to them, it may be possible to build much better bridges. At the very least, it removes the possibility of asymmetry rendered as inequality, and may help to forge new and mutual forms of respect.

Notes

1 This is of course somewhat of a simplification – in ethnographies of material culture, both people and things are equally present to the observer and it is their relationship that is of primary concern, even if it is things which are often foregrounded as the primary subject (e.g. see Henare *et al.* 2006).

2 Here the philosophical literature is of great relevance, particularly Whitehead ([1920] 2004).

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11

No more ancient; no more human: the future past of archaeology and anthropology

Tim Ingold

Introduction

The year is 2053, and the Association of Social Anthropologists is celebrating its centennial with a big conference.[1] As scholars are wont to do on such occasions, a number of contributors to the conference have been dwelling on the past century of the discipline with a mixture of wistfulness, curiosity and hubris, wondering why their predecessors hung on with such tenacity to forms of argumentation that now seem rather quaint. Everyone recognises that the title of the Association is a relic of past times. Social Anthropology is not what it was, for it is distinguished neither by a preoccupation with social phenomena, nor by the axiom that such phenomena are the exclusive preserve of a categorical humanity. The discipline has become, rather, a principled inquiry into the conditions and potentials of life in a world peopled by beings whose identities are established not by species membership but by relational accomplishment.

By this year of 2053, the term 'Archaeology', too, has become an anachronism, for the subject that still goes by that name has long since lost its association with antiquity. It is not that archaeologists have ceased to dig down for evidence of past lives, any more than ethnographers have ceased to participate in the lives that are going on around them, in what we call the present. But they have dropped the pretence that what is past is any older, or more ancient, than the present, recognising that the occurrences of the past are not deposited at successive moments while time moves on, but are themselves constitutive of that very movement. Between Archaeology and Social Anthropology, then, there is no longer any difference of principle. They have, in effect, converged upon a science of life whose overriding concern is to *follow what is going on*, within dynamic fields of relationships wherein the forms of beings and things are generated and held in place.

No more ancient

In short, both the *archaeo-* of archaeology and the *anthropo-* of anthropology have lost their former appeal. To show why this has come about, I shall examine these disciplinary

prefixes in more depth. Starting with *archaeo-*, we could pose the following question. What does it mean to ask how old something is? Or to put it another way, what kinds of assumptions do we make about a thing for such a question even to make sense? How old is a mountain, a river, a stone? How old is the wind, a cloud, a raindrop, or an ocean wave? How old is a tree, a person, a building, a pot, a piece of furniture? 'Ah, that writing desk', you exclaim with some relief, 'I can tell you *exactly* how old it is'. For you are a specialist in antiques, and an expert in such matters. A little bit of detective work allows you to deduce when it was made. Let us say that it dates from 1653. Remembering that we are now in the year 2053, you conclude that the desk is exactly four hundred years old.

But if we judge the age of a thing by the elapsed time from the moment it was made to the present, does this mean that for us to ask how old it is, the thing must at some time have been *manufactured*? Is 'how old is that?' a question that can only be asked of artefacts? Even if we answer, perhaps with some unease, in the affirmative, this only begs a host of further questions. The desk is made of oak, which was once hewn from a living tree and well seasoned before being cut into planks. Why should we not say that the desk is as old as the oak? After all, in substance if not in form, there is no more, and no less to the desk than the wood of which it is made. Then how old is the oak? The tree was not manufactured; it grew. Is it as old, then, as the acorn from which it sprang? Is the oak, in other words, older than the wood from which the desk was made? Then again, the desk has not remained unaltered by use. Generations of writers have worn and scratched its surface. Here and there, the wood has cracked and split, due to fluctuations of temperature and humidity, or been restored with filler and glue. How can we distinguish those alterations that result from use and repair, from those that are intrinsic to the process of manufacture?

The answer, of course, is that something is deemed to have been made at the point when its form matches a conception that is supposed to have pre-existed in the mind of a maker. The notion that making entails the bringing together of a conceptual form (*morphe*) and material substance (*hyle*) has, ever since Aristotle, been one of the mainstays of the western intellectual tradition. What goes for the writing desk also goes for the pot: when we ask how old it is, we count its age from the moment when form and substance were united in the allegedly finished thing. The clay, we suppose, is shaped in the potter's hands to a final form which, once hardened and fired, it retains in perpetuity. Even if the pot is now smashed, we identify its 'finishing' with the instant of original formation, not of fragmentation and discard.

So it is with the building, though at this point we might feel rather less sure of ourselves. What a difference, in English, the article makes! Building is an activity; it is what builders do. But as soon as we add the article and speak of *a* building, or even of *the* building, the activity is abruptly brought to a close. Movement is stilled, and where people had once laboured with tools and materials, there now stands a monument to human endeavour, solid and complete. Yet as all inhabitants know, buildings are never

really finished. 'A "building"', observes the inventor and designer Stewart Brand, 'is always building and rebuilding' (Brand 1994: 2). The work of building goes on, in the day-to-day activities of repair and maintenance, and in the face of the inundations of animals, plants and fungi, and the corrosive effects of wind, rain and sunshine.

If, for this reason, it is difficult to state with conviction how old a building is, how much more difficult it must be once we turn from buildings to people! Of course, if you ask me how old I am, I can tell you right away. I was born in 1948, which means that since the year is 2053, I am presently 105 years old. But wait. In all probability, I died a few years ago, though I cannot tell you exactly when. Why, then, did you not start counting from the day I died? Why do we always count how old people are from their date of birth rather than death? Surely, at least for as long as people are still alive, they are not yet finished. Just as buildings are always building and rebuilding, and trees always budding and shooting, are not people always peopling, throughout their lives and even thereafter?

I think there is a reason why we count the years from a person's birth rather than from his or her death. It is the same reason why we count the age of the writing desk from when it was made, and the age of the oak from the germination of the acorn. There is a sense in which we believe that the person is finished even before his or her life in the world has begun. Though we conventionally date this finishing moment to birth, it would be more accurate to date it to that of conception. Indeed it is no accident that the inauguration of a new life should be known as a moment when the child is *conceived*, since it conforms to a logic identical to that of the Aristotelian model of making. According to this logic, a person is created in advance – or, as we say, *procreated* – through the unification of a set of ideal attributes with bodily substance. And if we ask where these attributes come from, the answer that social anthropologists would have provided, up to and even following the first decades of the twenty-first century, would have been: *by descent*. That is, each generation receives the rudiments of person-composition from their ancestors and passes them on, with greater or lesser fidelity, to their descendants. But the life of every person is expended *within* each generation, in being the person he or she is. For as we have seen, all the creative work has been done in advance, through the mutation and recombination of transmitted attributes.

What I have described is the essence of the *genealogical model*, namely that persons and things are virtually constituted, independently and in advance of their material instantiation in the lifeworld, by way of the transmission of ready-made but mutable attributes in an ancestor-descendant sequence (Ingold 2000: 136). I hope to have shown how closely this model is linked both to the idea that constitution involves the unification of form and substance, and to the possibility of asking – of both persons and things – how old they are. Returning to my original list, which ran from mountains, rivers and stones, through winds, clouds, raindrops and waves, to trees, people, buildings, pots and furniture, the tendency in thinking about antiquity has always been to start at the end and to push back as far as one can go. It is to think

of things early in the list, like raindrops and clouds, as though they were part of the furniture.[2] Yet already with people and buildings, we run into the problem that this way of thinking cannot countenance how people build buildings, and buildings people, throughout their lives. Once we move on to things placed earlier in the list, such problems become insurmountable.

We are talking here of things that grow and wither, swell and abate, flow and ebb, whose forms emerge from the movements and circulations of earth, air and water. Yet these things are as much a part of the inhabited world as people and artefacts. One of the oddities of archaeology, as late as the first decade of the twenty-first century, was that it imagined the entire material world, barring the people themselves, as furnished accommodation. It was as though people, buildings and the artefacts to be found in them comprised *all there is*. In such a world, however, there would be no air to breathe, no sunlight to fuel organic growth, no moisture or soil to support it. Without these things, life would be impossible. And it was at the very moment when it began to dawn on archaeologists that the world they had imagined was crippled by inertia, but when they were still prisoners of the idea that things are constituted through the unification of form and substance (as in the classic concept of 'material culture'), that they came up with the notion of *agency*. The word was introduced to fix an insoluble conundrum: how could anything happen in a world of solid and immutable forms? The answer was to endow them with an intrinsic, but ultimately mysterious, capacity to act. Huge efforts and millions of words were expended in the futile search for this capacity. Fortunately, we can now put all that behind us.

For what has taken place, during the first half of the twenty-first century, has been a genuine sea-change in our thinking. One way of putting it would be to say that where before, the tendency was to start from the end of our list and work backwards, we would now – in 2053 – be more inclined to start from the beginning and work forwards. This is to think of a world not of finished entities, each of which can be attributed to a novel conception, but of processes that are *continually carrying on*, and of forms as the more or less durable envelopes or crystallisations of these processes. The shape of the mountain or the banks of the stream attest to processes of erosion that are still going on now, as they have done in the past. The rounded forms of pebbles on a shingle beach arise from their abrasion under the constant pounding of the waves, which are still breaking on the shore, even as sea-levels have risen and fallen. Ocean waves have the same basic forms now that they did hundreds, thousands or even millions of years ago, as do storm clouds and raindrops. We may say of these forms that they *persist*. Of a pot, however, or even of a body buried in a peat bog, we would say that it is *preserved*. It is the focus on persistence rather than preservation that distinguishes current archaeology from that of earlier times.

It would be fair to say that traditional archaeology was more interested in pots and bog bodies than in mountains or clouds. For only such things as were deemed to have been preserved qualified for entry in what was called the 'archaeological record'. It is

a record comprised of fragments that, having once broken off from the flow of time, recede ever further from the horizon of the present. They become older and older, held fast to the moment, while the rest of the world moves on. But by the same token, the things of the archaeological record do not persist. For whatever persists carries on, advancing on the cusp of time. Waves continue to break, raindrops to form and to fall upon the mountainside, filling streams that continue to flow. In focusing on such things – persistent but not preserved, experientially ever-present yet ever absent from the record – current archaeology is interested not in their antiquity, not in how old they are, but in what we could call their 'pastness',[3] recognising them as carryings on along temporal trajectories that continue in the present. From the fixed standpoint of antiquity, what carries on also passes, and is thus ephemeral. If our interest is with pastness, however, it is the things that carry on that last, whereas the enduring constituents of the archaeological record, comprising the cast-offs of time and history, are ephemeral.

Persistent things have no point of origin. Rather, they seem to be originating all the time. For contemporary archaeologists, this is fundamentally the way things are. The world we inhabit, they say, *is* originating all the time, or undergoing what we might call 'continuous birth' (Ingold 2006: 3–4). And if that is true of mountains, rivers and clouds, then why should it not also be true of persons? Instead of comparing persons to buildings, pots and writing desks, and concluding that all are endowed with agency, we could compare them to mountains, rivers and clouds, recognising that all are immersed in the continuous birth of the world. This is to think of the life of the person, too, as a process without beginning or end, punctuated but not originated or terminated by key events such as birth and death, and all the other things that happen in between. And it is to find the locus of creativity not in the novelty of conception, to be unified with substance, but in the form-generating potentials of the life process, or in a word, in *growth*. And pushing this way of thinking as far as we can, we could wonder whether it might not give us a better understanding of things like buildings, pots and furniture. In so far as their forms, too, emerge within processes of material flow and transformation, cannot they also be said to grow? Even our writing desk could be considered as a phase in the pastness of oak!

No more human

This is the point at which to return from the *archaeo-* of archaeology to the *anthropo-* of anthropology. I have already connected the time-honoured archaeological concern with antiquity, with how old things are, to the genealogical model of classical social anthropology. Of course the genealogical model was never *confined* to social anthropology, but was rather characteristic of thought across a range of disciplines. One of these was biology, reconfigured in the wake of the Darwinian revolution as

the study of genealogically related life-forms, and concerned above all with tracing the phylogenetic pathways along which populations were understood to adapt through variation under natural selection. In the neo-Darwinian revival of the late twentieth century, the commitment to the genealogical model became ever more hard-line and explicit as living organisms came to be seen as the recipients and vehicles of digital information, their lives dedicated to the project of transmitting this information to progeny. Axiomatically, every organism was understood as the product of an interaction between genes and environment: the former introducing a character specification in the form of a suite of attributes or traits; the latter supplying the material conditions for their realisation. So far, so Aristotle.

Yet it is worth remembering that the one work widely credited with having launched modern biology had virtually nothing to say about human beings. This was of course *The Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin. As he laid out the argument of his book, Darwin imagined himself as a spectator, watching the panorama of nature unfold before his eyes. Bringing the book to a close, he famously observed that 'there is grandeur in this view of life' (Darwin 1872: 403). But it is not a view available to non-humans. How was it, then, that human beings – or at least the more civilised among them – could reach such a transcendent position that they could hold the entirety of nature in their sights? How could they *know* nature in a way denied to other creatures, which could only *be* in it? Granted that Darwin could explain natural selection, could natural selection explain Darwin? It was in a later book, *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, that Darwin set out to answer this question (Darwin 1874). Where *The Origin of Species* was a view, as it were, from the summit, *The Descent of Man* was an account of the climb (Ingold 1986: 49). And as everyone knows, his conclusion was that however great the gulf between the summiteers and the denizens of the lower slopes, the difference was one of degree rather than kind, and could be filled by countless gradations. The very notion of differences of degree, however, implies a common scale. By what measure, then, are some creatures high and others low?

It was a scale, in effect, of the balance of reason over instinct. Flying in the face of all that he had argued in the *Origin* about the ways in which species adapt along ever diverging lines and in manifold fashions to their particular conditions of life, Darwin now maintained that the relentless pressure of natural selection would drive an increase of 'mental power' across the board. Even in such lowly creatures as earthworms and fish one could observe a glimmer of reason, while at the other end of the scale, the residues of instinct could be detected in the most exalted of men (and still more so in women and savages of various descriptions). Contrary to the thinking of many but by no means all of his predecessors, Darwin insisted that the possession of reason – or the lack of it – was not an all or nothing affair distinguishing all humans from all non-humans. In evolutionary terms, he thought, reason advanced by a gradual, if accelerating ascent, and not by a quantum leap. Yet he never wavered from the mainstream view that it was man's possession of the faculty of reason that allowed him to rise above, and to

exercise dominion over, the world of nature. In short, for Darwin and for his many followers, the evolution of species *in* nature was also an evolution *out* of it, in so far as it progressively liberated the mind from the promptings of innate disposition.

After a shaky start, Darwin's stock grew throughout the twentieth century to the point at which he had become a virtual saint among scientists. The celebration, in 2009, of the bicentenary of his birth spawned a glut of hagiography. We could not, it seemed, have enough of it. Yet the history of anthropology's flirtation with Darwinism had been far from glorious. Up until the outbreak of the Second World War, prominent physical anthropologists, drawing chapter and verse from *The Descent of Man*, were continuing to maintain that what were known as civilised and savage races of man differed in hereditary powers of reason in just the same way that the latter differed from apes, and that interracial conflict would inevitably drive up intelligence by weeding out the less well endowed groups. In 1931 Sir Arthur Keith, distinguished physical anthropologist and erstwhile President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, delivered a Rectorial address at my own institution, the University of Aberdeen, in which he maintained that interracial xenophobia was to be encouraged as a way of selecting out the weaker varieties. The war of races, Keith declared, is Nature's pruning hook (Keith 1931).[4]

But the second war in a century to break out among the supposedly civilised races of Europe, itself fuelled by xenophobic hatred, put paid to such ideas. In the wake of the Holocaust, what was self-evident to Darwin and most of his contemporaries – namely, that human populations differed in their intellectual capacities on a scale from the primitive to the civilised – was no longer acceptable. Darwin's view that the difference between the savage and the civilised man was one of brain-power gave way in mainstream science to a strong moral and ethical commitment to the idea that *all* humans – past, present and future – are equally endowed, at least so far as their moral and intellectual capacities were concerned. 'All human beings', as Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, 'are endowed with reason and conscience'. To emphasise this unity, scientists reclassified extant human beings as members not just of the same species but of the same sub-species, designated *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Yet if these beings are alike in their possession of reason and conscience – if, in other words, they are the kinds of beings who, according to orthodox juridical precepts, can exercise rights and responsibilities – then they must differ in kind from all other beings that cannot. *Homo sapiens sapiens*, then, was no ordinary sub-species. Doubly sapient, the first attribution of wisdom, the outcome of a process of encephalisation, marked it out within the world of living things. But the second, far from marking a further subdivision, registered a decisive break from that world. In what many late twentieth century commentators took to calling the 'human revolution' (Mellars and Stringer 1989), the earliest representatives of the new sub-species were alleged to have achieved a breakthrough without parallel in the history of life, setting them on the path of ever-increasing discovery and self-knowledge otherwise known as culture or civilisation. Human beings by nature, it was in the historical endeavour of reaching

beyond that very nature that they progressively realised the essence of their humanity. Half in nature, half out, pulled in sometimes contrary directions by the imperatives of genetic inheritance and cultural tradition, their double-barrelled sub-specific appellation perfectly epitomised the hybrid constitution of these creatures.

It was with this cast of unlikely characters, known to science as 'modern humans' (as opposed to the 'archaic' variety, so-called Neanderthals, who had not made it through to the second grade of sapientisation), that the evolutionary anthropology of the late twentieth century populated the planet. The first such humans were portrayed as archetypal hunter-gatherers, people whom history had left behind. *Biologically* modern, they were supposed to have remained *culturally* at the starting block, fated to enact a script perfected through millennia of adaptation under natural selection. It was a script, however, that only science could read. Between the hunter-gatherer and the scientist, respectively pre- and post-historic, was supposed to lie all the difference between being and knowing, between the adaptive surrender to nature and its subjugation in the light of reason. In this scenario, it was the achievement of *cultural* modernity that provided science with the platform of supremacy from which, with no little hubris and profound contradiction, it asserted that human beings were part and parcel of the natural world.

Indeed by the late twentieth century it had become apparent that in this contradiction lay the very meaning of 'the human'. Referring neither to a species of nature nor to a condition of being that transcends nature, but rather to both simultaneously, it is a word that points to the existential dilemma of a creature that can know itself and the world of which it is a part only through the renunciation of its being in that world. Writing at the turn of our present century, the philosopher Agamben argued that the recognition of the human is the product of an 'anthropological machine' that relentlessly drives us apart, in our capacity for self-knowledge, from the continuum of organic life within which our very existence is encompassed (Agamben 2004: 27). To resolve the contradiction – that is, to comprehend knowing as being, and being as knowing – calls for nothing less than a dismantling of the machine. Far from tacking on a second *sapiens* to mark the onset of fully fledged humanity, it was necessary to move in a direction opposite to that of twentieth century science, and to attend to the generic *Homo* itself. And that was the direction anthropology took. By the first decades of the twenty-first century, it had become obvious that the concept of the human would have to go.

How come that anthropology was brought to such a pass that it had to relinquish the very *anthropos* from which the discipline had taken its name? The answer is that it came from thinking with, and about, children. In fact, children had always posed a problem for anthropology. Apparently delivered into the world as natural beings, devoid of culture and civilisation, they had somehow to be provided with the rudiments of identity that would make them into proper social persons. Childhood, wrote Goldschmidt sixty years ago, is characterised by 'the process of transformation of the infant from a purely biological being into a culture-bearing one' (Goldschmidt 1993:

351). As the offspring of human parents, the new-born baby was acknowledged as a human being from the start, but as one that had still to reach the condition of being human. On their way from infancy to adulthood, children appeared to be biologically complete but culturally half-baked. Indeed their status came closely to resemble that of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, likewise suspended in a liminal phase in the transition from a natural to a fully cultural life.

The resemblance is no accident. For in both instances the anthropological machine was at work, producing the human by regarding as not yet fully human an already human being (Agamben 2004: 37). Some humans, it transpired, were more human than others: grown-ups more than children; scientists more than hunter-gatherers. Moreover this same machine, dividing body and soul, generated a point of origin as the moment when these components were conjoined in the definition of a historical project, whether for the individual human being or for humankind as a whole. We used to speak, without batting an eyelid, of 'early man', and of the child's 'early years'. It was as though the antiquity of prehistoric hunter-gatherers could be judged, like the ages of pre-school children, by their proximity to their respective origins. Just as the child was deemed to be closer to its origin than the adult, so likewise, early humans were thought to be closer than later ones to that mighty moment when humanity began. Yet despite their best efforts, prehistorians failed to find this moment. And this was for the simple reason that it never existed. Nor indeed is there any such moment in the life of the child.

In reality, as we all know, children are not half-baked hybrids of biology and culture but beings who make their way in the world with as much facility and hindrance, as much fluency and awkwardness, as grown-ups. They are in the process not of becoming human, but of becoming the people they are. In a word, they are *growing*, in stature, knowledge and wisdom. But the child's life does not start from a point of origin, nor is his or her 'early' life closer to such a point than later life. Rather than being literally descended from ancestors, as posited by the genealogical model, children follow in the ways of their predecessors. They carry on. Of course there are key moments in life, but these are more akin to handovers in a relay than points of origin. And so it is with the history of the world. It, too, carries on, or persists, without beginning or end. Its inhabitants may follow where others have passed before, but none are more ancient than any other, nor others more modern. Or to put it another way, the world we inhabit is originating all the time. Yet the anthropological machine, as it drives the recognition of the human, also splits conception from materialisation, form from substance, and in so doing establishes the idea of their hylomorphic reunification in an original moment of procreation. Whenever we ask how old things are, the machine is operating in the background. To take it apart is thus to do away not only with the concept of the human but also with the question of antiquity. Abandon the concept, and the question disappears with it. No more human; no more ancient.

Afterword

In 2009, the system of international finance that had fuelled the unprecedented prosperity of the preceding decades abruptly collapsed. It had always rested on shaky foundations, dealing as it did in a world of virtual assets, visible only on computer screens, which were ever more tenuously related to the material transformations wrought by real working lives. Once the pretence on which it rested was finally exposed, the whole apparatus fell like a house of cards. The fall was followed, in the immediately ensuing years, by the equally precipitous collapse of big science. For this, too, was found to rest on the pedestal of illusion and conceit. The particle physicists who believed that with one final throw of their collider, in the biggest and most expensive machine ever built, they would finally explain the structure of the universe, were pilloried as reckless and arrogant fools, like the bankers before them. And the bioscientists, who had abandoned the real world of living organisms for the computer-based modelling of large genetic data-sets, went the same way. It was a messy, bitter and contested implosion that cost many once distinguished careers. The funders of research were left in disarray.

Amidst the wreckage, however, a handful of small and adaptable disciplines that had never lost their footing began to thrive. Like tiny mammals in the dying days of the dinosaurs, they were ready to seize the opportunities opened up by the extinction of the megafauna that had once ruled the scientific world. They had a different strategy of reproduction. It was not to lay as many eggs as possible in the hopes that a tiny minority might survive in a fiercely competitive environment, but to treat the germs of knowledge with the same reverence as life itself, to be grown, nurtured and cared for. These mammalian disciplines recognised, as their reptilian predecessors had not, that knowing is itself a practice of habitation, of dwelling in a world undergoing continual birth. For them, knowledge grows from the ground of our engagement with the world. They saw that to be is to know, and that to know is to be. And among these disciplines, I am pleased to say, were anthropology and archaeology. That is why, in this year of 2053, we are still here to celebrate their success.

Notes

1 This is the (somewhat revised) text of a plenary address presented to the 2009 Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, on *Anthropological and Archaeological Imaginations: Past, Present and Future*, held at the University of Bristol, April 6–9.

2 In a famous painting, René Magritte highlighted the surreal consequences of this way of thinking about things by depicting a cloud making its entrance through the door of a room.

3 For this term, I am indebted to Cornelius Holtorf. In his presentation to the 2009 ASA Conference on *Anthropological and Archaeological Imaginations*, Holtorf argued that the 'pastness' of things depended not on the determination of a date of origin but on our being able to tell trustworthy stories linking them to the present. Of things preserved in the archaeological record, these would be stories of preservation, or perhaps of recovery.

4 Elsewhere (Ingold 2004) I have told the story of this lamentable episode in the history of anthropology at Aberdeen.

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12

Commentary. Boundary objects and asymmetries

Marilyn Strathern

The invitation to offer some reflections on these papers is generous indeed. Growing up in Roman Kent, and escaping home to dig whenever I could, my early exposure to archaeology left a deep impression. Literally: for years after I ceased digging I remained absurdly proud of my excavator's thumb and worn down trowel. Indeed archaeology left an external mark on the body in the way ethnographic fieldwork in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea never did – except in the form of bodily protocols, such as finding myself in a room full of people sitting down and being squeamish about stepping over anyone's legs. But perhaps pride in a muscular thumb displaced a commitment to archaeology as a source of knowledge. It ceased to be an arena still to tussle with. I welcome the opportunity now.

By contrast, the tussle with anthropological problems became never ending, not least because objects of study are changing all the time. When a Highlands friend of mine visited Cambridge in 1999,[1] I had the pleasure of taking him to the Museum (Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) and showing him some of the artefacts purchased from him 35 years previously. He was pleased to see them looked after and exclaimed at their pristine state. But I was conscious of an unspoken problem between us – that when he had accepted my invitation he assumed it would be to do with certain very pointed remarks (articulated in a letter a colleague wrote for him) about who plants the seeds of knowledge and who reaps the benefit. And while he no doubt saw some benefit to his people (as he put it) in being known through artefacts such as these, he indubitably saw much more benefit accruing to me/academia from the information he had given me over the years. The unspoken word was not so much recompense or compensation as measure – what measure of his worth, of his knowledge, of what he had given, would he find in Cambridge?

In a way we could almost say that he was hankering after a (re)description of what had gone between us earlier, imagining I would come up with a dazzling depiction – expressed materially or otherwise – of the ornamentation he had bestowed on me, to follow the thinking in Gosden's chapter. It was less the ineffability of experience that was the problem, than the fact that he was seeking to discern a transformation of values. (Indeed the redescription would have been that transformation.)