**Week 5 Craft specialization and production: some thoughts Clive Vella**

Sifting through this week’s readings the obvious over-arching theme that emerges is that archaeologists should examine craft specialization through evidence of production. While perhaps this statement might appear lividly basic to many reading this paper, a distinct group of archaeological literature has often, not only separated the two processes, but actually dealt with either as if they were distinct agents that rarely overlap. In contrast, our three readings for this week highlight a push towards combining both processes in light of their wider social, technological, and ritualistic embeddedness.

Cathy Costin’s (1991) ‘*Craft specialization: Issues in defining, documenting and explaining the organization of production’* is a seminal publication in technology studies. To me, the prominence achieved by this publication lies mainly in the exhaustive manner in which Costin envisaged the operation of craft specialization cross-culturally. In fact, throughout this passage the author carefully examines models and typologies proposed by some key players, such as Van Der Leeuw, and Earle, which she feels have some significant drawbacks. The initial problem in typologies appears to lie in the inevitable variability of datasets. Also, to be quite honest I feel that sadly a discreet chunk of archaeological research focuses on highlighting uniform patterns. Secondly, archaeologists (and social scientists) tend to utilize different terms to refer to the same basic phenomenon. Similarly, there is also the problematic use of one term to describe two different kinds of production. While Costin is right in pointing out these drawbacks, I would add that typologies are simply problematic and should be confined to a researcher’s interest. While typologies can act as valuable heuristic and explanatory devices, it is up to later scholars to re-negotiate typologies and rather consider their dataset contextually prior to any direct transposition of typologies that were envisaged by other researchers.

In her own work Costin does not provide us with a schematic typology, on the other hand the article focuses on providing the reader with a sequential group of factors that are all intertwined in the process of craft specialization and production. As a material culturalist, I feel that Costin drives an excellent point when she points out that ‘… exchange events are invisible in the archaeological records, while production events often leave a clearer and more easily interpreted record …’ (Costin 1991: 1). It is often evident that archaeologists do not consider production analysis as necessary footwork in their research and simply skip to the richer, somewhat conjectural, interpretational stage. However as Costin indicates, there is a natural connection between craft specialization and production which should be upkept. Through the study of production processes in the archaeological record, Costin believes that an understanding to the organization of production can be accessed. However, I feel that studying production processes is not necessarily equitable with the comprehension of the organization of production. The production processes uncovered in the archaeological record are not only fragmentary, but they often show a limited part of the wider production process. Costin however does not outline such perils, particularly since she appears committed at providing the reader with a ‘shopping list’ of variables. For example, Costin explains that production is complemented by distribution and consumption. In these processes the nature of demand, the level of demand, the logistics of distribution and the rationale of the producer/supplier play large roles in the eventual archaeological record.

Turning to overlapping juncture of craft specialization and production, that is the organization of production, I felt that Costin was immaculate in outlining previous definitions. However, the ensuing variability of terms aggregated from numerous authors, only highlights my impression that there is no true way to define such processing constructs. Perhaps as illustrated by Costin, being aware of the different operational levels, context, concentration, scale, and intensity could facilitate our analysis of datasets. However, the bigger question presented by Costin in my opinion, is how can we identify the presence and organization of specialists?

Costin defined craft specialization as ‘… differential participation in specific economic activities …’ (Costin 1991: 43). At odds with Childe’s semi-glorified specialists, Costin claims that the issue of attached vs independent specialists is not the larger factor at hand, but rather that specialization requires a standardized contextual comprehension of a particularistic aspect of production that intersects the social, technological and sometimes ritual. The latter is at the forefront of Katherine Spielmann’s publication entitled ‘*Feasting, craft specialization, and the ritual mode of production in small-scale societies*’ (2002). Clearly utilizing Costin’s publication, Spielmann focuses on presenting the reader with the ways in which societies intensify their production to uphold the demands generated by ceremonial events in Melanesia. These communal and ceremonial events appear to require a substantial amount of food and goods that is not catered for in daily production activities. However, despite the pressure such an organization produces on an individual or group, Spielmann indicates that through such event organization, prestige can be ultimately achieved. Also, the necessary work required does not fall on the elites but moreso on numerous individuals who fulfill their ritual obligations and cater for the surge in demand. Therefore, despite that the Melanesian ceremonial preparations fall under Costin’s definition of craft specialization, these economic intensifications are part-time, and surely a quantum leap away from Childe’s perceived notion of craft specialists. Returning to Costin, I feel that she omitted the importance of geographic distance (Spielmann 2002: 199). Mary Helms in particular has noted that distance, voyaging and object history play a crucial role in the creation of craft specialization, an aspect duly noted by Spielmann. While the definition of such aspects in an archaeological record might be inferred, elements such as the power and prominence of place can help us access such meanings. Furthermore, Spielmann highlights that terms such as attached or independent specialists have a difficult applicability to small-scale societies. I would add that even in societies undergoing an emerging complexity, many of the variables outlined by Costin might result in a less than formal picture. Possibly, until higher levels of political authority and market forces emerge, the aspects noted by Costin are inapplicable.

In comparison Sinopoli is more compatible to Costin’s work. Dealing with 14th century AD South India, Sinopoli defines craft specialization as ‘… a defining characteristic of sociopolitical complexity …’ (Sinopoli 2003: 13). Clearly highlighting the importance of sociopolitical complexity, Sinopoli makes an interesting addition. Primarily, gender debates have in the past years been omitted/avoided due to the political issues in our own contemporary society.

In the end, I feel that these readings illustrate that there is no fast rule to archaeological interpretation of craft specialization and production. As indicated by Spielmann, low-level societies defy the list of operational aspects that Costin proposed and possibly require us to delve deeper into issues pertaining to ritual aspects of society. Furthermore, economic intensification can easily be scaled back and forth on the basis of demand, which is then supplied through part-time non-attached specialist. Finally, I feel that both Costin and Sinopoli make excellent points in arguing that typological classification used in relation to craft specialization are problematic, if not over-schematized. Despite our natural urge to classify and fit data into ‘pigeon holes’, production processes are often times particularistic and informal. Then ultimately, our interpretations should naturally reflect this reality.