

THE PRIVILEGE OF TIME DEPTH: RESPONSIBILITY AND OBLIGATION IN AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

by

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This paper is about the status and state of archaeology in American universities. It is also about the growing responsibility and emerging obligation of archaeology in the academy that arises from archaeology's privileged view of human history. It is fitting that I present this paper in a symposium about time, because it is time depth—the long-term perspective of continuity and change afforded by the archaeological record—that leads me to make these remarks, to stake this claim for another part of the temporal continuum, archaeology's future.

Archaeology is the only academic discipline whose data provide access to a long-term record of sociocultural change. Archaeology also offers a unique diachronic perspective of variability in human organization and human behavior. Throughout my teaching career I have referred to these qualities of the field as *the privilege of time depth*. The privilege of time depth underlies archaeology's great promise to contribute meaningfully to understanding the place of humans on our planet. I suspect that it is both the privilege of time depth and the promise to contribute meaningfully to knowledge about the human condition that drew many of us to study archaeology in the first place. I know I have felt that these two essential qualities of our field conferred on it a centrality and status not accorded other academic fields.

Academic disciplines occupy positions in a social structure in the academy and have standing in patterns of reciprocal behavior. As those who make their living inside of universities know, each academic discipline occupies a unique status. The concept of status (and role) has been important in anthropology ever since Ralph Linton brought his pioneering research in this area to the field in 1936. Anthropologists use the status concept to order and describe complex patterns of social behavior. We know that individual and group relationships are structured by

differences in status and role, and that the network of social interaction in human society revolves around perceived status differences.

Academic administrators are acutely aware of the university's complex social structure and the statuses which different disciplines occupy. Administrators set budgets and develop hiring plans, in part, in accordance with common understandings about this social structure. At the foundation of this structure is a status hierarchy of academic disciplines. Writ large, the hierarchy of disciplines produces an academic metastructure that is the product of a complex interplay of perceptions about the shifting relevance of different fields of knowledge. Although individual universities may vary in their adherence to the academic metastructure, there is a general priority of fields. Today, for example, molecular biology and information science occupy higher rungs on the disciplinary ladder in universities than do classics and philology.

The university, however is a free and ordered space (Giamatti 1988), and the status hierarchy of disciplines is not fixed and static. Rather, as academic disciplines "mature they occupy different positions in the social structure. When they die, these positions are vacated, and others fill them. [And of course,] the status endures, even though the occupants change" (paraphrasing Kottak 1982: 236). Thus, two decades ago, physics was king and chemical physics was in ascendancy. Today, chemical physics is a "mature" field, and physics after the SSC is a shrinking discipline in search of new patrons. Departments of computer science that grew from departments of mathematics are being outpaced by the evolution of computational and information sciences, by artificial intelligence and software engineering.

Anthropology has become a mature field. It is no longer breaking new ground, but instead is plowing the same furrows marked on the academic landscape 100 years ago. Indeed, it could be said that anthropology has actually lost important academic ground in the last decade to the national and comparative literatures and to all of the "studies." Another way of saying this is that anthropologists have lost the culture wars. The "lits" and "studies" now employ culture as a central concept. Indeed, the emergence of cultural studies as a viable and growing field has damaged the perception of anthropology irretrievably in the university. Moreover, anthropology has ceded important methodological ground to a variety of interlopers. Doing "ethnography," for example, is now routine for those seeking advanced degrees in the fields of education and history. That the culture of the lits and studies, and the ethnography of education and history bear

only slight resemblance to the anthropological foundation is, regrettably, of little consequence to scholars in these fields and administrators leading universities.

In the social structure of universities, some disciplinary statuses are ascribed and some are achieved. The ascribed status of a field means that practitioners inherit their discipline's status; it is assigned based on perceived inherent characteristics of the field and its members. This is the status dimension most used by administrators in evaluation (and most reviled by faculty members). Achieved status, on the other hand, is the dynamic dimension of academic status. A recent study by Engell and Dangerfield (1998) has shown that the achieved status of an academic field is heavily influenced by what we might call the monetization of disciplines. That is, during the last two decades academic fields with a strong career orientation, fields that study money, and those that receive money for research have grown far faster in the university than academic fields that do not share these qualities.

In addition to the three qualities noted above, a major determinant of status in the academy is the perception of coherence in a discipline. By coherence, I mean the logical consistency of the field's different analytical features (the unity of its theory, methods, and techniques), and the near single-minded focus of the field on a few major research questions and issues of common concern. A stunning demonstration of disciplinary coherence is found in Jablonski's recent essay denoting the current state of knowledge in paleontology and elucidating the central research questions of the field (1999).

My recounting of this context may seem superfluous to the theme of time in our symposium today, but because the status of archaeology in the academy is directly related to the privilege of time depth, I believe these issues are relevant and bear very serious consideration. Today, archaeology is perceived to be a low-status discipline in the academy. It occupies this status because archaeology is intimately intertwined with the broader field of anthropology, and anthropology has moved into the ranks of low-status disciplines in the academy. Indeed, as Schiffer has noted "anthropology has lost its distinctiveness in academic and applied contexts" because much of its "subject matter has been appropriated and theoretical perspectives co-opted" (1999: 64). Nancy Hynes puts it more directly: anthropology has lost "its distinctiveness ... because it has been so comprehensively pillaged by ... other disciplines" (1999: 2). Thus, the dictum that "archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing" may be doubly true.

American archaeology is a field that sits halfway between the sciences and the social sciences. Its techniques and methods are increasingly those of the physical and biological sciences—a group of disciplines that are currently adding vast amounts of measurable and verifiable new knowledge to the human store. Archaeology is quantitative and, like many contemporary scientific disciplines, it integrates technology to aid in the discovery, identification, and description of different classes of data, and to manage information. The sciences proceed with a common understanding of theory and method, and with a handful of general models that have guided inquiry for some time. In universities today, the sciences are in ascendancy.

If archaeology rides the wave of adulation bestowed upon the sciences, it risks a wipe out from its other pedigrees. Archaeology's mode of inquiry and its theories and propositions are decidedly those of the social sciences. The social sciences are a group of well-meaning disciplines that have never figured out exactly what the right questions are. Nevertheless, these fields are characterized by much activity and very little external support. The social sciences, including archaeology in this guise, are currently adding vast amounts of new information to the human store, much of which is neither measurable nor verifiable. The speculation and conjecture from these fields, however, is interesting. As a collective, the social sciences are also virtually paralyzed by the analytical problem of equifinality.

If this burden were not enough, archaeology is also part of the humanities; it is concerned with humanistic inquiry into belief systems, values, ideology, customs, and praxis (cultural practice). The humanities disciplines, once the core of the liberal arts, have lost compass and purpose. As Engell and Dangerfield (1998) point out, humanists have descended into “endemic pettiness” over disputes about the “nature of language and of gender, and the roles of politics and race in non-Western culture. ... Inner political and theoretical bickering in the humanities has contributed little wisdom to the ... life of the country or local communities for two decades.” (1998: 111). Impoverished by internecine wrangling, “their appeal [has been] diminished by rebarbative jargon, name calling, narrow specialization, and dull, predictable accusations of being on the wrong ‘side’ of a polarized war” (Ibid.).

Because of these circumstances, there is a general perception of academic irrelevance and intellectual disarray in the social sciences and humanities among many university administrators. Anthropology is included among the fields that are suspect in this regard. Regrettably, this context has been imprinted ever more

deeply because many social science and humanities departments over the last decade have been characterized by significant internal strife and interpersonal conflict which have required overt administrative intervention.

In the remainder of this paper let me suggest that archaeologists need to take concerted action to rescue the field from deepening institutional problems created by this intellectual disarray. Let me also suggest the following explicit course of action: First, the field of archaeology must secure a separate and distinct institutional identity within the academy. What this means in different institutional contexts will vary, but archaeology requires an identity that segregates it from its most fractious and fragmented social science and humanistic kin on the one hand, and places it outside of departments of anthropology on the other.

The development of archaeology and its growth away from anthropology is analogous to the emergence of information science from the discipline of computer science, or of molecular biology from the broader field of biology. Archaeologists do not deny their history or heritage by taking such a step. Rather, archaeology seeks disciplinary independence and autonomy within the university to advance knowledge through pursuit of the unique, central elements of the field that distinguish it from all other academic disciplines: the privilege of time depth that includes the ability to study temporal variability in human and organizational behavior and access to a long-term record of sociocultural change. I note that my suggestion for disciplinary independence and autonomy is the logical outcome of an implicit course of action recommended (and followed) more than 25 years ago by Richard B. Woodbury (1973).

Second, archaeology must identify its core; it must define the central questions of the field and the appropriate methodologies for their investigation. All established fields, especially those that espouse a scientific underpinning, are able to limit the field of meaningful inquiry. Archaeology can and should undertake this exercise. As I noted earlier, Jablonski has provided a useful model of how this kind of prioritization might be accomplished. Jablonski argues that the most powerful contributions of paleontology “will emerge from analysis of evolutionary dynamics at different scales and hierarchical levels over deep time” (1999: 2116), a statement that anchors the field firmly on evolutionary ground. Archaeology, in contrast, has yet to find meaningful accommodation with evolutionary theory, a body of knowledge which include the most powerful ideas in science. In my view, this circumstance creates a significant impediment to the field’s advancement, especially given the fact that it is “the only discipline that can access evidence about the entire human experience on the planet” (Schiffer

1999:64). But it also points the way to what an *evolutionary social science* might look like.

Third, archaeology needs a disciplinary midden! In general, archaeologists practice explicit methods of evaluation and testing which contribute to a higher degree of rigor in the assessment of competing explanations. But contemporary archaeology is a theoretical patchwork. Perusal of the field's journals and books reveals practitioners of nearly every conceivable theoretical stripe. Currently the most common—culture historians, processualists, post-processualists, and behavioralists—have beginning assumptions that might as well be mutually exclusive. And these beginning assumptions are then layered and flavored by marxist, neo-marxist, materialist, historicist, post-structuralist, functionalist, and a host of other “ists” ... “made official by the hissing suffix” (Wilson 1998: 11). Not all of these approaches are of equal value or utility. Hard-edged evaluation by the field would do wonders to move the discipline forward.

Archaeologists must begin this process with the elements that unite the intellectual enterprise—the long-term record of sociocultural change, and the unique diachronic perspective of variability in human organization and human behavior. These qualities give archaeology what Schiffer has rightfully identified as “a comparative perspective utterly lacking in other disciplines that study humankind.” The time to reclaim lost ground in the academy is now. The future in universities will not wait.

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