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## Anthropology and Archaeology: the 100 Years War?

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### Abstract

The paper aims at offering a possible explanation of the theoretical and methodological divide between Anthropology and Archaeology. While both fields share the same broad area of interest, the assumed scope and methodological stanzas have created different interpretations of the past-as-record. Questioning traditional viewpoints, it is inferred that the differences can be played to the advantage of both fields. To use a metaphor, while the first deals with the show of human society, the later deals with the stage and the props, and it takes both to make a relevant performance.

**Keywords:** anthropology, archaeology, scientific definitions, methodology, performativity

### Introduction

Anthropology and archaeology are fields of research that, in theory at least, share a common object of study, that is, the development of human societies and communities. Notwithstanding this baseline, the last century has been filled with the debate over the commonalities and dissonances between the two domains. The issue is not necessarily new. Classic texts, some of which were instrumental in the shaping of these fields, point to the distinction between anthropology and archaeology. The issue is even more significant today; the need for theoretical and methodological clarity becomes more important as both fields are in expansion and are in a long process of reinvention. Therefore, looking at these two fields and their theoretical stance might shed some light on the issue at hand. While the theoretical literature is literally overwhelming<sup>1</sup> and has evolved into a specialized branch in both fields, some viewpoints formulated over the last century are of significance.

### Anthropology ...

„*Anthropology has been called the science of humanity. That is a vast and noble calling but a vague one and also not one that immediately distinguishes it from all the other human sciences*” (J. D. Eller, 2009, p. 2).

There are questions related to the beginnings of Anthropology as a field of human inquiry, and the answers range from the classical Greek Philosophy or historical writing to the Enlightenment and the first major works that try to give a bird's eye perspective on human societies (T. H. Eriksen, F. S. Nielsen, 2001). One of the most influential texts is Franz Boas' *General Anthropology* (1938). In Boas' perspective, anthropology „*deals with the history of human society [...] Anthropological researches extend over the whole of humanity regardless of time and space*” (1938, p. 1). Its main focus includes the reconstruction of human history, the typology of historical phenomena and their sequence, and the dynamics of change, but with a focus on communities and societies, not on

individuals (1938, p. 4). Archaeology is just a method of research, but its limits are given by the fact that „nothing pertaining to the intangible aspects of life can be rescued with the help of the spade” (1938, p. 2). The text also comprises the theory of the four subdivisions of anthropology (Archaeology, Linguistics, Physical Anthropology, and Cultural Anthropology). Ten years earlier, another significant text (for our topic) stated that although anthropology is the science of man, its primary focus is on the contemporary society: „ a clear understanding of the principles of anthropology illuminates the social processes of our own times and may show us, if we are ready to listen to its teachings, what to do and what to avoid ” (F. Boas, 1928, p. 11). He qualifies the term man as representing the generic, almost ontological category<sup>2</sup>: „In short, when discussing the reactions of the individual to his fellows we are compelled to concentrate our attention upon the society in which he lives. We cannot treat the

*individual as an isolated unit. He must be studied in his social setting, and the question is relevant whether generalizations are possible by which a functional relation between generalized social data and the form and expression of individual life can be discovered; in other words, whether any generally valid laws exist that govern the life of society ”* (F. Boas, 1928, p. 15). For Boas, then, anthropology is the study of man as part and product of a specific culture. The result was a split between social anthropology and cultural anthropology (T. H. Eriksen, 2001, chapter 3). The split is indicative for the distinction between the European approach and the American perspective (T. H. Eriksen, 2001, 2004), a split that demonstrates the differences between the reluctance of late-nineteenth century research to acknowledge the similarities of local (European) prehistoric communities with the communities encountered outside the continent.

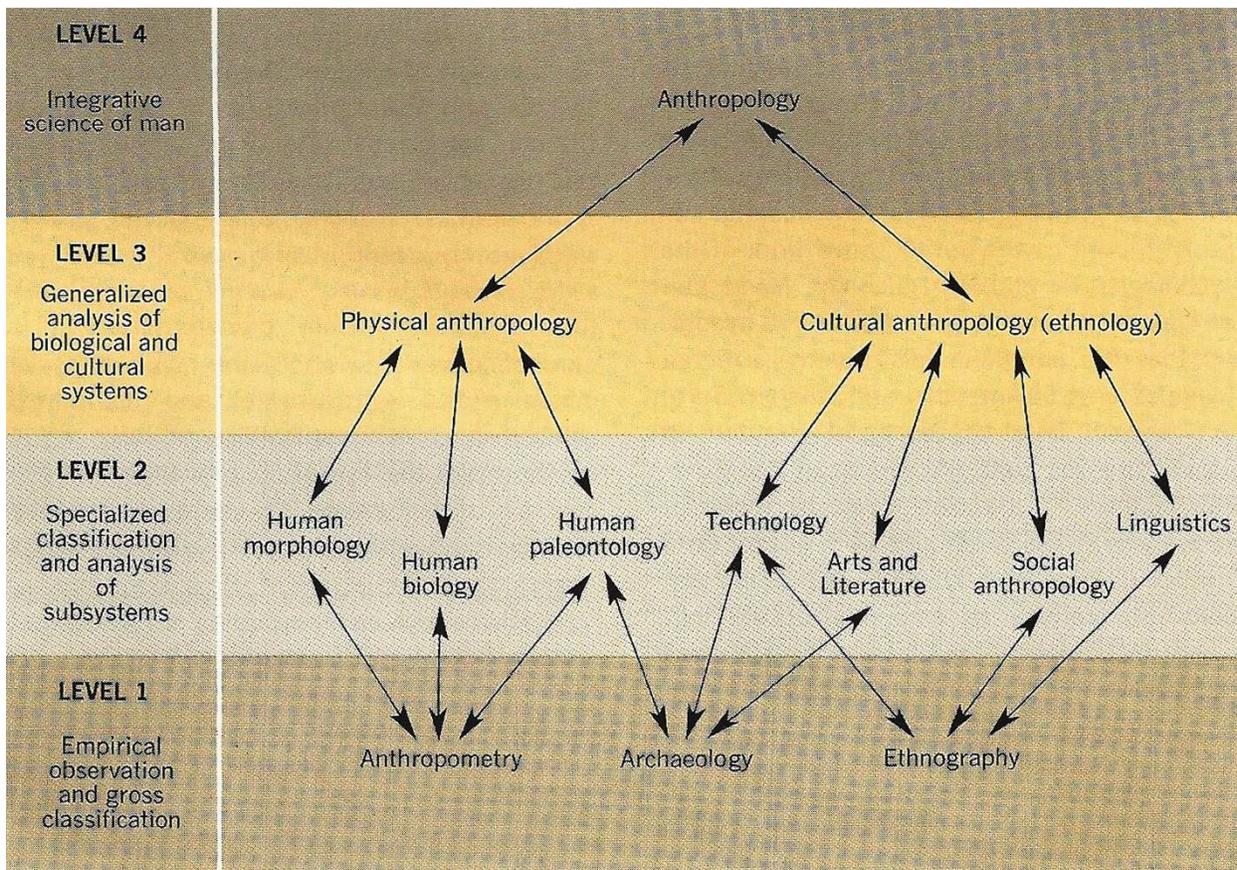


Fig. 1 - The structure of Anthropology (after E. A. Hoebel, 1966, p. 6, fig. 1-1)

Similar stances are taken by E. A. Hoebel (1966), R. Beals and H. Hoijer (1965)<sup>3</sup> and a significant number of introductory or in-depth texts on anthropology. From the viewpoint of classical post-war cultural anthropology, the difference is bigger than the simple hierarchy established between a general field and a specialized sub-domain, it is the scope and the limits of each: „*Cultural anthropology studies the origins and history of man's cultures, their evolution and development, and the structure and functioning of human cultures in every place and time. It is concerned with culture per se [...] Archaeology or prehistory deals primarily with ancient cultures and with past phases of modern civilizations*” (R. Beals, H. Hoijer, 1965, p. 10). The result is more than a separation between the two fields. In terms of scope, anthropology has only ontological limits, while archaeology seems to have both chronological and methodological ones. One of the illustrations in Hoebel's text (fig. 1) indicates the distance set by anthropology in relation to other directions of inquiry<sup>4</sup>; anthropology seems to be the only one considered to offer an integrated perspective on the past<sup>5</sup>.

The overarching position of Anthropology is advocated also in more recent approaches. For T. H. Eriksen (2004), the field of Anthropology is providing an image of the cultural diversity in the world, and is providing intellectual instruments for making sense of the human condition by comparative means. It also is „*the comparative study of culture and society, with a focus on local life. Put differently, anthropology distinguishes itself from other lines of enquiry by insisting that social reality is first and foremost created through relationships between persons and the groups they belong to*” (T. H. Eriksen, 2004, p. 9). The author offers also another definition: „*Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a particular social setting. The discipline thus compares aspects of different societies, and continuously searches for interesting dimensions for comparison*” (T. H. Eriksen, 2001, p. 4). This definition is, I think, crucial in understanding the difference and similarities between the two fields. We will revisit it later in the argument.

### ... And Archaeology

„*It is unlikely that you will ever come across two archaeologists who will agree exactly what archaeology is*” (P. L. Drewett, 1991, p. 1). „*The past would be very boring if we all agreed about it*” (C. Gamble, 2008, p. 20).

The above observations are quite true. Definitions of archaeology are numerous, and they range from statements related to the differences with other fields of inquiry (P. L. Drewett, 1991) to the object of study<sup>6</sup>, or the aims of the field: „*Archaeology may be broadly defined as the investigation of human cultures and societies of the past through recovery and interpretation of both remnants of ancient material culture and, most critically, the physical contexts in which they have been preserved*” (M. Dietler, 2010, p. 53). Another fairly recent definition of archaeology is that „*the aim of archaeology is to obtain valid knowledge about the past. It tries to show that archaeologists do not need to be failed ethnographers. It argues that there are diachronic patterns in the past which we can discern retrospectively but of which people at the time would have been totally unaware, or only perceived from a limited perspective, and which can only be explained from the point of view of the present-day archaeologist*” (S. Shennan, 2006, p. 4). The important things underlined by the definition given by Shennan are the different sensitivity to time, and the subjective perception of people in relation to their own cultural settings. That is, familiarity with one's own culture blurs elements that might be of significance and that are visible from the outside<sup>7</sup>. H. Burk and C. Smith, focusing on Australian archaeology, state simply that „*Archaeology is the study of past human behavior through material remains. In Australia, this translates to a variety of interests: from Indigenous archaeology which focuses on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupation of Australia over the last 50 000 years to historical archaeology which deals with the last few hundred years since colonial contact*” (H. Burk, C. Smith, 2004, XVIII). The rather narrow definition of contemporary archaeology is somewhat enlarged by adding the fact that archaeology is also a matter of managing cultural heritage. The central point is that archaeology deals with material remains and

the setting in which these were used, both in physical and symbolic ways. The materiality of archaeology has led to a specific problem, that is, the renewed interest in matters theoretical. In a significant paper on the changes induced in the 1960s and 1970s, Trigger, made a significant observation: „*The principal challenge that has always faced archaeologists has been to infer human behavior and ideas from material culture. It is now effectively argued that realizing that goal requires a detailed understanding of the archaeological contexts from which data are recovered and also of the systematic relationships between material culture and behavior*” (B. G. Trigger, 1984, p. 276).

Of course, these perspectives have been challenged by the advent of more sophisticated methods of research in the field and in the laboratories; an even more significant challenge is coming from the spread of the digital media and instruments – digital reconstructions, as well as new statistical methods, that enable a better analysis of the archaeological data. However, the statement made by Lewis Binford is still at the core of our work: „*It is suggested that 'material culture' can and does represent the structure of the total cultural system, and that explanations of differences and similarities between certain classes of material culture are inappropriate and inadequate as explanations for such observations within other classes of items. Similarly, change in the total cultural system must be viewed in an adaptive context both social and environmental, not whimsically viewed as the result of 'influences', 'stimuli', or even 'migrations' between and among geographically defined units*” (L. Binford, 1962, p. 217). Again, that does not preclude a more dynamic perspective on the crucial term 'culture' for the archaeologist: „*[...] culture is not reduced to normative ideas about the proper ways of doing things but is viewed as the system of the total extrasomatic means of adaptation. Such a system involves a complex set of relationships among people, places, and things whose matrix may be understood in multivariate terms*” (L. Binford, 1965, p. 209). This position, although challenged by the entire theoretical stream that started with the seminal work of Ian Hodder (2003, 1995), has in our opinion still a certain validity, especially since the position of archaeology as an academic pursuit seems to be endangered by specific public

interests<sup>8</sup> (G. A. Clark, 2003), or by a new perspective on the relation between people and objects (A. Appadurai, 1986; I. Kopytoff, 1986). The theoretical reconsideration of archaeology (the 'discovery' of the fact that the archaeologist is by no means objective only by the fact that he deals with objects), and the inclusion of objects in the narratives on how cultures and individuals function call for a new agreement between the two fields of research.

#### **What relationship?**

„*Social anthropologists have generally not bothered to search for regularities between material culture and human behavior since they can observe the latter directly [...] Yet what archaeology lacks in the limited variety of its data is compensated for by its ability to study change over long periods of time*” (B. G. Trigger, 1984, p. 276).

The points made before do not explain what is the fundamental issue involved in the relationship between anthropology and archaeology. For the traditional, normative, perspective it is the interest in developing universal explanations of human behavior. Both fields aim at presenting a general view on how humans function, and both share the same interest at processes<sup>9</sup>. The result was a fragmentation of both directions of research along not only geographical boundaries, but also along fractures related to methodological, technical, and theoretical approaches. The observation made by Gamble (see above) rings true also for Anthropology. While it may be argued that this is the result of the continuing increase in facts ready to be known, we think it is also a result in the pursuit of universality.

There are ways to reconcile the two fields. One of the ways is technical and digital (G. W. Weber, 2014) and, indeed, represent one way of both enriching research. But the issue is more problematic, and is based on the differences in ontology (B. Alberti et al., 2011), that is in the way fundamental concepts are used to shape methodology, research-as-action, and present the results. The point made by G. Lucas (2010) is challenging: the difference between the two fields is given by the lack of focus on the individual, the static character of archaeological data, and the dialogue with the modernity of the object (fig. 2).

Recent developments in archaeology suggest that this not the case, at least not anymore.

However, they constitute a point of interest, since they explain the major differences that have time and again been interpreted as creating hierarchies.

As T. Yarrow puts it (2010), different vantage points create different methodological solutions and different partial images of the past.

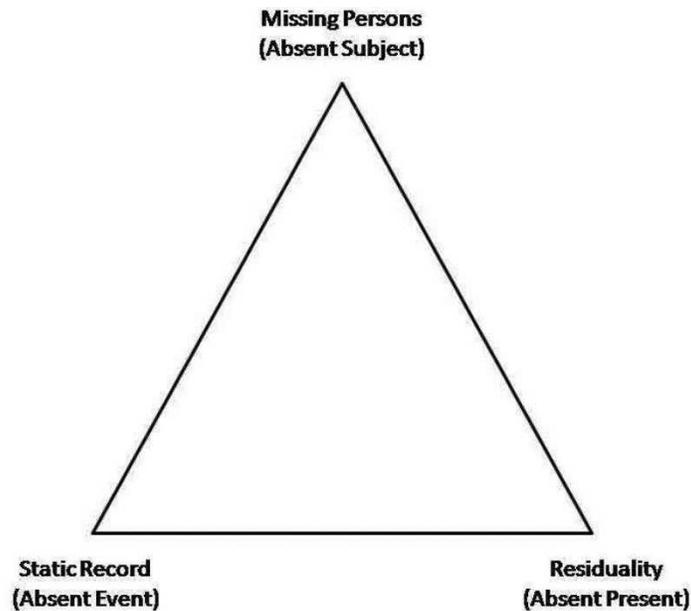


Fig. 2 - The differences between Anthropology and Archaeology (after G. Lucas, 2010, p. 37, fig. 3.2)

**Conclusion – the pizzaioli<sup>10</sup>**

„ [...] in our definition culture is not necessarily shared; it is participated in. And it is participated in differentially. A basic characteristic of cultural systems is the integration of individuals and social units performing different tasks, frequently at different locations; these individuals and social units are articulated by means of various institutions into broader units that have different levels of corporate inclusiveness ” (L. W. Binford, 1965, p. 205).

But I think that one might look at the issue from another perspective, and this is one related to both sets of data, anthropological and archaeological. The fieldwork of Anthropology means foremost looking at people, while the fieldwork of archaeology means before anything else to look at objects and their setting. The ontological difference is less one of object or of methodology, and more of different points in time in the human action. That is, one field analyses the actor's performance (and his/her use of the material world), while the other looks at the setting and stage props (and his/her use of action). There is actually no fault line involved, but – to paraphrase

G. E. Lessing – there are arts of the moment and arts of the process. In my interpretation, the debates in the last 100 years have been more about coming to terms that the two fields are equal and inseparable. One might look at the pizzaioli and their skill in transforming a margherita in an element of performing arts, and receiving the applause from real-life people. Another one might look at the oven, the charcoal and, if lucky, at the ingredients and the vessels in which they are stored.

But it takes both onlookers to fully understand the pizza and its makers.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>A search on Google Scholar reveals over 1,4 million items that use these two words in their title.

Interesting, a search with the formula archaeology and anthropology relationship results in only 457.000 items. While not the result of a scientific approach, the numbers seem to indicate the fact that the relation between the two fields is perceived at best as an ambiguous one. In all fairness, the debate and interest in this equation is increasing, as the traditional European model of academic training in the field is challenged by organizational models more related to the US experience.

<sup>2</sup> For the relation between anthropology and the critique of contemporary society, see chapter IX, which puts forth not only the basis of applied anthropology, but also foretells the debate concerning the emic vs. etic approaches.

<sup>3</sup> One sentence is noteworthy for our topic. For the two authors, archaeologists are „*a group of anthropologists interested in man's past*” and „*Archaeology or prehistory deals primarily with ancient cultures and with past phases of modern civilizations*” (R. Beals, H. Hoijer, 1965, p. 2), a qualification many of those concerned would reject. To complicate the issue even more, ethnology is included in the debate, but only as *the* descriptive approach.

<sup>4</sup> The challenge to archaeology did not go unnoticed. At about the same time, V. G. Childe stated flatly that „*My thesis is that archaeology and anthropology (or, if you will, ethnography) are two complementary departments of the science of man [...]*” (G. Childe, 1946, p. 243). One might argue that the statement represent the difference between European and US perspectives, but 'complementarity' is the important word, since it implies ontological equality.

<sup>5</sup> The model is interesting also for those involved in rethinking academic organizational models. For the European academic setting the structure is bewildering, since it would involve a specific co-operation between academic institutions. For the Romanian setting it would involve a common educational trajectory involvin separate universities.

<sup>6</sup> „*Archaeology is the study of the past through material remains. It is about three things: objects, landscapes and what we make of them [...]* Today there is an archaeology of nearly everything” (C. Gamble, 2008, p. 2-3).

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the motives for which the contact between cultures is a topic of interest, and why

travelogues and the memoirs of travelers are significant documents fo both fields.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, here is one of the significant differences between Anthropology and Archaeology, at least in chronological terms. The first has had no problems in integrating contemporary applications of its results and approaches (Applied Anthropology is well and flourishing). The second field was more reluctant to accept that there is a public interest in the field (the idea of a Public Archaeology and what it actually means is still under debate).

<sup>9</sup> This has also a more ominous result. Both Anthropology and Archaeology have had to fight teleological discourses.

<sup>10</sup> The recent inclusion of the pizzaioli on the list of Representative Intangible Heritage is to be found at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-neapolitan-pizzaiuolo-00722>.

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