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Week 4 – Socio Politics

The readings for this week examined the relationship between craft specialization and social complexity. For many, the central question was, what role does craft specialization and technology play in society and how can we, as archaeologists understand this in past societies. For some, such as John Clark and William Parry, this relationship can be simply understood in the form of a series of tests and equations. Levels of craft production can be examined next to categorically ranked societies in order to determine what level and type of craft specialization should be equated to a particular level of social complexity. For Peter Wells, however, craft specialization actually changes and nuances the notion of social complexity within Temperate Europe. In a consideration of the role of technology in modern society, David Nye critiques the notion of technology as deterministic, even further undercutting the argument for using technology as a means to measure social complexity. Each of these papers present a series of lessons to archaeologists. Most importantly of these is the fact that in order to understand the complex interplay of technology, craft specialization and society, each of these cannot be viewed deterministically or along an evolutionary line.

In their article “Craft Specialization and Cultural Complexity”, Clark and Parry set out to test the hypothesis that craft specialization is heavily tied to cultural complexity since archaeologists often employ craft specialization as a marker of cultural complexity without problematizing the relationship. They have rightly

identified a preconception that needs to be further explored, but the methodology which they employ creates a circular argument by which their own hypotheses, craft specialization can be used for determining social complexity, are affirmed. In this heavily processual study, Clark and Parry use the HRAF to examine 53 ‘traditional, preindustrial societies or those relatively free of “Western” influences’¹, excluding peasant societies where possible. This is the most information, except a list of names in Table 2, we receive about the case studies used. Everything unique, interesting, and enlightening about these groups is reduced to a series of numbers, whose parameters have been set by the authors in the case of their craft specialization and by Murdock and Provost in the case of the “cultural complexity”. This type of methodology suffers from all of the critiques that are typically leveled at such processual approaches. Where this study falls even further is in its circular argument that is based on a series of definitions which allow little flexibility and upon Western ideas of what craft production and specialization should entail. For instance, they define Attached Specialization as being sponsored by special patrons or institutions and believe that it is characteristic of mid-level rank or stratified societies.² Since one of the ways in which they measure this type of specialization’s link with social complexity is through political integration (number of political levels within the society), the specialization automatically must at level 2, the middle range of complexity. This type of circular argument occurs for every category of craft specialization and corresponding marker of social complexity that they employ. In the end, all of their assumptions are confirmed, no specific data

¹ Clark and Parry 1990, 303

² *ibid.*, 293

about the case studies has been mentioned, and yet they insist at the end that this is exploratory and not meant to be a way to equate craft specialization directly with a level of social complexity. This, however, is the only conceivable result.

Another difficulty of the study is that the information that Clark and Parry use is something which is generally unavailable to archaeologists. Although I agree that there are different types of craft specializations (they use attached, full-time, etc, terms which may be too restrictive), being able to determine this from the archaeological record is much more difficult than assigning values to numbers of craft specializations and time invested. There is still considerable debate within Bronze Age archaeology as to the level of control in particular craft specializations, and this is a period with considerable textual evidence. This fact does not lead scholars to question the level of social complexity however, it leads to questions of what type of governing structure was present. Being able to make these determinations for periods with even fewer types of evidence would be considerably more difficult.

Peter Wells gives a good example of an archaeological approach to studying a region through considerations of production rather than solely consumption. Rather than using craft specialization to determine the level of social complexity, Wells examines the nature of demand for pottery and metal objects and the organization of their production. By not having preconceived notions about tying technological advances and craft organization to social complexity, he is able to discover non-evolutionary shifts in the nature of how the two relate. Previous studies of Roman involvement in the region tend to treat the Roman presence as

something that both advanced technology and mobilized the local population into a much more controlled, and organized productive unit. In this article however, Wells notes that centralization in pottery production actually occurred before the Romans arrived during the *oppida* period in the Late Iron Age and that even when Roman did control the area, production of metals actually remained at a smaller, local scale. These subtle shifts in craft organization would be difficult to fit into Clark and Parry's model, which would destroy the nuances that make Wells' findings so important for understanding Temperate Europe over the long durée.

Wells is also able to complicate the evolutionary understanding of technological advancement. In the case of pottery, even though the potter's wheel was introduced in the Early Iron Age, it did not gain wide acceptance, and fine wares actually continued to be made by hand. Even though later during the Late Iron Age and Roman periods the wheel became much more predominant, coarse handmade wares continued to be used. This is not a local population failing to understand the potential increase in efficiency provided by such a technology, but a society making an active choice about how, when and why to use a particular technique. Nye makes this same point of technological choice within a more modern context. He notes the preference for swords and arrows amongst the Japanese of the sixteenth century over the "more advanced" technology of guns. This did not mean that the culture devolved in its social complexity, as Clark and Parry may look at it, but that it was a conscious, cultural decision to prefer traditional weapons. Nye is asserting that not only is technology not deterministic, but that technology alone does not have the ability to change society. Facebook, for instance, is being praised as a primary

mover in the recent revolution in Egypt, but the internet and social networking alone did not change society. These technologies were socially constructed and were used by people to create a new society. The technology alone, however, did not cause such a change. If technology alone cannot change society, how can we as archaeologists look to it as a measure of social complexity? By setting aside the deterministic and evolutionary perspectives of how technology interacts with society, we stand a better chance as archaeologists to understand the complexities of both.