

The Institutional Landscape of American Archaeology: A Short Guide

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This article offers a brief analysis of the institutional landscape of American archaeology, and it is intended particularly to help European scholars comprehend and navigate this complex and sometimes bewildering domain.¹ It is a slightly revised version of the first half of an article published at the request of a Spanish journal several years ago (Dietler 2001). The editors of the EJA blog felt that it would be useful to present this material to a wider European audience: hence, the current offering. Although originally published several years ago, the conditions it describes have not changed substantially, except, perhaps, for minor variations in the statistical patterns cited.

The task of constructing a synopsis of the current state of the terrain of archaeology in the United States is, obviously, a dauntingly large and complicated charge to fulfill, and no individual could hope to present more than an impressionistic and inherently partial survey of such a large and diverse field in a brief article. However, this is an important topic that certainly merits a serious analytical effort. I say this for two reasons. In the first place, because of the sheer size of American archaeology (in terms of the number of archaeologists and the publications they turn out each year), as well as the global geopolitical forces that structure fields of power and symbolic capital within the international academic world, what happens in American contexts inevitably has global implications, for better or for worse. In the second place, as someone who has been navigating for a couple of decades between the American and European systems, it is my impression that there exists a good deal of mutual misunderstanding about even the most mundane cultural and institutional aspects of academic practice in the two contexts. Hence, an effort at cultural translation seems highly desirable.

Works characterizing national “schools” of archaeology generally tend to focus on recent theoretical and methodological developments and the debates between currently competing theoretical perspectives. That is decidedly not the goal here. Rather, the focus of this article is directed toward the institutional, social, and cultural context that has shaped American archaeology. Archaeological practice is not simply an abstract world of the philosophical clash of ideas and theories in some pure conceptual space. These debates are grounded in particular contexts of practice, and I would contend that a deeper understanding of theoretical trends is not possible without first comprehending

¹ In the context of this article, I use the term “American” to refer specifically to the United States. Obviously, this usage is less than ideal given its exclusive usurpation of this identity from the rest of the American continent, but I cannot think of a handy substitute. I should also point out that I use the phrase “American archaeology” to describe research done by scholars at American institutions (which is actually global in its reach) and “Americanist archaeology” to describe research on the archaeology of North America.

the institutional landscape within which American archaeology operates and has developed. Indeed, I would suggest that it is precisely the lack of a clear understanding of the historical development of the institutional context of American archaeology that often inhibits European archaeologists' efforts to comprehend American archaeological practice.

Academic Departments and Disciplines

One of the basic institutional differences that is immediately apparent between archaeology in European and American contexts is that the majority of American archaeologists are trained and housed in "departments of Anthropology" as one of four broad "subfields" (Archaeology, Cultural or Sociocultural Anthropology, Linguistic Anthropology, and Biological Anthropology) that constitute a discipline. In most European nations (and their former colonies which have been influenced by European disciplinary concepts) the archaeology of recent prehistoric periods has generally tended to be more closely allied to history, meaning especially national history. This is because European archaeology developed as a professional discipline in the context of 19th century European nationalism and was seen as a backward extension of the history of the nation in a search for prehistoric origins (Veit 1989, Wotzka 1993). This kind of project was not tenable in the context of the United States, where the record of the prehistoric past was exclusively one of peoples who were culturally alien to the scholars engaged in the development of the discipline (and, indeed, where those scholars were members of a dominant colonial society that had decimated the indigenous inhabitants in the recent past). In this context, prehistoric archaeology developed largely as a partner to ethnography in the joint project of "salvage ethnography" by which scholars attempted to document what they saw as the vanishing cultures of Native Americans. Many of the earlier practitioners used both archaeology and ethnography together in an attempt to reconstruct the cultures of native peoples before the dramatic transformations that were produced by European colonialism.

The kind of institutional linkage to history that is common in European contexts is rare in the United States. However, it should also be pointed out that, while the vast majority of American academic archaeologists are in Anthropology departments, archaeologists studying the ancient complex societies of certain regions (especially the Mediterranean, Egypt, and the Near East) usually tend to be incorporated with other, text-oriented, humanistic scholars in highly specialized departments or institutes (e.g. Classics, Egyptology, Near Eastern Studies, Art History) often having limited contact or intellectual rapport with Anthropology. This division is reflected in the distinctive membership of the two main American professional archaeological societies and the character of their respective scholarly journals: the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) and its journal *American Antiquity* (which are primarily for anthropological archaeologists), and the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) with its *American Journal of Archaeology* (which cater largely to classicists and Near Eastern archaeologists).

This institutional setting within Anthropology for the majority of American archaeologists, although it is the accidental product of a broader set of historical circumstances, has had important intellectual consequences. In general, it has served to orient American archaeologists towards social science

(rather than humanities) research questions and modes of explanation and to devalue the study of particular historical cultures as an end in itself. It has also tended to preclude the conceptualization of archaeology as a discipline in and of itself (see Lenoir 1997); instead, archaeology is generally seen as an investigative technique at the service of broader disciplinary questions determined by larger communities of scholars. Although my discussion here concerns primarily academic archaeology, this is equally true of the much larger community of what are called "Cultural Resource Management" (CRM) archaeologists; that is, those who undertake rescue excavations and survey in advance of construction projects. Most CRM archaeologists are also trained in Anthropology departments. In general, archaeologists in the United States have three avenues of employment available: universities, museums, and CRM firms (either public or private). There is no exclusively research institution equivalent to the French CNRS. In all three cases, the majority of practitioners are trained in Anthropology departments, although some museums tend to have a relatively greater proportion of scholars trained in Art History or Classics.

It is also important to understand that in nearly all university Anthropology departments, archaeologists are a minority subfield and cultural anthropology is the dominant subfield. Usually, archaeologists represent 25 percent or less of the faculty members in a department, while cultural anthropologists usually represent nearly half, or more. Among the few exceptions to this pattern are the universities of Arizona and Pennsylvania, in which archaeologists constitute around half of the department. This minority status of archaeology, both within the discipline of Anthropology as a whole and in most individual departments, defines the balance of power within the discipline and has an effect upon the implicit definition of significant research frontiers and theoretical paradigms. It is also necessary to point out that, despite the shared ideology of a united discipline of Anthropology, the degree of genuine intellectual and social integration between archaeology and cultural anthropology is highly variable from one department to another. At some departments, such as Berkeley and Michigan, archaeologists and cultural anthropologists are actually housed in separate buildings and have relatively little to do with each other except at a few joint administrative meetings. At others, such as Chicago, there is a self-consciously close spatial, theoretical, and social integration between the subdisciplines, with joint teaching of classes and workshops, joint participation on dissertation committees, etc. These subtle structural features often have a marked influence on the kind of archaeology that is practiced in the different departments.

The American University and College System: Symbolic Capital

One of the things most often misunderstood by those outside the United States is the institutional framework that governs both the training of archaeologists and the generation of research: the American university system and its often implicit hierarchies and divisions. One of the first things that must be appreciated is the distinction between "undergraduate" and "graduate" education. Students first take a four year undergraduate program of studies (normally from age 18 to 21) to obtain the Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BS) degree. This can be done at either a college (that is, an institution specializing in undergraduate education and offering only the BA and BS

degrees) or at a university (that is, an institution with both undergraduate and graduate programs). Some institutions also offer programs for a terminal Master of Arts (MA) degree; but, for most, the MA is a degree that is simply awarded at a certain stage during the PhD program on the basis of having fulfilled various requirements. For those working in CRM archaeology, the BA or MA is often a sufficient credential for entering the job market. However, obtaining an academic position requires achieving a PhD, which means, on average, an additional eight to ten years of training after the BA, culminating in a dissertation. Entering a graduate program involves a process of highly competitive selection, in which students apply to their preferred universities at the end of their undergraduate training and are selected on the basis of both their performance in undergraduate programs and on standardized examinations. The reputation of the undergraduate institution they attended, for which there is a widely recognized national hierarchy of prestige, also weighs heavily in this evaluation process.²

There are at least 450 colleges and universities in the United States that offer a BA degree in anthropology (from among about 1,400 institutions of higher education). Of those institutions, 98 universities offer PhD programs in Anthropology. The annual production of Anthropology PhDs by all these institutions has been relatively stable since the mid 1970s, with an average of about 400 per year, although the most recent figures show a total of 556 PhDs in Anthropology during the 1999-2000 academic year. Of this total, approximately 50 percent of the PhDs are in sociocultural anthropology and about 30 percent in archaeology (or roughly 120 of the latter per year on average). However, as with the undergraduate institutions, these doctoral programs are highly variable in terms of their size, prestige, and influence within the discipline, and there exists a well-entrenched hierarchical ranking of symbolic capital that has many structuring effects for archaeological practice. For example, if one looks at the ten highest-ranked Anthropology departments in the country, it is clear that over 60 percent of the 256 Anthropology faculty at those institutions were trained by those same ten institutions (and a significant portion of the remaining 40 percent were trained at the most prestigious foreign universities). But what is more, 71 percent of those top-ten-trained scholars were actually trained at the four highest rated departments (the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the University of California Berkeley, and Harvard University), and one department alone (Chicago) accounted for over 25 percent of all the top-ten-trained scholars teaching at those institutions (in comparison to less than 4 percent for the fifth-rated department).³ One can debate the relative extent to which this pattern results from these departments consistently attracting and training the best

² Prestige of undergraduate and graduate programs are not necessarily correlated. For example, several colleges rank very high on the national scale of undergraduate prestige yet have no graduate programs. Moreover, some state universities have highly prestigious graduate programs but only moderately respected undergraduate programs.

³ The rankings are taken from the most recent study by the National Research Council, the most serious and respected of the organizations that publish such evaluations. A new NRC ranking of Anthropology departments is expected within the next couple of years, but it is unlikely that this will produce substantially different results. The quantitative statements about degrees and departments are based upon the 2000-2001 *Guide to Anthropology Departments* published by the American Anthropological Association and data from the AAA webpage.

students or simply from the symbolic value attached to a degree from these institutions; but what it does clearly indicate is that disciplinary reproduction within American Anthropology is structured by a sharply marked hierarchy of symbolic capital that produces a remarkably consistent degree of elite exclusivity at the top (e.g., see Rabinow 1991).

This phenomenon is also evident within a more general hierarchy of institutions in which five elite universities (Berkeley, Chicago, Harvard, Stanford, Yale) all have exceptionally large numbers of highly ranked graduate departments across a broad range of disciplines and consistently vie with these "peer institutions" for the greatest number of highest ranked departments. Other universities may outrank all of these five in particular disciplines, but none is currently able to compete on such a broad front (although several are close). And "compete" is the correct word to describe the relationship between American universities. There is a constant attempt to lure "star" faculty away from other institutions, through bidding wars involving salary, research funds, and other benefits, in order to build departmental reputations (much in the way that football teams operate in Europe). Moreover, there is constant competition among the best departments to attract the national pool of the best graduate students (with a continual escalation of fellowship offers). Departments also take great competitive pride in the success of their students in the national academic job market, and, reciprocally, the relative success of placing students in academic posts plays a significant role in student decisions about which departments to attend.

This hierarchy of national prestige also determines how the balance of research and teaching is structured for faculty members. At the top universities, reputation is based almost exclusively upon the influence of one's research publications, and teaching plays a relatively minor role in the selection of faculty or the awarding of "tenure" (that is, a guarantee of permanent status). Faculty at the elite institutions also tend to teach less and are expected to devote more time to research than those at other institutions. In contrast, faculty at small colleges may find most of their time taken up by heavy teaching duties, whereas the expectations for significant publication in tenure and promotion decisions are far less demanding.

The American Faculty Career

There is relative uniformity in the American system in the formal stages of an academic career, if not in the criteria upon which advancement is based. There are three levels of status for full-time faculty: assistant professor, associate professor, and professor. One normally remains an assistant professor for a period of about 7 years, at the end of which one undergoes a process of rigorous review for promotion to tenure. If successful, this marks the all-important transition from "assistant professor" to "associate professor". Those who do not achieve tenure at the time of the review must leave the university and seek employment elsewhere. Those who are granted tenure have job security for life (literally, as the imposition of a mandatory retirement age is illegal in the American system). Given the highly democratic structure of most American university departments, once tenured, there is little effective difference between associate professor and professor, except for an eventual increase in salary. There is no equivalent to the elevated centralization of power that the position of

“professor” entails in many European university systems. In most departments (although not all), even the position of “chair” is merely a temporary (usually for about 3 years) rotating role in which one person is chosen as the representative of the department in dealing with the university administration. One also finds some scholars identified as “lecturers” (not to be confused with the very different status of “lecturer” in British universities). These are temporary, poorly paid positions filled on an ad hoc basis to teach specific courses, and they are not considered regular faculty (for example, they cannot participate in faculty meetings and vote on departmental policy). The use of larger numbers of lecturers is a practice seen increasingly at many of the non-elite universities, in particular, as a way of cutting costs, and it has the potential to create a two-tiered system with adverse effects on younger scholars.

Public and Private Universities

Another structural feature of importance in understanding the American academic scene is the distinction between public and private universities. There are no universities supported by the national government (aside from the military academies), but each of the 50 individual states supports at least one “state university”, often with multiple campuses in different cities. Some states, such as California, even have two tiers of state university systems. In addition, some major cities also support their own college / university systems (for example, both New York and Chicago have multiple “city universities” or “city colleges”). In addition to these public institutions, there are also many private universities and colleges supported by large endowments, alumni donations, and tuition fees. It is worth noting that of the five super-elite universities noted earlier, the University of California at Berkeley is the only state university among them; the others are all private. However, it should also be noted that, of the 25 highest rated Anthropology PhD programs, 60 percent are in state universities. Tuition at private universities and colleges can range to over \$30,000 per year, while state and city universities and colleges charge only a small fraction of that or may be virtually free of tuition charges (although a large percentage of students at private universities do receive scholarship aid that substantially reduces or eliminates the high tuition fees).⁴ Private universities also tend to offer higher average salaries for their professors than all but the most elite state institutions. At the undergraduate level, state universities tend to attract a large majority of their students from within the state in which they are located, while private universities and colleges tend to serve a national, or even international, pool of applicants. At the graduate level, the more prestigious state universities also tend to attract a national and international body of students. Public universities also tend to have a much larger ratio of undergraduate to graduate students than do private ones. For example, Berkeley has approximately 23,000 undergraduates (of whom about 91 percent come from *within* the state of California) versus about 9,000 graduate students (from all over the world) and a full-time faculty of approximately 1,545; while the University of Chicago has approximately 4,400 undergraduates (of whom 78 percent come from *outside* the

⁴ Admission is generally granted on what is called a “need blind” basis: students are selected purely on the basis of academic criteria with their financial data unknown. After admission, their financial status is reviewed to determine the level of scholarship aid they are to be given.

state of Illinois) versus about 9,000 graduate students (also from all over the world) and 2,160 faculty members.⁵

Archaeological Funding Agencies

The funding of archaeological research is another structural feature of major significance in determining the character of American archaeology. Aside from very small amounts provided by universities, funding for academic archaeology is derived primarily from a few central institutions to which one submits research proposals that are judged and funded on a competitive basis.⁶ Of these, the most significant is the National Science Foundation (NSF), an organization supported by the federal government. NSF disburses about \$12 million annually for archaeology and archaeometry research (out of a total budget of \$4.47 billion for all the sciences) and funds approximately 35 percent of the archaeology proposals it receives. Other funding agencies that are potential sources for archaeological research grants include the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Science Research Council, the Fulbright Foundation, and a host of smaller agencies focused on specific domains of research.

The amounts available for academic research from all these sources, although significant, are only a small fraction of the money spent on CRM archaeology. Moreover, CRM is the largest and fastest growing segment of employment for archaeologists. Hence, many Anthropology departments (especially at state universities) operate CRM extensions that tap into this pool to provide additional graduate student and research support.

There are several subtle constraints imposed by this funding system. In the first place, most funding agencies do not like to support projects for more than about 3 years duration, although longer support can sometimes be achieved with some creative grant proposal writing. This mentality operates against long-term investment in the excavation of particular sites and tends to encourage a kind of superficiality in research strategy such that seemingly significant results must be produced within three years before moving on to other projects. I suspect that this also lies behind the recent dominance of survey, as opposed to excavation, within some schools of American archaeology. Another constraint derives from the way that grant proposals are judged. They are sent out to be reviewed anonymously by a large number of other specialists. This tends to produce a certain conformity and conservatism in research designs (or at least their presentation) because scholars are trying to anticipate the preferences and biases of other scholars who represent what are perceived to be dominant paradigms within the field. It also means that there is a kind of language in which grants are written that may eventually differ dramatically from the publications resulting from the research funded by those grants.

⁵ Information obtained from the relevant university web sites. Chicago is unusual in its very small ratio of undergraduate to graduate students; most other major private universities have a more even ratio, whereas public universities are heavily weighted toward undergraduates.

⁶ Universities derive substantial amounts of revenue from the grants obtained by their faculty members (although the big money is primarily in the physical and biological sciences). Most universities charge "overhead" fees of up to 50% or more on grants that are run through them, and these costs are built into the grant budget.

Departments, Research Specialties, and Networks

Because of the way that Anthropology departments are structured in the United States, it is rare that one finds congregated together in the same department or university multiple specialists working on the archaeology of one region. Most departments select faculty who provide a diverse range of geographical specialties (what is sometimes referred to sardonically as the "Noah's Ark strategy" of representation). There are some exceptions: for example, the University of Arizona has a large number of archaeologists who work on the local archaeology of the Indians of the American Southwest, Vanderbilt has a concentration of archaeologists who work in Mesoamerica and the Andes, and the University of Chicago has a large cluster of archaeologists who work in the Near East (mostly in the well-known Oriental Institute rather than the department of Anthropology). But such concentrations are unusual. In most cases, there will be only one (or perhaps two) archaeologist doing research in a given region at any one university. At state universities, at least one archaeologist will normally be specialized in the archaeology of the local area, although this is not necessarily the case at the major private universities (which often aim primarily for a strong international profile). At the University of Chicago, for example, one finds archaeologists who do research in Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Caucasus, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Near East, and Louisiana and the Caribbean, but no one who works within the state of Illinois.

This pattern of geographical diversity has important intellectual consequences. In the first place, it means that one deals on a daily basis primarily with colleagues and students who do not share one's regional interests and who must seek commonality in shared theoretical issues or methodological interests. For example, a graduate student working in Bronze Age Germany will normally have only one or two members of his/her dissertation committee who are specialists in this field, while the other committee members will be archaeologists who work on similar theoretical topics in places such as South America or China, or cultural anthropologists with relevant theoretical expertise. Hence, this tends to reinforce the idea of the importance of theoretical discussion as the binding medium of the discipline and to further enhance the relative valuation of theory over regional culture history. It also means that, in the context of seminars, student dissertation committees, and workshops, one is continually exposed to the archaeological record of other regions of the world and obliged to deal with these data in a reasonably detailed way. This tends to reinforce a strong comparative perspective on one's own regional data. One is always forced to explain the significance or relevance of one's own regional research problems and data to those working in other areas in broader comparative terms.

National Meetings, Networks, and Disciplinary Rituals

The departmental patterns noted above also result in the fact that regional specialists are spread around the country at different universities and face-to-face communication among them tends to take place mostly at the annual national meetings of the major American anthropological and archaeological societies, or in special ad hoc conferences arranged around precise themes. These

meetings are a very important part of the institutional landscape of American archaeology, but not simply for the intellectual content of the formal presentations. They are a major venue for young scholars just finishing their dissertations to enter the market for university jobs. Responding to notices published in the society newsletters, these candidates submit their dossiers to universities seeking new faculty in advance of the meetings and wait hopefully for invitations to be interviewed there. The meetings also provide a venue for departments seeking new faculty to discreetly scout for talent by listening to the papers presented by these young scholars. There is also a great deal of “networking” that takes place over dinner or in the bars, where more senior scholars line up support for their political maneuvers within the societies and the discipline in general, organize research or publication projects with others, talk with officials from the grant agencies, and trade the latest gossip and scientific information. The numerous academic presses are also on hand with displays of all their recent publications. In addition to vibrant book sales, the publication hall also serves as a venue in which presses vie with each other to attract the most prestigious authors to publish with them and in which the less well known scholars attempt to interest the presses in publishing their books. The largest and most important of these meetings, such as those of the American Anthropological Association or the Society for American Archaeology, will draw over 5,000 scholars from all over the country (as well as from abroad) and will offer thousands of brief presented papers in hundreds of parallel sessions spread over five days. For example, the most recent SAA Meeting, held in New Orleans in April of 2001, had 2,028 presentations grouped into 233 sessions (Chamblee and Mills 2001). The redundancies in titles of these sessions and their papers are often a good key to the shifting fashions within the discipline, highlighting the currently popular research issues and theoretical “buzzwords” and the emerging popularity of particular paradigms.

The official sessions at these national conferences also provide clues toward the shifting implicit hierarchies of prestige within the discipline, by noting who is selected to organize and participate in “plenary” or “opening” sessions, who is chosen to deliver honorary addresses, which scholars are asked to be discussants, which sessions draw especially large crowds, etc. They also highlight the sometimes conflictual relationship between what Bourdieu (1984) called “academic capital” and “intellectual capital” in the structuring of power within American archaeology. As Bourdieu noted, those scholars who invest heavily in the acquisition of “academic capital” (that is, administrative power within departments, universities, national scholarly organizations, funding agencies, etc.) are not necessarily those with the greatest “intellectual capital” (that is, those whose power derives from the respect for, or popularity of, their ideas and research); and vice-versa. Hence, the meetings are a ritual arena where both of these forms of power are in operation and on display, and where competition between them is worked out on a national stage. The meetings are also an important ritual of identity in which the far flung networks of scholars are annually reconstituted as a single “imagined community” of American archaeology (indeed, given the geographical scale of the country, the national meetings are often the only place one encounters a good many old friends and colleagues; hence the meetings have a constant feeling of reunion and renewal of community).

Gender Issues

Another important structural feature of American archaeology to be considered is the gender balance within the field. Although American archaeology, like many academic disciplines, used to be dominated by men, recent studies have shown a significant transformation. A recent study of the state of women in American Anthropology (Burton et al. 1994) showed that by 1992, gender composition at the assistant professor level had stabilized at around 50 percent. It also showed that, although women still represented only about 34 percent of the associate professors and about 21 percent of the professors, this represented a slow but steady increase from previous years as the increased number of women at the entry level gradually moved up through the system. The study also noted that there were no statistically significant differences in salary between men and women at any faculty rank, which represents a further amelioration of earlier patterns from as recently as the 1980s. The situation is roughly comparable for archaeologists within this larger disciplinary pool. Indeed, a 1994 survey indicated that a higher proportion of women than men were being hired at lower level academic archaeology positions (Zeder 1997). This is not to say that subtle forms of discrimination do not still exist, or that subtle differences in prestige hierarchies and career trajectories are not structured according to gender. For example, it is clear that women are more likely than men to become faunal and archaeobotanical analysts (Zeder 1997), and, consequently, they are often viewed as technical specialists who work on the projects of other scholars rather than as project leaders. Moreover, women are still underrepresented as invited discussants at national conferences (Chamblee and Mills 2001), they are less often cited by men than by other women (Beaudry 1994), and there are skewed gender patterns in such things as faculty representation at the most prestigious departments, grant and publication success, and prominence within certain regional traditions of archaeology (Nelson et al. 1994). All of these specific features indicate that not everything is quite as homogeneously open as the more general statistics imply. Hence, although great progress has been made over the last couple of decades in rectifying practices of gender discrimination, there remain some subtle, but important, barriers to be overcome.

Conclusion

Clearly, in such a short piece, I have been able to do little more than point to a few themes that have struck me as particularly important foci of attention in understanding contemporary American archaeology. This is a vast academic domain with thousands of scholars pursuing diverse projects, and my choices are obviously constricted by personal interests and my own position within professional networks. It should be obvious as well that I have left out far more than I have included. Nevertheless, despite its inadequacies, I hope that this brief exercise has served at least as a practical introduction to navigating and translating the complex world of contemporary American archaeology. I hope, in particular, that it helps to put the intellectual terrain of its theoretical debates and research themes in a more comprehensible perspective by providing a working understanding of its institutional landscape. This latter is all the more

difficult for foreign colleagues to acquire because it is the kind of implicitly shared knowledge that is rarely voiced or put in print.

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