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Technology and Production

April 7th, 2011

Actor Network Theory: A Rumination

The readings this week deal with multiple approaches to (and an application of) actor-network theory, or ANT. As I (hopefully) understand it, actor network theory does not see a clear boundary between “people” and “things” but instead sees the experience of the world of reality as an interaction between innumerous actors which influence each other to varying degrees, regardless of their animate or inanimate, conscious or unconscious status. This seems to manifest itself in an overwhelming rejection of the traditional conceptions of the “social.” This short paper will review, and with any luck, help me to clarify, what I believe to be the theoretical perspectives of these authors who expand on their interpretations of ANT and its related conceptual frameworks, as well as their criticisms of the academic (over)use of the term “social.”

Webmoor and Witmore, in their article “Things Are Us!” (with a slightly overenthusiastic exclamation point) criticize the use of the term “social” by Meskell and Preucel in their recent publication on “social” archaeology. Although they recognize its utility in countering hyper naturalistic approaches of processual, positivist archaeology, they argue that the application of “social” to so many varied contexts has transformed it into a tautology that is both what is explained and what does the explaining. Its ephemerality has also crippled the ability of archaeologists to address the vey topic that is central to the discipline: the ancient material record. The authors seek for the field to move beyond its current obsession with humans and their supposed “social construction” of their universe, as well as discouraging use of the term “dialectic” in regards to human/object interaction, as it implies an asymmetry that they reject, and presupposes a division between the two without critical analysis. Instead they propose that all elements within a “society” are made up of multiple interactions, events, people, places, and times and that society is in actuality “a collective assemblage of diverse entities” including human people and material objects. This complete impartiality toward human or non-human entities, while consistent, strikes me as a difficult goal for *human* investigators.

Callon and Law, proponents of the STS approach, extend this criticism to the presumed, Western dichotomy between the individual and the society (or rather, the collective) in their article “After the Individual in Society.” They argue that studies in STS demonstrate key aspects of the true nature of the social that must be understood. They describe a four part theory: 1) that non-humans can intervene in and influence action, 2) that what appear to be individual entities are actually interactive effects, 3) that action is structured and serial in its movement, but so complex and transformable/ing as to be unpredictable, and 4) that one action cannot be explained as a consequence of another action. In this conception, the social is really no more than a term that serves to hide the true complexity and multiplicity of its own nature. While this theoretical approach is intellectually stimulating (the authors use it to present a number of examples in an engaging and thought-provoking manner), it seems to lack a predictive or explicative impetus of any kind, perhaps serving more as a

descriptive tool than an investigative one.

In Latour’s introduction to his work on ANT, he states that the term “social” may be used to describe an assemblage of entities but should never carry associations with the *nature* of any given assemblage. In his re-evaluation of the term and its current usage in academics, he proposes that scholars should not see sociology as a science of the social, but as the “tracing of associations” of any and all things; associations that can only be observed as they change and are made anew. This focus on constant change and renewal of associations between actors, is in opposition to what Latour sees as a harmful, postmodern trend of deconstructionist approaches. His main goal is the separation of the “social” from society, and instead the re-assemblage of it into collectives or networks of interacting parts. This is a framing of the ANT theoretical approach that strikes me as the most active of those presented; it has as its goal not just the description of observed networks, but the identification and re-discovery of missing or hidden connections.

An attempt to apply the precepts of ANT to an archaeological investigation is made by Knappett in his chapter on Minoan ceramic drinking vessels. He rejects the traditional conception of utilitarian, unelaborated material goods as lacking any kind of meaning outside of the functional. He attempts to search for the meanings of this particular class of objects by examining their associations with other drinking vessels, other classes of objects, human individual, physical location, patterns of consumption, etc. He particularly focuses on the indexical nature of these drinking vessels; they can serve as an index of other material objects, or of consumption activities, or of certain technologies (such as the pottery wheel). In this way, it is not the physical object per se, but its multiple connections to other entities which imbue it with significance. Knappett also highlights the importance of indexicality in this study by de-emphasizing the symbolic; the data simply does not allow for any type of propositions about the symbolic nature of Minoan clay drinking cups. This study seeks to break down the connections between meaning and pure aestheticism by finding meaning in a utilitarian, everyday object through its position in a network of interconnected entities, thus demonstrating a practical application of actor network theory in an archaeological context.