1984 Social Dynamics and New England Archaeology

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

This issue of *Man in the Northeast* is composed primarily of papers from the 1982 Conference on New England Archaeology. Papers from the 1983 conference will be published in Fall 1984 (Number 28). Both sets of papers were reviewed and edited by Robert Paynter and David Starbuck prior to further editing and production at SUNY Albany. The arrangement was at times cumbersome, but it has encouraged us to consider publication of similar sets of papers in the future. Two such sets are currently in preparation, and we welcome inquiries from others wishing to publish similarly coherent sets of papers.

While the New England conferences have focused on archaeology, a review of the titles included in this issue reveals the extent to which archaeologists have begun to address issues not traditionally regarded as archaeological. Increasingly rigorous approaches to theory and modeling have compelled an expansion into issues usually assigned to other anthropological subdisciplines. This is an encouraging trend that holds out some promise for a reintegration of anthropology.

Space has allowed us to include a paper that is not much concerned with either archaeology or New England. Our policy is to maintain as much diversity as possible even when much of an issue is dedicated to topically related papers. We continue to solicit articles in all branches of archaeology, and we are encouraged by the healthy mix of papers accepted and currently under review.

Dean R. Snow

SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND NEW ENGLAND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Papers from the Conference on New England Archaeology on the subject of New England's past social systems are introduced. These papers contribute to a more general critique of narrow ecological and diffusionist models in archaeological theory. Four aspects of the general critique, a disenchantment with population as a prime mover, a concern with pastive models of culture, a role for individuals as culture creators as well as culture bearers, and nonpositivist epistemologies, are discussed to set the intellectual framework for the collected papers. In addition, a brief history of the conference is presented to set the institutional context.

This is the first collection of papers from the Conference on New England Archaeology to appear in *Man in the Northeast*. As such, it marks what should be a fruitful joint venture in which the best papers from the conference see wider distribution. A salutary effect is anticipated, for the readership of the journal and for the study of New England anthropology, because the scope of the conference is broad enough to have something of interest for nearly everyone who studies New England culture.

By way of introduction I consider two topics. The first is to introduce the readership to the Conference on New England Archaeology. It is an idiosyncratic perspective, though one formed from sitting on the Steering Committee for two of the conference's four years. The second is to consider, again idiosyncratically, issues concerning social systems in New England's past.

THE CONFERENCE ON NEW ENGLAND ARCHAEOLOGY

The Conference on New England Archaeology is an outgrowth of many discussion sessions on archaeology that took place in the 1970s. Mike Roberts was instrumental in these and has chronicled (Roberts 1985) many of the events and concerns that led up to the first Conference on New England Archaeology. The goal of the conference was to bring together those pursuing research on New England's past—prehistorians and historical archaeologists, theoreticians and field specialists—to work on some of the more generally interesting problems involving New England archaeology. The general problems were to be of national as well as regional interest. Bringing together a critical mass was expected to lead to some breakthroughs on these issues. Communication was stimulated by having the
Barber analyzed the social organization of the Cree. His ethnohistorical study was a cautionary tale, this time relevant for the prehistoric period. In noting that different social groups accomplished the various tasks of subsistence and social reproduction, he argued for a clear definition of social units and a concern for variation to avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentric bias. Worrell gave a detailed and interesting presentation of household change in historical New England. His case study was the Stratton Tavern, which he has successfully integrated archaeological data and historical documents in a multidisciplinary methodology for studying the past.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS IN NEW ENGLAND

As I noted, one of the motifs for taking up the topic of social systems came from a realization that settlement patterning can only be partially understood in reference to ecological conditions. A similar reaction to cultural ecological models can be found throughout anthropological archaeology (e.g., Hodder 1982; Friedman and Rcwnlans 1978; Keene 1983; Leone 1982; Moore 1981). The papers in this collection exemplify some of the themes of this general critique. To further stimulate the debate, possibly the viscer, I will pursue this critique by first briefly outlining the salient schools of New England archaeology. Few works and fewer authors can be neatly pigeonholed, and some damage is done in lumping. However, to do justice to the papers, some preliminary stage setting is required.

With the rest of North American archaeology, New England archaeology has been dominated by two major schools, the diffusionist school and the cultural ecological school. The diffusionist school is exemplified by Ritchie's (1968a, 1969b) work for the prehistoric period and Deetz's (1977) for the historical. When explicated, as in Deetz, the theoretical position tends to be broadly idealist, with varying degrees of sophistication and accommodation with materialist positions (such as in stated concerns with reconstructing past subsistence systems and foodways). Change, across space or time, is attributed to primary (people moving) or secondary (trait movement) diffusion, without much concern for unmediated interaction. This is normative, and intracultural variation is not seen as a deviation from innovators in time and space. Social systems, when considered, are mother culture trait, difficult to reconstruct from the material record because of their immortal character.

The cultural ecological approach emphasizes culture as adaptation and is exemplified for prehistory by a number of authors, most notably Sanger (e.g., Sanger et al. 1977), Bourque (1973), Tuck (1971), Dincauze (1976; Dincauze and Muholm 1977), and Snow (1980, 1981). No cultural ecological syntheses have been produced by historical archaeologists, though interesting applications of this perspective can be found (e.g., Berton and Mrozowski 1979; Paynter 1979; Worrell 1980). The theoretical position is broad materialist, emphasizing culture's role as an adaptive system, again with varying degrees of sophistication (e.g., Perlman 1976; Yeager 1980) and accomodation with the diffusionist program such as taking the time-space systematics of the diffusionist approach and unmediated interaction. Culture is generally normative, even if the possibility of variation (e.g., seasonal rounds) is recognized. Social systems figure as the infrastructure of adaptation, the human relations that respond to and create changes in the environment. These relations tend to be consensual rather than riddled with conflict. However, the close articulation with the environment offers both a greater possibility and stronger need to reconstruct social relations than is found in the diffusionist approach.

The theoretical, ontological, and epistemological tenets of cultural ecology and diffusionism have recently drawn sound criticism. Fully detailing the critiques of dominant paradigms takes more space than is available in an introduction. Four general themes recur in various critiques and help frame the papers in this collection. These themes are: (1) a disenchantment with population as a major variable, (2) an emphasis on particular rather than...
normative models of culture, (3) an emphasis on people as creators as well as bearers of culture, and (4) a critique of positivist epistemology. Theory, ontology, and epistemology are all questioned, and though no alternative is embodied herein, the papers in the collection exemplify many of the strands of this critique.

To begin with theoretical issues, the disenchantment with population as a major variable is fairly widespread in the discipline. The ecological logic in part criticized the diffusionist use of population movement to account for cultural change (e.g., Steward 1955), only to use population as a source of disequilibrium in their adaptive systems (e.g., Spooner 1972). Theoretical and empirical issue has been taken with the cultural ecologists’ position, the former most cogently by Cowgill (1975). Empirical evidence of some of the more serious problems with this position includes work on state origins, demonstrating that population grew in response to sociocultural change and not vice versa (e.g., Flannery et al. 1981; Wright and Johnson 1975).

Interestingly, none of the authors in this collection offers population pressure as a cause of sociocultural change. This is not to say that population has dropped out of the discussion. However, when raised by Feder, Yearns, and Mrozowski, the point is to widen the scope of what constitutes a population. In particular, all three authors see social processes operating at scales larger than those defined by demographic viability (e.g., Wobst 1974) or ecological regions (e.g., Binford 1964; Snow 1980). These studies do not deny the importance of regional population-natural environmental interactions; they do suggest that the units of ecology, such as watersheds or minimum mailing networks, are frequently transcended by humans following the dictates of social systems.

What are the social relations characteristic of larger scale systems? For the historical period Mrozowski suggests the literature on world systems as a source of alternative models (e.g., Wallenstein 1974); see Paynter 1982 for New England. Paynter (1982) argues for the importance of understanding New England within the context of an emerging capitalist world system, a controversial position (cf. Brewer 1980). In a world systems analyses social relations are unequal and based on wage labor, slavery, tenancy, and/or taxation. That the concepts are relevant for defining and understanding change in historical New England seems clear. The appropriateness of the world systems scale, if not the social processes, is also clearly pertinent for the contact period, as Feder’s paper demonstrates (e.g., Ceci 1982; Barfield 1982; Jennings 1975). Elucidating the social processes of the Native Americans within these large-scale systems, however, is another matter.

More problematic is how to conceptualize the social processes of large-scale social systems in the prehistoric period, as in Yearns’ consideration of the larger-scale setting for Archaic and woodland occupations in coastal Maine. The task will require theoretical and methodological innovations. However, the payoff, for ethnology as well as the paleoecography of New England, is worth the effort. Beginning to specify social relations that encompass large areas allows us to address such issues as the relationship (or lack thereof) between New England and the Adenogrupel headland, betweenIstria and the more complex polities to the west, and between native New Englanders and Europeans. Similar problems already cast in large-scale terms, such as the broadpoint problem and the diffusion of agriculture, may become more tractable if attention is paid to the social context.

Some critics of ecological determinism and diffusionist approaches have offered models that may prove useful for working on social relations in New England. For instance, Johnson (1982) considers causes for different social organizations with the notion of scalar stress. Scalar stress occurs when the number of social units engaged in intensive interaction exceeds a manageable limit. Johnson’s cross-cultural analysis suggests a surprisingly high and surprisingly small threshold for the onset of scalar stress—about six social units. One solution is to recognize the smaller scale units into larger scale units following a hierarchy.
dimension to understanding the differential distribution of prestige and nonprestige items throughout New England. Ontological assumptions, especially concerning the nature of variation and the role of individuals in society, have attracted criticism. A number of the following papers address the issue of variation by pointing out the limits in our present categories used to describe social systems. Yerkes calls attention to the inadequacies of point type temporal boundaries when other classes of material culture are studied. Explicitly for him, the boundary between the prehistoric and the historic is hard to see with social variables such as chiefdom, house form, and burial features, even if it is marked by the literates. Mozolowski is concerned with the ignored social boundary between men and women and its implication for the material record. In particular he notes an interesting paradox in that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women increasingly controlled the material of the household, even as they became more subordinate in society at large. Although the gender contrasts of prehistoric New England are likely to have been different, their existence cannot be doubted. Mozolowski's point is a methodological challenge to prehistorians and historical archaeologists to develop methods for studying these social variables when the past is available (e.g., White 1949), fundamentally because an action ontology calls attention not only to the great (men and women) but also to the unexceptional (e.g., Kus 1983).

An immediate implication of an interest in actors lies in the realm of technical variation (e.g., Cross 1983; Hil and Gann 1977). Certainly before mass production, some realms of production were dependent upon the skills of individuals, on differing abilities to act and create, and not just on the preferences of the culture. Thus, lithic and ceramic variation, those corners of the diffusionist approach, vary along dimensions of individual ability as well as time and space. Moreover, individual variation can be used to make a particular item scarce, and as such, a candidate for a prestige item (Cross 1984). Theoretically as well as empirically, such skill differences, and their inherent power, lay at the heart of the move to mass production in historical societies. Under mass production, the skill, knowledge, and direction of the production process was removed from the control of the producer and put into the hands of the owner, with the assistance of machinery (e.g., Braverman 1974; Montgomery 1979). Though more easily approached with historical documents, it does seem that if we are to tell the (pre)history of an area, people need to be something other than the precipitators of roles.

The issue of the (pre)history of an area leads to the final line of critique. It concerns epistemology, the way in which we know what we know. The dominant explanatory paradigm in anthropological archaeology is the logical positivist position of Hempel (e.g., Watson et al. 1971; Salmon 1982). Though Hempelian explanatory models have always had their detractors, the hegemony of the law and order logical positivist position has become unacceptable to some of its earlier champions (e.g., Dunnell 1982). Alternative models of explanation, especially the ethnohistory of the South Tarawa atoll (e.g., Geertz 1973) in cultural anthropology and Hodder (1982) in archaeology. Seeking to interpret rather than explain is to describe richly, in categories familiar to members of the observed culture, their way of life, so that members of our culture can understand them. Interpretation is a stance that is more comfortable with particularism than with generalization. Thus none of the authors directly deal with issues of epistemology, or championed interpretive approaches. Even in the historical epistemology of the Shakers exemplify an interpretive approach. Certainly the rich documents and data from the historical and cultural record made the study of New England a prime culture area for using an interpretive epistemology.

In sum, an interest in social systems and their material remains is in the air. For the Conference on New England Archaeology it grew out of efforts to account for settlement contrasts using ecological parameters. The insufficiency of these variables alone led to a consideration of the kinds of social relations shaping responses to the environment. A similar questioning on a broad range of themes has characterized the discipline as a whole. There are no clear-cut answers and only a few clear-cut alternatives. The alternatives include an understanding of culture change in which power and surplus production, and not only
biological reproduction and ecological catastrophe, cause differences. Alternative ontological commitments are that societies, even simple ones, are comprised of groups that may not operate to benefit the society, and that individuals need be considered as creators as well as carriers. Finally, a recomprehension of how we know what we know seems in order, especially when confronted with telling culture histories.

SUMMARY

The conferences’ goal is to produce ideas about human cultures based on study in New England. That these ideas will reflect and influence some of the major issues of contemporaneous anthropological archaeology, as well as illuminate New England culture history, is its objective. True, New England data has its problems (what data base does not?). All the same, this collection demonstrates that there are ethnologically interesting questions to be asked in New England, and clever people working on them. The reader will find some stimulating challenges and useful directions to advance our understandings of New England’s past social systems.

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