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POWER FROM BELOW IN THE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Trends and Trajectories

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INTRODUCTION

What happens to governing when “the public” is not available as a matter of practice? . . . What happens to governing (and all common endeavors) when “the public” is not available as an idea? (Mathews, 1984: 120).

In 1856, a young Edward Burnett Tylor spent six months in Mexico investigating the Toltec civilization with antiquarian Henry Christy, and many of his later and profoundly influential notions about “culture” and “civilization” were formed there. In his report on a trip to the pyramids of Teotihuacan he notes: “As has often been remarked, such buildings as these can only be raised under peculiar social conditions. The ruler must be a despotic sovereign, and the mass of the people slaves, whose subsistence and whose lives are sacrificed without scruple to execute the fancies of the monarch, who is not so much the governor as the unrestricted owner of the country and the people. The population must be very dense, or it would not bear the loss of so large a proportion of the working class and vegetable food must be exceedingly abundant in the country, to feed them while engaged in this unprofitable labour” (Tylor, 1861: 142).

Although he would hardly have called Queen Victoria a despot, Tylor’s impressionistic observation describes a hierarchic scheme not unlike the British empire into which he was born: an imperial head under which was formed its aristocracy, strata of social classes, with “working class” peoples toiling on

behalf of those far above them, and finally millions colonized, unfree and enslaved people, whose various types of bondage continued both legally and illegally even after the British abolished slavery (Bolland, 1981; Brass, 2015; Brown & van der Linden, 2010).

Ironically, Tylor never would have ascribed the achievements of the British system of empire to such conditions as he described for ancient Mexico. The British imperial system, for all its impermeable hierarchy, was also a parliamentary one that included the House of Commons – something that was inconceivable to a visiting Englishman in the context of the governance of Teotihuacan. This is ironic in light of our theorization of Teotihuacan today as a likely candidate for an alternative, more horizontal form of rule (Froese et al., 2014; Froese, 2018; Froese & Manzanilla, 2018; Mendoza & Lucido, 2017), at least during some of its phases.

Tylor and his contemporaries were not alone in their skewed understanding of power. Throughout the 20th century, archaeologists wrote about power largely by assigning particular sets of values to specific types of artifacts, features, structures and patterns. Assumptions about how objects, places and relationships encode or represent the workings of sociopolitical power were unusually narrow and rooted in specific worldviews: early modern or modern, in most cases Western, and ultimately from the perspective of humans living within recent states and empires. This greatly limited the ability to imagine other objective or subjective realities.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE COMMONERS

There are many disciplinary and historical reasons for this situation. The traditional understanding of power has a long history in the anthropological and prehistoric archaeologies of the 20th century. During the so-called culture-historic period before WWII, common people were often explicitly acknowledged by those such as Tylor as props for elite magnificence. For those attempting to map cultural hearths and culture cores, the humbler remains – the pots and points that defined “culture areas” – were used merely as boundary markers, while the more spectacular items were foregrounded in museum exhibits. The prehistoric peasant also made an appearance in the narratives of nationalist and fascist regimes, to illustrate how their citizens could aspire backward in time to the righteous common man who took up arms for the state and the women who earned honor by bearing as many potential warriors as possible (Arnold, 1990; Arnold & Hassmann, 1996; Koonz, 2013; Peer, 1998; Ziegler, 1986).

During the era of neo-evolutionary, new and processual archaeology in later decades, the commoners continued to exist as “masses,” but as agents they were viewed largely as unimportant. For most scholars, they implicitly did what

elites told them to do: produce surplus and supply labor, silently and facelessly congregating in the boxes of systems diagrams where archaeologists placed them in order to support their hypotheses – but they were not perceived as having any active political role (Peebles & Kus, 1977). They became most important when huge quantities of their humble bevel-rimmed bowls or comals indicated surges in the production of monuments or infrastructure, under the command of elites (Blanton et al., 1981: 71–72; Wright & Johnson, 1975: 282).

Within the more developed processualism in the later 1980s and 1990s, the material culture of the commoners was still often used to assess patterns of change determined by elites, who were believed to have personally supervised the reorganization of their farming, manufacturing, storage and social relations – the managerial hypothesis for chiefdoms or state formation (e.g. Cherry, 1984; De Montmollin, 1987; Haas, 1982; Kolata, 1986; 1991; Stanish, 1994; Upham et al., 1981 and many others). While this was sometimes amended with a caveat that it might be valuable to study the commoner segment if it was possible, as archaeology had grown scientific, it was even more clear to some authors that as human beings the *hoi polloi* (“the many”) were simply “undetectable.” Perhaps one of the best descriptions of this comes in Lohse and Valdez’s volume *Ancient Maya Commoners* (2004): “An array of frameworks, approaches, and perspectives have been employed through the years to address questions . . . of the prehistoric Maya of Central America, though the majority of these frameworks have tended to focus on the behavior of only a small segment of society. Highlighted individuals, many of whom are known to us by name thanks to advances in epigraphy, were community and polity leaders whose actions are perceived as influencing the course of culture history. Most people today are, quite understandably, comfortable with this picture; it accords well with the model of our own society” (Lohse & Valdez, 2004: 1) (Figure 1.1).

Both authors go on to state, as do we, that such elite individuals did play important and central roles in the ordering of their societies, but that the archaeological study of commoners should comprise more than mapping, weighing and measuring their humble detritus for the purpose of gauging the success or failure of elite plans.

“Materialization” of ideologies was typically reserved for analysis of elite-conceived and elite-planned projects, to the extent that anything that could be significantly observed was assumed to have been elite-built or motivated. This perspective derived from Marxists of various types, who during these decades had yet to address the already antiquated Marxism that denied influential ideologies or values to any group but the ruling class. How different would the move from interior to exterior storage facilities be if it was imagined as aimed differently? Was it elite-ordered to make tax collection easier, or was it



1.1. Royal palace at the Classic Maya city of Palenque (photo: A. Zwegers, CC BY 2.0).

commoner-devised to keep tax collectors, officials and soldiers out of one's household? Instead, following models such as the historically documented Inka system of imperial warehousing (e.g. Earle & D'Altroy, 1982), most examples of widespread shifts in storage were attributed to elites.

Despite the ethnographic documentation of dozens of types of surplus storage with varied goals and intentions (Smyth, 1989), in an era before the concept of *emergence* was broadly understood, large “horizon” effects or ubiquitous adoption of new patterns were generally equated with elite power, and quantifying the “stuff” of commoners was a key method of evaluation. Yet at the same time, a new counterpoint was also emerging: commoner initiatives were documented in the context of major economic challenges, to collectively and voluntarily cope with the development of political complexity as well as eventual structural crises brought on by state institutions and traditions. An emerging group of authors with newer ideas about self-organization contested older views (e.g. D'Altroy & Hastorf, 2001; Erickson, 1988; 1993; Graffam, 1992; Scarborough, 1998; Stein, 1998; 2001) arguing for traditions of negotiation and conflict resolution between above and below, if not outright commoner self-management from the bottom up (Erickson, 1988: 13; Graffam, 1992: 882).

It almost goes without saying that today, many “establishment” authors (though not all) would happily disavow some of their stances during an earlier period of their careers (e.g. DeMarrais & Earle, 2017; Janusek & Kolata, 2004; Ortloff, 2009). Despite this retrospect, it may be suggested that the era of the

1980s and 1990s was shaped by even much earlier assumptions, which although often denied, were still consciously or unconsciously internalized. The various undertakings of elites were generally described as achievements and rarely, if ever, in light of the political, economic or biosocial havoc their grand plans and goals would have wreaked on others, documented by a vast number of studies on parallel contemporary conditions across every discipline. We emphasize these various impact domains because that is how they are described in the literature for “elites” – their political advantage, the ubiquitous notion of sacred “legitimation,” their control of “wealth” and of course, consolidation of power, usually through struggles with other elites over the right to dominate the rest. While we should not deny that many of the aspects just mentioned did occur in many societies, at least during some point of their trajectory, we also need to be aware of the possibility of different, less hierarchical models of organization. Moreover, all the above domains of action are equally as relevant for the non-elite. The point of raising issues of self- or co-organization and self- or co-management is not to reject the existence of inequality or the power of leaders and rulers, but to grant reasonable agency to others, gaining a more realistic view of the past and a better reading of our data. In this sense, the chapters included in this volume offer a variety of case studies that exemplify, both on a theoretical and a practical level, alternative models of power relationships.

THE BROADER INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE

A large buffet of ideas was and continues to be “out there” for our consideration, and most are yet to be mined by archaeologists. Despite the periods of lag in archaeological theory (Siapkas, 2015: 33), across the other social sciences, scholarship on ordinary or suppressed people’s experience and their role in society has been ongoing, giving a small number of interested archaeologists plenty of fodder for thought. In what follows we will present a brief overview of some of the most influential approaches in different disciplines: while we are aware that the list is incomplete and that it has a clear focus on the literature of Anglophone scholarship, it nonetheless includes many of the key conceptual trends and figures, which have partly – although not always – influenced archaeology.

Sociologists had already questioned the reigning “great man” theory of historical change and progress in the early 20th century (Ogburn, 1926). After World War II, the concept of “community power” was introduced (Hunter, 1953), which examined the complementary, though not always harmonious, leadership roles of governments and communities. This was followed by a number of theories describing balance between government authorities and ordinary people, who were seen as self-organizing local power

at various levels in cities, communities and subcommunities, each with its own vertical and horizontal networks (Dahl, 1961; Emerson, 1962; Walton, 1976). During this era, agency theory and all its offshoots had largely been developed to reveal and study the power of ordinary people – a topic neglected by most structuralists in the post-WWII era. Although some sociologists postulated that democracy “is an either-or phenomenon . . . the concept categorizes a society or political system as being democratic or not democratic” (Hage, 1972:10), others pointed out that all societies vary in the degree of elite domination and whether it is unified or diffuse, lasting or fragile (Kerbo & Fave, 1979: 20).

In the aftermath of World War II, many political scientists were inspired to study totalitarian and authoritarian leadership (Lasswell et al., 1952; Mills, 1959), while studies of lower and underclass political participation, collective action and political economies were also growing areas of interest (Allen, 1947; Fisher, 1947; Jackson, 1973; Sen, 1966; Wesley, 1944). In the 1970s, the previously untranslated work of early 20th-century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci was rendered into English, and concepts from his surreptitious prison diaries, like *hegemony* and the *subaltern*, entered the Anglophone social science vocabulary. A polemic developed around this time, similar to the one familiar to archaeologists in the 1990s, two decades later. Political scientists characterize the debates of the 1970s as “between those who view the discipline as a hard science – formal, mathematical, statistical, experimental – dedicated to the cumulation of tested ‘covering laws’ and those who . . . view all scholarly methods, the scientific ones as well as the softer historical, philosophical and legal ones, as appropriate and useful . . . [and] takes the position that relationships in the social sciences are less predictable . . . [as] human actions and events are governed by memory, learning, aspiration, and goal seeking” (Almond, 1990: 7).

This eerily familiar-sounding quote was written just as political anthropologist James Scott’s work on peasant moral economies and resistance began the climb to its early crescendo of influence (Scott, 1977; 1985; 1990). This era also produced some of Elinor Ostrom’s most influential work on political economics and collective action, cooperation and trust in human forms of organization and governance (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom & Walker, 2003), which won her a Nobel Prize in economics. In a process within the range of activities described in collective action theory, Tarrow described the idea of *contentious politics* – defined as “collective activity on the part of claimants – or those who claim to represent them – relying at least in part on noninstitutional forms of interaction with elites, opponents, or the state” (Tarrow, 1996: 874). However, a parallel school focused on power and domination by authority figures of different types, often viewed as autocratic masterminds operating only in worlds populated by their ruling class allies and opponents (Medding, 1982; Perrucci & Pilisuk, 1970; Prewitt & Stone, 1973; Zuckerman, 1977). Thus, political

thought in the second half of the 20th century was divided: while one school was rife with studies of subaltern power, resistance and subversion of authority, the other school focused on elite power theories. Over time, these views largely unified, and the debate transitioned from naïve to mature. Processual archaeologists borrowed heavily from political science, but in most cases embraced only one of these schools.

Perhaps the most inexplicable example of this is the absence from most Marxist archaeology of post-Marxist thought, which explicitly acknowledges inspiration stemming from Marx's political notions, yet "questions the reductive, and anti-democratic nature of Marxism, and of any political movement which explains changes in history in terms of the role of a specific class" (Lechte, 2007: 206). Beyond Arendt and Habermas, who might be viewed as "grandparents" of post-Marxism, in 1985 Laclau and Mouffe were already asking what can we utilize (salvage?) from the Marxist tradition to address our present understanding of the issues Marxists have attempted to resolve (Sandler & Diskin, 1994: 186)? This work describes "radical democracy" and argues against the ideal of democratic society as having symmetrical power, when "perceived symmetry relies on hidden asymmetries, and the unacknowledged exercise of a force which can never finally be justified" (Devenney, 2004: 2).

In their oft-cited, seminar-friendly chapter "Critical Archaeology: Politics Past and Present", Palus et al. (2006) provide a brilliant and succinct discussion of Post-Marxism as a reaction to the embracing of Post-Structuralism across the social sciences and humanities, coupled with the widely held perception that Structural Marxism's inherent flaws were exposed by the advent of this and other later 20th-century thought. Here, they accurately note that while archaeologists had not labeled themselves as "post-Marxists" a number of them had de facto incorporated its critiques: for example, Barbara Bender, Dean Saitta, Audrey Horning and Carol McDavid to name just a few, largely in relation to the ability of commoners to create and promote their own ideologies and understanding of their relationship to a ruling class – an outgrowth of Gramsci's intriguing but undeveloped notions of subaltern ideologies that bubble up from below (Smith, 1971).

One might expect more 21st-century Marxist archaeologists to engage with Laclau and others, even if only to reject them, due to their direct relevance to interpreting elite performances and their impact on the commoners. Against the prevailing notion that acts of political performativity represent communicative rationality – bolstered by claims of "truth, sincerity and right" – Laclau argued that performative acts are unstable (because people "hear" them differently and can imbue them with meaning that is totally unintended) or at odds with what is being communicated (Devenney, 2004: 3). Thus, the speech of a president or prime minister – or ancient chieftain, king or emperor – can be

heard differently by different people, and the “materialization” of political acts and ideologies within an archaeological context can be “heard” in entirely different ways by different parts of intended and unintended audiences. Instead of either incorporating, acknowledging or explicitly rejecting Post-Marxism, many archaeologists were – and are still – arguing with the Post-Structuralism of the 1970s as it was expressed in the “Post-Processualism” of the 1980s.

The “radical” school of human geographers also had an impact on archaeology. These scholars created a large corpus on the subject of peasant and commoner power using the trope of “power of place,” especially in the context of place as instrumentalized by both elites and commoners (Agnew, 1999; 2002; Agnew & Duncan, 1989a; Cosgrove, 1983; 1998; Cresswell, 1992; Daniels, 1992; Pred, 1981; 1986; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1975; 1977). Many of these works were based upon a fusion of sociology and human geography that resulted in the consideration of Giddens’ (1979; 1984) structuration as it applied to place, space and its experience (Agnew & Duncan, 1989b; Pred, 1986). In many cases, they postulated hermeneutic-like methods for understanding place in distant times and unfamiliar cultures. This stemmed from the even more influential school of cultural landscape studies, derived from early scholars like Friedrich Ratzel who first recognized that as humans adapted to their environment, their economic goals and political orientation influenced landscape (Ratzel, 1882; 1898; see also Bassin, 1987). This continued with de la Blache (1898; 1908), who emphasized interaction between the cultures that pattern the physical world and the environment that circumscribes it (Buttimer, 1971). Carl Sauer, founder of The Berkeley School of Geography, introduced these ideas to Americans. He noted that the cultural landscape records cultural change, including the replacement of one culture by another, allowing us to read the succession of landscapes molded by human beings and suggested areas and strategies for research (Sauer, 1963).

In social psychology, a body of work termed social identity theory was outlined by Tajfel and Turner (1979; 1986) and refined by many authors (e.g. Grint, 1997; Hogg, 2007; Northouse, 2007). The gist of this theory, combined with anthropological observations (Barth, 1969) was taken up by, mainly, post-processual archaeologists in the late 1990s (e.g. Jones, 1997) and had a revolutionary impact. Social identity is theorized as the portion of a person’s identity that lies in understanding of their membership within broader social groups. The original theory, which has not been used as well in archaeology as it potentially could be, deals with intergroup conflict between high-status and low-status elements, how people pass from lower- to higher-status groups and under what conditions social or even violent conflict is avoided or fomented. Later developments in social psychology led to studies of “leader emergence” incorporating the concepts of influence, self-monitoring, relationship to followers or potential followers and how



1.2. On the church steps in Mora (Sweden), Gustav Eriksson (later King Gustav Vasa) recruits Dalecarlian farmers to his cause. Painted by J. G. Sandberg (1782–1854) in 1836. NM 2451, Sveriges Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

a potential leader embodies behaviors or values approved by the group at local and “national” levels (Brodbeck et al., 2000; Dickson et al., 2006) (Figure 1.2). The *perception* of fair and honest leadership is a factor in such studies (Lord et al., 1984; Lord & Maher, 1990). Given that the phenomena linked to these conditions and perceptions are statistically replicable at very high levels cross-culturally in both set experiments and natural societal settings, it is remarkable that it took this long for parts of these ideas to be incorporated in our understanding of archaeological cultures. The relatively new discipline of environmental psychology, stemming from the pioneering work of Tuan (1975; 1977), which deals with people’s socialization and emotional responses to built and natural places, has made interesting forays into historical responses important for understanding predictable reactions to space and place and recognizing evidence of responses to “the past in the past” (Devine-Wright, 2014; Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997; Hartley, 2012; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Parkinson et al., 2017; Rohl, 2014).

At this stage, we should also cite the social historians who are concerned with processes or developments through time and the events or event cascades that sometimes form turning points in social and political trajectories. As such, their work has had significant impacts on the archaeology of “power from below.” Even though many conventional historians were long interested in the power of the commoners in medieval and early modern times, a new movement known as “History from Below” developed before WWII. This phrase, which

appears in many historical studies of ordinary people, began with the Annales School of history when Febvre coined the term in 1932 (Febvre, 1932: 576). A history of the commoners within a *longue durée* approach was also the main focus of Ladorie's influential work on the peasants of the Languedoc (Ladorie, 1966). Moreover, on a shorter timescale his book *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Ladorie, 1975) shaped a new way of writing history "from below" by focusing on the customs and beliefs of the inhabitants of a small medieval village, revealing a completely different daily life picture than the "history of above" of kings, nobles, churchmen and upper-class urban residents. The Annales School itself has provided inspiration for many archaeologists through the interests of Bintliff (1991), Knapp (1992) and many others, who drew clear and understandable connections to how archaeologists could benefit from this movement.

Able outlined in Thompson's excellent essay *History from Below* (1966), the notion has always appealed to left-leaning scholars and was picked up in post-WWII England where "the people's history" was next pursued by the Communist Party Historians Group, which produced Eric Hobsbawm, among others. The History Workshop movement in the 1960s at Ruskin College, Oxford, brought historians, students and ordinary people together to share papers, research and oral testimonies in a convivial atmosphere (Scott-Brown, 2017: 95). In the 1960s, "new" histories of women, labor, black and brown people and indigenous people sprang up across the Western world, and in the 1970s, similar movements went worldwide with the additional subjects of postcolonialism: in the United States, Howard Zinn wrote his MA in history on the Colorado Ludlow Massacre (Zinn, 1952), which four decades later American archaeologist Randall McGuire would materially validate (Larkin & McGuire, 2009) as part of his "working class archaeology" (McGuire, 2016).

A final yet important research corpus that archaeologists have drawn upon is, of course, the anthropological literature. Most of the source material, even in recent archaeological publications, is drawn from work of the 1980s and 1990s – this is largely due to the turn toward humanism in many current ethnographic studies. It is far easier to deduce effects seen in archaeological material from causes described in muted-group theories (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981; Orbe, 1998) or by James Scott (1977; 1985; 1990; 1998) and the Comaroffs (Comaroff, 1987; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; Comaroff & Roberts, 1986) than to draw them from works by many more recent students of inequality, power and agency in the political sphere, and even from more recent works of the above authors. In fact, it is quite difficult to find reflexive, critical views on this issue within the field itself. One comes close with this: "Anthropology's approach to the study of difference has been marked by dramatic shifts defined in political terms. Nonetheless, the accompanying historical trajectory of the discipline's theorization of politics hasn't