

Review article

Between Marx and Locke: approaching early complex societies

Richard E. Blanton*

ROBERT L. CARNEIRO, LEONID E. GRININ & ANDREY V. KOROTAYEV (ed.). *Chieftoms: yesterday and today*. 2017. New York: Eliot Werner; 978-0-9898249-8-9 paperback \$34.95.

ROBERT M. ROENSWIG & JERIMY J. CUNNINGHAM (ed.). *Modes of production and archaeology*. 2017. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-5430-8 hardback \$95.

MANUEL FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ & DIRK KRAUSSE (ed.). *Eurasia at the dawn of history. Urbanization and social change*. 2017. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-107-14740-9 hardback \$140.



I viewed this review project as an opportunity to assess the degree to which archaeologists have been able to transcend what Gary Feinman (*Eurasia at the dawn of history*, p. 146) refers to as

“impenetrable academic silos and rigid adherence to entrenched ideas”. Happily, I found ample evidence of transcendence, with the exception of *Modes of production and archaeology*. Historians properly recognise Karl Marx as an important contributor to Western thought in a time of economic turmoil one and a half centuries ago. Especially, his efforts to motivate opposition to an exploitative economic system are highly regarded—I, for one, have made a pilgrimage to view his work-space in the British Museum reading room. And I agree that ideas influenced by Marx and Engels (considering the work of Childe, White, Wittfogel, Polanyi and the like) have been so thoroughly internalised that they amount to a kind of “disciplinary common sense” (in the introductory chapter by Robert

Rosenswig and Jerimy Cunningham, p. 1), perhaps better characterised as ‘entrenched ideas’. From the perspective of contemporary anthropological theory, however, I find it difficult to understand why researchers might insist on bringing notions from Marx and Engels directly into today’s archaeological thinking and practice, but this is exactly what most of the contributors to *Modes of production and archaeology* have done.

A main aim of this book is to demonstrate why a Marxist mode of production (MOP) analysis should be central to all archaeological theory in spite of suggestions such as Bruce Trigger’s that it “deserves a decent burial” (quoted in the chapter by Cunningham, p. 175). Rather than bury, the book’s authors idealise the central role of MOP in the way it facilitates “the reproduction of society” (in Rosenswig and Cunningham’s Introduction, p. 4), while constituting the ultimate source of human consciousness (p. 9). Yet, neither claim is given credible support in the volume beyond citing chapter and verse of the canonical Marxist literature. Instead, we are treated to largely descriptive and static accounts of categories of MOP (emphasising kin-ordered, lineage, tributary, Germanic, Asiatic, peasant, petty-commodity and plantation modes).

I looked for evidence of ways of thinking and practice that deviate from typical Marxist analysis, and did find some, including the use of statistics (in the chapter by Myrian Álvarez and Ivan Briz Godino) and cross-cultural comparative analysis (using the eHRAF file) in the Ensor and Rosenswig chapters. Álvarez and Godino also cite some recent economic anthropology literature on consumer behavior, but they recast those interesting ideas into a ‘mode of consumption’ analysis that in my opinion does not provide any useful new insights. Otherwise, most theory is as one would expect for devoted

* Department of Anthropology, Purdue University, 700 W. State Street, Suite 219, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2059, USA (Email: blantonr@purdue.edu)

Marxists. Of the notions I find most incompatible with current theory, I would point to the fetishistic attachment to the priority of materialist causation and especially the MOP, even the bad-mouthing of theories based in idealism rather than materialism; a prioritising of local causal factors over exogenous; a sparse theory of human nature in which, for example, commoners are viewed as passive 'dupes' in the face of elite ideology; and a tendency to reify society. The chapters I found more interesting were those that departed from Marxist dogma. Johan Ling, Per Cornell and Kristian Kristiansen view temperate European Bronze Age exchange through the Ricardian notion of comparative trade advantage rather than MOP. The chapter by Gary Feinman and Linda Nicholas (not cited by other chapter authors) describes how Marxist-inspired theories resulted in the mischaracterisation of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican complex societies as 'Asiatic'. Rather, they argue, recent research points to the usefulness of an approach, grounded in collective action theory, which posits strategic interactions of elite and commoners. And, rather than a centralised 'command' economy, they emphasise the vitality of markets linking specialised producers. In the Marxian paradigm, markets are not a mode of production and are thus not worthy of consideration.

Charles Orser's chapter on the plantation economy of Providence Island in the Western Caribbean begins with the usual Marx adoration but then goes to places Marxists do not. Here we learn that plantation owners faced the typical cooperator problems addressed by collective action theory (although the author does not cite that theory): how can trust be established between owners, tenants, soldiers and others involved in the enterprises? Owners faced high transaction costs of maintaining their organisations, which cut into profit. Tenants and slaves liberated themselves, departing the plantations to establish new communities, and thereby cutting into the plantation labour-supply. The cross-cultural association between slaves and English farmers even challenged the owners' predominant ideology that set whites strongly apart from darker-skinned persons. These chapters pose challenges to Marxist dogma that I was hoping the book's editors would attend to, but no such project was attempted.

By contrast, many of the contributors to *Chiefdoms: yesterday and today* approached their subject with the idea in mind of evaluating the history of ideas in a critical and productive manner that will enrich

anthropological teaching and research. The chiefdom concept was conceived during the mid twentieth century (a period of emergent neo-evolutionist sensibility), and accordingly was burdened with certain theoretical baggage. Most importantly, it was originally conceived as a multi-village evolutionary bridge, or developmental stage, between the more acephalous 'tribal' societies made up of autonomous villages and the earliest state formation. In addition, neo-evolutionists borrowed from Marx's Asiatic form to theorise chiefly authority. They saw a chief as a sacred being, as the head of the paramount lineage in a system of ranked descent groups and as the executive director of a redistributive economy.

Neo-evolutionist ideas are now regarded by many as antiquated, yet are well represented in the book (for example, in the Introduction by Leonid Grinin and Audrey Korotayev, and in the chapter by Robert Carneiro). Other chapters present new ideas, without, thankfully, abandoning the subject matter. Most importantly, the idea that a chiefdom is one of a predetermined sequence of stages in the evolution of social complexity is now critiqued as exemplifying the logical fallacy of teleology. The definition of chiefdom is also changing. This is necessary because there is far more variation in forms of chiefdom governance than the neo-evolutionists imagined (masterfully discussed in Chapter 3 by Grinin and Korotayev, on societies of 'medium complexity'), and because there is not always a clear distinction between the neo-evolutionist's chiefdom 'stage' and their state 'stage'. Another issue of definition arises when the ascripted authority of a paramount chief is absent. This is a problem that I wish had received more treatment in the book, as the paramount chief model persists as a key determinant of chiefdom organisation throughout most of the chapters. This dictum leaves societies with effective institutions for societal governance in limbo when the leading figures are not sacred and whose positions are not ascripted. The League of the Iroquois is a useful example but is not adequately treated in the book's chapters—I find it odd that the League is identified as a form of chiefdom (or even early state) by Grinin and Korotayev (p. 90), but not by D. Blair Gibson (p. 180).

Two chapters in particular provide pathways to new and, to my mind, productive avenues to rethink the chiefdom and to make better use of the great corpus of data collected through historical, ethnographic and archaeological work.

Timothy Earle's chapter convincingly argues that a rethinking must move away from typology and 'social steps', and instead examine processes by which power becomes centralised and is funded. In the chapter by Patrick Chabal, Gary Feinman and Petr Skalník (see also the chapters by Ludomir Lozny, Earle, Skalník and the concluding thoughts by Korotayev and Grinin), a perspective is developed that rethinks chiefdom research in a non-evolutionist frame. In their view, chiefdoms develop in particular socio-political circumstances, not necessarily as a bridge to something more complex, and may even be incorporated into the operational structures of states. Chabal, Feinman and Skalník point out that conditions favourable to the development of chiefdom analogues can be found in many circumstances today within the boundaries of weak states unable to provide adequate governance or public goods, and in inter-state spaces in the form of criminal organisations or religious movements.

The goal of *Eurasia at the dawn of history* is to summarise recent thinking about the nature of social, technological and cultural change during the last few millennia BC of Western Eurasia (although there are brief forays into East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and pre-Hispanic Mexico). As a person who is not a regional specialist but has a deep interest in this important region and time period, I thought the volume did largely achieve that goal, using an approach in which each author (in 27 chapters) contributes a brief summary of recent thinking and research about particular topics. The approach does impart a strongly fragmented quality to the book, although several broad themes are addressed in many of the chapters. I mention in this respect a welcome interest in what the editors (in their introductory chapter) refer to as the subjective and cognitive domains (particularly concepts of self in society) and how these changed in relation to political change, long-distance interaction, social differentiation and the growth of cities and early states. Mario Liverani's chapter captures these themes most effectively in his summary of transformations from the Late Bronze Age through the Early Iron Age across multiple regions. He discusses how the rise of technologies such as iron metallurgy and local-scale irrigation facilities (such as *qanats*) developed in conjunction with commerce, the alphabet and social philosophical innovation that recognised the value of the individual (for example, as a citizen). Change in these domains served to undercut traditional elite privilege and the

centralised political institutions of the Late Bronze Age, particularly in periphery zones (such as Greece) outside the domains of the traditional empires.

While I applaud the turn to the cognitive domain, three early chapters that introduce this topic in my opinion are misleading and fail to align with many of the later chapters. The basic idea, laid out by the editors in their Introduction, is that across the time span in question, a 'relational' notion of the self was replaced by the forces of 'rationalism' and 'individualism'. David Olson's unfortunate chapter attributes these forces to the decline of oral transmission and the rise of literacy, a claim I find highly dubious (see below). But what bothers me most is his elitist intimation that the minds of non-literate persons are equivalent in cognitive capacity to young, pre-literate children in more complex societies (p. 47). Another problem for his thesis is that, in my opinion, by prioritising the role of literacy, he misses key aspects of socio-cultural evolutionary change. I illustrate this with the example of democracy in Classical Athens, an obviously quite literate society, but where new institutions were developed that enhanced public oral communication and that were entirely consistent with philosophical discourses that recognised the self as a rational person. New practices included speech-making in the People's Assembly (*ekklesia*), oaths of office, dramatic performances, public funerary orations lauding exemplary citizens, public trials and an elaborate annual round of religious rituals. Practices intended to enhance public gatherings, very probably analogous to those in Athens, have been noted by archaeologists even in non-literate societies. In several chapters dealing with the Bronze Age to Early Iron transition, we see mention of new forms of built environments, including accessible open spaces that would have served as venues for intermingling and communication among large groups gathered for public meetings, feasts and rituals.

Almudena Hernando's chapter repeats anthropology's often expressed dystopian sense of modernity and its inherent 'emotional detachment' that supposedly separates persons into self-centred individualists, following Durkheim and Mauss. He also, as anthropologists often do, attributes this rise of individualism to Western Enlightenment philosophers (p. 56), which does not accord well at all with other chapters that see this impetus in far earlier periods. For archaeologists to make progress in addressing the cognitive domain, I suggest that they forgo

Hernando's notion of 'individualism' and instead consider how the democratising forces described in Liverani's chapter (and in others) developed in conjunction with the idea that the self, irrespective of social standing, has the capacity for thoughtful, rational social action, and correspondingly is able to understand both the rights and obligations of

citizenship (also a main argument of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke). This is not a turn to the selfish individualism imagined in traditional anthropological thought. Rather, it is a notion of a rational self that is consistent with the institutional development of highly cooperative and inclusive forms of society.