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REVIEWS

Cochrane, Ethan, and Andrew Gardner, eds., 2011. *Evolutionary and Interpretive Archaeologies: A Dialogue*. Left Coast Press. 361 pp. ISBN 978-1-59874-427-9. RRP US\$36.95.

Academic book reviews typically ignore the cover, but you have to make exceptions. The cover of *Evolutionary and Interpretive Archaeologies* is completely abstract and will probably be quickly passed over by many, but it contains a (possibly not very) subtle joke. As a whole the cover is pinstriped, though divided down the middle by two different colour schemes. To the left the background is light blue with slightly darker stripes of even thickness and spacing, exhibiting a rational mathematical order like the shirt of an accountant. In contrast the right side is a nearly patternless mix of line widths and colours ranging from deep purples through hot pinks to clashing orange and yellow, with gradients rendering all divisions uncertain, like the iconoclastic shirt of an eccentric artist. The names of the editors are printed within these two zones – Ethan E. Cochrane, an evolutionary archaeologist, occupies the left, and Andrew Gardner, an interpretive archaeologist, the right. Wait, could this be a metaphor? The dull but systematic versus the fun but flaky? The two sides are separated by a thick white line, but bridged by the book's subtitle: "a dialogue".

Resolute empiricists will no doubt say "bah! It's just a pretty cover", but others will be happy to recognise the visual allegory. Finding a way to negotiate such differences of opinion is what this book is all about: can we resolve approaches to evidence that accept only testable fact versus those that accept plausible interpretation?

Radical epistemological differences tend to dampen dialogue, because fundamentals cannot be agreed upon. Both evolutionary and interpretive archaeology start from a kind of scepticism about our ability to secure truths from archaeological data, but this leads in opposite directions. Evolutionary archaeologists suggest we abandon the notion of a lived past and focus solely on the temporal patterns evident in diachronic artefact assemblages, and test these against Darwinian models of change using concepts of drift, selection, convergence and so on, in a way that is quantitatively secure. Certainty lies only in that narrow window. Interpretive archaeologists are even more sceptical, and hold that no certainty at all can ever be had, because all knowledge is produced through interpretation – but rather than being disabling, this effectively

frees up the past to many avenues of enquiry, since the standard of ‘truth’ is lowered. They hold that contemporary social theory can and should be used to understand the past, allowing us access to the ‘lived experience’ of symbolism, power, agency and ideology. Consequently, interpretive archaeologists tend to disparage evolutionary archaeology as just another metaphor dressed up with scientism. Evolutionary archaeologists, on the other hand, claim their interpretive counterparts are doomed would-be ethnographers engaged in the production of “tabloid human-interest stories” (p.325).

When you have differences as great as this the sides usually simply ignore each other, and true to form there has rarely been any interaction between evolutionary and interpretive archaeologies. This book aims to be a first step towards changing all that.

In a useful introductory chapter the editors suggest that the way forward is through better mutual understanding and respect for diversity in the discipline, and the book is basically a monument to that ideal. Chapters tend to occur in pairs addressing central topics (violence, agency, ethnic/cultural identity, landscape) from each perspective, or are summaries of current methods or debates within either interpretive or evolutionary schools. So, Cochrane contributes a chapter on units of transmission and examines the utility of memetic theory for evolutionary archaeology (Ch.2). Gardner writes about the agency vs. structure debate in interpretive archaeology (Ch.3). R. Alexander Bentley discusses the style vs. function dichotomy in evolutionary archaeology and then goes on to describe the history of the division of the discipline into different camps as an example of natural evolutionary processes of bifurcation (Ch.4). Simon James documents how the topic of violence has been largely avoided in interpretive archaeology (Ch.6), whilst Robert Layton summarizes debates in evolutionary perspectives on violence (Ch.7). Ulrike Sommer presents a case study on how interpretive archaeologists study ethnic group formation and how they separate this out from other causes of change (Ch.8). Claudia Glatz, Anne Kandler and James Steele similarly present a case study looking at how change in the artefact record can be explained, but here test the data patterns against a model of neutral drift (Ch.9). Jamshid J. Tehrani gives an overview of the use of cladistics in evolutionary archaeology (Ch.11). Sue Hamilton does the same for the landscape approach in interpretive archaeology (Ch.12).

These chapters seldom have more than a few sentences referring to their counterpart perspectives, usually pointing out a definitional conflict or a point of complementarity. Thus, Sommer suggests the long term patterns she recognises could be amenable to cladistic analysis, Tehrani states cladistic approaches could benefit from knowledge of the social context of production, and Glatz et al. acknowledge an overlap with interpretive approaches when attempting

to explain the motivations behind selective behaviour. Needless to say little of this constitutes a ‘dialogue’ – that is mostly left up to the reader, who will naturally tend to think through the points of difference and similarity as they make their way through the book. Perhaps we can think of this as being similar to the way dialogue occurs in archaeology naturally – extremists, though vocal, are usually in the minority, and it is the majority who, not identifying strongly with either camp, tend to read a bit of both, picking and choosing what they find useful. In this sense differences get worked out in practice. But that does not make a very satisfying book.

More interesting are the sections that either mount strong defences of an approach, or conduct true comparison and critique (mostly written by more established scholars). Bill Sillar (Ch.5) defends the role for intentionality in archaeological accounts, making a robust case for considerations of agency in response to evolutionary critiques that the reasons for behaviour are unknowable and largely irrelevant. His chapter is complementary to the final section of Gardner’s chapter which uses the agency-structure problem as a fulcrum for fruitful comparison with Darwinian approaches. Heidi Colleran and Ruth Mace (Ch. 13) propose a new synthesis, with interpretive and evolutionary approaches existing on a complementary spectrum. They make some very perceptive observations of differences in the way arguments are mounted and deployed. However, their insistence on a renewed and common commitment to a scientific programme of generalisation and hypothesis testing may well limit acceptance of their proposal. Ruth Whitehouse, whose chapter is mostly about different ways of theorising the human body (Ch. 10), ends with a perceptive critique of Colleran and Mace, reminding us that hypothesis testing in archaeology is a matter of ‘goodness of fit’ to the evidence, and that alternative hypotheses are often viable. We are left with plausibility as our final mode of judgement, much as with interpretive approaches. The key limitation is the nature of archaeological data which seldom enables us to properly test all possible hypotheses.

Whitehouse does, however, agree with Colleran and Mace that evolutionary and interpretive approaches are complementary to the extent that they address the archaeological record at different scales (a point also made in passing by several others in the volume). Evolutionary archaeology excels at explanation over the long term, where individual human intentions cannot be realistically deployed as causes of variation. Interpretive accounts are more suited to synchronic analyses of small scale contexts with high resolution data. But that still begs the question of how the scales link up.

The book ends with summary reflective chapters by two well-known figures in archaeological theory. Matthew Johnson (Ch. 14) writes from an

interpretive perspective, whilst Stephen Shennan (Ch.15) addresses the evolutionary side. Johnson's chapter rambles a little, but he scores some hits and is surprisingly balanced given that his argument is very strongly in favour of the interpretive side. He questions the rhetorical strategies of evolutionary archaeologists, and argues that stripped of the specialist language there is no core distinction between the approaches in terms of the narratives produced. Shennan's chapter is more disappointing since it begins with a short paragraph baldly stating that interpretive approaches are unlikely to produce rigorous or convincing accounts, then proceeds to summarise the evolutionary approach (again). I hoped for more insight because, until sometime in the mid-1990s, Shennan basically was an interpretive archaeologist, writing about ideology, prestige and gender in Neolithic Europe. In any case, the effect is that the book closes not with dialogue but an argument for purity.

As a whole the book does not sustain the promise of dialogue because so many of the contributions are emplaced firmly within their own epistemological realm. I wished for more explicit consideration of parallels and overlap. While reading Cochrane's discussion of memes I was struck that they are theorised in way that is essentially an abbreviated form of semiotics, particularly the Saussurean variety – and that Cochrane's reasons for rejecting memetics as useful are comparable to the reasons interpretive archaeologists abandoned early semiotic approaches in post-processualism. I thought Bentley's examination of academic bifurcation as a natural, inevitable process, could have been profitably compared to social research on mimetic conflict where differences are a product of denied resemblance ('the narcissism of minor differences'). Gardner misses an opportunity to consider a case study (albeit non-archaeological) that really does suggest a bridge between the interpretive approaches concerned with agency and evolutionary studies when he dismisses a paper by Chris Gosden. Gosden refers to Alfred Gell's account of the classic study of Māori carving/painting traditions conducted by the late Roger Neich in which he was able to map a 60 year spatio-temporal network of cultural transmission. Using this device Gell successfully demonstrates how Māori social agency was vectored through the long term structure of an art tradition in a way that both exemplifies what Gardner suggests we should aim for in the balance of agency and structure, and hints at interesting intersections with evolutionary approaches.

Despite my frustrations, this is an important book if only for the fact that it marks a real departure point from which archaeological theorists might move beyond mutual ignorance and suspicion. If it gains a wide audience it could very well mark the beginnings of further collaboration and debate, and some interesting new approaches to prehistory.

Tim Thomas