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of Counternarratives

Edited by Geoff Emberling

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PART ONE

Introduction

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CHAPTER 1

Counternarratives: The Archaeology of the Long Term and the Large Scale

GEOFF EMBERLING

“The task is to make grand narratives (long-term histories, big histories) a way to study power, ideology, and resistance in all their forms.”

– Norman Yoffee (via correspondence)

For much of its history as a discipline, archaeology has studied problems of the long term and the large scale: the rise and fall of civilizations, the (pre)histories of entire cultures, migrations of peoples, and the development of networks of long-distance trade and exchange. This broad perspective on the past grew from concerns by early anthropologists like Lewis Henry Morgan (1877), who assembled the range of ethnographically known cultures into stages but whose work was based on virtually no archaeological data. A related and sometimes competing grand narrative focused on diffusionism, in which cultures and traits spread from centers of origin across sometimes vast geographies (e.g., Trigger 2006:217ff.). Later syntheses that could draw on an increasing volume of archaeological research (e.g., Childe 1936) took a comparative and evolutionary approach – how were comparable stages of Egyptian civilization similar to or different from Mesopotamia, or China, or cultures of the Americas? These approaches were further developed by neo-evolutionary anthropology of the 1950s and the New Archaeology of the 1960s – now perhaps most commonly identified as processual archaeology.

The salience of long-term approaches to the human past have since arguably faded away under a variety of critiques, beginning even before the postprocessual archaeology of the 1980s (e.g., Yoffee 1979). Archaeology now addresses a much wider scope of questions about the past, ranging

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from the activities of individual agents to the ways that power and ideologies have structured past societies (and archaeological narratives) or how ethnic and gender identities (among others) have structured lives, the ways that societies interact with their landscapes, and how material things function in social life. These represent one set of what we might call *counternarratives* – new stories that challenge a previously hegemonic understanding. Some of the contributions in this volume engage these newer questions of smaller scale.

One result of these more recent directions in the field has been that much archaeology conducted today is focused on the small scale and the local at the expense of the possibilities for broader cross-cultural and trans-historical understanding. With a microfocus, larger phenomena – such as cultures (to say nothing of civilizations) – fade from view. The field is not dominated by theoretical debate as it was with the rise of New Archaeology or the postprocessual critiques. As Andrew Sherratt (1995) lamented nearly twenty years ago, archaeologists too seldom write grand narratives or address the large-scale questions of human history.

A different counternarrative has critiqued evolutionary approaches in archaeology, particularly the stage model in which societies developed from bands to tribes, chiefdoms, and states. Norman Yoffee's work is a central part of this critique (e.g., Yoffee 1993, 2005; Baines and Yoffee 1998). The emphasis has not been so much to focus on smaller timescales and individual agents but to rehabilitate the archaeology of the long term and the large scale. It is not a question of returning to unifying grand narratives that simply justify current social and political orders (Pollock 2013) or returning to large-scale archaeologies if they neglect local conditions and actors. At the same time, there are reasons to retain interest in the larger questions of the human past; they are one of the historical justifications for the existence of archaeology as a field. Anxiety about the loss of the big picture has recently been apparent in several multi-authored statements, reasserting the importance of large-scale generalizing questions that archaeology (according to the authors) can and should continue to address (see M. E. Smith et al. 2012; Kintigh et al. 2014).

At the same time that many archaeologists have abandoned generalization, there remains broad scholarly and public interest in approaches to the past that seek to explain large patterns. The people writing books on the subject now just happen to be mostly non-archaeologists. The geographer Jared Diamond is perhaps the best known of this recent group, having written large-scale books comparing the rise of civilizations in Eurasia and the Americas (1997), on the collapse of civilizations (2005), and on the

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importance of “traditional” cultures (2012). Archaeologists have generally been highly critical of his approach to these subjects (e.g., McAnany and Yoffee 2010; Wilk 2013) while perhaps also regretting that it was not someone with firsthand knowledge of the archaeological record that wrote in such ambitious terms about the ancient past. But archaeology may be on the cusp of a return to attention to the large scale and the long term, and it is fitting to consider what is important to maintain of past approaches even as we begin developing new questions and perspectives (see Tarlow and Stutz 2013).

The essays in this volume have been inspired by the work of Norman Yoffee, who has provided some of the most cogent critiques of neo-evolutionary archaeology while working to retain concerns with the large scale and long term that have been at the center of comparative, historical, and anthropological archaeology (e.g., Yoffee 2005; Bolger and Maguire 2010). Before turning to the essays themselves, I would like to survey in a bit more depth some recent work by historians, archaeologists, political theorists, and others on the large patterns of (pre)history.

Scale in space and time

Of course, the dichotomy of general (theoretical and comparative) as opposed to specific (local and interpretive) approaches to archaeology – however often repeated – is a false one. Archaeology has always had to work at multiple spatial scales, as Flannery’s (1976) *Early Mesoamerican Village* memorably showed, and it has always had to consider multiple temporal scales as well (Robb 2008).¹ It could be said, however, that recent work on the ancient past has significantly broadened the range of timescales upon which archaeological studies focus. Not content merely to return to the consideration of cultural trajectories extending over centuries or a millennium or two, some have broadened their focus to encompass tens of thousands of years (Shryock and Smail 2011) – if not more (Christian 2004).

First, perhaps I will be excused for reviewing two well-known approaches to the long-term and large-scale questions of the human past. One set of approaches to histories of the long term derives from the *Annales* school of historiography, founded in 1929 and further developed by historians including Fernand Braudel. Of all the *Annales* historians, Braudel and his work have had by far the biggest impact of these scholars within archaeology (Hodder 1987; Knapp 1992; Cunliffe 2011). Braudel’s study of the Mediterranean basin in the sixteenth century (original French 1949; revised

English 1972) sought to investigate the history of a region (rather than that of a culture, or of a principle like inequality) at multiple timescales: the “longue durée” (long term) of landscape and geography or of economic and political structures or, one might add, of cultural patterns; the “conjunctures” of medium-term cycles or trends; and the more traditional history of events. Braudel prioritized structures as explanatory principles over what he considered more ephemeral events, although one repeated critique of his approach is its lack of facility for explaining change. Archaeologists and historians working in this mode have often deployed structuration or practice approaches by Giddens or Bourdieu to connect event and agent to broader structure (e.g., Moreland 1992; Hodder 2000). Braudel’s approach has been congenial to archaeologists perhaps in part because our time in the field inclines us to situate ancient cultures in their native geographies and environments.

The work of the *Annales* school has continued to influence perspectives on large-scale, long-term histories, with the more recent publication of volumes by historians and archaeologists on the Mediterranean that have expanded Braudel’s approach from the sixteenth century to encompass the Mediterranean throughout history (Horden and Purcell 2000; Abulafia 2011; Broodbank 2013). Braudel himself was working at his death to expand his project to prehistory (Braudel 2001, published posthumously), and a recent large-scale archaeology of Europe (Cunliffe 2011) also derives its inspiration from Braudel’s method.

Another dominant approach to the longer view of the past is that of social or cultural evolution, developed in collaboration between archaeologists and cultural anthropologists beginning in the 1960s and practiced largely – if not exclusively – in North America. This approach has focused on identifying the stages of cultural development, in which societies were thought to have moved in regular patterns from band to tribe, chiefdom, state, and empire. Unlike the *Annales* school, cultural evolutionary approaches have focused on processes that can lead to change from one stage to another, and they have been explicitly comparative (see M. E. Smith ed. 2011).

Many critiques of the stage approach have been developed since the 1980s (Yoffee 1993, 2005): The categories group together societies that are in fact significantly different; some categories (tribe and chiefdom) do not work at all; not all societies move along this particular trajectory; and, finally, the model in its focus on primary developments ignores characteristics of later generations of societies as well as societies on the margins of the “pristine” sequences, even though these societies constitute the

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majority of the human experience. To these, I would add that the stage model is fundamentally noncultural in that it deliberately strips away the cultural specificity of societies: How is a state in China different from one in the Andes Mountains? It is also fundamentally ahistorical in that it ignores cultural continuities in specific trajectories.

All this might be considered to be beating a dead horse, but the approach is very much alive in some quarters (e.g., Flannery and Marcus 2012) – with some modifications, including the addition of a variable that divides societies according to whether they structure authority by “corporate” as opposed to “network” models (e.g., Feinman 2011). It is worth pausing to discuss some of the issues raised by Flannery and Marcus (2012) as a summary of two careers’ commitment to a social evolutionist approach. The book mixes chapters on societies with varying degrees of social inequality in different parts of the world known from ethnography and from archaeology to suggest there are regular patterns in the ways inequality is resisted, established, justified, and maintained. The general point that there are some recurring cross-cultural regularities in past societies is one that threatens to be lost in newer studies.

It is inevitable given the scope of Flannery and Marcus’s work that specialists in different regional archaeologies will have criticisms; here, I focus on their treatment of the ancient Middle East² to highlight the ways this approach dissects cultural trajectories and de-historicizes them. This volume dedicates four separate chapters to the Middle East that trace developments from the Upper Paleolithic and Natufian of the Levant (mostly sites in Israel) through the Neolithic of Upper Mesopotamia and Anatolia (mostly sites in southeastern Turkey); the Ubaid, Uruk, and Early Dynastic periods of southern Mesopotamia (in Iraq and northeastern Syria); and the empire of Sargon of Akkad. This sequence is odd in many ways, even if standard in volumes that discuss the archaeology of the Middle East. In its focus on cultural developments, it moves from region to region in what are really quite different cultural zones. What happened in the Levant after Jericho? It is not discussed here, as the torch of developing inequality has passed to southern Iraq. Thus, this approach does not pose questions about continuity in the development of specific cultures or particular regions.

Flannery and Marcus’s approach follows in a direct lineage from the early neo-evolutionists, such as Sahlins and Service (1960), who distinguished between “general” and “specific” evolution of cultures. While the functionalist language of the earlier days is gone, the focus on general evolution to the exclusion of specific cultural trajectories continues.

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A recent resurgence of interest in the large scale and the long term – as well as in explanatory rather than simply descriptive accounts of the past – could be said to derive from the publication of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997). Diamond asked why some regions of the world, particularly Eurasia, have been more prosperous than others, including the Americas before European colonization. His answer was that it did not have to do with cultural superiority of one area over another. Rather, he argued that the distribution of natural resources – particularly plants and animals that could be domesticated – gave Eurasia a head start in developing economies, diffusing technological innovations, and developing resistance to a wide range of diseases. As he put it, “differences between the long-term histories of peoples of the different continents have been due not to innate differences in the peoples themselves but to differences in their environments” (Diamond 1997:405).

Diamond's work is ambitious and proposes a broad range of hypotheses. It has often been read as a work of environmental determinism in which individual actors and even entire cultures have no power to change the course of history; it was all established by the end of the Pleistocene. But I think his approach is more aptly characterized as probabilistic than deterministic. It could also be said to be an oversimplification of a diversity of regional trajectories in its focus on the large blocks of Eurasia and the Americas. But in all, it represents an attempt to zoom out and to look at prehistory and historical developments over thousands of years at a global scale, and it shows the provocative questions that can be raised by that approach.

Some historians with more recent interests were also writing large-scale and explanatory histories during the 1990s. Among them, historian Samuel Huntington (1996) suggested that the future of international politics would be a “clash of civilizations” based on cultural values and identity rather than on conflicts over resources or political interests. His essay was based on a book by Francis Fukuyama (1992), who had proposed that the rise of Western democracy would represent the “end of history,” arguing that democracy represented the most effective (and therefore final) form of government. Fukuyama (2011) himself recently wrote a large-scale history of political development from prehistory to the French Revolution, with a focus on developments in Asia. David Landes (1998) and Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) addressed a more focused version of Diamond's question: Why did Europe become wealthier than other areas of the world during the past few centuries? Landes has been followed more recently by Niall Ferguson's 2011 book *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, whose title encapsulates the

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focus of these historians: explaining how Western civilization came to dominate world politics and economic life for centuries.

These are all triumphalist histories that seek to explain how current geopolitical orders came into being and to justify them as being the natural result of superior forms of government, technology, or culture. In this respect, they bear some similarity to neo-evolutionary approaches to the ancient past. These explanatory histories are resolutely focused on policy-making in the present, which raises at least two issues. In their interest in explaining the past so governments can know better what to do in the future, they ignore the role of events, including accidental and chance individual agents. Second, their analyses ask why “The West” gained economic and political dominance during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they do not extend their analyses to ask why (for example) China may have held a similar advantage during the Han Dynasty.

These perspectives – with their clear connection to modern economic and political policy – seem at first glance not to have much in common with archaeology, but two recent volumes written by the classical archaeologist Ian Morris (2010, 2013) pose a similar question. Inspired by the United Nations Human Development Index, Morris developed four measures of societal development: energy capture; urbanism (size of the largest city); information processing; and capacity to make war. Dividing the world into West vs. East (Europe and the United States vs. East Asia), he estimates each variable at regular chronological intervals to chart the growth of the West. Individual agents and cultural or religious traditions do not play a part in his analyses. And like the historians whose work is oriented to current government policy, Morris has also presented his work (and its implications for the future) to CIA analysts (Parry 2013).

Even larger-scale work is being done in history these days. So-called “Big History” (Christian 2004; Spier 2012) takes the history of the universe as its subject. With a perspective at that scale, some patterns perhaps appear more clearly: Individual agents and societies disappear, replaced by pure economic process without any sign of culture. Christian’s discussion of pre-modern civilizations is distressing in being based almost exclusively on Mesopotamia – and significantly outdated research at that. Christian’s analysis – unlike Diamond’s work – does not make it clear that his big-history approach contributes any innovative questions or insights to the study of the archaeological past.

A particularly interesting and challenging recent work has proposed first steps in an analytical vocabulary for discussion of the longer term. In a book with chapters written by pairs or multiple scholars from different

disciplines, Shryock and Smail (2011) propose terms (and research questions), including “kinshipping,” exchange, hospitality, networks, trees, extensions, scalar integration, and spiraling feedback. Their stated timescale is the past 2.5 million years of the genus *Homo*, and one particularly provocative chapter proposes “a metaphor for human history that follows the pattern of a fractal, in which the same pattern is repeated at every level of magnification. Smaller scales do not simply vanish as larger ones emerge” (Stiner et al. 2011:247).

The emerging discipline of world history (Northrup ed. 2012; Yoffee 2012; also McNeill and McNeill 2003; Landes 1998; Van De Mieroop 2013) takes an intermediate timescale but significantly broader geographical scales to look at cultures in their interconnectedness or, indeed, to dissolve ideas of culture into pure interaction. Archaeological perspectives in these discussions have grown out of the world system approach of Wallerstein and Gunder Frank (Kohl 2011; Chase-Dunn and Hall 2012; also Sherratt 2001; Wengrow 2011; Wilkinson et al. 2011).

There are, of course, other current perspectives on the archaeology of the large scale and long term. Complex (adaptive) systems models are beginning to address some traditional archaeological questions by using agent-based modeling techniques that are in some sense an implementation of a practice theory approach (e.g., Wilkinson et al. 2007; Griffin 2011; also noted by Krakauer et al. 2011). Perspectives based on Darwinian evolution are also active, including a focus on the development and transmission of particular cultural features (e.g., Bentley et al. 2008; harking back to Richard Dawkins’s [1976] memes) and a larger “macro-evolutionary” approach that encompasses adaptation as well as agency (Zeder 2009).

New archaeologies of the long term

This wide range of work on the history and archaeology of the long term provides a set of contexts for the essays in this volume. Most contributors remain committed to addressing long-term, large-scale questions of the human past, even if our focus broadens to encompass a wider range of timescales and subjects. Some take up the long term through what might have been called *specific evolution* in previous generations of archaeological theory but which is here encompassed in the notion of *cultural trajectories*. This approach raises questions not often addressed in archaeology – not only change over varying timescales but continuities and memory and the ways these contribute to the distinct culture of different traditions (cf. McCorriston 2011; Corfield 2013). Many retain a comparative