
reaction

Archaeological Dialogues 23 (2) 229–235 © Cambridge University Press 2016

doi:[10.1017/S1380203816000246](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203816000246)

Against object agency. A counterreaction to Sørensen's 'Hammers and nails' *Artur Ribeiro**

Abstract

This paper commends some ideas that Torill Christine Lindstrøm presented in this journal on the subject of 'object agency' (2015) and contends, against Tim Flohr Sørensen's reaction paper (2016), that object agency subsists on philosophically questionable premises. I argue that Sørensen relies on a definition of 'agency' which is too labile and virtually indistinguishable from 'cause'. Moreover, certain premises that Sørensen supports lead to some contradictions with regard to social responsibility. Finally, I argue that object agency is part of a larger intellectual trend which perceives agency as a dynamic global force – and that a return to a more constrained understanding of agency would be of more benefit to archaeology.

Keywords

agency; objects; context; responsibility; symmetrical; materialism

We have been fortunate to see several commentaries on the concept of 'agency' in archaeology in past years, one of the most recent contributions being Lindstrøm's (2015) article critiquing the current instantiations of 'object agency' as represented in symmetrical archaeology. However, Lindstrøm's appraisal was followed by a response penned by Sørensen (2016) claiming that Lindstrøm has mischaracterized certain advantages of object agency.

Although both Lindstrøm and Sørensen have put forth many compelling points, the dispute lies primarily on what 'object agency' actually is, with the former characterizing it as a 'one-size-fits-all' concept (Lindstrøm 2015, 221 ff.) and the latter arguing that agency is something that 'issues forth in specific contexts and with particular consequences' (Sørensen 2016, 116). This latter argument might seem *prima facie* a good defence not only of object agency but of agency in general, and it is one that is often repeated (see Barrett 2000, 66; Robb 2004, 105–6; 2010, 503; Johnson 2006, 122),¹ but I believe that it is Sørensen who has mischaracterized Lindstrøm's arguments and not Lindstrøm who has mischaracterized object agency. By stating that

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agency is something that issues forth within specific contexts, Sørensen is not actually providing a more concrete understanding of what agency actually is, given that even if a ‘context’ is necessary to recognize it, agency remains nevertheless a one-size-fits-all concept, i.e. agency can be perceived in *any* and *every* context which contains humans and/or non-human objects. In order to make things clear, Sørensen needs to provide a concise definition of ‘context’ and explicit examples of contexts in which the *interaction* of humans and objects *does not produce agency*. For example, are there contexts in which a child can play with a doll (Lindstrøm 2015, 216; Sørensen 2016, 116–17) and not produce agency? If there are, Sørensen needs to explain how and why situations such as these are possible.

A second topic I take issue with concerns Sørensen’s claim that Latour, Gell and the symmetrical archaeologists have put forward ideas that allow us to appreciate the non-neutrality of non-humans and in the process explore how humans and objects coexist under a non-Cartesian ontology – something which he claims has never been done before in archaeology (Sørensen 2016, 120). As Lindstrøm points out, this has, in fact, been consistently done inside and outside archaeology. The anthropocentric Cartesianism that the symmetrical archaeologists repudiate (e.g. Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007) is not as widely accepted as they claim it is – and as such it is disingenuous to assume that symmetrical archaeologists are the only ones who have developed non-Cartesian frames of research. For instance, can it not be claimed that Tim Taylor’s *The artificial ape* (2010) and Jared Diamond’s *Guns, germs and steel* (2005) are explorations of human–object interaction in a non-Cartesian manner? Both symmetrical archaeologists and scholars like Taylor and Diamond are exploring human–object interaction while disallowing Cartesian principles, and the only thing separating these two groups is that symmetrical archaeology is riddled with buzzwords like ‘hybrid’, ‘pramatogony’ and ‘entanglement’ (Lindstrøm 2015, 212). Moreover, the non-Cartesian ‘materialism’ that the symmetrical archaeologists follow finds close parallels with positions which have been defended in philosophy for many decades now – positions which are currently witnessing a backlash. Philosophers of both Continental and analytical background are questioning whether it really makes sense to talk about objects as if they were some sort of Kantian *an sich* (the actual) (Brassier 2014, 412–13; Meillassoux 2008; Žižek 2013, 10). Furthermore, the collapse of the subject–object divide, which the symmetrical archaeologists also claim to have attained, is consistently claimed by other scholars (see Heartfield 2006 for more on this issue). It is so common a claim that many philosophers tend simply to ignore it (e.g. Descombes 1988). All these ‘new’ ideas, as Lindstrøm states, are old wine in new bags.

Third, I find Sørensen’s (2016, 118) support of symmetrical archaeology by appealing to a dictionary definition of agency, as an ‘action or intervention producing a particular effect’, a bit unwise. Once again, we have old wine in new bags – but this time it is *causation* which is being put in a new bag. A brief look into the same dictionary Sørensen cites, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, has ‘cause’ defined as ‘[t]hat which produces an effect; that which gives rise to any action, phenomenon, or condition’, which makes ‘cause’ and ‘agency’ virtually synonymous. The present issue, of course, is one that cannot be

solved by appealing to lexicographical definitions. If we accept that agency is nothing more than something that can produce an effect, then anything and everything can be an agent (or part of a context in which agency issues forth, in Sørensen's words (2016, 116)). Things like a grain of sand, a neutrino, Margaret Thatcher, the Eiffel Tower, the number 27, sadness, James Bond and unicorns can all be seen as agents because all that is necessary is a description of contexts in which these objects can 'produce effects' – something which is easily accomplished (e.g. James Bond inspired me to get in better shape, imagining unicorns led me to follow a career in writing fantasy novels).

Agency was a concept developed in philosophy and studied in depth by the 18th-century philosopher Thomas Reid, and it has, in more recent times, become intricately related to social theory, namely that of Giddens (1984), Bhaskar (1991) and Archer (1982; 2004). Although agency has also manifested in multiple ways in philosophy, its most common acceptance in that discipline involves not metaphysics, but ethics. Why is that? Well, in some of its earlier instantiations agency was perceived as 'freedom to choose (or to act) otherwise' (Chisholm 1976, 53; Pleasants 1997). This automatically adds another level of understanding to the concept of agency and why it remained for an extended period of time applied exclusively to humans, and sometime later to higher-order animals. The fact that agents are free to choose otherwise implies *knowing* what action is being performed and what consequences can be expected. Accordingly, freedom to choose or act means that actions are more than just mechanical causes – actions are *responsibilities*. A man who has access to food but chooses to starve to death is responsible for his own death; however, a man with no access to food who eventually dies of starvation is not responsible for his own death. This is exactly the point made by Lindstrøm (2015, 222) when she criticizes Latour's man-gun example by stating that a man can *choose* a gun but a gun *cannot choose* a man. Furthermore, this is the reason why the man in this situation would go to prison but the gun would not – because responsibility lies with the man as *he could have chosen* not to shoot the gun.

Sørensen (2016, 117) concedes that the capacity to reflect on moral responsibility is exclusive to humans, but he argues that non-human objects remain nevertheless a crucial element in human decision making. This sounds to me like a case of wanting to have one's cake and eat it. Sørensen's comments on Gell's (1998, 104) notion of 'distributed personhood' are not entirely clear – if an object influences a human decision and agency is a result of this relation, in what manner is *responsibility* actually shared with the object? I am not really convinced by Sørensen's argument on this issue, as he wants us to accept a contradictory middle ground in which non-human objects can be viewed as part of a process in which they are simultaneously responsible (by conditioning human decisions) and non-responsible (by not determining human decisions).

Ultimately, the crux of the issue is that for object agency to maintain logical coherency, it has to be perceived as much more than something 'situational, contextual and contingent' (Sørensen 2016, 116) – object agency needs to be perceived as a *dynamic 'force' immanent to all matter*. In fact, Gell fully agrees with this premise, as he states:

Because the attribution of agency rests on the detection of the effects of agency in the causal milieu, rather than an unmediated intuition, it is not paradoxical to understand *agency as a factor of the ambience as a whole, a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live*, rather than as an attribute of the human psyche, exclusively (Gell 1998, 20, emphasis mine).

This in turn relates to what Lindstrøm (2015, 211) claims is the current intellectual zeitgeist in which ‘materiality studies’ and the ‘new materialisms’ have become relevant labels. I cannot discern whether Lindstrøm is aware of this or not, but the current zeitgeist is much more widespread than it might appear at face value. The Anthropocene, climate change, palaeodiet, political ecology, ‘neo-Deleuzianism’ and the return to things are all different aspects of the same intellectual, cultural and political trend – one which has sacrificed the ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘Cartesianism’ in order to revive the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ and ‘Spinozism’ (*sensu* Israel 2001) – one in which the materiality of ‘Mother Earth’ has been given intellectual priority.

Underlining this trend is a deflation of linear causation as represented by the natural sciences and of teleological reasons as represented by the human sciences. What matters to these materialists is not reasons or causes for a given state of affairs of the world but the relational context in which humans and non-human objects play unmitigated roles. So against Sørensen, object agency in fact divests the human psyche of a measure of social responsibility and transfers it onto bodies/networks/assemblages, thus producing an omniscient perspective of reality (Lindstrøm 2015, 211). Therefore it comes as no surprise that the intellectual movements associated with this omniscient perspective (e.g. Jane Bennett’s neo-vitalism (2010) and Latour’s actor-network theory (2005)) have been mockingly dubbed ‘terrestrial animism’ and/or ‘weak panpsychism’ (Žižek 2014, 8).

According to the critics of this omniscient perspective, human and animal intention has been dethroned and replaced by some panpsychic ‘force’ which is everywhere but no one can see or describe – a materialism which unfolds itself into materialist and idealist principles (Ruda 2014; Žižek 2013; 2014). Although the reliance on idealist principles might seem the most problematic issue surrounding the omniscient perspective, the real issue lies elsewhere: it becomes easy to imagine the horrors wrought by the Nazis during the Second World War not as something of their own responsibility and choice but as a product of a network in which the Jews, the gas chambers, the rail system and all the logistics also played a role (Žižek 2014, 8). The Jews, as *actants* themselves, would have to be understood as co-responsible for their own terrible fate.

Of course, no one is denying that, counterfactually, Jews, Nazis, trains and gas chambers were not all part of the Holocaust; my question is, what does object agency actually contribute to our understanding of these historical situations? In its original acceptance, agency in archaeology provided a framework in which humans were capable of overcoming causal determination (Dornan 2002, 304; Trigger 1991). In fact, it is in this framework that agency can still serve a purpose in archaeology, a purpose that

is a much narrower one than that conceived by symmetrical archaeologists – agency has to be perceived as those knowledgeable choices which actors are actually free to make. These choices can only exist within a *social context* in which an actor understands what choices can be made. It is only in this framework that the notions of both ‘agency’ and ‘context’ make sense.

This raises a question: what is it that agency actually does? It does not actually ‘do’ anything because without the social context to provide *meaning* to the intentions of actors, all we have is a world of random physical connections in which it would be impossible to differentiate when and where physical actions start and end. The idea that it is the context which provides an understanding of the actions of actors is not necessarily a new take on the subject, as this is what John Barrett has been defending for many years now (1988; 1994; 2000; 2006). Unlike the vague and flexible notion of ‘context’ which Sørensen fails to further clarify, the notion of ‘social context’ addressed here is one that has been almost two centuries in the making, starting with Hegel’s *Philosophy of right* (2009), to today’s updated Hegelian philosophy in Slavoj Žižek (2006; 2013; 2014), Charles Taylor (2015) and Vincent Descombes (2001; 2014). Central to the Hegelian paradigm is the idea that freedom to act cannot exist outside a world without social ‘rules’. That is in fact the greatest paradox of freedom – one is only free when one is committed to the rule of others (Brandom 2004, 248).

However, unlike Giddens’s theory of structuration (1984), rules are not the structural boundaries of social existence; rules are exactly what provides intelligibility for freedom of action. For example, if an ant walks across a patch of sand and draws a line which resembles Winston Churchill, can it be said that the ant *chose* to draw Winston Churchill (Putnam 1981, 1)? Of course not, given that the ant cannot understand who Winston Churchill is. Following this perspective, it clearly makes no sense to ask whether the ant *could have chosen not to represent Winston Churchill*. To follow a rule is to understand (*verstehen*) what it means to draw or not draw Winston Churchill, and in order to do this one must live within a context in which Churchill and wanting or not wanting to draw him are something intelligible not only to yourself but also to other actors in society. Naturally, accepting this perspective would mean that object agency is impossible given that non-human objects lack the capacity to follow rules.

In closing, although it is clear that there are differences in how Lindstrøm and I perceive agency, we remain largely on the same page, especially with regard to object agency. It also seems clear that we both agree on the fact that agency has been shoehorned (or hammered) into new intellectual trends in an incongruous way. Accepting a situation in which the definition of agency can be easily altered to suit whatever fashion is in vogue can lead us down a dangerous road – who is to stop it from being constantly altered? Today agency concerns objects; tomorrow, who knows?

Acknowledgements

I have to thank Gustav Wollentz, John Barrett and Alexandra Ion for reading earlier drafts of this paper. All indiscretions in the paper remain, nevertheless, my own.

Note

- ¹ Admittedly, the 'context' that these authors are referring to might not be the same as Sørensen's 'context'. Nevertheless, I believe that these authors and Sørensen are commending the same idea under different terms.

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