

Martin Porr and Jacqueline Matthews, eds. *Interrogating Human Origins: Decolonisation and the Deep Human Past* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, 352pp., 15 figs, 3 tables, hbk, ISBN 9781138300415)

Human origins research is a thriving academic enterprise in which new discoveries are made at an astonishing pace, each unearthed puzzle piece promising to challenge the *status quo* of scientific knowledge. Yet, the interrogation of the deep human past is also increasingly dominated by the natural sciences and biology, fields which place little emphasis on reflexivity and critical thought, not least because they are strictly predicated on positivist approaches, realism, and empiricism. From a historical perspective, human origins research has emerged only recently as a distinct platform of inquiry, amalgamating strands of Palaeolithic archaeology, palaeoanthropology, evolutionary anthropology, primatology, and palaeogenetics. The root of this research endeavour is, thus, primarily 'scientific' rather than 'humanistic' and many of its proponents identify with the tenets of what is known as processualism or 'processualism-plus' in the Anglophone world (e.g. Davies, 2000; Hussain, 2019: Ch. 1). Together with the discovery-driven advances of recent years, this has created the impression that our knowledge of the deep human past is progressive and cumulative, and that solving the big questions of our origins now mainly depends on amassing more and better data as well as refining our methods.

What is often overlooked, however, is that more and better data cannot compensate for problematic assumptions and interpretations. With the maturation of the field, there is now an urgent need to cultivate a self-critical attitude and to begin a serious conversation about the foundations of knowledge production in the study of early human evolution. *Interrogating Human Origins* makes a major contribution here and invites its

readership to reflexively engage with some of the main tropes, confusions, and recurrent ideas that underpin modern inquiries into the deep human past. The book is a welcome addition to the presently available, yet still underdeveloped, critical literature about human beginnings: it avoids partisanship and unnecessary ideologization, while fostering diversity and pluralism. The book probes the application of post-colonial theory to pending issues in human origins and offers a timely reminder that empirical research needs to be married to meta-archaeological reflection and conceptual analysis in order to yield robust insights. By the same token, the volume resists an overly relativistic reading of the evidence and is, hence, generally compatible with the goal that we all share: to expand, refine, and deepen our understanding of early human evolution.

Interrogating Human Origins is a dense scholarly production woven into the increasingly complex arena of debating the 'coloniality' of Western science. The book is divided into five parts. In the first part (Ch. 1), Porr and Matthews, following up on their important Antiquity paper (2017), outline the ambition, scope, and thematic focus of the volume. They argue that post-colonial thought offers a powerful means to expose implicit tropes of Western modernity, and to trace and finally vanquish lingering Eurocentric and colonial biases. The authors contend that, because archaeological research cannot escape its presentism, knowledge claims are necessarily framed by the political and socio-economic conditions of their time. To render deep-time narratives more objective thus requires us to expose these frames of reference, and to discuss their

conceptual ramifications and the values, hierarchies, and power-relations they nurture. The objective is to work towards a culturally informed critique of what is currently considered 'knowledge' in Western academia, making space for alternative forms of inquiry, complementary modes of knowing, and taking into account long-marginalised voices. This effort is understood as an 'active intervention' (p. 7), disrupting and dislocating what is too easily accepted as secure knowledge in order to flag racist undertones and to enable more balanced understandings of human origins. As I personally see it, a key task is to better articulate particularist and universalist renderings of becoming human and to expose their mutual bearing (p. 4), to strengthen suppressed perspectives and to systematically chart the space of 'unconceived alternatives' (Hussain, 2019: 10)—a key condition for assessing the relevant range of testable hypotheses in a given research context.

The second part of the book gathers four contributions (Chs 2–5) that tackle core assumptions of our understanding of 'being human' and discuss the politics of knowledge surrounding the place of Africa and Asia in the human story. The examined topics include the long-standing Western idea of human exceptionality and superiority—amalgamated in the regulative idea of 'nature-transcendent beings' (p. 58)—its entanglement with nineteenth century racial brain studies (pp. 62, 66), and its somewhat surprising return within contemporary debates on the Anthropocene (pp. 64–5). Another important locus of critical reflection is the recurrent trope of cultural 'degeneration' and 'retardation' (p. 97–100), shown to underpin even recent work on the Out-of-Africa dispersal of our species, as well as the arbitrary definition of 'behavioural modernity' and its exclusionary and often

harmful politics (pp. 100–5). A foundational contribution is the chapter written by Athreya and Ackermann highlighting the detrimental effects of a 'longstanding practice of otherisation' (p. 73) in narratives of early human evolution. They highlight the perception, treatment, and exploitation of the many Indigenous peoples of non-European origin, as living, 'primitive models' for early humans (p. 80), and insightfully discuss the entrenched Hobbesian template of aggression, violence, and warfare which, when combined with racist prejudice, creates a shocking yet surprisingly obstinate evolutionary story of conquest, superiority, and extirpation (p. 81).

The third part of the book (Chs 6–9) explores the role of art and fiction in decolonising Western academic thought and charts the enduring effect of imaginaries of supposed 'geographies of origin' for contemporary politics and narratives. The chapters collectively examine the importance of time and temporality for current understandings of human beginnings. The discussion about academic creativity and the call for 'experimental methodologies' drawing on non-conventional means such as art and fiction (e.g. Greenwood, 2019) touches upon a critical issue, namely the ability of increasingly specialised scholarship to map the range of credible interpretive possibilities and to produce innovative readings of the available evidence. Such 'arts-based' approaches can be extremely constructive and contribute significantly to the decolonisation project as showcased in by the chapters by Frederick and McNabb. Creative art-practices can help to break free from deeply ingrained representational shackles (p. 127) and may give birth to surprising ideas and hypotheses. The analysis of literary fiction can for example aid in tracing the historical origins of core interpretive concepts that continue to inform evolutionary narratives,

such as the schizophrenic-xenophobic Victorian rendering of the 'the animal within' (p. 174) and the idea of morality as an acquired human factor linked to specific Western 'civilisatory' attitudes and so-called achievements.

Mickel's discussion of the 'cradle of civilisation'—although often not so much about the deep human past than about more recent times—emphasizes the curious role of 'imagined geographies' and 'imagined places' (p. 142), impossible to anchor unambiguously in space and time, in shaping our origin stories. In a similar fashion as Porr (pp. 193, 199), Mickel underscores the importance of questioning taken-for-granted conceptions of time and to move beyond universal, linear, and progressivist understandings (p. 154). It is regrettable that alternative approaches to temporality within history, anthropology, philosophy, and archaeology are not further surveyed here. Without downplaying Porr's timely reminder of the cultural determinants of temporality (p. 201), policing time remains inextricably linked to the ongoing dispute between relational and objectivist conceptualisations of time, embodied by the epoch-making controversy between Einstein and Bergson (Canales, 2015).

The fourth part of the book (Chs 10–13) brings together historical, regional, and Indigenous perspectives on latent issues in human origins research in the hope to facilitate 'out-of-the-box' thinking. Esterhuysen's contribution underscores the potency of dark historical legacies in shaping discourses on the deep human past. She shows that, in South Africa, the rejection of Western science and the latter's portrayal of African origins is not a symptom of general adversities against open-mindedness, rationality, and scientificity, but rather reflects the emphatic repudiation of a universal 'Africanism' and the celebration of South

African nationalism motivated by hominin findings of proclaimed world heritage status (p. 281). Importantly, the disapproval of the Western narration of human origins by many South Africans is impossible to separate from the long history of 'science being used to create a difference between black and white' (p. 282). Esterhuysen's account highlights the historical responsibility of human origins research and illustrates the need for re-imagining our explanatory resources as well as the ways we encourage and engage with African scholars.

Dennell's chapter provides an instructive historical contextualisation of human origins narratives in East Asia and especially China. He demonstrates that the examination of disciplinary history can hold valuable clues for contemporary research efforts. He not only argues that the 'Movius line' subdividing the Old World into a handaxe-bearing and handaxe-free sphere of interaction was from the beginning based on biased perceptions of the archaeological record (p. 219–21), but also convincingly shows that Weidenreich's classic model of multi-regional evolution (cf. Caspari & Wolpoff, 1996)—envisaging metapopulations instead of panmictic populations (Scerri et al., 2018)—may still inform the interpretation of the increasingly complex hominin fossil record from East Asia and elsewhere (p. 229). Dennell rightly points out that critical analysis must avoid judging others in a top-down fashion and should instead focus on the much more difficult but informative task of seeing the world 'through their eyes' (p. 211).

Steeves' chapter offers a challenging account of the deep-rooted primate heritage of our species and explores the possibility of a considerably extended chronology for the initial peopling of the Americas (p. 268). While I do share many of the presented standpoints and find her

critical review of the debate inspiring, I could not escape the impression that ‘received’ interpretations of human evolution and the Out-of-Africa narrative are at times distorted, and the counter-narratives merely hinted at rather than developed or empirically/theoretically fleshed out. I also found the question of ‘who is correct here’—Western science *or* Indigenous people—to which the writing returns to more than once (p. 270) deeply concerning. In my view, the decolonisation of thought requires the recognition of both epistemological pluralism and the always-provisional nature of knowledge, *irrespective of its origin and framing*.

Notwithstanding the importance of opening up the Palaeolithic discourse for non-Western voices, the purpose of Chapter 11 on current research in India remains unclear to me, for it mostly offers a general discussion of research history and does not contribute much to the broader debate framed by the volume. Both the language and the concepts employed throughout this chapter ironically affirm what the volume wishes to overcome—the recurrent invocation of terms such as ‘colonization’, the mobilisation of explanatory scenarios in the wake of ‘ethnicity’ or ecological determinism, and the heavy reliance on supposed hominin–technology mapping functions are just a few examples.

The fifth and final part of the book (Chs 14 and 15) is dedicated to conceptual issues at the interface between archaeology, society, and ancient DNA research. The arguments developed here were rather eye-opening to me. Mark’s sophisticated analysis of taxonomic practice and its relationship to palaeogenomic narratives puts a nail on the coffin of quasi-ethnic interpretations of the past in the wake of Reich (2018) and others. Mark argues that in the wider context of human evolution, what may be called ‘biopolitics’ plays a

decisive role in the construction of both analytical and explanatory units, and that the accruing ‘facts’ are thus never facts of nature but always facts of ‘nature/culture’ (p. 296). In the closing chapter, Muller and Dortch attempt to make a case for consilience between scientific knowledge claims and Aboriginal knowledge systems (p. 317), arguing for their principal non-exclusivity. They not only remind us that working with rather than against Indigenous people’s viewpoints tends to produce better science, but also show that carefully analysed genetic data and non-Western knowledge of the past can frequently be read as mutually supportive and a ‘theoretical synthesis is [therefore] possible’ (p. 312).

Altogether, *Interrogating Human Origins* represents an extremely valuable, at times highly perceptive, and certainly long-overdue introduction to the relevance of post-colonial perspectives for human origins research. I can only hope that both theorists and more empirically minded scholars will find the time to carefully read and digest it. The book forcefully showcases the importance of complementing, and possibly counteracting, the conceptual shallowness of the modern convocation of fast-paced palaeosciences with the conceptual and interpretive ‘thickness’ of much slower critical and reflexive thought.

My main criticism is that the book could have done much more and seems often too easily satisfied. Much ink is spilled on general and often hardly contested issues, obstructing the in-depth analysis of more specific concepts and discussions from the forefront of ongoing Palaeolithic and palaeoanthropological research. For example, I could not stop to wonder whether the notion of the ‘Other’, deployed in emancipatory rather than discriminatory fashion, might in fact help in the decolonisation of the Neanderthal discourse, promoting rather than masking the

recognition of the unique humanity of these Eurasian hominins. Although the volume proficiently dismantles the problematic underpinnings of centre-periphery models, it misses the opportunity to address its Palaeolithic instances, e.g. the ‘cultural pump’ (*Kulturpumpe*) model to explain the emergence of a ‘modern’ material culture package rich in personal ornaments and zoomorphic art in the Aurignacian of Southwestern Germany (Conard & Bolus, 2003). Other examples include the *chaîne opératoire* controversy in Palaeolithic archaeology (Bar-Yosef & Van Peer, 2009) or the recent proclamation of ‘ecological hyper-plasticity’ as a defining evolutionary human characteristic (Roberts & Stewart, 2018). The politicised debate surrounding the utility and primacy of explanatory concepts such as ‘intentionality’ and ‘agency’ at the expense of environmental accounts for understanding Palaeolithic hominin behaviour also awaits a critical, post-colonial reappraisal, and any more debates prone to decolonisation could be invoked—we can and should not pause where *Interrogating Human Origins* stops.

The occasional lack of discursive focus has much to do with the broad definition of human origins advocated throughout the book, also comprising post-Palaeolithic societies and so-called ‘early civilisations’ (Ch. 7). This rendering is at odds with the standard meaning the term has now acquired within the panoply of disciplines engaging with early human evolution. It is worth noting, incidentally and somewhat ironically, that the term ‘human origins’ is never formally defined, resulting in the neglect of internal conflicts and politics of knowledge formation. A problematic consequence of the ensuing generic, all-encompassing rendition of human origins is the reification of Western science as a monolithic and homogeneous body of knowledge, and the tendency of juxtaposing scientific knowledge with Indigenous ways of

knowing, even though there is perhaps more variability within each of the two than between them. While the incorporation of other voices is important and laudable, it offers no box-ready solution and can only but part of the answer.

A key argument of many chapters is that Indigenous and other non-Western ways of knowing should play a more central and active role in our efforts to understand the deep human past. I could not agree more but argue that such pluralism can only be truly successful if we learn to better navigate the strengths, weaknesses, and biases of *each* involved standpoint and this seems only possible by investigating the guiding principles of different modes of knowledge production, academic and non-academic. This brings me directly to my last point: the potential role of specialized yet, in the post-colonial discourse, often bypassed fields such as the history and philosophy of science or STS (*Science and Technology Studies*).

A central issue for the decolonisation enterprise is the disunity of the sciences and the relationship between distinct knowledge systems more generally, the importance of epistemic and ontological pluralism within and between different academic traditions, and the prevalence of evidential underdetermination necessitating the reflexive engagement with theories, argumentative patterns and narratives themselves—independent of the empirical evidence. Although it may of course be argued that these issues are not within the scope of *Interrogating Human Origins*, there is a fair amount of archaeological work that has already taken some initial steps into this direction (e.g. Embree, 1992; Clark & Willermet, 1997; Ribeiro, 2018). I raise this point here not so much to criticise *Interrogating Human Origins*, but rather to express my growing impression that post-colonial approaches within archaeology have hitherto missed the

opportunity to establish a productive dialogue with the nascent field of *science studies*, not only to reinforce their pool of conceptual resources, but also to clarify the specific challenges of knowing, understanding, and narrating the deep human past. At the same time, science studies within archaeology may similarly benefit from post-colonial perspectives in taking notice that much of past and present meta-archaeological research is still produced by Western scholars and rarely escapes the academic chapels erected in the course of Western intellectual history.

In sum, *Interrogating Human Origins* is a much-needed milestone in critical archaeological theory and encourages further investigations precisely where its individual chapters leave us behind: at the interface between critical thought and the epistemological and research-historical analysis of archaeological knowledge production. The volume offers useful resources for a wide range of scholars from varying fields, including the history and sociology of science and issues urgent and extremely timely rallying calls to more vigorously work towards an assumption-sensitive, reflexive, and self-critical stance within the interdisciplinary endeavour of researching the deep-time becoming of us all.

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