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Past Practices: Rethinking Individuals and Agents in Archaeology

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Archaeologists who seek to examine people's roles in past societies have long assumed, consciously or unconsciously, the existence of individuals. In this study, we explore various concepts and dimensions of 'the individual', both ethnographic and archaeological. We show that many protagonists in the debate over the existence of 'individuals' in prehistory use the same ethnographic examples to argue their positions. These positions range from the claim that any suggestion of individuals prior to 500 years ago simply projects a construct of western modernity onto the past, to the view that individual identities are culturally specific social constructs, both past and present. Like most contributors to the debate, we too are sceptical of an unchanging humanity in the past, but we feel that thinking on the topic has become somewhat inflexible. As a counterpoint to this debate, therefore, we discuss Bourdieu's concept of habitus in association with Foucault's notion of power. We conclude that experiencing oneself as a living individual is part of human nature, and that archaeologists should reconsider the individual's social, spatial and ideological importance, as well as the existence of individual, embodied lives in prehistoric as well as historical contexts.

The result [of recent work on agency] ... has been to conflate agency with the actor ... and thus to assume that evidence of agency is the same thing as evidence for individuals or subjects or selves. This confusion is an understandable one, and in archaeology its origins would seem to lie in the wholly necessary and laudable attempt to think about the concrete attributes of individuals in the past and their role in social and cultural change. (Moore 2000, 260)

On the surface of archaeological method and theory today, and given the current fascination of many archaeologists with the concept of 'agency', there might seem to be little reason to challenge this straightforward statement by Henrietta Moore. From the earliest, in-depth archaeological treatment of *The Individual in Prehistory* (Hill & Gunn 1977), to its recent re-visitation in a thoroughly overcrowded session at the American Anthropological Association's 100th annual meeting (*Twenty-five Years after the Individual in Prehistory*, New Orleans, 21 November 2002), through a wide range of writings both 'processual' (e.g. Renfrew 1972, 503–4; Hayden 2001, 254–8; Snow 2002)

and 'postprocessual' (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1987, 61–78; Meskell 1999, 8–36; Hodder 2000; 2003; Tarlow 2002, 26–7; Gosden 2004, 33–9; Kristiansen 2004, 83–5), archaeologists who want to open up windows onto the roles people played in past societies typically assume, consciously or unconsciously, the existence of individuals.

Thomas (2004a, 147–8), however, challenges unqualified assumptions about the existence of individuals, at least in Europe prior to about 500 years ago:

... to impose the concept of the individual on the distant past is a dangerous and potentially narcissistic exercise. ... If personhood is relational, we should explore the relationships that enable humanity to create and sustain itself in the past, and attempt to distinguish what that humanity was like, rather than presume that the transcendental individual has always stood at the centre of everything.

In his view, the concept of the modern individual has become lodged in the 'archaeological imagination' (Thomas 1996, 63–4). He has long argued (1) that

this 'rational' or 'autonomous' or 'transcendental' individual is a cultural construct unique to western modernity and its most characteristic political philosophy — humanistic liberalism, and (2) that projecting this 'phantom individual' onto the past is not just anachronistic but indeed an ethnocentric distortion of the past (Thomas 2002a, 30; 2004a, 136–7). Even historical archaeologists, like Martin Hall (2000, 9–10), feel that by assuming an unchanging humanity in the past, we open ourselves up to circular interpretations and make our historical enquiries self-serving.

In large measure, Fowler (2004, 3–6) follows Thomas's lead, maintaining that people in the past were not necessarily as 'individualized' as modern people are, and that past notions of personhood and identity would have been closely tied to context (just as they are today) and intimately related to social interactions and community concerns. Kirk (2006, 333–5) is less sanguine and, in discussing contingent senses (i.e. unfixed, non-stable through time) of personhood that may have been constituted through various material practices played out at some early Neolithic monuments in southern Britain, does not deny the possibility that some 'historically-specific' forms of the individual may have existed in the past. In examining the Neolithic of southeastern Europe, Chapman (2000) developed an anthropological model of 'personhood' to consider how processes of fragmentation and accumulation link people and objects. In his view, persons — not individuals but 'dividuals' — are made up of the sum total of their relationships. Jones (2005) cast his net more widely, examining the broader European Neolithic and considering how the person was constituted during this transformational period. He suggests that personhood is a relational concept of central importance to understanding the European Neolithic overall, and that we must take care not to totalize either the individual or the 'dividual'. Jones's engaging study focuses upon social practices, the ways in which persons are produced and performed through networks of relationships — differing in each historical context and involving both people and materiality.

In many respects, this body of research on Neolithic Europe and Britain has tended to shift the focus of the debate from individuals to persons, or personhood, concepts we discuss in some detail below. In this study, our aim is to explore and seek to minimize the still polar positions about the existence of *individuals* in the past. We discuss first various concepts and dimensions of 'the individual' (including personhood), citing some ethnographic and social science issues that have influenced archaeological thinking on

this topic. We then consider how archaeologists, and in particular prehistorians, have used the concept of the individual, and the differences that have ensued. Like Thomas, we do not use a specific case study or studies to illustrate our points, but we cite several relevant publications that do.

On closer inspection, the often acrimonious debate conducted in the writings of Lynn Meskell and Julian Thomas in particular reveals common threads of misunderstanding, some of it interdisciplinary in nature (ethnographic *vs* archaeological) and some intra-disciplinary (processual *vs* postprocessual, 'European' *vs* 'Mediterranean' archaeologies). We show here that the main protagonists use the same ethnographic examples to argue their positions, and suggest that the resulting divisions are somewhat superficial. As a counterpoint, one we find relevant in this debate, we discuss the connections between agency and power and, taking our lead from Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, together with Foucault's notion of power, we propose an alternative to the entire debate. In conclusion, we suggest that experiencing oneself as a living individual is part of human nature, and that archaeologists should reconsider the social, spatial and ideological importance of the individual and of individual embodied lives in the past. We contend that this does *not* amount to embracing the modern concept of the individual, or individualism, as long as we allow the relevant prehistoric and historical contexts to be part of the equation.

Individuals: concepts and dimensions

Because western social science typically proceeds from (the greater) society to (the lesser) person or individual, most archaeologists have followed suit, and have long ignored the relationship of the individual to society, or the position and relations of persons within society. Instead they have tended to treat individuals, or persons, in systems-theoretical terms as merely the smallest constituent parts of a larger system that has its own dynamics and follows its own logic, one that individuals cannot influence. Amongst the few processual archaeologists who attempted to make more of these 'individuals' are Hill & Gunn (1977), but their insistence on the systemic nature of individual behaviour within wider social, economic and other contexts effectively turned persons into miniature systems (Thomas 2004a, 116–17 & 120–21). Of course, there are exceptions to this trend in the social sciences: some Darwinian archaeologists, evolutionary ecologists and behavioural biologists, amongst others, regard individuals — often in an under-theorized

sense — as the basic building blocks of social theory (e.g. Nettle 1997).

Schortman (1989), an archaeologist who attempted to swim against the processual tide, developed the concept of ‘salient identities’ in an early, insightful paper sympathetic to the notion of individuals but ultimately treating wider social categories — ethnicity and class. Salient identities refer to social affiliations that guide cultural and interpersonal behaviour and have multiple material signifiers (Schortman 1989, 54–5). One crucial implication is that such identities typically are multiple, invoked under different circumstances and for diverse reasons during a person’s lifetime. Most people, in fact, must negotiate multiple and divergent, even conflicting identities throughout their life experience (Fisher & Di Paolo Loren 2003, 226).

In considering a wide range of material media — from monuments, figurines and frescoes to iconography and stylistic motifs to jewellery and ornamentation — archaeologists regularly treat issues related to posture, gesture, costume, sexuality, representation and experience. Only recently, however, have they attempted to (re)construct individuals, individual identities and personhood, or to engage with individual bodies and actual bodily experience on the basis of such material evidence (e.g. Meskell 1999; 2001; Gillespie 2001; Joyce 2003; Meskell & Joyce 2003). Postprocessual archaeologies generally have emphasized human intentionality and paid lip service to studying the individual, but in practice ‘real people’ (Johnson 1989, 189–90) seldom make an appearance. The presentation of ‘individuals’ in archaeology, and particularly in prehistory, is more often implicit than explicit. More serious is the pessimism that leads at least one archaeologist to argue: ‘Although all the material we deal with was made, used and discarded by individual people, we see them only as part of a collective, often a time-transgressive collective of considerable duration’ (Frankel 2005, 24).

Accessing the individual in material culture obviously poses real challenges to archaeologists, not least because the concept of the individual is a loaded, historically-situated term (Shanks & Tilley 1987, 62). The material record cannot ‘prove’ that people in prehistory held a concept of themselves as individuals, even if the material conditions of individual people are *represented* in media such as architecture, rock art, clay and stone figurines, frescoes and pottery, or *reflected* in everything from stone tools (Dobres 2000) to monuments (Brück 2001; Kirk 2006) to skeletal remains (Robb 2002). Despite the practical

and theoretical issues that complicate any definition of analytical or real individuals in a prehistoric context, we believe it is necessary to move beyond attempts simply to identify social groups or categories, or to break them down into opposing binary classifications, or to argue that they are only modern reconstructions cast in our own image (cf. Latour 1993). Instead we need to seek better resolution of specific individuals or persons, embodied lives and representations of relational selves, not least because individuals are, and were, intimately implicated in maintaining and transforming social structures, values and practices. Moreover, as argued below, the concept of *habitus* not only provides some leverage for recognizing non-western notions of personhood, it also enables us to understand that ‘western’ personhood is itself pluralistic: as a result, dividing western and non-western notions of personhood, or of individuals, is not very useful conceptually.

When archaeologists discuss concepts related to the individual or the person, typically they use four terms — person, individual, identity and self (or better, selfhood). Because Meskell (1999, 32–3) and others (e.g. La Fontaine 1985; Tarlow 2002, 26; Fowler 2004, 7–9) have defined and expanded upon these terms in light of the anthropological literature, we simply summarize them here.

The individual, as the primary focus of study, is the physical, mortal human being, and hence one aspect for which archaeologists do have direct evidence. The person is one who has been ascribed with social status or ‘selfhood’, i.e. any human being who may be conceptualized and treated as a person (Fowler 2004, 7). In effect, individuality — based on our unique, current western conception — transforms this social person into a rational social agent. Each person, in turn, has an identity, or rather several identities that may or may not converge and that constitute the person in the context of the society or the groups of which s/he is part. Self(hood), finally, represents the collected attributes of a person, the ‘site’ or perspective from which a person perceives the surrounding world and acts upon and within it (Mauss 1985 [1938]). Fowler (2004, 7), followed largely by Jones (2005) and Kirk (2006), uses the term ‘personhood’ instead of selfhood, defining it as a person’s state of being in any specific context. He also adds as key features of personhood ‘dividuality’ and ‘partibility’, derived from Strathern’s (1988) study of the composite, multiply-authored, divisible persons in Highland New Guinea society (Fowler 2004, 8–9). Clearly none of these terms is fixed, especially in the ways that archaeologists have used them. Moreover,

and in any case, all of them are interlinked in lived, bodily experience (Meskell 1999, 32).

Archaeologists have also treated no less than five dimensions or notions of the 'person' or the 'individual' (Meskell 1999, 34–6). Briefly stated these are:

1. the self-inscribed, cultural concept of the individual, which effectively concerns the ways that people in the past may have conceived of themselves;
2. the anonymous individual or individual bodies, as encountered for instance in mortuary and especially skeletal evidence or represented by prehistoric figurines;
3. individuals as distinguished through their actions as artists or craftspeople, or through their use of technological styles, in effect the original understanding of the 'individual in prehistory' as proposed by Hill & Gunn (1977; cf. Conkey & Hastorf 1990);
4. representations of individuals in iconography, architecture or documentary evidence, such as figurines, burial monuments, frescoes, lists of weavers or metalworkers attached to a palace, medieval nuns;
5. historically known individuals such as Sumerian kings, the Egyptian villagers of Deir el Medina, Greek philosophers or Roman satirists.

The last two categories of the individual, from proto-historic or historically documented societies, may seem *prima facie* more accessible and readily verifiable, but that does not preclude the study of people as individuals through the use of exclusively material data. Moreover, and of crucial importance for the following discussion, with the possible exception of the last (fifth) category, it seems to us that such people — and their personhood or individuality — have nothing to do with contemporary fixations on *individualism* (privacy, personal relations and feelings) (Fowler 2004, 17), much less with the Thatcherite, neo-liberal, 'autonomous individuals' that haunt Thomas (2002a, 34–8) and typify the 'humanistic' tradition that so concerns him.

Individuals in archaeology

Defining and understanding individuals has always been seen as more of a challenge in prehistory, and perhaps most obviously in its earliest stages where, for example, the refitting of flint fragments often enables archaeologists to reconstruct the specific acts of one or more persons producing chipped stone tools. Yet from diverse backgrounds and multiple geographic or chronological areas of focus, prehistorians increasingly discuss the various dimensions

of individuals, persons and identities as they may be seen in the material record. McDermott (1996), for example, argues that European Upper Palaeolithic female figurines were attempts at self-representation, whilst Duhard (1990; 1993) suggests that each figurine may have represented an actual individual, or person. Sinclair (2000) links the Solutrean (Upper Palaeolithic) lithic technology of southern France and Iberia to an artistry and 'boldness' that reveal discrete individuals' actions instrumental in creating and maintaining social identities. Combining landscape studies with an embodied approach, Last (1998) presents the biographies of individual bodies uncovered in a Bronze Age Cambridgeshire cemetery. Using human representations in Moche art to consider how male and female bodies were differently treated in ritual sacrifices, Hill (2000) argues that males (as prisoners) were represented anonymously in groups, whilst all women (as sacrifices) were represented singly, as individuals who may have played specific roles in Moche rituals. Jones (2005, 196–9) usefully summarizes further Mesoamerican and Andean accounts of persons and personhood.

In her study of human figurines and burials in Neolithic Greece, Talalay (1993; 2000, 4–5) argues that production and exchange in this primarily egalitarian society involved (anonymous) individual men and women, whether potters, peddlers or pastoral herders. Amongst the remains of more than 400 skeletons from the Italian Neolithic, Robb (2002, 162–5) establishes a detailed 'osteobiography' of one individual female, from birth to death and all the traumas she suffered in between. Renfrew (1994, 167–70; 2001, 135) links the beginnings of metallurgical production in Bronze Age Europe and the Aegean to the emergence of socially distinct individuals, identifiable by their actions as evident in symbolic mortuary displays of weaponry (Europe), or by high-prestige commodities (the Aegean). In a related study, Treherne (1995) maintains that the (masculine) toilet articles and armaments that appear at a particular moment in European prehistory are related to the increasing sense of individuality associated with the rise and transformation of an elite male warrior group. Broodbank (2000, 170–74) argues that a high incidence of single burials, along with the growing frequency of elaborately painted figurines showing unusual forms or attributes, signals the increasing archaeological visibility of individuals in the Cycladic Early Bronze Age. Frankel (1991, 247–9) and Cherry (1992) discuss individual artists, respectively on prehistoric Cyprus and in the Bronze Age Aegean, whilst the reconstruction of skulls from a

Middle Minoan 'shrine' at Archanes-Anemospilia in Crete suggest '... important and striking individuals, marked out both by their physique and their possessions' (Musgrave *et al.* 1994, 89) — one example of anonymous individual bodies.

From a more theoretical perspective, Shanks & Tilley (1987, 62–3) speculated that '[t]here has probably never been a society which did not recognize the individual subject by such means as naming or being able to differentiate between and perceive physical bodies', and the ethnographic case-studies referred to by all contributors to the debate support this point. Shanks & Tilley go on to caution, however, that the actual concepts of individuals ('personages') will vary from one society to another, and that our modern western concept of the person is 'a rather peculiar idea'. In the latest revision of a now-classic textbook on theory and interpretation in archaeology, Hodder & Hutson (2003, 121–4) also recognize that the concept of the individual is complex, and discuss it in terms of embodiment and the relational self (see also Hodder 2000, 25). Meskell (1999, 8–36), developing arguments adumbrated in earlier studies (Meskell 1996; 1998; Knapp & Meskell 1997), discusses at length the concept of the individual, both in the social sciences generally and in archaeology specifically. She outlines the historical trajectories and ontological necessity in the study of the self and as they concern the emergence of individuals, social actors and social identities in the material and documentary records (Meskell 2001, 188–95). Wilkie & Bartoy (2000, 755, 771) draw a clear line of demarcation between the individual and 'individualism', on the one hand, and on the other recognize that a dialectical relationship between society and the individual is crucial for understanding better the complexities of social life.

Thomas (2002a; 2004a,b) has persistently critiqued any and all of these attempts to use the concept of the individual in archaeology, and is not satisfied with the distinctions many scholars make between 'the western conception of the autonomous sovereign individual' and individualism, because he sees both as specifically western notions, even if created at different times (2004a, 139). Note, however, that in the passage cited at the outset of this study, Thomas (2004a, 147–8) himself moves from the 'concept of the individual' to 'personhood' to the 'transcendental individual', failing to distinguish clearly between them. He feels that several studies which have focused on the concept of the individual *in* society, or on the relationship between the individual *and* society, have reified these constructs as distinctive and autonomous entities in which individuals are seen to draw on social structure

or else to have a relationship with society, rather than seeing both individual and society as inseparable (Thomas 2004b, 121).

Thomas has delved more deeply than most other archaeologists into the philosophical and social science underpinnings of the notion of the individual, and we do not dispute his attempt to challenge the notion of a fixed, universal human nature. Indeed, given the pervasiveness of 'methodological individualism' in some areas of sociology, classical or neo-liberal economic theory, and neo-Darwinian archaeologies, we are in accord with his stance against liberal humanism. Nor do we have any problem in upholding his view that archaeologists cannot and should not presume that all people who lived in the past were individuals 'just like us' (Thomas 2004a, 144). Nonetheless it seems to us that Thomas repeatedly and often repetitiously seeks to ratify his position and will brook no opposition (e.g. in reviews and comments such as Thomas 2000b; 2002b). And, whilst we too abhor the kind of right-wing liberalism that underpins neoconservative ideologies and 'futurologies' (Fukuyama 2006), we feel that Thomas is reluctant to look beyond the philosophical and political bases of his position, and categorically dismisses the existence of individuals in a wide range of social contexts the world around, from earliest prehistory to historically-based eras. As a result, he has castigated rather perfunctorily an extensive body of work beyond prehistoric Britain and Europe, and has failed to come to grips with the terminology and definitions that archaeologists and anthropologists alike have employed and developed in arguments related to the individual (see previous section). Despite repeated denials, it seems to us, as it did to Wilkie & Bartoy (2000, 771), that Thomas persistently tends to read other people's use of the term 'individual' as 'individualism'. In turn, this has led both Thomas and others (in particular, Meskell) to adopt somewhat intractable stances in the debate over individuals in archaeology and to lose sight of the subtleties and nuances they all advocate.

Given his insistence that both notions — individuals and individualism — constitute specifically and indeed exclusively western constructs, albeit of different periods and contexts, Thomas is unlikely to deny this contention. We therefore suggest that it is his claim, maintaining that any appreciation of 'individuals' is an *exclusively* western stance, which lies at the heart of this controversy. Before we delve deeper into the theoretical roots and implications of his position, however, we first sketch the outlines of this debate in archaeology.

Individuals in archaeology: contours of a debate

Interestingly, both Thomas and Meskell use the same ethnographic cases — from Strathern's (1988) study of gender in Melanesian society — to argue their opposing points of view (Chapman, Fowler, Jones and Kirk also discuss Strathern's work to various degrees). Thomas (2002a, 34) maintains that the concept of 'individuality' is incomprehensible in the Melanesian situation, where 'dividual' identities emerge from various pre-existing relationships, and persons are conceptualized only as amalgams or hybrids of different relations and substances. Meskell (1999, 33), in contrast, points out that a person in Hagen, Papua New Guinea, may be seen as an embodied set of internal relations, with each person being part of a multiple, or partible composition. In Strathern's (1988, 273) view, personhood is a relational state whilst the person is construed from the perspectives of the relations that make up the individual. For Thomas (2002a, 34), Strathern is arguing that individual agency can only be understood in relational terms, and that one person's actions can only be seen in terms of another's: the corollary is that '... no aspect of identity or embodiment is sufficiently knowable for universality to be established'. For Meskell (1999, 33), Strathern is describing '... multiple selves that are aspects of individual persons': the corollary is that agents act within relationships and are revealed as a result of those actions.

Pointing out one way toward a possible resolution, Bachand *et al.* (2003, 239) maintain that '... personhood took the form not of the autonomous and disconnected individuals of contemporary methodological individualism, but of relational selves'. Similar arguments from the pen of Li Puma (1998) have been discussed by Thomas (2004a, 124–35), Gosden (2004, 33–5), Fowler (2004, 34–6), Jones (2005, 194–6) and Kirk (2006, 333–5). The materialization of an embodied individual is realized through interpersonal social actions, and the individual person is composed of multiple natural and cultural materials, brought together in a specific time and place by the accumulated acts and relations of other social beings, be they ancestors, elders, family members, craftspeople, masters, servants or slaves (Joyce 2000, 185–6). If the protagonists in the debate accepted these points, their perspectives might be seen less in opposition than as contrasts, or points along a spectrum of interpretation that could help in framing a concept of individuals as a negotiation between differing social and personal concerns.

Thomas, however, insists that we cannot establish the universality of individual identity and

claims instead that we must accept the universality of (Foucauldian) power relations, recognizing that people are different (or at least have different identities?) as a result of the ways they position themselves within networks of domination, resistance and knowledge (Thomas 2002a, 37–8; 2004b, 24–5). Thomas thus situates himself squarely in the realm of a 'Foucauldian archaeology' that Meskell (1996; 1999, 30–31) has criticized for its binary equation of oppressor *vs* oppressed, especially as this relates to issues of sex and class. Tarlow (1999, 175) also has excoriated the way that archaeologists (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1982) have privileged power relations in considering mortuary practices, viewing this as a cynical interpretation of human behaviour that takes insufficient account of individual people's motivations and experiences. Sweely (1999, 2) points out that most archaeological analyses of power focus primarily on institutional forms and ideological structures rather than on the individuals affected by them. Foucault himself recognized and indeed insisted on the impact of power in all social relations. Even if he was more concerned with institutional than with individual discourses on power, he was firmly committed to the ubiquitous and all-pervasive role of power in social relations. Foucault, in any case, was no less part of the modernist discourse than the views that Thomas criticizes.

Excepting the most extreme instances of domination, power relations are historically contingent, negotiable and amenable to individual interests. To examine power relations amongst individuals, we may view them as a 'dialogic' interaction (Bakhtin 1981), where centripetal forces shape and continually recreate the meanings and terms of power, and where, in turn, power relations impact individual lived experience through the engagement, negotiation and manipulation of *difference* (Moore 1994, 71–5). Equally, and in seeking to disentangle opposing perceptions of the institutionalized and individualized realms and relations of power, Moore (1999, 13–14) observes: '... it is not enough to focus on fragmentation and particularism; there has to be some acknowledgment that hierarchical relations of power and domination set a larger context within which the particularities of lives are lived' (see also Cheater 1999, 7–9).

We can see no clear difference between Moore's observations and Thomas's statement that '[p]ower is not simply an external force that bears down upon us; it is the set of possibilities immanent in the social and material relationships in which we are engaged' (2004b, 34). Maintaining a Foucauldian stance, however, Thomas believes that only by considering issues

of power and domination will we come to understand how bodies are materialized. For him, all categories of personhood — from women to children to the disabled, from Bronze Age warriors to the Alpine Late Neolithic ‘ice man’ — are seen as modern western constructions that have no bearing on the ways in which difference was constructed in the past (Thomas 2004a, 140–48; 2004b, 32–4). Thomas (2004a, 145–6) criticizes Hodder (2000, 27), not unreasonably, for viewing the ‘ice man’ as a rugged individualist, but his own view is worth quoting in full: ‘... we could equally argue that [the ice man’s] materialisation on the Alps was the outcome of a network of relationships that together constituted him *as a specific kind of person, able to act and understand the world in a particular way*’ (emphasis added). In our reading, these words speak to the existence of an individual acting upon shared social traditions of knowledge but in a specific manner within a definitive context.

For Thomas, there is something even worse than neglecting to consider how difference was viewed in the past: ‘[w]ithout power, we return to the liberal view of the social as something that we can enter from the outside, by free choice’, thus giving the social priority over the subject (Thomas 2002b, 38). Liberal humanism is Thomas’s bogeyman, and a de-politicized ‘liberal archaeology’, wherein the personal is severed from the political, is his greatest worry. Such concerns seek refuge in the (often justified) postprocessual angst over the modern political implications of archaeology, but seem insensitive to attempts to study the material conditions of prehistoric individuals, persons, relational selves and social identities discussed by Meskell and others. Even Thomas (2004b, 138) admits that ‘[i]t is “common sense” to think of oneself as an individual, and I do not exclude myself from this generalisation. It requires a counter-intuitive effort to think anything else’. But perhaps we do not need to think quite as counter-intuitively as Thomas believes, because the crux of the matter is how we understand power — what it is ‘to have power’ — and in particular to what extent we assume that individual people can have power.

Power, practice and agency

Power was introduced into the social science equation as early as the 1970s by theorists such as Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault and James Scott (Ortner 2006, 4–8), all of whom explicitly posed the question: how pervasive is power? In other words, they were concerned with the extent to which people can decide for themselves how to behave or at least deviate from the social norm and, indeed, think critically about

themselves and their situation. In Hodder’s (2003, 84) view, agency came to be seen in terms of the material and informational resources that gave people ‘the power to act’. Foucault, in line with his focus on power as a primarily institutional phenomenon, adopted the extreme position that power is all-pervasive, totally suffusing people’s lives. When transposed to the debate over individuals, it is not difficult to see that the logical conclusion could only be to deny people much if any individuality.

Quite different perspectives were proposed by Williams and Scott (see Ortner 2006, 6–7 for a brief summary). While the latter took the diametrically opposed view that individual people may *always* reserve a certain measure of autonomy and thereby preserve their individuality, the former developed an intermediate position, taking the lead from Gramsci’s notions of ‘hegemony’ and ‘subaltern consciousness’ (discussion in Mitchell 1990). Since the 1970s, most anthropologists and many archaeologists in their wake have tended to assume positions somewhere along this axis but generally away from the extremes. Along with them, we would insist on the crucial if somewhat complex triangle of relationships between people’s desires and motives, structural constraints and the unintended outcomes of their actions (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992, 10–37; Ortner 2001; cf. Gardner 2004a, 3–6).

No one, we believe, would deny that people both past and present have always had and will continue to have their own specific desires and motives, even if these were dictated to varying degrees by hegemonic structures and might regularly have led to unintended consequences. If so, then this observation fundamentally undermines the separation Thomas would make between individual identity and social power relations (see above). Taking our lead from Gramsci and Bourdieu (see next section), we suggest instead that power relations cannot be privileged or separated out, because they are inextricably entangled with identity, autonomy and consciousness as well as gender and class, albeit to varying degrees. As Antonio Gramsci insisted, every social group, no matter how exploited or dominated, has their own ‘conception of the world, even if only embryonic’ that allows them to influence these power relations (*Quaderni* 11.12; Gerratana 1975, 1379; cf. Hoare & Nowell Smith 1971, 327).

For the present discussion, the key question is therefore whether this amounts to or presupposes any individual awareness. This issue was addressed by Henrietta Moore from a different perspective in response to papers in a recent volume exploring the diversity of approaches to agency and individuality in archaeology (Dobres & Robb 2000). In her epilogue to

the book, Moore ponders the epistemological necessity of assuming that ‘individuals’ in the past were ‘competent social actors’ and thus at least endowed with agency. We quote from her text in fragments as she takes up the several points outlined above (Moore 2000, 259–61, emphasis added).

The influence of Foucault in all the social sciences and humanities has produced a formal commitment to the notion that the self is not ontologically prior to the relations in which it finds itself; it is therefore culturally and historically constructed and formed. ... The social engagement archaeologists have with the people they study is through the ethical spaces created by the pre-theoretical assumptions and values that make the discipline and its practice possible. ... One such value ... is that individuals in other times and other places were endowed with human characteristics, and thus archaeologists cannot reconstruct their lives or social systems without assuming that people in the past were competent social actors. ... In spite of all the talk of the importance of not assuming that individuals, persons, selves and subjectivities are constant or consonant across space and through time, it does indeed turn out that agency is crucial in the past because it is significant in the present. But the past has never been just about the past; it has always been what makes the present able to live with itself. *And we could not live with ourselves if our archaeology produced accounts of individuals, cultures, and societies that left no space for individuality, freedom of choice, will, self-determination, creativity, innovation, and resistance. No archaeologist could live with such a view because humans would then have no role, or very little, in the making of their own history.*

Of course, on the one hand, archaeologists can and have produced top-down, systemic views of the past that leave little room for individuals in the senses we are concerned with in this study. On the other hand, if archaeologists wish to examine the ways that past peoples experienced themselves, and how such experience was situated in cultural attitudes and social structures, we must accept that people in the past were capable of acting as social agents and, crucially, were *aware of themselves as persons*, whether or not we want to call them ‘individuals’.

Habitus, practice and agents

We thus return to the point made at the start of this article, namely that much of the controversy appears to stem from the connection made by many archaeologists between agency and individuals. Part of the problem is the Anglophone focus on agency as proposed by Anthony Giddens, who primarily focused on interactions between individuals and, as a sociologist,

emphasized the intentionality of agents and of agency in general (Gardner 2004a, 6; 2004b, 33–5). While this makes perfect sense in a twentieth-century western setting dominated by individualist agents, it may be rather less relevant to pre-modern contexts, as there is no reason why this particular western conception of agency should apply universally. If we want to preserve a notion of agency that is meaningful in non-western contexts both past and present, then we have to distance ourselves from some of the assumptions that come with Giddens’s version of agency. Instead we need to recognize that agency is socially and culturally constructed and consequently variable (Ortner 2006, 136–7), just as much as any notion of personhood is a product of its social and cultural context. Whether personhood is constructed in individual, dividual or other relational terms is, moreover, a culturally specific matter that needs to be examined in its own right in the relevant social context, bearing in mind that ‘we must be careful to totalize neither the “dividual” or the “individual”’ (Jones 2005, 196).

In order to counter-balance the individualistic emphasis of Giddens’s (western) modernist notion of agency and the prominent role it plays in his structuration model, we propose to shift attention to Bourdieu’s practice theory, because it adds to the discursive choices explicit attention to the unconscious and internalized dispositions, perceptions and practices that are shared between socially and culturally constituted groups of people, and that generate the patterned behaviour of these groups. Key to Bourdieu’s theory is the concept of *habitus*, which may be defined as generative schemes that produce regular but non-binding and goal-directed but not necessarily conscious, habitual practices and representations (Bourdieu 1977, 72; 1990, 52–65; cf. Bentley 1987, 28). Basically *habitus* enables people to create an intelligible, common-sense world imbued with meaning. Like learning a language, one can gain various levels of competence with varying degrees — if any at all — of conscious awareness of the structure(s) involved. Without losing sight of the larger structures of society, *habitus* has been characterized as having “grounded” cultural processes — discourses, representations ... — in the social relations of people “on the ground” (Ortner 2006, 3; more generally 1–18).

For social archaeologists, the concept of *habitus* is attractive because it holds forth the promise of presenting a materially constructed world, one that generates but equally constrains the everyday (conscious or unconscious) social experiences of human actors. Dietler & Herbich (1998, 245–8), for example, argue that a dynamic theory of material culture — as a social phe-

nomenon — should account for and actually transcend both structure and agency by showing how the two are mediated through practice. In other words, we should be able to understand how individual human actors are conditioned or constrained by social structure, and in turn how specific practices reshape social structure as much as they reproduce it. For Dietler & Herbich, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* offers just such a framework by integrating material culture and its production techniques (*châînes opératoires*) with the individuals responsible for making and transforming material culture. Reproducing material culture thus becomes more realistically situated in people's social life, and the dispositions that stimulate social action are formed together in the course of practice. From such a perspective, *habitus* is a dynamic relational phenomenon that is both historical product and agent: it enables us to see how specific practices reproduce and transform structures as they adjust to social demands.

Of particular relevance to our discussion of individuals is that the 'material conditions of existence' — which Bourdieu (1977, 91) termed 'the mind born of the world of objects' and which help agents to shape and reproduce their *habitus* — are defined less in terms of individual practice than of fundamental structures. *Habitus* is not an individual 'feature' of some sort, because the dispositions can only exist in and amongst the actions of people who reproduce them. Unlike agency, *habitus* is indeed only loosely associated with (discursive) intentionality and instead closely connected to the wider circumstances ('structures') in which people live their lives and decide their actions (Silliman 2001, 192–6). More than anything else, it is about the relations between people and their social context, and about giving meaning to it — how people conceive of themselves is part and parcel of these relational indices (Jones 2005, 195–200).

People may have acted at times in singular roles within their households, communities, landscapes and polities, even in their attempts to communicate directly with the divine, but the crucial point is that they always remained members of and participated in social 'collectivities' (Meskell 1999, 22). There are two levels at work here, both ontologically and materially. On the first and broader, more malleable social level, identities are framed and defined by formal associations (relations) or rules of conduct. On the second, more fixed personal level, an individual may experience multiple identities, but within a single subjectivity (Meskell 2001, 189, 193).

Archaeologists confront both of these entangled levels as they struggle to come to terms with concepts of (individual) actors and agency, especially agency *vs*

structure. As Barrett (2001, 149) has noted, obviously with some concern about archaeological debates over individuals: 'Certainly individuals act as agents and certainly agency operates through the bodies of individuals, but [the concept of] agency must also include the operation of collectivities extending beyond the individual's body and their own lifespan'. We would like to take this one step further, and on the one hand recognize that people in the past — as today — were conscious of themselves in one way or another. On the other hand we would also emphasize that we should focus less on these individuals or individuals, and more on the 'parameters' of their actions that set the 'alternatives and limitations for an individual in any given social setting' (Silliman 2001, 192). To give the final word once again to Moore (1990, 111; also cited in Meskell 1999, 31): '... the social world is made up of individuals who speak and act in meaningful ways; these individuals create the social world which gives them their identity and being'.

Conclusions: an alternative take on individuals

Because hegemony and subliminal forces like *habitus* influence human behaviour and the way that we 'know' and engage with the world, one may question the meaning and indeed the relevance of the notion of the 'individual'. Although archaeologists thus need to move beyond the concept of 'agency' in understanding social practice, we should not lose sight of the 'sensual and experiential person' (David 2005, 194). In our view, archaeologists can only benefit by acknowledging the social, spatial and ideological significance of individual persons, and of individual embodied lives, in both prehistoric and historical contexts. It is Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, we argue, that offers precisely this link between the subjective, internal experience of individual people's identity, and the objective, external social context of their lives. Individual human beings, persons and indeed 'dividuals' belong to multiple social groups that are themselves aggregates of individuals and in which they are situationally active or inactive (Snow 2002, 170). *Habitus*, we argue, 'embeds' people's activities in the fabric of their society by tying it into the communities, kinship networks and other 'collectivities' in which they are involved. The concept of *habitus* thus enables us both to recognize non-western notions of personhood as individual, dividual or otherwise and to explore the culturally specific frameworks within which people acted and perceived each other.

Concepts of and concerning individuals, just like those concerning factions, polities and social

systems, have always been in flux and continually take on new forms. Thus it is important (as both Thomas and Meskell *might* agree) that we consider culturally specific constructions of the individual rather than imposing our own, western precepts in the attempt to understand the past. In this respect, it seems clear that the current western fascination with individualism is not just culturally specific but also something that could not have happened at any other time in the past, as Thomas rightly argues.

Its currency now, however, in the highly articulated form of western individualism, cannot and should not negate archaeological concerns with earlier forms of individuals, persons and identities. Experiencing oneself as a living individual, we insist, is part of human nature. Beyond this, people will have more culturally specific notions of their individuality in any given time and place, and will hold certain beliefs about their own individual natures and capacities. And beyond this lies the realm of experiences individually determined and dependent on factors such as age, status, sex, class, life cycle, ethnicity, identity, religious orientation or sexual preference, all of which can and do produce individual difference and variation. Even if the relevant parameters of such a framework are deeply imbricated in culturally specific modes of thought, that does not mean we cannot gain enough distance from our own urban, western cultural preconceptions to make intelligent enquiries into the human and very individual life histories that in their social total make up the past.

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Comments

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I am largely in agreement with the authors, and will concern myself with what I see as the larger context of their arguments. Although their discussion centres on the meaning and relevance of the ‘individual’ in archaeology, in my mind the real question is as to how we are to address the meaning and relevance of modernity in our work. Knapp & van Dommelen effectively make the case that one can experience individuality and self-critical awareness in many historical contexts, yet they still have left Julian Thomas and others in control of the terms of the debate, that is, modernity is a Western-dominated construct that has fostered a qualitative shift in the way that people view their place in the world.

In broad contour, this is a compelling argument that offers a useful point of departure for the pursuit of a critical archaeology. Yet, on the ground — in the places where people live and how they live — this thesis is difficult to maintain if it is reduced to a series of related axioms concerning Western domination: that modernity is about spatial discipline, about faith in technological progress, about the rise of the individual, and so on. The difficulty with this characterization is that it leaves unquestioned the nature of the interactions between West, East, South and North that we associate with the rise of the West beginning in the 1400s AD. Modernity may have a strong Western bent but it developed in a world-wide arena of mutualism. Marshall Sahlins (1993) describes an ‘indigenization of modernity’ to impart a sense of this historical hybridity. Recognition of this has led many workers to undertake research that explores the negotiation — rather than the simple imposition — of modernity (e.g. Berman 1982; Ong 1996). Ensuing from this idea

is an entire cottage industry that has addressed 'multiple', 'alterior' and 'parallel' modernities. If modernity is so nebulous, it becomes difficult to maintain that its constitutive elements — self-determining individuals — are any less so.

In the essentialized view of modernity and its precepts — so commonly adopted in contrast to the pluralized view — one is reminded of the path that modes of production took under structural marxism. Capitalism was seen to penetrate or articulate with indigenous modes, but it was always monolithic and it always existed outside of lived experience. To be fair to Julian Thomas, singled out for critique in this article because of his vocal stand on these issues, his work does show that he has grappled with these nuances. In *Archaeology and Modernity*, he emphasizes that modernity is a heterogeneous process rather than a thing, but in some passages this process is defined by its Western source rather than its dialogical nature: 'modernity has become something plural, as fragments of the Western framework have been assimilated and recontextualised by different communities' (Thomas 2004a, 51). I would suggest that modernity has always been plural, even as the Western framework itself has been continually recontextualized by its interactions with communities worldwide.

This is not to deny that modernity can be recognized by historical tendencies (back to discipline, technology, progress, and the importance of the autonomous individual); but it is also a cultural representation that is not to be confused with lived experience. While I believe that the construction of the self in the last five centuries may be increasingly defined by modernist tendencies in many areas of the world, we need to be wary of generalizations about the nature of the individual in either the pre-modern or modern eras. Such generalizations are useful for laying a framework for research, but they need to be constantly critiqued, re-evaluated and refined. Micro-economics textbooks may assume the rational individual and decision-maker, government bodies may develop policies based on this principle, and neo-liberal thinkers may argue for its universality, but the contingency of history always undermines such constructs as it does the meta-construct of modernity. Indeed, this is, I believe, the argument for empirical investigation of the (person:self:individual) made by Knapp & van Dommelen. Western beliefs regarding the autonomous individual have been translated into reifying institutions and practices which, in the United States, range from interest rate decisions made by the Federal Reserve Board to beer advertisements on television. The interesting question is not how this

'structure' contributes to a transcendental Western individualizing ethos, but how such an ethos has been rendered into local mores. Likewise, the challenge for archaeologists is to develop ways of understanding the other forms of relational networks that contributed to the constitution of selfhood in the pre-modern era.

From Dean J. Saitta, Department of Anthropology, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado 80208, USA; dsaitta@du.edu.

Agency theories in archaeology developed, in part, as a corrective to the often bloodless models of social life and change produced by various systems-theoretical and other processual approaches. Their development has been a good thing for the discipline. Agency theories have put people back into culture along with the cognitive factors — for instance, the frameworks of meaning by which people assign significance to events and things — that inform and motivate their actions. They have moved us to think about the freedom or 'relative autonomy' that individuals have to manoeuvre within cultural systems and structures of social power. They have reunited society with history. In so doing, agency theories have rediscovered a key insight of the older culture history approach that dominated archaeological thinking before the advent of processual archaeology: that the particulars of local historical context are worth investigating for their own sake, rather than simply serving as fodder for sweeping evolutionary narratives driven by cultural laws.

It was just a matter of time, however, before the concept of human agency would itself come under fire. Charles Orser (2003, 131), worried that agency had become an 'all inclusive buzzword' for archaeologists, covering so many diverse human actions that the term was 'rapidly acquiring non-meaning'. Critiques of agency start with the observation that individual agency is just one form of agency (Johnson 1989; Hodder & Hutson 2003). Thomas (2000a), drawing on Foucault, notes that the idea of the autonomous individual exercising rational choice and free will is a relatively recent invention, specific to modernity. He argues that humans always carry out their projects in the context of a concrete material world that includes other people. Thus, it is inadequate to consider human beings apart from the relationships in which they find themselves. Barrett (2001) agrees, noting that agency must include the operation of social collectives that extend beyond the individual's own body and lifespan. Indeed, Johannes Fabian (1994) has noted that human acting is always acting in company. Hodder (2004) helpfully suggests that agency, like power, is less a thing we possess than a capacity that we exer-

cise. With Thomas, he sees the group as forming part of the resources used for individual agency, and thus views group behaviour as another form of individual agency.

McGuire & Wurst (2002) push the critique of agency theory the farthest, from the standpoint of an explicitly activist archaeology that seeks to engage with the political present. They argue that theories of individual agency in post-processual archaeology are as ideological as the cultural systems theories that preceded them. They identify the focus on the individual agent as a sustaining belief of modern capitalism: capitalism depends for its survival on cultural processes that constitute people as free and unfettered individuals; so it works, through its cultural forms, to universalize this historically contingent idea. Where this ideology is internalized and taken for granted, it obscures the oppositional nature of class groupings and exploitation in society. It also produces the kind of self-serving 'identity politics' that can fragment and debilitate collective movements for change. Thus, McGuire & Wurst find advocacy of individual agency models by scholars intending to use their research to challenge class, gender and racial inequalities in the modern world to be misguided and contradictory. By embracing the logic, language, and symbolism of individual agency, activist scholars are in fact reinforcing that which they wish to critique. By projecting and universalizing that which is contingent, they help to propagate existing social relations. This notion of agency lacks transformative, emancipatory and revolutionary potential (Harvey 1973).

Alternatively — and building on McGuire & Wurst — we can see individuals as always thoroughly enmeshed in a web of social relations. Collective action results from the shared consciousness or solidarity that defines a community of individuals. Such consciousness may be based in class, gender, ethnicity, race, age, physical ability or some combination of these identities. People make history as members of social groups whose common consciousness derives from shared existential anxieties, political interests and social relations. To the extent that these anxieties, interests and relations are traceable to larger forces like global capitalism, and to the extent that community is always a delicate relation between fluid processes of self-identification and relatively permanent associations like that between person and nation-state (Harvey 2000, 240), archaeology needs grand narratives of the structural and long term as well as small narratives of lived moments (Hodder 1999, 147).

The critiques of agency noted above usefully respond to Orser's concern. The paper by Knapp &

van Dommelen does likewise. I appreciate Knapp & van Dommelen's survey of the theoretical landscape and their call, informed by Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, for a more flexible approach to the question of agency. The task today — one that is clearly identified by Knapp & van Dommelen — is to sort out and better theorize agency's many variable dimensions. We need to analyse the broad social relationships and material conditions that produce agents with particular subjectivities, and study the social processes used within specific cultural formations at particular moments in time in order to negotiate and coordinate group behaviour and consensus. In so doing we will be better positioned to identify those subjectivities and collectivities in the past that might have relevance for informing political action in the present.

From Julian Thomas, School of Arts, Histories & Cultures, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, England; julian.thomas@manchester.ac.uk.

Bernard Knapp & Peter van Dommelen are to be applauded for attempting to clarify the continuing debate on individuals and agency in archaeology. Their intention is to seek consensus in a polarized argument, and to establish a middle position which places individuals into a social context. However, I believe that in so doing they are misguided, for the divisions of opinion that they identify are not trivial, but grounded in fundamentally different philosophical positions. Their argument threatens to obscure important conceptual distinctions, and to muddle the terminology that gives us purchase on the material that we study. The question of whether or not the term 'individual' is a universal one, which can be applied to people throughout history, is lodged in the broader confrontation between essentialist views of humanity and their critics. On the one hand, there is the belief that human beings have an essential and unchanging nature, so that they represent entities with a range of attributes, and, on the other, the position that 'being human' is a practice — something that one does rather than something that one is by virtue of possessing a range of formal characteristics.

When people in the contemporary western world use the word 'individual', they are generally (at least implicitly) invoking a conception of what it is to be human which gradually emerged between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. This image of the person combines autonomy, agency, finitude, primordiality and irreducibility. The modern individual is understood as a mortal instance of a trans-historic entity ('Man'), endowed with a range of qualities

(principally reason) which constitute ‘human nature’ and which are pre-given, prior to any context of interaction. As such, individuals are irreducible and self-contained social atoms who come together to create collectivities through their willed action. Individuals are the authors of their own acts, which originate in the immaterial interior spaces of their minds, so that thought precedes action. Yet this model of the human is, to borrow Judith Butler’s term, a regulatory fiction, an imagined mirror in relation to which people constitute themselves. No-one ever achieves the ideal of ‘being the individual’, for they can never stand free of society; they always find themselves already imbricated in social relations and condemned to use shared linguistic concepts in order to express themselves. As Knapp & van Dommelen rightly point out, even in the contemporary West, human identities are multiple and fragmented, so that in-dividuality is never complete. It has been the achievement of philosophy, anthropology and social history over the past century to demonstrate that this vision of humanity is specific to a particular place and time.

Knapp & van Dommelen complain that I persistently tend to read other people’s use of the term ‘individual’ as ‘individualism’. The problem is that we are using the language in rather different ways. It is virtually impossible to employ the term ‘individual’ without tacitly implying the kind of personhood referred to above. I have been very careful to distinguish between ‘the individual’ and ‘individualism’ (Thomas 2004a, 139–40): the individual is a particular conception of what it is to be a human being, which characterizes western modernity; individualism is a discourse which seeks to celebrate and valorize the individual, and which developed at a later stage, as Lukes’s (1973) classic text details. These are distinct phenomena, and we need the two terms to distinguish between them. Knapp & van Dommelen seek to subsume both under the heading, ‘individualism’, which can only harm the precision of our language (see Fig. 1 for a representation of our respective uses of terminology).

Knapp & van Dommelen appear to be using the term ‘individual’ in a less specific way than I do, to refer to a singular, embodied, self-aware human agent. As such, it becomes more or less interchangeable with ‘human being’ or ‘person’. I am not sure why we need so many locutions that mean much the same thing. Potential confusion is created in the process, for, according to their definition, those forms of humanity that are generally distinguished from individuality, such as partible and permeable personhood (Strathern 1988; Busby 1997), are incorporated

‘INDIVIDUALS’	THOMAS	KNAPP & VAN DOMMELEN
A Modern Western conception of the person: agency, autonomy; primordial, finite, irreducible	INDIVIDUAL	INDIVIDUALISM
A discourse celebrating and valorizing the Modern Western individual	INDIVIDUALISM	
A singular, self-aware, embodied human agent	PERSON	INDIVIDUAL

Figure 1. *Contrasting use of the terminology of ‘individuals’ by Thomas and Knapp & van Dommelen.*

into individuality. That proposition that individuals can be individuals too seems problematic, for such people are embodied, self-aware agents who do not consider themselves to be irreducible or possessed of pre-social qualities. Similarly, when Knapp & van Dommelen list a series of ways in which archaeologists can identify individuals in the past (as bodies, iconographic representations, or named personages), it is only singularity that is being identified, not individuality. The question of how a Sumerian king might have understood himself is fascinating, but we cannot assume that he was an ‘individual’ simply because he had a specific name and a particular body. This is precisely where ‘contemporary fixations’ do bear on these examples, for, by employing the term ‘individual’, we invite the inevitable slippage between the general and the specific sense of the word, and invoke the mass of cultural baggage that comes with it.

Equally, the wealth of case studies that Knapp & van Dommelen cite which treat ‘the individual in the past’ hover between the specific and the general. In what sense is the occupant of a single grave or the maker of a pot an individual? Is it just as unique social actors, or as people who understood their bodies, acts, and relationship to society in the way that we do in the modern West? Presumably it is the former, but when archaeologists refer to ‘the rise of the individual’ is there not necessarily a hint of the latter? The danger then is of a past in which ‘the rise of the individual’ takes place again and again, in innumerable contexts, and so the process is robbed of its specificity.

Knapp & van Dommelen stress the way that western social science concentrates on the collective rather than the individual but this is a recent development, principally attributable to Durkheim. A more deeply embedded tradition of thought, which goes back as far as Hobbes and beyond, identifies society

as a form of contract established between individuals who, in the first instance, float free from any relational context. I would argue that it is more often the latter that is responsible for our implicit expectations of what people and society should be like. This would appear to be the case with Knapp & van Dommelen themselves, for, in addressing Bourdieu's invaluable concept of the *habitus*, they seem to indicate that people's freely willed actions need to be 'embedded' in social contexts, as if they were in the first instance asocial. The reverse is the case: the social contexts that people always already find themselves within at once initiate and sustain their ability to act.

Knapp & van Dommelen appear to be committed to an essentialist perspective, to judge from both their acceptance of the idea of 'human nature' and their account of power as primarily a limitation on the exercise of free will. Their statement that 'Experiencing oneself as a living individual is part of human nature' (p. 24) appears to contradict their expressed scepticism over an 'unchanging humanity in the past', but they resolve this difficulty by resorting to a variant of the traditional humanist model of a person 'built in layers' (Heidegger 1993, 227). In their particular case, this involves the notion that there is a fixed and transcendental core of human nature, onto which more historically and culturally variable elements are freighted. By implication, this 'core' is pre-social and fundamental, while multiple identities and statuses are inscribed on its surface by society. It follows from this that 'human nature' is ungendered or pre-sexual, and that sex or gender is a relatively superficial element 'added on top'. Some feminists would find this view severely problematic. The alternative is to argue that humans have no pre-social existence and no fundamental nature, and that they discover themselves in their totality through a process of self-understanding which is socially initiated (see Butler 1997, 33).

The matrix within which the initiation of human subjects takes place is that of power relations. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of Knapp & van Dommelen's article is the curious account that they provide of Foucault's view of power. I simply cannot understand how anyone who has read his work can refer to Foucault's 'binary equation of oppressor *vs* oppressed' (p. 20). As I understand it, such a perspective was precisely what he set out to challenge. Foucault's insistence on the pervasiveness of power has to be understood in the context of his complete re-evaluation of the concept. For Foucault, power is never the binary relationship between the powerful and the powerless. It is never merely restrictive, but also productive of

knowledge and pleasure (Foucault 1979, 7). Contrary to Knapp & van Dommelen's expressed view, power is not an object or entity that people 'have' or 'hold', but a web or circuit of relations that people inhabit and exercise. All social relations are power relations, for they bear within them the potential for realizing some actions and constraining others. Power relations include those between lovers, friends, and partners. Power relations can be democratic and balanced, and based on apprenticeship, solicitude or desire. Without power there is no possibility for action: a society without power relations is impossible (Foucault 1982, 220). As the regicides, Jacobins and Bolsheviks discovered to their cost, one cannot simply chop off the king's head, remove the central authority, and create a society without power. Instead, one should strive to make power relations more democratic. Foucault's view of power is not that it is a 'primarily institutional phenomenon' (p. 21), or at least not universally so. Instead, he attempts to distinguish the radically different forms that power relations have taken at different points in history. His concern with 'bio-power' in high modernity, the way that the wellbeing of the subject becomes enmeshed in the capillary institutions of the state, is the ground of his criticism of a binary model of power, which was itself a product of the feudal world (Foucault 1988; McNay 1994, 118). This latter is what he refers to as the 'juridico-discursive' model of power (Foucault 1978, 88). Yet he argues that entirely different forms of power existed in the ancient world. These views form part of a sustained and profound critique of modernity, so that to describe Foucault's work as merely 'part of the modernist discourse' (p. 20) is highly questionable.

For Knapp & van Dommelen, it appears that the question of the omnipresence of power relations is primarily a matter of the restriction of agency. This again reveals their commitment to the idea of a pre-social human agent (or 'individual'). It should be clear that in the Foucauldian scheme of things there can be no agency without power. Yet such a view is relatively congruent with the ideas of Bourdieu, which Knapp & van Dommelen appear to approve. Bourdieu was, after all, a practice theorist, who sought to question the existence of fixed structures underlying the play of social life. The *habitus*, in his account, is a set of inherited cultural dispositions which facilitate the unconsidered improvisations that make up everyday life. Clearly, the reproduction of the *habitus* will be intimately implicated in the power relations of a given society. We might go so far as to say that the *habitus* is one of the many things that power produces.

A Response: Singular Views and Practical Arguments

A. Bernard Knapp & Peter van Dommelen

Singular views

We thank the commentators for their thoughts on our discussion of past practices, agents and individuals. In particular we welcome them as an important first step in recognizing that this debate should benefit by being viewed from a wider perspective — or indeed perspectives, as the three respondents run the gamut from American Marxists and postprocessualists to British deconstructivists. However, because our goal was, and remains, to give a new direction to this debate over the existence of individuals in the past, it would be counter-productive to engage further in labelling individuals in the present or to continue pursuing the rather unhelpful polarization that typically has characterized exchanges on this subject.

Because we are convinced we should acknowledge and indeed take seriously the rich array of identifications of self and others that people constructed in the past, we prefer to concentrate on the multiple and multi-faceted connections between people's subjective perceptions of themselves and others, on the one hand, and the social contexts in which they constructed these meanings, on the other. As we argued in the second half of our paper, Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* provides the theoretical pivot onto which our understanding of individual or 'dividual' practices and shared perceptions may be pegged. Focusing our efforts on the specific details of particular case studies and keeping an open mind about what may or may not have been possible therefore seems to us the way forward in this debate.

As stated in our article, we accept Thomas's point that post-Enlightenment and Modernist thought (which are not identical) has shaped much of our understanding of the past, including how people thought about themselves. But this cannot be taken in any absolute sense, if only because it has also been argued that 'we have never been modern' (Latour 1993). While anthropologists, sociologists and geographers generally confirm the western roots of modernity, they also emphasize its historical character and intimate connections to specific economic developments and thus tend to blur the distinction between modernity and pre- or non-modern societies (see e.g. Berman 1982; Anderson 1984; Miller 1994, 58–81; Rowlands 1995). As postcolonial theorists have pointed out, the

whole idea that modernity marked a fundamental and clean break with the pre-modern past and contemporary non-modern societies bears all the spurious hallmarks of evolutionist and one-sided colonialist or 'occidental' thinking (Mignolo 2000, 91–126). And, from an archaeological perspective, Pluciennik (2007, 238) has already challenged Thomas's (2004a) arguments on individuals for 'mak[ing] too much of the contrast between pre-modern and modern'. So, whatever we think about the merits of Latour's claim, at the very least it should inspire caution in adopting extreme positions or singular views.

Two of our commentators follow up this line of thought: Cobb suggests that the core issue is how archaeologists can address the meaning and relevance of modernity in their work. Rather than being simply a construct of the west, he points out that modernity developed in a worldwide context of 'historical hybridity', and that we must therefore be careful not to make blanket generalizations about the nature of the individual, whether in the modern era or in the deep past, unless they are constantly critiqued and refined. Saitta, too, maintains that agency theories have 'reunited society with history', and that we must investigate the particulars of local historical context on their own terms, rather than using them as 'fodder for sweeping evolutionary narratives driven by cultural laws'.

Both these points, we feel, go to the heart of our arguments and mesh with our endeavour to overcome or at least side-step the entrenched dichotomy that has tended to dominate the debate. To suggest, therefore, as Thomas does, that we are seeking to establish some middle ground or 'soulless compromise' is entirely beside the point: by widening the binary opposition between modernist and non-modernist, effectively reifying it into an absolute divide, debate has been stopped in its tracks and we gain no further insight into the ways people may have understood themselves and others in the past. The challenge for archaeology, as Cobb concludes and we concur, is to develop new ways of understanding the diverse relational networks that impacted on the constitution of selfhood in the pre-modern era. Saitta, similarly, maintains that the task of the archaeologist today is to evaluate the material conditions and broader social relationships at particular moments in time that produce individual agents with distinct subjectivities. Insisting on the absolute difference of modernity might indeed be seen as privileging Western thought and marginalizing alternative representations and concepts (see e.g. Schmidt & Patterson 1995, 4–7, 13–14; Mignolo 2000).

Discourse analysis provides a starting-point for this type of analysis; in our view, however, Thomas

sees his own analysis as an end-point, while we recognize it as a point of departure for further consideration of the myriad problems and pitfalls exposed. Take for example the Sumerian king whose singularity Thomas acknowledges, but whom he denies individuality. Of course we cannot assume that a person such as Enmebaragesi, king of the Sumerian town of Kish (c. 2600 BC) and the first man known to be commemorated by his own inscription (Cooper 1981, 228; Walker 1987, 13) thought of himself as an individual. But neither can we assume *a priori* he was not an individual or never could have been. We have to engage with the evidence at hand, and having textual, emic documents actually makes a crucial difference in cases like this one.

In terms of terminology, it is difficult to follow Thomas's discussion. He notes, for example, and we would agree, that 'individual' and 'individualism' are distinct phenomena, but we documented at some length in our article how Thomas himself has repeatedly invoked the concept of 'individualism' to criticize the work of several other scholars who are discussing the concept of 'the individual'. Thomas goes on to say (p. 27) that: 'Knapp & van Dommelen seek to subsume both under the heading "individualism"' (also in his Fig. 1). In fact, like Wilkie & Bartoy (2000, 755, 771), we see a clear distinction between the individual and 'individualism' and we reiterate that Thomas's claim — that any appreciation of 'individuals' is necessarily closely aligned with 'individualism' — is an exclusively western stance that goes to the heart of this controversy. Indeed, Thomas manages to contradict himself in this respect within the space of three lines (p. 27): having stated that 'It is virtually impossible to employ the term "individual" without tacitly implying the kind of personhood referred to above', he goes on to do just that by saying: 'I have been very careful to distinguish between "the individual" and "individualism".' Moreover, Thomas's Figure confirms our point exactly: he makes a vague distinction between conception and discourse, while insisting that both are modernist constructs. It is clear that the real distinction, which for him is far more absolute than for us, lies between the self-aware agents in the past and the modernist perception or discourse or conception or representation of ours. Why does Thomas castigate us for having 'so many locutions' when he continues to insist on making even more distinctions that are far from clear, or helpful?

Practice and identity

Terminology is not the only point where Thomas misreads our text and misconstrues our arguments.

In particular, he alleges (p. 28) that we are committed to an 'essentialist perspective', which goes against everything we write, practise and believe, something Thomas should have realized based upon our published work. He ought to have recognized this, and perhaps he did, when he noted our 'expressed scepticism' over an 'unchanging humanity in the past'. To say, as we did, that 'experiencing oneself as a living individual is part of human nature' is not really so different from what Thomas (Fig. 1) defines as the 'singular, self-aware embodied human agent'.

In light of our overall arguments about *habitus* as enabling people to relate and give meaning to the local conditions in which they live(d) their lives, we are struggling to make sense of Thomas's comments. We did indeed use the term 'embedded' and would do so again, because it conveys particularly well the notion that perceptions and meanings, including those of oneself as an individual, 'dividual' or otherwise, are not isolated from the wider social and economic contexts in which people grow up, acquire values and evaluate other people's actions and ideas. With both this description and our original statement that '*habitus* "embeds" people's activities in the fabric of their society by tying it into the communities, kinship networks and other "collectivities"' (p. 23), we sought to emphasize that motivations, actions and perceptions are not free-floating but constituted by their contexts. In consequence, people's identities cannot be 'layered' onto a *tabula rasa* or 'fixed and transcendental core of human nature' (Thomas, p. 28) because there always is an earlier experience or action.

We remain puzzled as to why or how Thomas thinks these words may imply 'freely-willed actions' or a 'core' that is 'pre-social and fundamental, while multiple identities and statuses are inscribed on its surface by society' (p. 28). Indeed, Thomas seems to descend into sheer fantasy when he suggests that we must feel human nature is 'ungendered or pre-sexual, and that sex or gender is a relatively superficial element "added on top"'. Indeed, not only will feminists find this view severely problematic, so do we. We never stated anything like this, never imagined it, never even dreamed it. Had Thomas consulted our published range of works, he would have known that one of us, at least, holds very feminist views on interpreting both the past and the present (e.g. Knapp 1998).

Thomas's misreading of our text plummets even further with his comments on Foucault (p. 28, bottom), suggesting that it may be 'the most worrying aspect' of our paper. In the first place, we do not refer to Foucault, but to a 'Foucauldian archaeology', quoting Meskell (1996; 1999, 30–31). Here Thomas makes

yet another (to us, pointless) digression to critique something we never said, whilst at the same time continuing to polarize, unnecessarily and unhelpfully, the terms used in the debate. Citing Meskell does not necessarily mean we are in agreement with Meskell, and in any case our point was that Thomas himself has situated himself in the realm of a 'Foucauldian archaeology'.

Because our principal interest lies with interpreting the past and because we feel there is little to gain in further polarizing this debate, we leave these matters as they are and return to the 'material conditions of existence'. As stated at the outset, we prefer to direct our efforts towards a more nuanced understanding of past perceptions and practices than engaging in unhelpful exchanges of who misread what. Indeed, what remains unsaid and largely without comment so far is what we put forth as an 'alternative take on individuals'. This view, primarily based on Bourdieu's notions of *habitus* and practice, and coupled with insights derived from Foucault and Gramsci (because power is never far off when people engage with each other), offers one way to appreciate culturally specific constructions of personhood and the self without *a priori* assuming or excluding certain dispositions.

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