

BOOK REVIEWS

Archaeologies of Complexity

Robert Chapman

2003

London: Routledge

Reviewed by Donna Mae Arriola

As we all know, archaeology is not unified in its theory and practice. The average Anglo-American archaeology student is confronted with too many “isms.” There may be areas of overlap within these different schools of thought and attempts to bridge disparities where some are said to be mutually exclusive. Having said this, Chapman points out that individual archaeologists are agents of influence and change and not passive receivers of theories and ideologies. Going back to the concept of social evolution, various archaeologies are seen in an evolutionary scale, too. Traditional archaeology is regarded as simple while Processual and Post-Processual archaeology, complex. Also, non-Anglo-American archaeology is equal to “simpler” archaeology while Anglo-American archaeology is seen as complex. Just like individual archaeologists, non-Anglo-American archaeology does not merely absorb advancements made in the Anglo-American world. As Chapman has seen for himself, there is much to be learned from non-English speaking countries. He then calls for materialist rather than idealist archaeology and a focus on the relationship between theory and practice, class, surplus, property, exploitation, production, and consumption in the study of inequalities.

In Anglo-American theory, various types of neo-evolutionism, practice theory and historical materialism has been utilized. In this book Chapman addresses how these were used, whether they are successive bodies of thought and to what extent they are mutually exclusive. The practice of archaeology is much more complicated than it seems and portrays this in his narrative of Spanish archaeology. At the same time, he also addresses the ambiguous terms used in the study of past societies.

Categorizations of societies into opposites such as equal/unequal, egalitarian/ non-egalitarian or simple/ complex fails to show the gray areas present in reality. In his study on the prehistoric past of southeast Spain from the fifth to the second millennia cal. B.C., he declared to have used a materialist approach to social change, avoiding social dichotomies. What he describes as a critical and challenging materialism is being developed in the Spanish-speaking world – focusing on the material conditions of life as the grounds for social change, using the relations of production and analysis of production in the study of the archaeological record.

Early state societies in southeast Spain are in no way comparable to the world's "earliest" civilizations in places such as Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia so they cannot be defined as states, which is according to Chapman a completely predictable proposal. At best, these are all just complex chiefdoms. He criticizes this by saying that "it still confuses a structural model of the state with the various material forms it might take." There is always the risk of trying to fit our archaeological research on past societies into existing evolutionary typologies instead of finding out how similar or different social forms were as compared to those from the ethnographic record. Most archaeologists want the archaeological record to document human achievement and it is the world's first civilizations that portray this. The more they are like "us", the more civilized they are. Changing the definition of the state just so we could all have early states is not the answer to the problem of the unequal view of past groups of people. The separation of structural change from material representation allows us to see "other" kinds of societies in the past. Indeed, one of archaeology's greatest challenges is the search for the "other."

Chapman succeeds in writing about a subject that is often taken for granted, putting it in the context of the present which makes it timely and relevant. The theoretical aspect of the book is balanced by the discussion of how a materialist approach was practiced and what the results of seeing through that perspective are.

By exposing the dichotomous thinking that has prevailed in Anglo-American archaeology, it drives readers to question long-held assumptions on past societies. Were human societies originally simple and egalitarian? What does "egalitarian" really mean? On the basis of North American society, this pertains mainly to opportunity and democracy – an ideal.

Complexity as characterized by inequality in this book is mostly founded on economic inequality. Gender was barely touched upon despite being an obvious topic with regards to burial practices, his forte, even the cover of this book. The issue of gender appears only in generalizations made with a so-called universal female subordination in state societies which was clearly not the case.

With Philippine archaeology being influenced much by Anglo-American archaeology, Chapman's work becomes a powerful reminder of the ideological traditions we follow which greatly affects archaeological interpretation. How real are Junker's chiefdoms? How sound are claims of gender equality in pre-Spanish Philippine societies? There is a real need to re-evaluate how we label Philippine societies in past and how we come to conclusions about them. Most of our books and journals come from English-speaking countries, and most teachers in archaeology were educated in the Anglo-American world. There are certainly other archaeologies out there that are worth looking in to.