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PostScript: Doing Agency in Archaeology

Rosemary A. Joyce^{1,2} and Jeanne Lopiparo¹

We argue that since agency and structure are indivisible parts of a single process through which society is continuously created over time, everything that persists or changes in archaeological sites is evidence of agency. The challenge is to adopt appropriate descriptive levels and language to avoid falsely dividing agency and structure. Successful archaeological studies use networks and chains as models or metaphors for connections in sequences of action over time. We argue that models must also link micro-scale actions to outcomes on the macroscale. Because theories of agency differ in the degree of freedom of action they assume, archaeologists must also clearly identify their own position with respect to constraints on action.

KEY WORDS: agency; structuration; temporality; power.

We suggest that whenever archaeologists manage to do analyses of agency right, we are simultaneously talking about agency and structure, since these are not alternatives, but inseparable parts of a single process (Giddens, 1979, pp. 53, 69–70). Moore (2000) suggested that archaeologists think about structure and agency dialectically. While forcing us to keep agency and structure linked, in practice this still risks allowing us artificially to separate structure (interpreted as institutions) from agency (interpreted as action). It risks our envisioning the past as an alternation of moments of the exercise of agency in an otherwise continuous flow of structure.

Our position is that structure and agency do not alternate. Structured agency is exercised in sequences of practices that recapitulate and transform prior actions, sequences that we can recognize as structures at scales from the individual technical practice to the collective coordinated experience of long-enduring landscapes. Structuration is simultaneously the exercise of agency and the constitution

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of society. Over the long term, structuration constitutes those chains of continued, repeated, stylistically similar actions we recognize as traditions (Pauketat, 2001a).

A focus on agency can, paradoxically, risk overlooking the evidence of agency in structuration. We must more precisely frame our questions: when is innovation or the continuation of traditional practice to be understood as the result of strategic or tactical choice? Can we create a framework that allows us to identify unintended and intended consequences of action? Can we recognize evidence of enduring dispositions? Each of these questions, subsumed under a concern with "agency," requires slightly different approaches to archaeological materials. Nonetheless, we suggest that archaeological materiality provides the basis to answer all these, and other related questions, through a focus on the repetition of practices over time documented at multiple scales.

Some authors have proposed that agency is already adequately encompassed in models of long-term processes (Flannery, 1999, p. 18). Differentiating structurationist archaeological studies from determinist processualism, Pauketat (2001b) has applied the term "historical processualist" to archaeological studies of the reproduction and transformation of practices over time. We argue that the difference he discusses between structurationist archaeological studies and determinist processual ones is closely tied to differences in the assumed degree of freedom of actors in the past to create historical processes, differences in outlook that come with different social models of structuring through practice.

Practice theories always incorporate assumptions about the relative power of actors to change the circumstances in which they operate. The nature of the linkage between what have traditionally been construed as different social levels (the individual and the institutional) conditions the way these theories can be used by archaeologists. Different models of the structure-agency relationship imply more or less hegemonic understandings of the power of social institutions, traditions, or elites (Lopiparo, 2003). The models we choose from this spectrum from greater to lesser freedom of action determine how we can analyze the relative power of agents in the past to affect the conditions of their existence.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME: STRUCTURAL DETERMINATION

At one end of the spectrum, we will model societies in which the weight of tradition overwhelms the ability of members of society to affect their own lives and those of persons who follow. We may come close to a traditional processual view of causality, positing institutional or even environmental determination. Some archaeological readings attribute such determinism (in our view incorrectly) to Bourdieu's (1977) description of practice conditioned by the embodied dispositions of *habitus* grounded in the unquestioned taken-for-granted of *doxa* (Smith, 2001). Other archaeologists impute to Anthony Giddens (1979) a similar degree of institutional determination, ignoring his discussion of the duality of structure, in which agents and structures are coproduced through structuration.

Worse, some have posited a class of super-agents who act as if provided with perfect knowledge and unfettered self-centered intentions, the hyperactive individual agent self-diagnosed and auto-critiqued by Clark (2000). Most deterministic are views of agency founded in work, like that of Foucault (1977, 1982), that equate social action with a continual creation of power, represented by some archaeologists (in odd contradiction to Foucault's own writing) as extraordinarily effective in limiting the understandings actors have of their possible gamut of action.

Less use has been made in archaeology of work from the other end of the spectrum of practice theories, where people are understood to have greater freedom of action and where the schemas that guide people in everyday life are seen as less comprehensively integrated. The distinction between Bourdieu's use of strategies, which are more stereotyped, and Michel de Certeau's tactics, improvised within the constraints of structures, is the most obvious example (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 35–39, 52–56). Judith Butler's concept of performativity similarly contrasts with Foucault's approach to subjectivation (Butler, 1997, pp. 10–18). Considering that de Certeau is concerned with the reproduction of society over time, through the materiality of space, it is surprising how few archaeologists have made use of his work (but see Robin, 2002). More have used Butler's concepts to explore forms of gendered agency (Joyce, 2004a; Perry and Joyce, 2001). Despite encouragement by Ortner (2001, p. 276), very few archaeologists have taken up the more balanced approach to relations of structure and agency developed within anthropology itself by Sahlins (1981; but see Gillespie, 1999; Pauketat, 2001a).

Even without exploiting all the distinctive positions on the spectrum of practice theories, the range of theoretical approaches to agency employed in archaeology is wide enough to introduce substantial differences in understanding of the degree of freedom that actors have, and the degree of consciousness they would have needed, to exercise agency (Dobres and Robb, 2000; Dorman, 2002). This has implications for our ability to derive methodological guidance from the interpretive strategies used by other archaeologists. To what extent can approaches used successfully in one case travel from their specific situations? Does the work of other archaeologists offer the potential for replicability of analyses? Perhaps most important, can we represent such a methodological middle range without reducing nuanced, specifically grounded analyses to the kind of cookbook that Pauketat (2001b, p. 79) has warned us against? The actual diversity in articulations of structure and agency among archaeologists presents a serious challenge to answering these questions affirmatively (for further discussion, see in this issue Dobres and Robb, 2005).

Nonetheless, we argue that we *can* identify features repeatedly selected by archaeologists in translations from the ethnographic vocabulary of structuration and agency which have been used successfully in considerations of archaeological materials. To make this argument, we have to temporarily de-emphasize the differences introduced by the choice to use agency, action, practice, performance, habitus, or dispositions as terms to describe the position of the person in

structuration. We do not mean that these choices make no difference. In fact, they often signal critical divergences in positions along the spectrum from more to less structural determination. Thus the use of agency and action in archaeological texts embroils us in arguments about the degree of intentionality, self-consciousness and autonomy enjoyed by some or all past persons. An emphasis on habitus and dispositions tends to mark texts that treat most persons as acting on most occasions without reflection. Our own preferences for practice and performance clearly stem from our interests in exploring how, though actions they chose, persons in the past reproduced and continually transformed structure even though they did so within structures not of their own making.

Given this diversity of positions with respect to freedom of action, it is particularly striking to us that archaeologists with very different views on the degree of determination of action by structure use similar metaphors or models to explore agency, practice, or habitus. Chains, networks and other images of repetition, such as citationality (Joyce, 2003b), re-appear in many analyses as the archaeologically identifiable evidence for the restructuring actions of past persons. In the remainder of this brief PostScript, we would like to explore some of the general characteristics of these models of structuring action in different archaeological works, including our own. While limitations of space preclude a full elaboration, we believe that there is value in drawing attention to the congruence of different models and to exploring how the slight differences between them affect the kind of archaeological analyses they facilitate.

LINKS IN A CHAIN: SOME USEFUL WAYS TO APPROACH AGENCY

In many cases, deep histories of repeated practices that allow us to define regional traditions are interpreted as evidence of long term reproduction of dispositions (Joyce, 2003a; Joyce and Hendon, 2000; Pauketat and Alt, 2003, see Cobb and King, 2005; Martin, 2005; Owoc, 2005; Sassaman, 2005). The linking logic is that what we today recognize as continuity, or better, repeated replication, is the material expression of the intentional actions of past agents working within the structures they inhabited, along with the unintended consequences of those actions that were incorporated in the structural matrix of later actors. Structuration becomes visible to archaeologists, in a way that it is not necessarily visible to ethnographers, because we examine temporal spans that cover multiple generations of reproduction of structure.

Since structuration is the realization of agency, by definition we “see” agency in these sequences of structuration. Agency should not be recognized solely in innovation, but rather includes the choice, conscious or not, to reiterate what was done in the past (e.g., see Hegmon and Kulow, 2005). Deliberate recapitulation of the traditional can take place even under the greatest differentials of power

(Silliman, 2001). Only if we adopt an extreme position on the spectrum of determinism in practice theories can we rule out the possibility that actors in the past could have done things differently. From any position that allows for moderate freedom of action, or tactical choice, the reiteration by actors of previous actions was likely a choice from a number of alternatives.

Where different archaeologists identify agency is in our view, first a consequence of the position they adopt on the spectrum of practice theories and freedom of action, and second a matter of scale. Archaeological analyses based on theories of structure and agency ground the large-scale, long-term reproduction of specific social relations in the small-scale, everyday, and even biographical scale of persons. The “scale” of what we recognize as an agent is also variable, ranging from the methodological individual to collective agents and to the temporally enduring scale of things (Gell, 1998; Latour, 1999, pp. 174–215). Alternative conceptions of the agential entity change the scale at which we should expect agency to be perceptible. Objects that could endure over time or move across space coordinated the actions of multiple persons whose practices shaped the material traces we analyze today (Gamble, 1998; Joyce, 2003a). The coordinated actions of multiple persons, effected through the agency of things or through complex overlappings of multiple intentionalities (Owoc, 2005), produced archaeologically recognizable signs of replication of, and innovation in, sequences of practices.

Analysis of technology using the *chaîne opératoire* is the best documented strategy to lay out such sequences of actions, carried out by knowledgeable agents acting within a received structure and through their actions restructuring it (Dobres, 2000). Technical production, with reconstructable traces of individual action and statistically definable large-scale tendencies, is a highly productive site for the identification of structuration. For example, the structure/agency relation is by definition evident in the interplay of a potter’s actions mobilizing practical knowledge, discursive consciousness and intentional innovation, within the “rules” that governed design structure that we today identify as style (Lopiparo, 2003; see also Hegmon and Kulow, 2005). It is equally visible in the microstructure of traces of action that may be conflated during excavation in recording categories of features, such as post holes (Pauketat and Alt, 2003).

The *methodological* innovation common to practice-based analyses is an emphasis on descriptive language that references the *sequences of actions* that produced the objects, features, sites, and landscapes we analyze. Terminologies differ—life histories, structured deposition, “chaînes de travail”—but the implications are the same. Recording and analysis are transformed from a description of products of unexamined action to sequences of action that can be recognized as traditional or innovative, intentional or unreflective. This is a shift from a simple referential model of archaeological language to a more complex semiotic one (Preucel and Bauer, 2001).

REPETITION IN ACTION

We thus argue that archaeological approaches to agency require a transformation from an ethnographic emphasis on “shared” practices to a historical examination of *repeated* practices. We must expand our analysis of the ethnographic scale of the everyday to incorporate the scale of the landscape. Vast temporal and geographic scales of structuration are embodied in archaeologically discernable landscapes that coordinated movement and reproduced mythologies, histories, cosmological and astronomical models, at scales from the individual to the regional and extra-regional, from the event to the *longue durée*. For example, in her study of the integration of Late Classic communities within the central lowlands of the Ulua River valley in northern Honduras, Lopiparo (2003, in press) showed how the household-based production of figural ceramic artifacts was critical to community and regional-scale reproduction of orientations to landscape that endured over centuries. Moving back and forth from the scale of the individual life course, the life-cycle of houses, the persistence of microtraditions of ceramic production, and regional ritual practice, she identified technologies and materialities that facilitated repetition of practices and through that repetition continuously restructured knowledgeable persons with particular dispositions toward action.

Archaeologists interested in the ways knowing agents worked within landscape-scale structures to reproduce and transform them have made good use of the work of geographers who describe how the coordination of the experiences of people in space embeds dispositions, and also allows or in some cases demands innovation (e.g. Pred, 1990; see Love, 1999). Previously structured spaces re-structure subsequent action, at the very least by influencing the orientation of actors to the landscape, but also through understandings of place and history that could have been brought to discursive consciousness when use of space changed (see Cobb and King, 2005; Gosden, 2005). An analysis of the constitution of a new community after A.D. 800 at Cerro Palenque in the Ulua River valley can serve as an example (Joyce and Hendon, 2000). The deliberate construction of newly established house compounds with a visual orientation toward a preexisting hilltop settlement that was abandoned at the time ensured that residents of the many new house compounds in this uniquely large settlement would have experienced a coordinated sense of place, and specifically, of a place with history. That sense of place was enacted in the original construction of these house compounds, but was reiterated in the movement of residents through the compounds in their daily life. It would be possible to argue that Cerro Palenque was the product of self-conscious actions by a small group of actors who determined that the new settlement should be built, and initiated each of the individual building projects, although such an assertion would require ignoring the many variations in building plan and construction techniques and use of materials involved that suggest decentralization of these construction projects. But even if the innovation of a new large

settlement were attributed to the agency of a few self-conscious actors, the tactical occupation of the site through everyday circulation and acts of daily life would still need to be acknowledged as repeated practices critical to the maintenance of the settlement, and the reproduction in the persons tracing trajectories through it of dispositions to act in certain ways (similarly, see Martin, 2005; Owoc, 2005; Pauketat and Alt, 2005; Sassaman, 2005).

As this example shows, attention to innovation is the necessary counterpart to archaeological recognition of reproduction of practices over time. Archaeologically visible disjunction in practices can be interpreted as contestation of correct representation of the underlying taken-for-granted dimensions of knowledge that Bourdieu (1977, pp. 164–171) labels *doxa* (e.g., Martin, this collection). Because colonialism inevitably produces conflicts in these stocks of uninterrogated knowledge, some of the best examples of this approach come from the archaeology of historical colonization. Here, nondiscursive knowledge and dispositions were brought to consciousness and subject to reflexive self-monitoring because of the confrontation with an alternative version of the self-evident and naturally preferable (Silliman, 2001).

There is no reason to assume that breaks in *doxa* are limited to such extreme confrontations; as Bourdieu clearly indicates, *doxa* is an abstraction always made visible either in the form of *heterodoxy* (a knowing break with that which is now viewed as obsolete tradition) or *orthodoxy* (a conscious rearticulation of what is viewed as valued tradition). This may be as visible in differences in mound-building as it is in the use of pre-European technologies for tool production in historic California.

Archaeologists studying the construction of early monumental architecture in Formative Mesoamerica assume that the community laboring together to produce these works of architecture made social differences manifest through these construction projects. Whether the creation of social difference effected is seen as relatively intentional, largely unintentional (Joyce, 2004b), or somewhere in between (Love, 1999), the new architectural projects are seen as stratifying space and creating the potential for differential experience and knowledge. These building projects directly affected the bodily practices of community members, and through their embodied experiences community members incorporated what all these authors argue were largely nondiscursive dispositions.

We argue that the construction of such new architectural projects required the re-incorporation of what had been taken for granted (*doxa*) either in what was asserted to be traditional orthodoxy or represented consciously as innovative heterodoxy. Such transformations of *doxa* would have necessarily involved not only a small group of agents (the planners of these projects) but also those whose labor is directly represented by these works, as well as those who lived through the changes in spatial layout that were outcomes of these projects and continued to reside in the newly structured spaces around them. While we tend to recognize

the innovations of construction as products of the exercise of agency, we must also understand the continued repetition of practices in the face of such innovations as evidence of the reproduction of structure through action.

TOWARDS DOING AGENCY IN ARCHAEOLOGY

We have suggested that the conceptual vocabulary that recurs repeatedly in archaeological studies of agency is one of chains, networks, and citations, all figures of sequences of action in time. Archaeologists are well positioned to identify sequences of action over time at multiple scales, a requirement for explanations that link the local and the everyday to the global and the historical. While in no way a prescriptive methodology, these shared procedural commitments are strategies for getting on with an archaeology of agency.

Putting such procedures in practice will no doubt benefit from the tactical space created by the diversity of theories of practice archaeologists can draw on today. Self-consciousness about the implications of different theories of agency and practice, especially for the degree of self-consciousness or determination of action, will be critical to making progress. If we begin with incommensurate understandings of the degree to which persons have a meaningful ability to make choices, then our understandings of the significance of chains of practices will necessarily be different. These differences will be attributable to initial theoretical assumptions, not to methodologies or understandings about effective forms of argumentation.

The position we take on the ability of persons to chose to act leads us to view the reproduction of practices, not just their transformation, as particularly fertile ground for archaeological analysis of what most people label agency. Our position further implies that archaeological interests are best served by language that avoids reifying agency or structure as something that can ever be separated from the continuous flow of conduct (Giddens, 1979, p. 55). The models we have touched on above—with their emphasis on connections over time—capture this important dimension of the ongoing flow of conduct. They also serve to position persons actively doing the work of making links over time, discursively and nondiscursively. In this they shift our emphasis productively from identifying agency as a kind of substantive thing, to attending to what people were doing as they recapitulated valued practices of the past and innovated within the constraints exercised by past practices and articulated traditions.

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