

The archaeological research on ethnic phenomena and the social sciences

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Archaeologists get their knowledge about ethnic phenomena in two ways. By using the knowledge embedded in their research tradition or by borrowing knowledge from elsewhere, from other traditions of archaeological research, from historical research or directly from the social sciences. The second course of action is now taken by a growing number of archaeologists educated in local culture history research traditions, like Sebastian Brather or Florin Curta, who are aware that assumptions about ethnicity taken for granted by their colleagues are fragile and, to a great extent, shaped by nationalist representations of society. They are encouraged by the current ideology of interdisciplinarity, which presents contacts between disciplines as fruitful cooperation within the pacific world of scientific research, imagined to share not only some basic commitments which make it different from common knowledge, but also the same view about what is to be known and what is worth knowing about it, differing only in the methods employed. The various disciplines are imagined as complementary, each particular form of scientific knowledge being supposed to fit into the coherent big picture of an objective reality.¹

This irenic representation of the scientific world ignores some facts. Many disciplines compete in their attempts to understand humanity, for instance interpretive social sciences with evolutionary anthropology,² or the normatively inclined political scientists with the social scientists who try to understand what happens, not to imagine what should happen. This competition can go up to denying the scientific character of what the opponent does.³

Some disciplines are more important than others. Archaeologists from my research tradition believe that history is more important than archaeology and that mathematics or physics are more important, scientifically more accurate and intellectually more demanding than both history and archaeology. In an interdisciplinary encounter, a molecular biologist has certainly more chances to impose his or her views on humanity to an archaeologist, especially in an encounter with one educated in the culture history tradition, because of a deep-seated belief, seldom developed into something specific, that there is more to ethnicity than culture.

Those culture history archaeologists who believe that what was good yesterday is no longer so today do not provide any information on how and why this change in their views happened, thus showing the lack of reflexivity characteristic for their tradition of research, and tell nothing about

¹ For the debate about the unity/disunity of science see GALISON–STUMP 1996.

² This competition is alive in the debates between postprocessual and evolutionary archaeologists. For recent attempts at reconciliation see RIEDE 2005. and COCHRANE–GARDNER 2011.

³ See, for instance, BOURDIEU 1977. 87 on political science.

how they managed to select from the huge amount of literature dedicated to ethnic phenomena – a literature which they were trained to ignore – what is both relevant for their concerns and viable in the context of the social sciences. Not only the mystery surrounding such interdisciplinary practices is unsettling. The heteronomous knowledge is introduced to fellow archaeologists, knowing that they have little or no means of judging its quality. That is why many of them are so reluctant to accept what is supported by an authority – “the social sciences”, “the anthropological research” and so on – they cannot recognise without losing faith in what they know a scientist should do: trust only what he or she knows according to the norms and practices of one’s own scientific tradition.⁴

In most cases, archaeologists who wish to use knowledge about ethnic phenomena from the social sciences take information either from syntheses written by social scientists as introductory texts (e.g. ERIKSEN 1993. or BANKS 1996.) or from other archaeologists who claim to have an accurate understanding of the social sciences (JONES 1997.), assuming that such readings give access to the most important trends of the research on ethnic phenomena.

The importation of knowledge by archaeologists is seriously affected by an unrecognised problem: how can one without training in the social sciences properly understand what social scientists write?

Contrary to what many people think, there are a lot of misunderstandings in the scientific world, most of them being generated by the conflicts between what the reader believes and what he or she is reading.

I will take as an example the following text:

“Since the historical provenance of any assemblage of culture traits is diverse, the viewpoint also gives scope for an ‘ethnohistory’ which chronicles cultural accretion and change, and seeks to explain why certain items were borrowed. However, what is the unit whose continuity in time is depicted in such studies? Paradoxically, it must include cultures in the past which would clearly be excluded in the present because of differences in form – differences of precisely the kind that are diagnostic in synchronic differentiation of ethnic units” (BARTH 1969. 12).

When I first read this, at the beginning of the 1990s, I did not understand what the author meant. Only a few years ago I understood what was so difficult to understand and why it was so difficult.⁵ Barth denies the sense of a long-term history of an ethnic unit. This opinion tends to be beyond the reach of someone like me, trained to believe that peoples are the movers and shakers of history and that the history of a nation is the most natural thing to do and the main task of a historian. This passage was for me obscure because my beliefs made difficult for me to understand F. Barth’s

⁴ This is probably what V. Bierbrauer thinks when he writes about engaging ethnic interpretation “von ‘unten’, also meinem Fachverständnis entsprechend von der archäologischen Quelle (Funde und Befunde) zur Aussage” (BIERBRAUER 2004. 49). The novelties are more palatable when they are presented as coming not only from the social sciences but also from the historical research, as S. BRATHER does (2008. 1), because of the constitutive subordination of culture history archaeology to history.

⁵ See BOURDIEU 2003. 19, agreeing with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s observation that our perception of reality is hampered more by our will than by the limits of our intellect.

radical proposal to change how we think about ethnic phenomena. I thought that his main contribution was the emphasis on the subjective character of ethnicity.⁶

Misunderstandings happen not only in the contact between disciplines. They also happen among social scientists and a remark made by one of the most famous anthropologists of the last fifty years, Clifford Geertz, in 2002 (published in 2005), shows how a misunderstanding can have a long and successful career. In a comment to a paper of Ulf Hannerz, in which Hannerz referred to the well known “primordial attachments”, a notion used by Geertz in an article published in 1963, Clifford Geertz rejoices that someone has finally understood what he meant.⁷ This widespread misunderstanding – which owes its remarkable success in part to its presence in introductory texts written by social and political scientists, has led to the labelling of Clifford Geertz as a primordialist, someone who believes that ethnic identities are anterior to other identities. If so many social scientists have misunderstood Geertz for almost 40 years, what is the chance that archaeologists get him right? Archaeologists should be more prudent when presenting what they have understood from the social sciences to their colleagues. They should offer information on how they have acquired this knowledge, on its workings in the context that generated it and should put their interdisciplinary dispositions to good use by showing what they know about ethnicity first to social scientists and then to archaeologists. This might seem extravagant, but it is nothing else than the extension from artefacts to scientific ideas of a central concern for any archaeologist, the recording and analysis of the contexts.

Even if we assume that we properly understand what the social scientists write about ethnicity, our interdisciplinary practices can hurt the autonomy of archaeology as a scientific discipline, that is its capacity to produce new knowledge. If our knowledge about ethnic phenomena taken from the social sciences is made of definitions of what those phenomena are, and, in order to use them, we assume they have always been, how can we produce more than an illustration of what we have understood, how can we offer to the social scientists something they do not already know?

For a long time archaeologists have used the notion of archaeological culture as the tool for understanding ethnic phenomena from the past and many are still doing this, thus confirming a view which was current in the social sciences a century ago. We can try to replace this view with more recent ones, but our interdisciplinary practices suggest that we will still be illustrating old knowledge,

⁶ A similar understanding can be found in CURTA 2001. 19 and 166–167, and BRATHER 2004. 3 (Brather does not mention F. Barth but he is clearly aware of his ideas, probably found mainly in the writings of Siân Jones and Walter Pohl). There is no mention of ethnicity as subjective in BARTH 1969. He refers to “self-ascription”, associated in his definition of ethnic groups with “ascription by others” (BARTH 1969. 13) and when I first read his paper there was nothing in my mind to contradict the common knowledge notion that the self is subjective. Now I have problems with this. See BOURDIEU 2003. 194: “[le] corps isolé... [a] la propriété (biologique) d’être ouvert au monde... susceptible d’être conditionné par le monde... il est soumis à un processus de socialisation dont l’individuation même est le produit, la singularité du ‘moi’ se forgeant dans et par des rapports sociaux” and his reference to P.F. Strawson’s notion of “collectivist subjectivism”. See also STRAWSON 1985. 22: “...it is in the highest degree improbable that one is unique among members of one’s species in being the enjoyer of subjective states, and of the kind of subjective states one does enjoy in the kind of circumstances in which one enjoys them”.

⁷ See GEERTZ 2005. 113 on his “primordial attachments” “[w]hich, praise be to God, someone has finally gotten right: They are not natural givens or frozen history or the return of the repressed; they are cultural perceptions”. This is a reaction to HANNERZ 2005. 91: “...Geertz’s actual understanding of primordialism seems rather different from what it may occasionally have been taken to be. Those primordial attachments...are *assumed* givens,...which means, in a latter-day vocabulary, that primordialism is indeed socially constructed...”. See also Florin CURTA (2001. 15) who, without referring to Geertz, embraces an understanding of ethnicity as “the social construction of primordiality”. The misunderstanding is present in the book written by Siân Jones on the archaeology of ethnicity, and used by many archaeologists less familiar than her with the social science research on ethnic phenomena: see JONES 1997. 65, after a long quotation from GEERTZ 1963.: „Hence, it is argued that primordial bonds between individuals result from the givens of birth—‘blood’, language, religion, territory and culture – which can be distinguished from other social ties on the basis of the ‘ineffable and unaccountable’ importance of the tie itself. Following Shils and Geertz, primordial attachments are involuntary and possess a coerciveness which transcends the alliances and relationships engendered by particular situational interests and social circumstances”.

because of the significant time gap between the moment when a new perspective on ethnicity gains recognition in the social sciences and the moment when archaeologists accept it, after being filtered by introductory textbooks and by the structures of authority of each archaeological research tradition. The case of the already mentioned introduction by Fredrik Barth can be used as an argument. As far as I know, it was first mentioned by archaeologists 8 years later, in an issue of *Norwegian Archaeological Review*.⁸ Then more archaeologists discovered the introduction in the late-1980s and in the 1990s, especially after Siân Jones published her book, where it receives a lot of attention. I am still looking for an archaeologist who has read the introduction and comments on the already mentioned paragraph, where Barth sees a history of ethnic units as meaningless.⁹

The practice of importing authoritative knowledge from the social sciences leads to the following disturbing situation: culture history archaeologists who refuse to use it, because they rely on the knowledge at work in their research traditions, on what they consider stable routines and on their empirical knowledge about the archaeological data, lose ground by defending what can no longer be defended against the social sciences, the idea of a humanity divided into ethnic cultures. By doing so they are defending the autonomy of their discipline. Competitors from the same or other research traditions can easily dismiss their interpretations by employing fashionable statements on ethnicity, easy to find in introductory textbooks. This seems to be a situation in which the good scientists are wrong and the bad scientists are right.

Social scientists usually investigate the present and the recent past. Archaeologists who oppose the use of the knowledge they produce believe this knowledge is irrelevant because it does not come from a study of the past and therefore it cannot be applied to the it.¹⁰ This is a major research question and archaeologists who use knowledge about ethnic phenomena produced by the social sciences usually ignore it. I believe both sides are wrong, mainly because they misunderstand what the social sciences can offer. Both sides expect definitions, namely of what ethnic phenomena are, but what they are depends on the larger social context and can be established only empirically not theoretically. We cannot predict someone's behaviour from his or her ethnic identity. The function of the definitions used by the social sciences is to orientate the research towards fruitful perspectives, not to give a condensed representation of the social reality, something similar to what some people expect to find in a common dictionary. The social sciences have difficulties in saying whether ethnic phenomena were or not important, or even existed, 2000 years ago. The distant past is simply not their concern because they were conceived for different goals and their practitioners are not trained to deal with it. But we can expect from them ways of approaching past social phenomena similar to current ethnic phenomena. There is no easy answer to the question of how can we say whether indeed they are similar and what is this similarity made of. We are usually tricked by the resemblance to the present suggested by the ancient sources. They use names of *ethne* and *gentes*, they ascribe behaviours to them and we assume that these are ethnic groups. But we know, not only from the social scientists, that groups having a name, a tradition about their origins and common behaviours can be very different, from aristocratic families to football clubs.

⁸ In two papers (HALAND 1977. and KLEPPE 1977.), the first commented by J. Desmond Clark, Bruce Trigger, Fritz Wendorf, Anthony Marx, and Joel Shiner, the second by Knut Bergsland, William Fitzhugh, Povl Simonsen, Ericka and Knut Helskog.

⁹ I have come across only one historian who quotes the paragraph, finding it relevant for his interest in the identity and continuity of the Hellenic and other newcomer groups in Ptolemaic Egypt (GOURDIAAN 1988. 11)

¹⁰ See, for instance, BIERBRAUER 2004. 57, n. 78, where S. Brather's use of an article dedicated to the ethnographical study of clothing, written by Gitta Böth, is qualified as misguided because: "sie sich als Volkskundlerin ausdrücklich auf rezente neuzeitliche Befunde bezieht."

If archaeologists want to understand ethnic phenomena from the past, they have to pay attention to what is important for the social scientists. We have to do that because whatever social scientists say about ethnic phenomena has full meaning only in the context created by the social sciences. Not only ethnicity looks different to them than to us, the whole humanity looks different. If we continue our interdisciplinary practices, our short incursions in search for what seems useful and authoritative, we will perpetuate the subordinate position of archaeology among the disciplines, we will continue to offer information to those historians who still believe peoples are the main actors of history and to the politicians who use our work for identity politics.

This view about what I think is a desirable future for archaeology is supported by the growing tendency to make history itself a social science and social sciences historical. I would begin such a transformation not by importing more knowledge for what we think we need, for instance, for the identification of ancient peoples, but by comparing our goals and those of the social sciences. We should pay more attention to what the social scientists believe are their most important tasks. One of them, for instance, is that of dealing with the reification of human realities, a problem recognised by few archaeologists (for instance BRATHER 2004. 109). We have to avoid, “the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly suprahuman terms... the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world... The reified world is, by definition, a dehumanised world” (BERGER–LUCKMANN 1966. 106). This task is now more important than ever because of the growing influence of common knowledge, especially of the politically authorised versions of it in which reification is the main instrument of legitimation and mobilisation. One of the many problems created by reification is that it makes us believe that human groups are primary and relations between them secondary, that they exist without these relations (STRATHERN 1996. 51). This offers us a better chance to understand Fredrik Barth’s remark: “[t]o think of ethnicity in relation to one group and its culture is like trying to clap with one hand” (1994).

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Az etnikai jelenségek régészeti kutatása és a társadalomtudományok

A társadalomtudományokból importált dekontextualizált ismeretek félreértéseket generálnak és a kultúrtörténeti régészetet hagyományosan alávettként kezelik. Ebben a helyzetben a régészet képtelen újabb ismereteket produkálni a társadalmi tények tekintetében. Objektíválnunk kell az indokainkat, ha az importált tudást és a releváns dolgok kiválasztásának módszereit használjuk. Nagyobb figyelmet kell fordítanunk azokra a kontextusokra, amelyekben az általunk használt fogalmak generálódnak és működnek, és össze kell vetnünk a saját céljainkat a társadalomtudósokéval.

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