reaction

Archaeological Dialogues 24 (1) 109–116 © Cambridge University Press 2017
doi:10.1017/S138020381700006X

Agency. A response to Sørensen and Ribeiro

*Torill Christine Lindstrøm**

Abstract

While agreeing to openness to other world views, the underlying premise of 'otherness' in 'the other' is questioned. It is argued that individual, intercultural and intra-cultural differences run criss-cross throughout the anthroposphere. The often convoluted language in symmetrical, Latourian and New Materialist directions in archaeology is criticized. One questions what their significant new contributions to archaeological research are. The importance of refined differentiations regarding agency and effects, and the living and the non-living, is maintained. Latour's claim of a universal dichotomization in Western thinking (both academic and common) is interrogated, and empirical proofs demanded. The concepts of 'dichotomy' and 'binary thinking' are discussed. The assumed political and ethical sequelae and implications of adherence to one or another theoretical position and research methodology are questioned. Ecological awareness can be acquired from various positions. In general, political correctness in academia is criticized.

Keywords

agency; 'the other'; symmetrical archaeology; New Materialist archaeology; Latour; political correctness in academia

> *På en obetydlig verklighetsgrund spinner innbildningen ut och vävfar nya mönster.*
> *On an insignificant basis of reality the imagination plays out and weaves new patterns.*
>
> Strindberg, *Ett Drømspel* (1902), my translation

First, I will express my deep gratitude for both Sørensen's and Ribeiro's reactions and comments on my paper. Your comments have added to my insight on various positions, and have greatly deepened the dialogue on 'agency'. Although Sørensen tends to disagree with me, and Ribeiro to agree with me, I will endeavour to respond to some of your comments in one reply.

*Torill Christine Lindstrøm, Department of Psychosocial Science, University of Bergen, Norway. Email: Torill.Lindstrom@uib.no.

Who is 'the other'?

To refer to other peoples' practices as an argument for one's own conceptions and ideals has a long history. Julius Caesar's descriptions of the restrained sexuality in Germanic tribes (*De Bello Gallico* 2008 (58–51 BC)), and Margaret Mead's descriptions of relaxed sexuality in Samoa (1928), were both used (by others) in propaganda for changed sexual practices in their respective times. Yet there is reason to question the validity of both. Today, ethnographic accounts of various people's 'ontological alterity' (seeing objects as personalized and as active agents) are used as arguments for various theoretical practices and conceptions of 'agency' in objects and other non-living entities. Sørensen (2016, 125) says that such ethnographic accounts should challenge us to 'mak[e] room for exploring how we can understand – on its own terms – that which escapes our predefined coordinates of logic, science and objectivity'. Sørensen's standpoint resembles Ingold's in 'Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought' (2006), where Ingold also refers to others' conceptions of a unity of being. I absolutely agree with these standpoints. We should be open, both as private persons and as academics, to other world views and other points of view. And, yes, I agree with you, Sørensen, when you say, 'I wonder how any form of anthropological or archaeological understanding of the other is possible without suspending our own sense of reality *temporarily* for analytical purposes' (Sørensen 2016, 125, original emphasis). But, first, (paralleling the cases of Caesar and Mead), I question whether there actually are *great* differences between 'the other' and 'us'. I argued against this, using psychological and neurological arguments, yet emphasizing that there are both individual and cultural inter- and intra-variations.

I also dislike the 'estrangening' flavour of the concept 'the other'. It implies a dualism of 'us' versus 'them' (and perhaps of 'the West' versus 'the rest'). And regarding 'suspending our own sense of reality temporarily', yes, I agree, this may be necessary in order to understand other people, often simply to understand one's children, partner or neighbour next door. One doesn't have to do anthropology or ethnography in order to meet people with ideas and conceptions that are vastly different from one's own. And regarding Willerslev's informants from Siberia (Willerslev 2004; 2007), Sørensen, you must have misunderstood me, because the point you make about them is *exactly* what I wrote too. We agree completely: they do have ontological distinctions and differentiations between phenomena in the world. In this they probably resemble me more than they do Latour. This is my point: regarding ontology and world views, similarities and differences run criss-cross in the anthroposphere. So, who is 'the other'?

Any news?

Now, clearly, how we human beings (with our species-characteristic perceptual organs and brains) perceive the world is not necessarily the way the world 'is'. And I agree: there are multiple ways of perceiving. Many insects see colours that we cannot see. But as academics I maintain that we should try to stick to methodologies as transparent and as replicable as possible, as ways of 'seeing', and to as well-defined and as clear concepts as possible,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S138020381700006X Published online by Cambridge University Press

when analysing what we 'see'. The methodologies are the 'glasses/spectacles' through which we 'see' the universe, world and being, and the concepts are what we communicate our observations with. Both should be clear.

Regarding methodology/ies, I may be unforgivably ignorant, but I have not discerned any new and revolutionary methodological development in the wake of symmetrical, Latourian, New Materialist archaeology. And regarding concepts and language, they are, in my opinion, unnecessarily opaque, convoluted and complex. Words like 'entanglement', 'enmeshment', 'embeddedness', 'materiality' and 'pragmatogeny' are fascinating, but to characterize them as providing clarity and simplicity is not what springs to my mind (I think Occam is spinning in his grave).[1]

And I am not alone in this criticism. Ingold wrote,

> I attended a session at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association which were held in that year in the city of New Orleans. The session was entitled 'Materiality', and included presentations on such topics as 'Immateriality', 'For a materialist semiotics', 'Materiality and cognition', and 'Praxeology in a material world'. These presentations were overflowing with references to the works of currently fashionable social and cultural theorists, and expounded in a language of grotesque impenetrability on the relations between materiality and a host of other, similarly unfathomable qualities, including agency, intentionality, functionality, sociality, spatiality, semiosis, spirituality and embodiment. Not one of the presenters, however, was able to say what materiality actually means, nor did any of them even mention materials or their properties. For the most part, I have to confess, I could make neither head nor tail of what they were talking about (Ingold 2007, 2).

I've had similar experiences in archaeological conferences. I once listened to somebody talk about a prehistoric laying out of branches and twigs across a stretch of wetland, in approximately this way (almost exact quotation): through their material engagement and practices of finding, breaking, carrying and laying out branches in the marshes, people performed a transformative engagement, creating a symbolic constellation, meeting and merging of the wet and the dry, the elements of air, water and soil, life and death, in the liminal zone of transition between land and sea. Whereas I, simple-mindedly, would simply have said that people made a path of branches and twigs over the marshes in order to get to the seashore without sinking in. I may have completely misunderstood these prehistoric people, or the archaeologist interpreting their behaviour. Anyway, I think ol' Occam had a point when arguing for simplicity. And 'the Sokal affair' (Sokal 1996) is a warning of how dangerously seductive impenetrable language can be.[2]

What are the significant *new* contributions and achievements from the symmetrical, Latourian, New Materiality positions? By this I mean have *new research areas* been discovered or developed? Have *new sites and findings* been discovered? Have already-known sites and findings been given *revolutionary new interpretations*? Are they seen from *new angles that shed new light on previous interpretations*? Have these positions resulted *in new consequences for archaeological practice*? Or is it a lot about new (albeit fascinating) ways

https://doi.org/10.1017/S138020381700006X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of saying what we already knew? This is what I, and also Ribeiro, call 'old wine in new bags'.

The experience of one-ness: objects as extensions of oneself

Sørensen (2016, 118) writes, 'Normally, in the ordinary use of a hammer, we do not consciously attend to the hammer in an objective way; rather, when we are absorbed in the activity of hammering, the hammer is in alignment with our bodily operation as a seamless extension of the body'. But I wonder, what if many do *not* experience this 'seamless extension of the body', but instead 'consciously attend to the hammer in an objective way'? Whether professional carpenters and others have this or that relationship with their hammers is an *empirical* question, not a philosophical one. However, Sørensen, I agree that we often feel that objects or other living beings are 'in alignment with our bodily operation as a seamless extension of the body' (sex is a compelling example). But what is *new* in saying that a hammer can be experienced as an extension of oneself? Of course it may feel that way – until you hit the wrong nail with it (not *the* nail but *your* nail). Then it stops being 'you', and becomes 'a thing made in hell'. Contact lenses feel like 'me', until they become dislocated. And who hasn't felt a deep unity with a horse while riding until the horse stubbornly refuses to obey, or throws you off. OK, you may argue that such feelings actually *are* temporal and transitory. But still, I argue that they may not be universally experienced. And, my main point is: what is *new* in that some people sometimes feel objects as extensions of themselves? We have long known that. The ancient Greek concept of the *centauros* (human and horse hybrid) indicates how old that observation is.

Political correctness in academia

Academia has its particular abusive terms. To be accused of being an 'empiricist', 'positivist', 'essentialist' or 'behaviourist' can lead to 'near-death experiences' in certain academic circles. Sørensen (2016, 116) claims that I represent 'a Cartesian scienticism as a solution to ontological challenges'. To this I can only say that I don't like Descartes. And I claim that scientific/academic methodology in research can be, and definitely *is*, performed and employed without a Cartesian dualist world view. You don't have to be Cartesian to be scientific, just as you don't have to be Latourian to acknowledge complex human–object connections, holism and ecosophy (I return to this later).

And methods must be adequate for the topic they explore. For instance, questions regarding animal agency can only be properly answered by quantitative investigations. Animals' abilities exist independently of our ontologies. In the world of psychology, CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) is one of the most effective psychotherapeutic methods based on behavioural theories. It works wonderfully also for social constructivists, despite their anti-behaviourist convictions. When I fall ill, I want help from doctors who, while holistically respecting me as a person, my ideas of illness causation and the meanings the illness may have for me, will give me treatments that are tested by 'hardcore' scientific methods. Christian doctors who believe in the transubstantiation of the Eucharist also adhere firmly to scientifically

https://doi.org/10.1017/S138020381700006X Published online by Cambridge University Press

based medical practice without any ontological conflicts. The Cartesian dualism is outdated. As Ribeiro argues, the death of dualism was not caused by symmetrical archaeology or by Latour, but has a long history. Both philosophy and science have moved on.

'Agency': in lexica

Regarding lexical (dictionary) definitions of 'agency', Sørensen points to definitions of both human and object activity as 'agency', using it as an argument for the use of 'agency' in symmetrical archaeology, and as a return to 'the ordinary definition of agency', against which Ribeiro argued that the dictionary definition of 'agency' is practically identical to 'causation', and therefore just a new label: 'Once again, we have old wine in new bags – but this time it is causation which is being put in a new bag' (Ribeiro 2016, 230). I will add that dictionaries simply list how words are used. Dictionaries are not encyclopedias. And the same word can have very different uses and meanings, such as 'nail', meaning both a metal spike and the horny surface on fingers and toes (providing a double meaning to Sørensen's headline: 'Hammers and nails'). In other words, dictionaries are of limited use in discourses over scientific concepts, including 'agency'.

'Agency': 'in itself'

First, I must correct a misunderstanding: Sørensen (2016, 216) writes, 'To Lindstrøm, it seems, all forms of non-human agency look the same, and should be hammered by the same counterargument. This is the premise of Lindstrøm's critique.' To this I must reply, no. My point was the very opposite: it is symmetrical, Latourian, New Materialist archaeology that has this flat conception of agency, and I criticized it. Regarding my own position, on the contrary, in my paper I clearly differentiated between the living and the non-living, and I particularly argued for *animal* agency, contrasting objects' effects (or 'effectancy'), with animals' central nervous systems as the discriminating pivotal point.

Sørensen, you define/describe agency as something that 'issues forth in specific contexts and with particular consequences' and that agency is 'situational, contextual and contingent' (Sørensen 2016, 116), and you add Malafouris's (2008, 34) description: 'Agency is the relational and emergent product of material engagement. It is not something given but something to become realized'. I get your point. I agree that agency can be described actively as doing, creating, performing and happening, and as emergent, transient and fluid. But I see a research problem here: how is this ephemeral agency to be discovered, identified and recorded from *archaeological* sites, findings and contexts? Not to speak of Malafouris's agency that belongs to the future, as it is yet 'to become realized'?

I also have *logical* problems with your symmetrical, Latourian, New Materialist description/definition of 'agency'. First, is it possible that something/somebody/assemblages (enmeshed constellations of artefacts, animals and people) can *not* have/do/produce/issue forth agency? The problem is this: if everything has it or does it, it follows that it is impossible that something *cannot* have it or do it. As a consequence, the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S138020381700006X Published online by Cambridge University Press

concept 'agency' becomes logically meaningless. Second, how can you discern agency from non-agency? How do you identify non-agency? If anything and everything, in principle, can create/do/perform/issue forth agency (given the right assemblage, situation, context, contingency), then 'agency' is, indeed a 'one-size-fits-all' concept, as also Ribeiro remarked.

Third, no matter how enmeshed, interwoven and interdependent they are, it is a non-academic ontological oversimplification to treat objects, plants, animals and humans on a symmetrical level, their differences erased or ignored, also regarding agency. I shall not repeat the lengthy arguments of my original paper (Lindstrøm 2015), but will add a quote from Ingold (2014, 235):

> It seems that in order to level out the ontological playing field, Witmore and his fellow irreductionists, symmetricians all, have contrived to reduce agency to the common denominator of bare existence, to which they habitually assign the qualifier 'non-human', thus neutralizing the potential of animate life to bring form into being. Living, sentient creatures, both human and non-human, figure in this account as but warmed-up assemblages, their capacity for action and perception stripped down to the physical presence and tangibility of lifeless objects ... human effort, or the effort of domesticated animals, is treated as just another object in the assemblage, a mere husk of sensuous, muscular exertion. There is no production – no work, no labour, no growth. There is only connection: the sequential joining up or collage-like juxtaposition of inanimate fragments. The New Materialisms indeed! Marx must be turning in his grave.

The core of the problem: 'It ain't necessarily so!'

(Gershwin, 1934)

Latour's theory often is mentioned and referred to as the ontological basis for symmetrical, Latourian, New Materialist archaeology. One of his basic claims is that there is a profound dualism (originating with Descartes) in Western philosophy,[3] the sciences, and even our everyday way of thinking. As Sørensen (2016, 119), referring to Latour (1993), writes, 'we continue to divide the world into artificial, impractical and deceptive binaries (human versus non-human, subject versus object, society versus nature) that are unhelpful for our way of understanding how people go about their everyday practices as well as their more fundamental conceptualizations of the world'.

Is it really so? It may be that sciences *have* made divisions of these kinds into oversimplifying binaries. But still? I am not sure. Is Latour sure? Has he investigated the theories and practices of various academic disciplines today thoroughly enough to make such a claim? Has he investigated people's ways of thinking? I have not, so I cannot refute him on empirical grounds. But I have done a pilot project on 60 students and others where I asked them to connect two and two of the words from Latour's theory regarding modern binaries: 'things', 'humans', 'society/culture', 'nature'. Latour's claim is that we dichotomize and connect 'things' with 'nature', and 'humans' with 'society/culture'. I did not find that. Contrarily, most participants in my pilot investigation connected 'things' with 'society/culture', and 'humans'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S138020381700006X Published online by Cambridge University Press

with 'nature', and many refused to make any dichotomizations at all. I will proceed with larger samples, and more non-academic samples, and from various cultures, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. And I will first investigate whether people find it easy and 'natural for them' to make binary divisions with these elements or not, because if one asks people to make binary distinctions, one may impose a binary way of thinking about these phenomena that may not be intrinsic to people.

Let us look at the opposite possibility: let's imagine that Latour is right and that we do dichotomize, at least sometimes. Is it really so bad? To divide the world into binaries and opposites is well documented cross-culturally (Lévi-Strauss 1964). It is so common that it qualifies as a human universal. Don't you, Sørensen, think and talk in terms of: up/down, light/dark, feminine/masculine, summer/winter, warm/cold, good/bad, you/me, etc., etc.? Most of the binaries we commonly use are not absolute opposites, but points on continua (hungry/full, warm/cold); many binaries are not 'opposite' in any sense, such as cross-country skis/downhill skis or sunshine/rain; and some are multiple: clean/dirty (literally) and clean/unclean (symbolic). Even the computers we write this discussion on are constructed on binary elements! My question, therefore, is whether this is really so bad. Are *all* binaries (and now I take elements from the Sørensen (2016, 119) quote above) 'artificial', 'impractical' and 'deceptive'? Are they 'unhelpful for our way of understanding how people go about their everyday practices as well as their more fundamental conceptualizations of the world'? *Is it really so?*

Sørensen argues that the New Materialism is a paradigm, or rather *the* paradigm which can lead us away from anthropocentrism, and towards ecocentrism – in my words a holistic, unitary, ecological/ecosophical, global, environmentally aware position and behaviour, respecting Nature and the inherent worth of beings other than humans (http://ecospherics.net). How I agree with this goal! But seriously, I contend that this position can be arrived at from other philosophical positions and convictions alike, including dialectical materialism, Marxism, atheism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity and many others.

I started by quoting Strindberg, where he applauds the powers of imagination: 'On an insignificant basis of reality the imagination plays out and weaves new patterns.' I will end by paraphrasing Strindberg and claim that it is the responsibility of all academia to pay close attention to both the significant and the seemingly insignificant, and to use our imagination not to produce fantasies, but to discover 'new patterns' on the 'basis of reality'.

Notes

[1] 'Occam's razor', *lex parsimoniae*: the principle formulated by the Scholastic philosopher and Franciscan monk William of Ockham (1285–1347/49), 'pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate' ('plurality should not be posited without necessity'). This principle gives precedence to simplicity, meaning that if one has two competing theories, the one implying a simpler explanation is to be preferred. This principle has also been expressed as 'Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity'.

[2] Alan Sokal (professer of physics at New York University and professor of mathematics at University College London) wrote a paper called 'Transgressing the boundaries. Towards

https://doi.org/10.1017/S138020381700006X Published online by Cambridge University Press

a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity' and got it published in *Social text* (1996). It was a hoax that fooled the social-constructivist who published it.

[3] Dualistic thinking is often wrongly thought to have been introduced by Descartes, but in fact the ancient Greeks also thought in this way (Erik Østby, personal communication, 26 September 2016. Erik Østby is a professor of classical archaeology).

References

Caesar, Gaius Julius, 2008 (58–51 B.C.): *De Bello Gallico*, Project Gutenberg.

Gershwin, G., 1934: *Porgy and Bess* (opera).

Ingold, T., 2006: Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought, *Ethnos* 71, 9–20.

Ingold, T., 2007: Materials against materiality, *Archaeological dialogues* 14(1), 1–16.

Ingold, T., 2014: Is there life amidst the ruins? *Journal of contemporary archaeology* 1(2), 231–35.

Latour, B., 1993: *We have never been modern*, New York.

Lévi-Strauss, C., 1964: *Le cru et le cuit*, Paris.

Lindstrøm, T.C., 2015: Agency 'in itself'. A discussion of inanimate, animal and human agency. *Archaeological dialogues* 22(2), 207–38.

Malafouris, L., 2008: At the potter's wheel. An argument for material agency, in C. Knappett and L. Malafouris (eds), *Material agency*, New York, 19–36.

Mead, M., 1928. *Coming of age in Samoa. A psychological study of primitive youth for western civilization*, New York.

Ribeiro, A., 2016: Against object agency. A counterreaction to Sørensen's 'Hammers and nails', *Archaeological dialogues* 23(2), 229–35.

Sokal, A., 1996: Transgressing the boundaries. Toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity, *Social text* 46–47, 217–52, doi:10.2307/466856, JSTOR 466856, accessed 3 April 2007.

Sørensen, T.F., 2016: Hammers and nails. A response to Lindstrøm and to Olsen and Witmore, *Archaeological dialogues* 23(1), 115–27.

Willerslev, R., 2004: Not animal, not not-animal. Hunting, imitation and empathetic knowledge among the Siberian Yukaghirs, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10(3), 629–52.

Willerslev, R., 2007: *Soul hunters. Hunting, animism and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*, Berkeley, CA.