
reaction

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Agency (again). A response to Lindstrøm and Ribeiro

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Abstract

In this reaction article I reflect on criticism raised by Torill Christine Lindstrøm and Artur Ribeiro in recent issues of this journal. I attempt to identify the source of our disagreement, and focus on three particular aspects of their previous reactions: (1) their framing of agency in Alfred Gell and symmetrical archaeology, (2) their basis for declaring symmetrical archaeology redundant and (3) their identification of the terminology of symmetrical archaeology as inflated and crammed with ‘buzzwords’ and ‘neologisms’.

To my knowledge, no one has given a non-controversial account of agency
Bryant (2014, 220).

Introduction

I would like to start by thanking Torill Christine Lindstrøm and Artur Ribeiro for their commitment to this debate on agency, departing from Lindstrøm’s initial critique of object agency and symmetrical archaeology (Lindstrøm 2015). Let me first state the obvious: Lindstrøm, Ribeiro and I do not agree on object agency and symmetrical archaeology. And without disregarding their arguments, I am honestly not inclined to fold after reading their recent criticisms (Lindstrøm 2017; Ribeiro 2016a) of my previous argument (Sørensen 2016). Since we will probably continue to disagree, I have chosen to use this response *not* to try to convince anyone sceptical of ‘object agency’ (or ‘material agency’) or to try to turn critics of symmetrical archaeology. In fact, my first response to Lindstrøm was not formulated with the aim of defending object agency or symmetrical archaeology as such, but simply to correct misunderstandings and mischaracterization. Despite the recent responses by Lindstrøm and Ribeiro, I believe we still see misunderstandings of other scholars’ definitions of agency and a gross mischaracterization of symmetrical archaeology, even to the point of caricature.

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Due to space limits, I will only address a few selected points, focusing on *how* and possibly *why* we disagree. I will consider at some length the claims, first, that object agency is nonsense and leaves us ethically crippled; second, and more briefly, that symmetrical archaeology offers nothing new; and third, that symmetrical archaeology is phrased too inaccessibly to make sense.

Agency is nothing ‘in itself’

The first disagreement I want to explore is why we differ on the notion of agency and its implications. First of all, the term is not all that important to me, and if some people are not willing to disentangle agency and intentionality (e.g. Lindstrøm 2015), I would be quite happy to substitute the term as long as its replacement does not reduce agency to linear causal effects of human intentionality and ‘environment’ (see also Bryant 2014, 11). Could or should Alfred Gell or archaeologists associated with the symmetrical orientation have opted for a different term than ‘agency’? Perhaps. However, I believe that ‘agency’ has to be considered a ‘travelling concept’, i.e. alive and therefore unstable, changing as scholarship moves on. So, instead of looking for the original meaning of the term, or locking it in ‘its original acceptance’ (Ribeiro 2016a, 232) as an immovable, stagnant entity (*ibid.*, 233), I believe that it is important to pay attention to the nature and life of concepts, including their change and transformation.

This also means that there is to me no canonical definition of agency. A dictionary definition is not a canon (I simply used the dictionary post to refer to what I assumed was a ‘common’ understanding of agency; Sørensen 2016, 118). Nor is any ‘original’ or ‘originally accepted’ formulation of agency a canon. And even though Gell forms a key reference for my understanding of agency, I feel no loyalty to this definition. Concepts can change. However, this does not mean that Gell’s notion of agency can be construed arbitrarily. It can definitely be challenged, but it needs to be understood and represented properly in the process, and what both Lindstrøm and Ribeiro are missing sorely is Gell’s seminal distinction between ‘agents’ and ‘patients’, and between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ agents (Lindstrøm 2017, 113–14; Ribeiro 2016a, 251).

Different contexts may offer different ‘gradations’ of agency (Bryant 2014, 222), meaning that some phenomena may not have freedom of choice (e.g. animals in a zoo, bog bodies, or prehistoric monuments threatened by the *agency* of coastal erosion or rising sea levels, to mention a few contexts). Accordingly, agency *cannot* be a flat, uniform, ‘one-size-fits-all’ concept that everything ‘has’ on equal terms. This is most clearly articulated in Gell’s distinction between primary and secondary agents, or ‘intentional agents’ and ‘artefactual forms’ (Gell 1998, 21). Ribeiro claims that ‘object agency needs to be perceived as a *dynamic “force” immanent to all matter*’ (Ribeiro 2016a, 231, original emphasis), and Lindstrøm follows suit: ‘if everything has [agency] or does it, it follows that it is impossible that something *cannot* have it or do it’ (Lindstrøm 2017, 113, original emphasis). This is simply a mischaracterization of Gell’s notion of agency. I therefore need to stress – once again – that agency for Gell is neither something a person or an object *has*, like eyes or blood, nor a *property*, like respiration, metabolism or

intentionality. Agency is *not* a thing or an immanent property, but precisely a *relational and labile* effect between humans or between humans and non-humans. This further implies that agency does indeed belong to the future, as something ‘to become realised’ (Malafouris 2008, 34), because ‘we cannot tell that someone is an agent before they act as an agent, before they *disturb the causal milieu* in such a way as can only be attributed to their agency’ (Gell 1998, 20, emphasis added).

This goes for primary and secondary agents alike, but it does not mean that their agential effects are the same or should be treated symmetrically.¹ Quite the contrary, for symmetrical archaeology at least, where *everything* is different and will, accordingly, have different effects on the world, agency is not uniform, but heterogenic and scalable (see also Bryant 2014, 220–23). So, the conception of agency in ‘symmetrical, Latourian, New Materialist archaeology’ simply *cannot* be flat, and symmetrical archaeology does *not* erase or ignore the differences between (or amongst) ‘objects, plants, animals and humans’ as Lindstrøm erroneously argues (Lindstrøm 2017, 113–14). Quite the opposite: ‘Ontologically placing priests, farmers, or shepherds on the same footing as walls, boundary markers, or goats is not a claim for an undifferentiated world. The entities of the world are of course different; in fact, they exhibit – between and among themselves – extremely varied modes of existence’ (Olsen *et al.* 2012, 13). This implies that there is no point in singling out the agency of an individual human being (the ‘big men’ or ‘elites’ of culture-historical narratives), individual artefacts (‘type finds’), specific places (‘key sites’ or ‘central places’), or particular moments (‘turning points’), because the singular focus eventually ends up reducing agency to a property and its realization to a linear causal effect going from centre to periphery.

Moreover, even approaching agency as ‘distributed’ (Bryant 2014, 223; Gell 1998, 222–23) does not mean that all and everything constantly holds agential power, as claimed several times by Lindstrøm and Ribeiro. This is simply a caricature of agency in Gell, symmetrical archaeology and New Materialisms. Obviously, for symmetrical archaeology, some phenomena are in certain situations and contexts not characterized by agency, or agency may be compromised, which leads to an obligation to care (Olsen 2012, 217–23; Olsen *et al.* 2012, Chapter 9; Webmoor 2012), leaving *responsibilities* on humans because they have particular capacities for making intentional effects (Gell 1998, 20–21). As stated in my previous contribution to this exchange, symmetrical archaeology explores, among other things, how humans and non-humans coexist, and what implications this has for our understanding of ethics and responsibilities on the part of humans (Sørensen 2016, 120). Once we start accepting that agency is more than the outcome of human intentionality, we are forced to understand human responsibility in a new way, for instance because the association with other entities prompts humans to actions and decisions s/he would not be making alone (Bryant 2014, 223; Gell 1998, 21). This does not relieve humans of responsibility and stewardship, but it does make it more complex. And this is *how* Lindstrøm and Ribeiro differ from my argument.

At any rate, the point for me is not the word ‘agency’ itself, but what it has been used to describe. As a consequence, effects that are cutting across

intentional and non-intentional, human and non-human, causal and random events are of significance to the archaeological record, and need – in my opinion – to be treated indiscriminately. What I hold to be a beneficial framework for understanding agency *for archaeology* is to pay attention to the complicity of objects, materials, artefacts, non-humans, or whatever we call them, in the shaping of societies.

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue

The second criticism I want to address is Lindstrøm's and Ribeiro's persistent claim that there is nothing new in symmetrical archaeology, only 'old wine in new bags' (Lindstrøm 2015, 212, 214; 2017, 112; Ribeiro 2016a, 230), and hence, seemingly, a waste of time. It may be true that some of the ideas represented in symmetrical archaeology resonate with ideas formulated before, but in my previous contribution to this debate I specifically addressed the role of symmetrical archaeology *within* archaeology. Lindstrøm, for instance, makes the sweeping statement that 'Cartesian dualism is outdated . . . Both philosophy and science have moved on' (Lindstrøm 2017, 113). I wonder if that is *entirely* true? With at least some experience in the discipline of archaeology, I feel confident to state that many practical and theoretical aspects of the discipline are based on a clear-cut distinction of nature and culture, human and non-human, past and present, and so on. It is indeed curious that both Lindstrøm and Ribeiro claim that there is nothing new about symmetrical archaeology, yet when doing so they both choose only to refer to works outside archaeology and do not consider the potential contribution *within* the discipline (Lindstrøm 2017, 111, 112, 113; Ribeiro 2016a, 230), which was my declared aim (Sørensen 2016, 120).

So, unlike 'philosophy and science', as Lindstrøm claims, archaeology – broadly – has never ceased working with a separation of 'ecofacts' and 'artefacts' from the moment of excavation through to exhibition, for instance meaning that the 'nature–culture duality has dominated narratives of agricultural origins' (Barrett 2012, 161), and leading to immensely different publication platforms, exemplified by the *Journal of archaeological science* and the *Journal of social archaeology*. Even national and international agencies responsible for managing archaeological and historic sites and monuments are formally divided along the nature–culture dichotomy, working from entirely different points of view and with different priorities (Harrison 2015). So archaeology has certainly not exorcized its binary demons yet. I would go as far as to argue that the opposite trend is proliferating in these very years, with an increasingly positivist paradigm threatening to define 'proper' archaeological studies as scientifically quantifiable and replicable *vis-à-vis* un-academic subjective conjecture (Sørensen 2017). Accordingly, what I hold to be the potential of symmetrical archaeology is being compromised, namely an approach to the archaeological record relieved of predefined categorizations of what objects *are* and what things *do* (or don't do), and without fixed coordinates for the material and the immaterial, matter and meaning, past and present, nature and society. This potential might otherwise lead to new ways of asking questions and a redefinition of what archaeology can be within the humanities.

Symmetrical archaeology does indeed revisit ideas that have been explored before. Some of its proponents acknowledge the deep disciplinary pedigree of their work (the introductory chapter in Olsen *et al.* 2012 is a case in point), and I cannot recall seeing symmetrical archaeology framed anywhere as ‘revolutionary’ (Lindstrøm 2015, 228; 2017, 111). In fact, it is stated explicitly that the destination is not a *new* theory, but instead ‘going to the heart of what archaeology is’ and ‘respectfully to *return* to things’ (Olsen *et al.* 2012, 13, emphasis added). This way of pouring old wine into new bags is a strategic and conscious way to pay deeper attention to thoughts that deserve further development and rephrasing (in full agreement with Ribeiro 2016b). We might even say that ‘our job is to go where everyone has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger’ (Bogost 2012, 34). So at least in archaeology, I believe that this shipment of vintage ‘old wine in new bags’ should be consumed under loud festivity and ecstatic rejoicing.

Let only Occam spin

In lieu of novelty, Lindstrøm and Ribeiro argue that symmetrical archaeology is riddled with ‘buzzwords’ (Ribeiro 2016a, 230) and ‘neologisms’ that are ‘opaque, convoluted and complex’, providing no ‘clarity and simplicity’ (Lindstrøm 2017, 111). I acknowledge that the terminology of symmetrical archaeology has some challenges, and I also addressed this earlier in this debate (Sørensen 2016, 123). However, I hold this to revolve around the choice of the term ‘symmetrical’ (*ibid.*, 121), and not around linguistic opaqueness or complexity in general. In fact, symmetrical archaeology is trying to sustain the complexity of the world in its archaeology of it, and it may be argued that any non-complex representation of a complex archaeology also at the same time fails to do justice to that very complexity.

This also means that I object to the idea that the explanation with the lowest degree of complexity should automatically be favoured (i.e. ‘Occam’s razor’; Lindstrøm 2017, 111). I acknowledge that some terms in symmetrical archaeology can be demanding, and a similar critique may be pointed at many other scholars within and beyond symmetrical archaeology, and beyond archaeology. Take, for instance this footnote in an influential book by Karen Barad:

The neologism ‘ontoespistemological’ marks the inseparability of ontology and epistemology. I also use ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’ to mark the inseparability of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. The analytical philosophical tradition takes these fields to be separate, but this presupposition depends on specific ways of configuring the nature of being, knowing, and valuing (Barad 2007, 409 n. 10).

Difficult new word – ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’ – and it certainly has attitude. But once explained, I find it is easy to understand, and potentially useful for describing the continuity of ethics, ontology and epistemology. In fact, there may be a point in rephrasing our vocabulary and ways of writing, when trying to achieve something different. The same kinds of narrative change characterize early processual publications as well as the first postprocessual publications.

Moreover, what symmetrical archaeology is trying to do is to install the potential for an archaeological account of the world that seeks to overcome arbitrary Cartesian binaries and to sustain the entanglements of phenomena in the world. This is in my opinion an ambitious goal, and I would only reluctantly undertake the enterprise myself. For it to work, it involves the need to do justice to the ‘as-found’ complexity of archaeology and the emergence of relations, of relative ontologies, of labile and distributed agencies, and of multiple non-linear temporalities. In this endeavour, it is not a solution to look for the easiest, simplest, most logical or intuitive explanation of any given problem. Indeed, ‘explanation’ may not even be the mission statement for this archaeology. Rather, our job is to ‘get our hands dirty’ and ‘amplify the black noise of objects to make the resonant frequencies of the stuffs inside them hum in credibly satisfying ways’ (Bogost 2012, 34). So, let only poor Occam spin in his grave, and add to the vibrancy of matter.

Conclusion

Trying to sum up an answer to my aim with this response, I would argue that the reason why Lindstrøm and Ribeiro disagree with symmetrical archaeology and the idea of object agency is that they have based their criticisms and rejections on a skewed reading of Gell, on a caricature of symmetrical archaeology, and by failing to attend to the particular historical and contemporary conditions of archaeology. Even though I consider symmetrical archaeology to be relevant beyond disciplinary boundaries, I would still argue that the critical rethinking of what an object is and does is of particular urgency in archaeology today. And, indeed, archaeology – with its expertise in studying the object world – holds a very particular potential in undertaking this rethinking, bringing it beyond the confines of the discipline and into the humanities more broadly. What is at stake is, perhaps, not a new but a revitalized archaeology.

Acknowledgements

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Note

¹ And this – to me – confusing terminology was debated with Bjørnar Olsen and Chris Witmore (2015, 193) earlier in this exchange (Sørensen 2016, 121–22).

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