

Anthropology Review Database

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Reviewed 22 May 2017 by:
Jack David Eller
<david.eller.anthropology@gmail.com>
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ABSTRACT: Is anthropology still a four-field science, and is archaeology an equal partner in that relationship? A set of essays examines the ways in which archaeologists and cultural anthropologists can close the gaps between the theories, methods, and practices of the two subdisciplines, particularly in an era of disciplinary specialization and of generalized threats to the livelihood of both.

Is anthropology still a 'four-field' discipline? Was it ever? And if it is becoming less of a four-field enterprise—the various subfields drifting apart, or one of the subfields dominating all the others—is this a problem? The contributors to the new volume offer “a critical evaluation of an issue seemingly ever present in Americanist anthropology: the relationship between cultural anthropology and archaeology,” noting that their differences and what David Shankland and his contributors in *Archaeology and Anthropology: Past, Present, and Future* (reviewed elsewhere in ARD) their 'divorce' can cause “miscommunication, feelings of alienation, and, in the most extreme cases, a rigid separation of anthropologists and their subdisciplines from one another due to feeling that they no longer have anything in common” (p. 3).

In their introduction, editors Englehardt and Rieger attribute this rift to three main factors—academic

structures that isolate cultural anthropology from archaeology, the “rigid empiricism and positivistic models on the part of archaeologists,” and the concomitant “applications and misapplications of postmodern theoretical discourse” especially in cultural anthropology, leading to a denigration of 'science' and to an infusion of thought that has made it “nearly unintelligible and impossible to apply in archaeological research” (p. 7). Yet, both disciplines have gravitated to the concept of culture, and the authors remain confident that “what cultural anthropologists and archaeologists have in common continues to be greater than what differentiates them” (p. 13).

The ten essays collected in the book testify to their assessment, although they demonstrate differences not only between the two major fields but within archaeology and between national practices of both (recall that Englehardt and Rieger singled out American anthropology for an acute case of separation anxiety). In the first chapter, for instance, Vincent LaMotta and John Monaghan consider the relationship between the fields in the context of two archaeological research areas—Mesoamerica and the Pueblo Southwest. While they note a general lack of collaboration between the two specialties, they also find that there seems to be “a higher level of subdisciplinary interaction” in the Southwest than in Mesoamerica, due to “more continuity between the temporal foci of research” in the former (p. 38). Paul Shankman puts the concept of cultural evolution at the center of his commentary, arguing that the shift to interpretive anthropology—personified by Geertz—has “led many cultural anthropologists away from science and, by association, away from cultural evolution and archaeology” (p. 46). (Interestingly, Stephen Reyna [2017] makes a similar charge against interpretive, postmodern, and text-obsessed anthropological theory, without specific reference to archaeology, in his recent defense of 'critical structural realism.') Geertz is accused of leading a stampede away toward “understanding rather than explanation” and thus toward a microscopic ethnographic view dismissive of the 'big questions' of cultural history (p. 51).

For Fredrik Fahlander, the key issue is ontology, given cultural anthropology's turn toward materiality of late. “Will it bring anthropology and archaeology closer together,” he wonders, “perhaps even conflating them, or will the two disciplines diverge even further?” (p. 70). Despite the shared interests, he still observes that few archaeologists use suggestions like Latour's Actor Network Theory—but then it “is not frequently employed in anthropology either” (p. 78)! Ivy Rieger discusses her experience as a cultural anthropologist working

alongside archaeologists in Oaxaca, Mexico, insisting that archaeology can benefit from an ethnographic knowledge of the people who live in (and often participate in, e.g. as excavators) archaeological research zones. Staying in Mexico, archaeologist Joshua Englehardt maintains that “if one looks objectively at the relationship between archaeology and anthropology in value-neutral and apolitical terms, anthropology remains the most productive intellectual context for an empirical, 'scientifically oriented' archaeology” (p. 104). He supports this claim with a comparison of disciplinary boundaries in the United States and Mexico, the latter being a place where archaeology and cultural anthropology “are currently distinct disciplines in practice, and they have never enjoyed as close a historical relationship as in the United States” (p. 117). This reminds us that the four-fields approach is not necessarily an international ideal.

Grappling with one particular anthropological concept, Joseph Hellweg contends that archaeologists continue to work with a notion of 'tribe' that cultural anthropology has long since criticizes if not altogether abandoned. Focusing on the work of William Parkinson, Hellweg contends that “the theoretical attempt to redefine 'tribe' misconstrues the dynamics of kinship, alliance, and gender that inform its anthropological critique” (p. 130). But then he also asserts that Evans-Pritchard got the 'tribal' nature of the Nuer substantially wrong. In place of the troubled concept of 'tribe,' he proposes that both archaeology and cultural anthropology would be better served by examining societies through the lens of 'the house.' Meanwhile, one of the most important and universal things that people do in their houses is cook and consume food, and Lilia Fernandez Souza gives us a chapter on culinary practices in a contemporary Yucatan village, identifying “an ethnographic approach to foodways in Yucatan that is applicable for archaeological purposes” (p. 153).

Similar to Rieger's chronicle of her parallel research with archaeologists, anthropologist Ashley Kistler describes doing fieldwork in a Mayan village where tensions “ran high between the villagers and the archaeologists, as excavations at the site had begun a few years before with little communication with the community” (p. 181). Kistler's case, like Rieger's, indicates that interdisciplinary collaboration “not only advances our discipline by providing a deeper understanding of the cultures we study, but also has potential to empower marginalized peoples by reconnecting them with a tangible and concrete sense of their past” (p. 183). But the past is a relative thing, as evidenced in David Small's essay on the archaeology of ancient Greece. He states

that classical archaeologists have more in common with historians than anthropologists because of the time-scale they investigate, although based on some useful concepts moving between the classicists and the anthropologists, he believes that “it is possible for archaeologists and anthropologists to work together to create analytical frames with depth, which can be used by both” (p. 217). Finally, Kent Fowler and Derek Johnson choose an unlikely topic—choice and wellbeing—to consider the interaction of subdisciplines, drawing examples from Gujarat fishing and South African pottery.

The volume ends with not one but two concluding chapters, both going beyond summarizing the preceding chapters but also more thoroughly critiquing them than usual. Donna Goldstein, after acknowledging that the authors ask how they “might contribute to one another’s projects,” adds that such truly productive interdisciplinary work might “require *other* collaborations with *other* disciplines” (p. 254). She also wishes for the voices of cultural anthropologists who already live in the post-divorce era, i.e. who teach in departments uniting anthropology and sociology but sectioning off archaeology. And despite the healthy cooperation documented by Rieger and Kistler, she judges that “not every cultural anthropology project would benefit from this particular engagement” (p. 258). William Parkinson writes the second conclusion, and, as the target of much of Hellweg’s argument, he naturally has a lot to say in response to that chapter. But more generally, he makes the very apt point that cultural anthropology and archaeology do not have to ‘speak the same language’ or study humans and their cultures in exactly the same way. What is important, he correctly insists, is “our ability to examine the human condition from a variety of different perspectives, using different theoretical models that operate most effectively as different social, geographic, and temporal scales”; if cultural anthropology and archaeology are or need to be unified, they “are unified not because of *how* we study humanity, but rather because although we study humanity differently *we ultimately share the same goal*” (p. 270).

I think Parkinson’s is a valuable point to make: not to belittle the volume in any way, it may in the final analysis be relatively trivial whether archaeology is housed in an anthropology department or whether the four-field model persists. It strikes me as strange that, as the masters of diversity, anthropologists often have so much difficulty handling diversity among their own ranks, be it academic anthropologists versus ‘practical’ or applied ones or, in this case, cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. We are all, as Parkinson underscores, working on the same fundamental questions, and we are also all facing

the same fundamental disciplinary threats (like having our funding cut, if not our departments dissolved completely). The final, but perhaps unexciting, answer to the question of the relationship between archaeology and cultural anthropology—and of course the volume explicitly does not deal with the poor lonely physical and linguistic anthropologists—is that sometimes their knowledge, methods, and concepts will intersect and sometimes they won't; sometimes they can make essential contributions to each other, and sometimes they won't. Anthropologists should understand better than anyone that there is seldom a single universal answer to a complex question.

Reference

Reyna, Stephen P. 2017 *Starry Nights: Critical Structural Realism in Anthropology*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.
