

1-1-2008

Rethinking Individuals and Agents in Archaeology, by
A.B. Knapp and P. van Dommelen

Charles R. Cobb

University of South Carolina - Columbia, cobbcr@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/anth_facpub



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, Volume 18, Issue 1, 2008, pages 10-11.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=CAJ>

© 2008 by The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

In broad contour, this is a compelling argument that offers a useful point of departure for the pursuit of a critical archaeology. Yet, on the ground — in the places people live and how they live — this thesis is difficult to maintain if it is reduced to a series of related axioms concerning Western domination: that modernity is about spatial discipline, about faith in technological progress, about the rise of the individual, and so on. The difficulty with this characterization is that it leaves unquestioned the nature of the interactions between West, East, South and North that we associate with the rise of West beginning in the 1400s AD. Modernity may have a strong Western bent but it developed in a world-wide arena of mutualism. Marshall Sahlins (1993) describes an ‘indigenization of modernity’ to impart a sense of this historical hybridity. Recognition of this has led many workers to undertake research that explores the negotiation — rather than the simple imposition — of modernity (e.g. Berman 1982; Ong 1986). Ensuing from this idea is an entire cottage industry that has addressed ‘multiple’, ‘alterior’, and ‘parallel’ modernities. If modernity is so nebulous, it becomes difficult to maintain that its constitutive elements — self-determining individuals — are any less so.

In the essentialized view of modernity and its precepts — so commonly adopted in contrast to the pluralized view — one is reminded of the path that modes of production took under structural marxism. Capitalism was seen to penetrate or articulate with indigenous modes, but it was always monolithic and it always existed outside of lived experience. To be fair to Julian Thomas, singled out for critique in this article because of his vocal stand on these issues, his work does show that he has grappled with these nuances. In *Archaeology and Modernity*, he emphasizes that modernity is a heterogeneous process rather than a thing, but in some passages this process is defined by its Western source rather than its dialogical nature: ‘modernity has become something plural, as fragments of the Western framework have been assimilated and recontextualised by different communities’ (Thomas 2004, 51). I would suggest that modernity has always been plural, even as the Western framework itself has been continually recontextualized by its interactions with communities worldwide.

This is not to deny that modernity can be recognized by historical tendencies (back to discipline, technology, progress, and the importance of the autonomous individual); but it is also a cultural representation that is not to be confused with lived experience. While I believe that the construction of the self in the last five centuries may be increasingly defined by modernist tendencies in many areas of the

Comments

From Charles Cobb, South Carolina Institute of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29204 USA; cobbcr@gwm.sc.edu

I am largely in agreement with the authors, and will concern myself with what I see as the larger context of their arguments. Although their discussion centres on the meaning and relevance of the ‘individual’ in archaeology, in my mind the real question is as to how we are to address the meaning and relevance of modernity in our work? Knapp & van Dommelen effectively make the case that one can experience individuality and self-critical awareness in many historical contexts, yet they still have left Julian Thomas and others in control of the terms of the debate, that is, modernity is a Western-dominated construct that has fostered a qualitative shift in the way that people view their place in the world.

world, we need to be wary of generalizations about the nature of the individual in either the pre-modern or modern eras. Such generalizations are useful for laying a framework for research, but they need to be constantly critiqued, re-evaluated and refined. Micro-economics textbooks may assume the rational individual and decision-maker, government bodies may develop policies based on this principle, and neo-liberal thinkers may argue for its universality, but the contingency of history always undermines such constructs as it does the meta-construct of modernity. Indeed, this is, I believe, the argument for empirical investigation of the (person:self:individual) made by Knapp & van Dommelen. Western beliefs regarding the autonomous individual have been translated into reifying institutions and practices which, in the United States, range from interest rate decisions made by the Federal Reserve Board to beer advertisements on television. The interesting question is not how this 'structure' contributes to a transcendental Western individualizing ethos, but how such an ethos has been rendered into local mores. Likewise, the challenge for archaeologists is to develop ways of understanding the other forms of relational networks that contributed to the constitution of selfhood in the pre-modern era.