Beyond agency

John Robb

Abstract

Agency theory has been used in archaeology for over twenty years now. During that time what agency has meant and the problems it has been used to study have changed dramatically. In this article I explore the evolution of the concept through three distinct interpretations of the concept, and discuss what 'agency' means at present and where it is going. The concept of agency has been subsumed into a more flexible view of past societies as built around relationalities (of personhood, of materiality and of fields of action). One way to use such a concept is demonstrated through a brief case study of routine and habitus in Neolithic southern Italy. As this case study implies, 'agency' as a capacity for action has to be historicized in specific contexts rather than used generically.

Introduction: a 'past with faces'?

Agency in archaeology is often said to be about 'putting people back in the past'. The seasoned reader will immediately recognize this statement as political mud-slinging rather than a real theoretical agenda: it automatically creates an opposed view which nobody in their right mind would endorse, and it is vague enough to not commit one to any actual position. In fact, there are good reasons why archaeologists should use agency theory to resolve specific theoretical problems. But to do so we need to reconsider the theoretical foundations of agency, which is a notoriously ambiguous concept. Any vision of the past at all implies human agents. We cannot envisage the past without some idea of what people are and were like. But the concept of agency has received relatively little analysis among archaeologists, and careful consideration is necessary if we want to develop a really useful concept rather than simply picking out a new wardrobe from the anthropology fashion store.

In this article, after a brief review of the historical background for agency theory, I identify several themes which capture important qualities of social actors and provide bridges for archaeological interpretation. To anticipate the conclusions, the tradition in archaeology has been to understand people by isolating them from their activities, settings and contexts. I argue that agency is inherently contextual and situated. Hence, agency is not a characteristic of individuals but of relationships; it is the socially reproductive quality of action within social relationships. Because of this relationality, agency is fundamentally material, for two reasons: because material things mediate and form the context for relationships between people, and because people form important relations with material things. The materiality of agency provides the basis for formulating a range of interpretative strategies with which we can tackle the material residues of the past.

The background of agency in social theory

What is agency? How do we relate individual actions to their effects, on one hand, and to their context, on the other? Without reviewing the agency literature extensively (Dobres 2000; Dobres and Robb 2000a; Dornan 2002; Gardner 2004b; Johnson 1989), there have been at least a dozen answers to this question. The key starting point, however, lies in our concept of human nature.

Before Marx and Engels, social theorists essentialized human nature. They assumed that humans simply acted in accordance either with their universal nature as humans (for instance, as in Rousseau and Hobbes, and in theological views of humanity) or with their particular fixed nature (as, for example, as 'barbarians' or as individuals of a particular character). Such views did not vanish instantly with the publication of the *German Ideology*, naturally; indeed, Victorian social evolution and culture history continued to be far more important forces than Marxism until at least 1900. But what Marx and Engels did was to put human action and consciousness systematically into relation with social context. In a preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx summarizes his chain of ideas:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.
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> (Marx 1978, p. 4)

For our purposes, the key insight here is that 'human nature' is relational: people develop their capacity for acting through participating in social relations. As these social relations vary, their consciousness varies. Human activity, therefore, has two distinct products:

externally, it produces an economic product and, internally, it shapes the worker's consciousness as a specific kind of person capable of acting within the system of social and economic relationships.

Anthropologists made little of this bold insight for much of the twentieth century. Rather, among a plethora of approaches (Kuper 1983), the dominant ones were structural-functionalist anthropology, structuralism and symbolic anthropology. In the first of these (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1940; Radcliffe-Brown 1952), the individual was treated as a specimen of a particular role or status and the emphasis was upon revealing the rules through which such roles or statuses were related. Similarly, as developed both by Lévi-Strauss (1968) and by Chomsky (1968), structuralism focused principally on how underlying generative rules related to observed behaviour; there was little attention to context and agency and human agents are portrayed essentially as working out underlying scripts. Symbolic anthropology, as developed by Turner (1967, 1974, 1988) and Geertz (1973), was a powerful and sensitive framework for reading the world of meanings constituting a culture, and many of its insights interestingly parallel those of post-structuralist theory.[1]

Agency or practice theory dates from the early 1980s, when it formed part of a reaction against systemic models (Johnson 1989). From the start, it has drawn principally upon Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) and Giddens' (1979, 1984) work, with their critique of structuralism (cf. Ortner 1984, Sahlins 1985). Giddens begins with a critique of classical sociology centred upon roles, rules and institutions. If it is true that people act in accordance with these structures, where do the structures themselves come from? How do people vary them? How do they change? The heart of his 'structuration' approach is a dialectic between structure and action, in which action is the outcome of rules which it recursively organizes. This is the 'duality of structure'. Bourdieu bases his work on a parallel critique of structuralism. Humans act in accordance with learned cultural structures (habitus), an ingrained system of dispositions which provides the basis for regulated improvisation. Habitus provides the reflexes with which people make it up as they go along and cope with new situations, often in self-contradictory or incoherent ways. Reciprocally, habitus is never formulated and taught as an explicit doctrine; rather, people infer its basic principles from a multitude of tiny, concrete behaviours which it enacts and exemplifies. Changes in actual behaviour thus can, over time, lead to a shift in habitus. Note that, while a naïve reading would equate structures with social restraint and determination and action with individual intention and freedom, for both Bourdieu and Giddens structures are not only restrictive but productive, enabling one to act. Put another way, for both thinkers, one cannot exist as an undifferentiated, essential person, but rather only as a specific kind of person in a specific social situation (McCall 1999).

This basic formulation of agency as involved in a dialectic between structure and action is not free from problems and ambiguities. For example, although Bourdieu claims that habitus provides a basis for improvisation and change, in his analyses it tends to resemble an overpowering and deterministic set of structures, not too different from the structuralist visions he critiques so vehemently: he leaves little space for resistance and for individual actors' awareness, critique or irony (de Certeau 2002). The feeling of logical systematicity we experience in social action may be as much imposed retroactively as immanent (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Another open question is the relationship between agency as a

cultural and social system on the one hand and economy and politics on the other. Giddens' work focuses principally upon modern Western settings with little concern for applicability to other situations. Bourdieu's Marxist linkage between habitus and class, so convincing in his work on taste and social exclusion in France (Bourdieu 1984), is decidedly less convincing in his ethnographic work on Kabyle peasants in Algeria (Bourdieu 1977). Such limitations serve to warn us that, while both authors are provide the ingredients for social analysis, neither furnishes us a recipe for it.

Agency in archaeological theory

Agency in archaeology, round 1: agency as intentional (political) action

The first round of 'putting people back into the past' took place in the 1970s and 1980s within processualism, although the term 'agency' was not used in it until later. Early 'new archaeology' had been aimed at studying systems rather than people, particularly in ecological adaptationism and in systems theory (in Clarke's (1968) delimitation of social life as a system of interlocking spheres and in Flannery's (1973) work). However, another strand of processualism traced social structure as emerging from political strategies. This really came out in discussion of the 'origins of inequality' – one of the big archaeological headline-makers and money-makers of the 1980s.

The basic argument is that, in all societies, there are ambitious agents who pursue personal prestige and power over others; the strategies which these individuals use to pursue their ambitions provide a motor for social change, principally the creation of institutionalized hierarchies (Blanton et al. 1996; Earle 1997, 2002; Feinman 1995; Flannery 1999; Hayden 1995). To give an influential example, Hayden (1995) has argued that in 'trans-egalitarian' societies (non-state societies with some elements of inequality) aspiring leaders accumulate food and obligations from other people to stage feasts which give them a platform for social leadership (prestige, creating debts from other people, social centrality).

Agency in this view is the individual's ability to effect his or her will or intention. It makes a number of assumptions about 'human nature'. First, people's motivations are assumed to originate outside culture, in something universal to all humans and pre-existing social action and contexts. Power is defined instrumentally, as a person's ability to exert his or her will, and action is viewed entirely in terms of the actor's intentions (Mann 1986). Second, symbols are defined as tokens relatively external to actor (Robb 1998); for example, aspiring leaders flourish the symbols of religious authority not because they believe them but to convince other people. This is tied into a traditional processualist focus upon material culture as tool for communicating social information. Finally, within any society, some people are inherently politically active and motivated to pursue power over others, while other people are not. This is usually simply assumed, though occasionally stated explicitly (Clark and Blake 1994; Hayden 1995). Why this should be so is usually left vague.

The great strength of approach to agency is its ability to deal with a specific question, political dynamics within hierarchical societies. Moreover, it has given rise to important

discussions of materialization, or the process by which political ideologies are given concrete expression and circulation (DeMarrais et al. 1996). As DeMarrais et al. point out, material things are not neutral vessels for meaning; rather, their intrinsic qualities condition how they can be made or acquired, used and exchanged, controlled and disposed of. Earle (2004) has extended this argument to discuss how cultural traditions of meaning shape politics and economics. The materialization argument converges interestingly with recent work by Barth (1987, 2002) on how knowledge is reproduced materially. Barth argues that the social practices through which knowledge is created and transmitted shape its long-term development. In terms of agency, this line of thought takes a straightforward approach to symbols which is practical rather than philosophical (for instance, in assuming that cultural symbols can pre-exist their expression in material form). Effectively, it complements the argument above: taking the materially constituted world as already existing, it explores the possibilities of practical, goal-oriented action within it.

The weakness of this model of agency is that it does not always transfer well from the world of elite hierarchical politics to a broader social canvas. Its underlying assumption is that social life is basically a zero-sum game of antagonistic competition among elites. Hence (for example) it does not answer telling questions such as where the motivations of ambitious people come from (what are their limits? how are they understood symbolically?), how would-be hierarchs relate to the rest of the group and how hierarchy as a process relates to other processes. For instance, if we take it as a given that weapons symbolize male power in Bronze Age Denmark (Earle 1997), we can theorize how political males competed to control them, but this tells us nothing about how this culture developed from an earlier situation in which weapons did *not* symbolize male political power. It does not deal well with social contexts outside explicitly political areas, for instance the worlds of grassroots communities and daily life, different genders and ages, and non-political forms of action. It is particularly open to charges that it is based upon highly gendered models of social action (Gero 2000). Finally, because it is narrowly focused upon protagonists of action rather than contexts of action, it does not deal with *how* things are done in the particular way in which they are, rather than *why* they are done. As we will see below, the agency of the social and material often works much more through hows than through whys.

Agency in archaeology, round 2: agency as dialectic

One of the major discoveries of the post-processualism in the early 1980s was the post-structuralism of Bourdieu and Giddens; agency theory in archaeology, as an explicit reaction to totalizing or systemic models, really dates to this (Johnson 1989). Although both Bourdieu and Giddens have been criticized, this general platform both underwrites post-processualism and has also become generally absorbed within the processualist tradition (Dobres 2000; Dobres and Robb 2000a, 2005 and papers therein; Dornan 2002; Gardner 2004b; Hegmon 2003).

Agency in this view is *not* an individual's ability to affect others; it is the dual, socially reproductive quality of action. The intellectual background of this has been discussed above. The dialectic model makes several key assumptions. First, actors act according to

culturally specific, deeply instilled social and cognitive structures (rather than universal motivations) but their actions are not limited by them. Rather, actors are knowledgeable, with highly developed practical consciousness (implicit, non-discursive knowledge for negotiating the situations they encounter). Moreover, cultural behaviour articulates with the 'real world out there' via action. Agents exist in, and understand implicitly, their landscape of action, which represents a set of possibilities and challenges formed by the past. Thus there is a dialectical relation between structure, which allows and channels action, and action, which recreates structures. Habitus is the internalization of history, the means through which inherited historical structures reproduce themselves in the actor. Their actions, in turn, can modify these conditions intentionally and unintentionally, setting the stage for future action. As the landscape of action shifts, agents' interpretation of the cultural structures of their lives may also shift reciprocally.

The post-structuralist view of agency has been deeply influential in archaeology (Barrett 1994; Gardner 2004a, 2004b). It has particularly important implications for how we understand intention and power. In our own experience as agents, intention is often the most salient part of action: our starting point for acting, or interpreting other people's actions, is the intention which provides the proximate stimulus for it. But intentions are mobilized within specified fields of discourse, and they cannot result in action until they are localized within recognized and rule-bound genres of behaviour. Intentions are already formulated within this world of rule-bound genres; we formulate intentions that take account, more or less well, of the rules. Tracing this line of thought further, any intended action presupposes a multitude of structures, arrangements and conditions which must be true, or provided, or in conformity with a norm, for the action both to exist as a possibility and then be brought to pass. It follows, as Giddens argues, that one effect of action, and quite possibly the principal one, is to reproduce these conditions and structures which enable it. In Barrett's terms, 'actions have effects which appear external to the embodied agent by being inscribed upon the world and upon others (they are objectified), but those actions also make the agent and renew that agent's understanding of their place in the world' (2001: 62). Hence both intentional and unintentional action are part of the larger process of social reproduction.

In such a view, power cannot be viewed simply as an individual's ability to achieve his or her goals. Social systems form specific kinds of persons, arrange them in social relations and provide them with the options and resources for action. This 'structural power' (Wolf 1990) is a characteristic not of individuals but of social systems. Power as a structural, decentred or culturally constituted quantity has been convincingly theorized both by symbolic anthropologists (Geertz 1980) and by Marxists (Engels 1972; Foucault 1977; Gramsci 1971; McGuire 1992; Miller and Tilley 1984; O'Donovan 2002; Wolf 1990). As Dirks, Eley and Ortner note, we must move the study of power out of the narrow realm of political institutions and into 'a variety of settings previously regarded as ''non-political'', including the workplace, the street, the deviant or criminal subculture, the recreational domain, and, above all, the family and the home' (1994: 4). Moreover, power is not possessed and exercised by individuals; rather, it creates people; our desires, responses, and strategies derive from a particular historical cultural order which as natives we never see in its totality. For example, Joyce's (2000) study of elite ritual action in Oaxaca, Mexico, shows how elites were enmeshed in a structure of belief in which sacrifice was

not only a tactic legitimating hierarchy but also a sacred covenant. Leone's (1995) interpretation of upper class china in eighteenth-century America argues that these table services embodied principles of order and precedence, associated with formal dining as an institution which demonstrated one's claim to possess the qualities of social elites.

Where does this leave agency? Agency, like power, is not a characteristic of individuals but of relationships. Action is fundamentally social; even when acting in isolation for purposes that concern only ourselves, we enact and recreate an identity originally created through relationships with others, we participate in well-defined genres of activity and we use inter-subjective practices and meanings learned through interaction with others. The intentional pursuit of goals is possible only through complicity with power structures, cultural ideas, ways of behaving – parameters of a situation which people enter into and normally accept as part of the situation. Hence agency exists in a 'grey zone' (Levi 1988): what is purposive activity from the actor's point of view can only be so because of numerous layers of collaboration and conflict with unseen structures of the material and social world, of conformity with a social reality which both defines the agents' intentions and ultimately encapsulates, absorbs or directs divergent intentions.

One important implication of this is that agency is not a universal capacity or quality but is defined within particular historical settings. Language provides a parallel: speaking a language is a universal human capacity, but one does not speak Language, one speaks English or Huron or Walbiri, and it is only through reference to the latter than we can construe a particular utterance. Likewise, we do not act with a universal, reified agency; we act with the historically situated agency of an early twenty-first-century Western male, or a seventeenth-century Iroquois female, or a Neolithic Italian child.

Fields of action   This implies that agency emerges in practical activity in particular fields of discourse (Barrett 2001; Dobres 2000; Dobres and Robb 2000b, 2005; Dornan 2002; Fowler 2004; Gardner 2004a, 2004b; Gillespie 2001; Joyce and Lopiparo 2005). As Marx and Engels noted with their concept of self-creation through labour, the relationship between extended practical activity, agency and identity is intimate and inextricable. Projects are extended undertakings which generate moral orientation and self-under-standing. While certain structuring principles cross and link many spheres of discourse, the agency of a parent or a potter can be pursued and evaluated only according to how these particular genres of practice are intended, understood and regulated. Certainly, all may be subsumed under some generalized rubric such as 'being a valued person', but this under-specifies not only the means but also the conceptualization of action. It is at the level of specific fields of action that agents experience and enact the pursuit of value via keeping or giving away, via harshness or tenderness, via obliterating the past or commemorating it, or via handshakes linking business suits or sexual embraces joining bodies. Thus, agency must be localized not in a simple, easily expressed abstract goal, but rather in the emergent practical logic of the projects through which this goal is understood, defined and can be pursued. In this sense, as Dobres (2000) has argued decisively in her work upon technology and social agency, the 'agency of why' is conditioned and encapsulated by a stratum of the 'agency of how'.

Perhaps the post-structuralist model can best be summarized diagrammatically in terms of levels of analysis. As discussed above, action presupposes cultural structures which in

some way can be understood as generating it. Habitus provides the agent's basic tools of thought, the basic values and oppositions which shape our thinking, the terms of identity and personhood which make us who we are and the emotional currencies we live through. It is an element of the world of the implicit, unquestioned and unquestionable values which Bourdieu calls 'doxa' (1990).[2] Deeply learnt during socialization, shared widely, often unconsciously held or not expressed directly, difficult to question from within a culture or to unlearn and generalized across many domains of social life, habitus is a sometimes unsystematic system of entrenched meanings, a resource for generating more immediately experienced meanings. Habitus clearly resembles structuralist codes, though Bourdieu emphasizes that it consists not of rigid grammars played out deterministically but of flexible dispositions full of ambiguities, potential contradictions and slippages – the raw material for creativity, conflict and heterodoxy as well as orthodoxy. But habitus has limitations. As an interpretative concept, used on its own, it is both reductionist and insufficient to explain action. As Bourdieu himself argues, reducing social games to their rules does not actually explain why people play them strategically as they do. Moreover, habitus is under-specified. Even if we can correctly specify how the Kabyle peasants' habitus leads them to construct as isomorphs of maleness activities carried out in public or outside places, in light, in summer, with heat or dry materials (e.g. trading, fighting, harvesting), this does not tell us why and how these are performed as different activities, as different social spheres of discourse, involving different places, materials, meanings and experiences. Moreover, it is not clear that abstract values have analytical priority over material practices; phenomenologists, for example, would give precedence to the processes of material engagement.

The point is that to understand agency, we need to be able to see action as emerging from, and reproducing, not only generalized, highly abstract structures, but also fields of discourse (Barrett 1988), genres of practice and institutions – shared understandings about what a particular activity consists of, how it may be carried out, by whom and in what circumstances and what its possible meanings and limits are. Less entrenched, more narrowly defined and more consciously formulated and learnt than habitus, genres of behaviour may act in shorter cycles of time and space. Activities within fields of action are projects, chains of events involving response to chance and contingency, dramas with defined beginnings, narrative forms and conclusions which shape the unfolding of action (Turner 1974, 1988). A genre of action is a potential reality, not a reality. As Barrett notes, 'agents recognize the coming into being of their own existence in an engagement with the remaking of the world itself' (2001: 153). Meaning is imposed or interpreted upon social dramas retroactively in closing them (Turner 1988). Knowledge and actions are things we exercise, and often the exercise is more important than the script.

Fields of action are the key to the materiality of agency. Values are immaterial abstractions (Rappaport 1979); enacting a value in a particular field of action means translating it into material practices (see Fig. 1). However, in contrast to a top-down Platonism, translating a value into a material practice transforms it to create something new, rather than creating a thin derivative of habitus or dogma. Such fields of action, while linked by more generalized structures of habitus, also possess considerable autonomy as the locus of specified and relational power and agency. For example, hunting or sport may be anthropologically interpretable as an ideological drama about
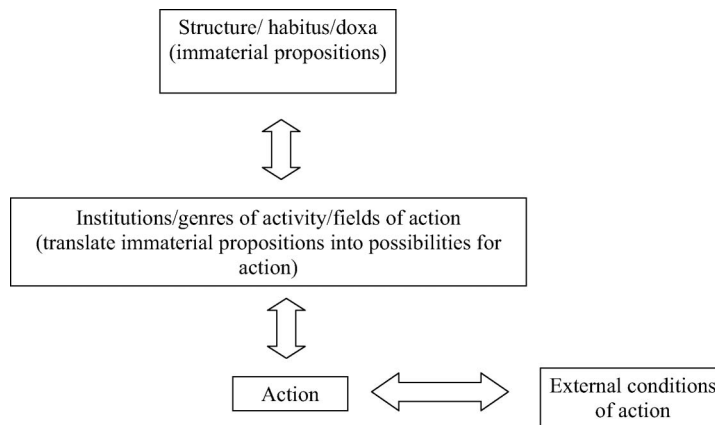
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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│  Structure/ habitus/doxa     │
│  (immaterial propositions)   │
└─────────────────────────────┘
              ⇕
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Institutions/genres of activity/fields of action    │
│  (translate immaterial propositions into possibilities for │
│  action)                                              │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
              ⇕
      ┌──────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
      │  Action  │  ⟵──────⟶          │ External conditions │
      └──────────┘                    │    of action      │
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Figure 1 Relations between generative principles, fields of action and action.

class or gender, but this does not mean that we can access, experience or dispute these values without the medium of the drama, or that hunting or sport transparently recreate the same meanings of class or gender as cuisine, education or dress. A general belief in highland New Guinea that being able to exchange and redistribute goods is the mark of political centrality is actualized through institutions such as long-distance trade and large-scale feasting. A general belief in male potency in Bronze Age Europe was worked out through institutions of exchange, hunting and warfare (Robb 1994). It is within these defined fields of action, not simply the general value itself, that meaningful, intentional action is possible.

Unless we consider individual action, genres of behaviour merely add another layer of determinism. In acting within a field of action, people act creatively, varying what they do to accomplish a proximate intention. Individual actions are often less embedded in habit, time and space; though often habitual, they are readily learnt and unlearnt; they can represent meaning on the spur of the moment. This is the level of context-specific manoeuvre, tactic, strategy, practice and performance, discursively understood and taught. What makes a good pig sacrifice or fox hunt? How can a ritual utterance be striking without breaching the limits of sanctity? Like speech acts, material acts have a great range of play: often the intention is simply to execute the basic purpose with efficacy or with distinction, but one can also do it excessively, intentionally carelessly or badly, ironically, innovatively or differently. As de Certeau (2002: 24) notes in his discussion of French workers' strategies for turning the conditions of their job to their private advantage (*la perruque*: for example, borrowing tools from work to use in moonlighting jobs), how people carry out a prescribed role or task may be as important as what it is. Such variation encompasses many of the individual strategies of competition, emulation, innovation, redefinition, resistance and subversion.

Agency in archaeology, round 3: relational agency

If agency in 1990 was about finding people rather than systems, and agency in 2000 was about finding social reproduction rather than universal political actors, the next

decade has brought a new set of buzzwords, the plunder from sacking new theoretical towns. The key discussions have been about relationality, networks and personhood, and about material agency. The principal work in this direction has been actor network theory (Callon 1998; Latour 2005; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Law 1986; Law and Hassard 1999). But it also converges with 'symmetrical archaeology' (Witmore 2008) and with other recent work on agency (Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Robb 2007; van der Leeuw 2008). In many ways, this is a coherent and logical development from the 'social reproduction' view of agency discussed above rather than a break from it, as it continues the focus upon the mutually constitutive relationships between agents and their material and social contexts. Rather than seeing social life in terms of nodes such as people and things, the focus is shifted on to the relationships linking these nodes.

The core of this approach is to interpret social action not in terms of sentient human protagonists faced with passive material objects of action, but rather in terms of heterogeneous relationships which span humans, collectivities, bodies of knowledge and material things. Such relations are semiotic in that their meaning is not inherent or fixed but develops through the relationship. They are centred around material practices. For agency, this means that the capacity to act emerges through participating in relationships with other people and material things. Participating in a field of action requires belief, commitment, a continued involvement in long-term projects, social relations of co-behaviour, public identity claims and associated attitudes, memories and emotions, and even a willingness to change oneself or allow oneself to be changed (for example, by acquiring knowledge or experience). For example, knowing is active and reproducing knowledge is a social act (Barth 2002); practical skill is laden with meanings of identity, efficacy and the production of certainty. Extended sequences of action, or projects, thus, are always also projects of the self.

Relational approaches to agency converge with recent discussions of personhood in archaeology. It is assumed in both the intentional-action and the post-structural model of agency that the agent is the individual. However, the definition and role of the individual have been critiqued as a fixation of Western culture (Strathern 1988). Whether or not Strathern's Melanesian model of personhood is ethnographically generalizable, this critique does establish that personhood is culturally variable and archaeologists need to consider this in making sense of past action (Fowler 2004); for example, Maya nobles acted as members of a lineage or house rather than as autonomous independent agents (Gillespie 2001). Indeed, even in the modern West, persons are not always individuals, as in the concept of the 'legal person' which might be a corporation. Personhood, 'the condition of being a person as conceptualized by a given community' (Fowler 2004: 155), refers to the most encompassing and generalized life project, and one which may involve a quite variegated *cursus honorum* and abstract but important concepts and metaphors such as the boundedness of identity and the constitution of persons through the transmission of bodily substances.

Multiple and collective agencies   Dissociating agency from the bounded, autonomous individual opens the door to a host of questions which archaeologists have traditionally found difficult to think about: multiple agency, collective agencies and material agency.

The idea that any society affords multiple forms of agency is a straightforward extension of the argument above and of current work on personhood and on gender. It also implies that a single person can participate in many distinct forms of agency in a day, a year or a life. To take an example, we often construe intentionality within our own society in terms of strategic, self-interested action. Yet, even so, this mode of intentionality is recognized as appropriate and attributed to oneself and others in particular settings and relationships (the business meeting, the public demonstration) and not in others (visiting friends, putting one's child to bed, watching television). We shift between such modes of intentionality accurately and without thinking, like gears changing in a car with an automatic transmission. Consider the different forms of acting one passes through in going between workplace, social situations, voluntary associations and family; the human biography is often thought of as a succession of kinds of person one becomes. Many rituals create spaces within which people can act as different kinds of beings, or mark, heighten or justify the transition between modes of agency. Only occasionally is this made explicit. For example, in Catholic doctrine the moral qualities of the man who is the priest are thought irrelevant to the priest's sacramental efficacy.

Can agency be conceptualized at levels outside as well as within the individual? Agency theorists have been reluctant to admit the possibility of collective agency (probably out of fear of losing sight of the humans so recently reclaimed from structuralist and functionalist views). Collective agency has never been well addressed in archaeological theory; the barrier has been the assumption that agency is a unitary thing associated with volitional beings, and hence must be ascribed to a single author. By this logic, when collectivities exert agency, they do so at the expense of individuals, who presumably simply become docile or dominated servants.

But when we look at many actions, the question of who is actually acting – in a social sense, not merely in the purely physical sense – is surprisingly ambiguous. Pulling a trigger to kill someone can get a soldier a medal, a hunter a caution for accidental death, a gang member an envious reputation or a murderer a life sentence. The context determines what the social act being performed actually is, and in many contexts (the soldier, the policeman, the member of a firing squad carrying out their prescribed duties) it is really a collectivity which is acting through the individual hand. As anybody who has participated in an organization knows, a group of people acting as a group do radically different things from what the sum of their actions acting outside the group would be. Group behaviour is usually a negotiated compromise which is shaped by both individual and group agendas but is reducible to neither. It makes sense therefore to consider collective agency as the capacity for action of the relationship forming individuals into a group.

Virtually all actions occur in chains of cause, effect and context involving other people. Hence social actions involve a palimpsest of purposes, some of which may be quite disparate. Without some understanding of collective agency, therefore, we cannot understand an entire range of cooperative efforts people participate in. Moreover, people act in consciousness of this situation, and interpret and modulate their actions accordingly. It follows that a key parameter of how people construct their agency in a given situation is their understanding of the relations with others; this is true whether these

other entities are understood as individual persons or groups (the family, the village, the university, the ancestors). From the actor's point of view, one dimension of a field of action is a sense of on-behalf-ness, a sense of the extent to which a particular action is understood as enacting a collective intention.

To take an example, consider a senior Enga man arranging a ceremonial pig exchange (Wiessner and Tumu 1998). He amasses pigs, which are fed through the labour of women, from his male kin group and from trade partners and relations in other communities, and he also collects trade valuables from far-flung trade partners. He may be trying to acquire renown for himself. His kin understand their participation as supporting an attempt to acquire renown for the kin group as a collectivity, and his trade partners are acting to maintain an obligation for which they may be respected within their own communities and which will in time yield them reciprocal benefits. The man giving away pigs and the people receiving them have reciprocal agendas. His action in giving away pigs simultaneously fulfils both his personal intention and that of his supporting pig donors; his action genuinely results in renown for the kin group as a whole. Moreover, the overall palimpsest of social relations conditions how he carries out and experiences the pig exchange; for example, he must discuss the exchange carefully to make clear his understanding that he is acting on behalf of a collectivity, he will have had to redistribute goods he received in previous exchanges carefully to people expected to contribute pigs and, when receiving pigs in future exchanges, he will be constrained to recognize the strongly felt entitlement to pigs from his constituency. Indeed, because of such obligations, much as a jaded academic trying to escape from a senior grants committee, even if he wishes to, he cannot stop exchanging.

If action results from a palimpsest of agencies both within and among actors, some of which have important collective dimensions, the question of how multiple agencies are organized becomes a significant one. Simple models of hierarchy presume a singular kind of agency in which individuals are distinguished only by degree to which they possess an undifferentiated power. Where this is manifestly not the case, we must consider a heterarchy (Ehrenreich et al. 1995) of qualitatively distinct agencies, existing in balance, in tension or in contradiction. This vision is critical to bridging between agency and long-term change, as it suggests that social change is as likely to emerge from the dynamic of how these agencies interact rather than from the agitation of individuals operating within them.

Material agents? Can non-human things exert agency? This sounds paradoxical; historically, our most intuitive concept of agency, the individual-action view, is rooted in a philosophical, and ultimately theological, dichotomy which opposed humans as autonomous subjects of action and material things as inert, formless objects of action. In common-sense logic as well as in most social theory, then, virtually by definition, things cannot be agents.[3]

The taboo against attributing agency to things was first broken by Gell (1998). Although the debate has moved on significantly, Gell's work is historically important and worth reviewing briefly. Relatively conventionally, Gell defines agents as persons who 'are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts

of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events' (1998: 16). Gell goes on to argue that the relationship between intentionality and causation is philosophically recalcitrant but can be circumvented; for purposes of his argument, if people *attribute* intentionality to someone else and respond accordingly, that person has started a chain of social events and must be regarded as a social agent. By extension of this logic, if people attribute intentionality or personhood to an inanimate object, it too exercises social agency. The point is that, in certain social settings, things both make people do things and are understood culturally as making people do things, much in the same way other people do: 'I am concerned with agent/patient relationships in the fleeting contexts and predicaments of social life, during which we certainly do, transactionally speaking, attribute agency to cars, images, buildings, and many other non-living, non-human things' (ibid.: 22).

This shifts the onus of defining agentive social action to the participants themselves: 'The idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent' (ibid.: 17). A bit paradoxically, in effect, agents are whoever or whatever people consider them to be, but it is always people rather than things which are doing the considering (hence the designation of things as 'secondary agents' rather than 'primary agents which are people' (ibid.: 20)). Gell's assumption that agency involves at least imputed intentionality forces him occasionally into blind alleys, such as attributing agency to material things only when humans anthropomorphize them (as in the example of his car, to whom he attributed a personality). But his key point is that agency is always relational and contextual – it is always defined in the context of a relationship between an agent and a 'patient' or recipient. Hence material things can be agents as long as humans interact meaningfully with them.

The other major proponent of material agency has been Latour (1993, 2005), whose argument is both simpler and in some ways more compelling. Latour points out that things continually intervene in human actions, and that it is neither things nor humans which shape the course of events. In an example also discussed by Robb (2004), it is neither the gun which kills somebody nor the person holding the gun, but rather the network of human plus gun – a network which includes the qualities of both (what the gun is capable of doing, what humans believe about and do with guns) (Latour 1999). Material agency has been further explored by Knappett and Malafouris (2008). As Malafouris argues, in ways paralleling Dobres (2000), 'the shaping of the pot becomes an act of collaboration between the potter and the mass of wet clay rapidly spinning on the wheel' (2008: 34).

The idea of material agency loses its shock value if we stop treating agency as a zero-sum quantity associated with individual, volitional mastery. It makes perfect sense within a relational view of agency; people act within relationships with things as much as with other individuals and groups. As a general rule, things tend to exert an 'agency of how' rather than an 'agency of why'. In practical terms, the agency of things normally operates through fields of action, as these are where the beliefs and practices associated with things are established – the sum of beliefs, associations with specific kinds of people, spatial and temporal contexts, norms of correct usage and so on which together make up the 'extended artefact' (Robb 2004) .

Interpretative strategies for material agency

A detailed discussion of how to pursue these themes through material culture would amount to an entire book of archaeological methodology; here I will focus upon showing how existing lines of investigation can be used to address the new questions posed by these views of agency.

Archaeologists sometimes tend to write about 'the meaning' of material things; at other times (particularly in recent interpretative archaeology) the assumption is that meanings are always open and unconstrained, and potentially infinite. Neither one is the really the case. Following on from above (see Fig. 1), material culture has three potential kinds of meanings:

1. Structural meanings derive from the doxic qualities of habitus and the general assumptions about how the world is put together which cut across and give coherence to specific fields of action.
2. Generic meanings derive from the particular field of action they form part of.
3. Finally, contextual meanings derive from the enactment or expression of this field of action in a particular instance.

To illustrate this, a pottery vessel might reference structural meanings such as colour symbolisms, aesthetic design principles and gender or class values which turn up in many fields of action. It might incorporate generic meanings deriving from the genre of social action it formed part of, for instance a vessel form associated with a particular food or drink consumed in a particular context or a design scheme appropriate for pots of its category; these tend to reference the norms for the kind of pot it is. And, at the same time, it might reference contextual meanings which comment upon how that specific pot relates to the kind of pot it is or how its user relates to the kind of user who might be expected to use such a pot – for instance, a particularly well-executed or richly decorated version of the design scheme, an intentional exaggeration of some features for ironic distancing or additional details suggesting the personal affiliations of the user. Rather than seeing these alternative potential meanings as exclusive and contradictory, as has sometimes been done, this view of agency implies that they are simultaneous and interdependent.

Of these three potential kinds of meanings, there has been a good deal of archaeological and anthropological work on high-level, doxic meanings which cross fields of action. These include discussion of the social construction of space (Tilley 1994) and time (Gosden 1994), spatial order as a form of power (Foucault 1977) and the 'temporality of the landscape', routine frequentation (Giddens 1984) and taskscapes (Ingold 2000). Ortner (1972) has highlighted the role of 'key symbols' which summarize important values, and these may include colours (Jones and MacGregor 2002), aesthetic patterning (Morphy and Perkins 2006) and semantically charged styles. Doxic foundations of social reality include concepts of the body, personhood and biographical narratives of age and gender (Borić and Robb 2009; Fowler 2004; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Sofaer 2006).

Similarly, archaeological study of individual material acts covers a wide range of contextual meanings. Archaeologists have studied prestige competition-signalling social distinction (Earle 1997; Shennan 1982), emulation as a cycling dynamic (Miller 1982), the

inversion of norms as dissent or subversion (Parker Pearson 1982), creative variation from norms (Hegmon and Kulow 1995) and *chaînes opératoires* (Dobres 2000), dissent and irony, as in transposing symbols to strange contexts (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 2001), resistance through alternative material culture traditions (Ferguson 1992) and many other ways in which individuals redefine symbols in new ways. As these examples show, such material acts are possible only within defined spheres of practice, but they can also change the meaning and direction of such practices.

In contrast, it is the middle level, the level of fields of action, which has been relatively little discussed in archaeology but which is central to understanding agency.

Practices: fields of action, projects of the self

Traditionally, archaeologists study *activities*, but people carry out *projects*. The distinction is important. As argued above, humans necessarily always act within a particular field of action: a genre of behaviour, a set of institutionalized practices recognized as a distinct activity. As discussed above, genres of action are important because they are places where doxic belief becomes mobilized in the service of concrete practice. They specify situations and arenas of social performance, their boundaries, rules and strategies, what kinds of people can be involved and how they have to behave. This poses an ambitious set of questions beyond the rather limited technical ones often raised:

- What is being done (as a defined, rule-bound kind of cultural activity)?
- What are the key symbols and central artefacts for this genre of action?
- Who are the appropriate people for doing it and in what circumstances?
- How it must be done technologically, bearing in mind that technology is not only a functional means to an end but a fundamental source of social representations and meanings (Dobres 2000; Lemonnier 1992; Pfaffenberger 1992)?
- What are the rules and practices for correct usage (in the sense of a constitutive definition: a wine glass is not only a particular form of glass but also a glass used in a particular way in a particular context) of these techniques and artefacts?
- What are appropriate spatial and temporal contexts for doing it? How are these constructed to provide stage management for the performance of meaning?
- What are the concomitant artefacts which form an assemblage related to it?

The most relevant archaeological literature tackling such questions is in analyses of particular topics such as feasting (Dietler and Hayden 2001), community work (Canuto and Yaeger 2000), warfare (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992), memory work (Mills and Walker 2008) and burial (Parker Pearson 1999). Much of the large literature on competitive elite politics is probably best understood as ethnographies of a single specific field of action.

Projects are long-term undertakings which involve the engagement of the self: being a potter rather than making a pot. Many elements of making things are essentially rule-bound but arbitrary and have as their main purpose allowing people to carry on material conversations by maintaining a space of discourse within which discourse can be carried out. As this suggests, there is a close link between making and doing things, agency and

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personhood. Knowledge and skill are dimensions of activity which are both archaeologically inferable and socially central (Sinclair 1995). The analysis of technology, knowledge and agency, especially as developed by Dobres (2000) and others studying the *chaîne opératoire*, makes clear the expressive and self-creative dimensions of carrying out even the most mundane tasks.

Fields of action form useful units for long-term historical analysis, as they often form material trajectories traceable through long time spans – as genealogies of practice (Harding 2005). As van der Leeuw's (2008) model for innovation in pottery making shows, we have to understand such histories in terms of an internal, developing logic based upon the economic, social and technological relationships between people, things and contexts. Archaeologically, what we see as cultural change – the rise of a new burial rite, the spread of an assemblage, a dramatic shift in economic production – is often moments of genre formation, where an existing variant practice is proclaimed as a new orthodoxy, often with a new uniformity of practice and material culture, a rearrangement of social relations and a new elaboration of ancient symbols.

Case study: agency in the early Mediterranean village

As this suggests, if we want to study agency in the past, the real challenge lies not in developing new methods for 'finding agency', but rather in formulating the right research questions to isolate which aspects of the past the concept of agency might usefully shed light upon in a particular situation. This is best illustrated through a case study. Here I turn to the question of agency in Neolithic Italy (summarized very briefly here; for full discussion and sources see Robb (2007)).

The Neolithic in Italy spans the period 6000–3500 BC (calibrated); while there are some important variations within it both chronologically and spatially, for our purposes here it can be treated homogeneously. It is defined at both ends by 'transitions' of the kind archaeologists usually focus upon: the beginning of farming forms its grand entrance, the sweeping social transformations ushering in the Copper Age provides its dramatic exit. What happened in the two and a half millennia in between? Very little, apparently. The Central Mediterranean was peopled with small farming groups who lived in scattered villages and clusters of huts, relied upon a basic Old World farming economy based upon growing wheat, barley, and pulses and raising cattle, sheep, goats and pigs, and carried on a constant, low-level rhythm of ritual and trade. In traditional archaeological categories, they are usually disposed of by designating them as 'tribes', with the unspoken rider that there really is very little else to say about them until they get on with something more ambitious, such as developing hierarchies.

This poses a real challenge for traditional agency theory. The archaeology does not provide us with the usual pegs to hang interpretation on – ambitious political actors, large-scale ritual, craft specialists and so on. Making pots and growing food and so on involved purposeful action, but it is quite difficult to connect them to an interpretative narrative beyond the proximate goal of making a pot or providing food. Frustratingly, the people behind this archaeological record do not provide the protagonists of our dramas of agency; they are just going about their daily lives.

In such cases, the problem is rarely the archaeological record's ability to speak, but rather our ability to listen. Here, my basic strategy is to work outwards from the material detritus of Neolithic Italy, to see how things formed parts of projects and fields of action, and then to see how the juxtaposition of these fields created both a dense and compelling rhythm of social life and the people carrying it on.

A prehistory of Italy in six artefacts

Rather than review the entire material record for all of Neolithic Italy (Robb 2007), as a brief demonstration let us use a handful of ordinary garbage. These things were excavated at the two sites of Umbro and Penitenzeria (Bova Marina, Calabria) as part of the Bova Marina Archaeological Project. Penitenzeria is a very small Middle Neolithic habitation site inhabited between about 5500 and 5000 cal. BC; Umbro is a rock shelter about 200 metres away which was used over a longer time span (approximately 5700–4400 cal. BC) for particular non-habitation purposes such as herding and pottery-making by people living at Penitenzeria or similar nearby sites.

Our first item (Plate 1a) is a fragment of house daub. This is clay mixed with straw, which was pressed onto a structure of poles, sticks and reeds to form house walls. It was a ubiquitous and important technology in Neolithic Italy, both in areas where people lived in villages and in areas such as here where people lived in isolated clusters of a few houses. Houses were a technology for creating spatial divisions between inside and outside; by demarcating areas of privacy and enclosedness in an intensely public and open social world, they allowed distinctions of access, vision and secrecy, and they created sets of people who were associated with particular spaces. They thus created the context for many different fields of action which placed people in different roles. Moreover, houses were projects. Building a house involved transporting, preparing and assembling a large quantity of materials over a time span of probably a year or more; as a collective activity undertaken on behalf of a smaller group which was to occupy the house, it was an exercise in social relatedness and endorsement of the family as a social unit. The same happened in reverse at the end of a house's use-life, as partially fired daub fragments such as this attest; many (possibly most) houses in Neolithic Italy were intentionally burnt to close their use-life, probably as part of a ritual of closure marking some transition in the social group living in it.

Then, food. The second item, a cow metapodial with cut marks from stone tools (Plate 1b), fits into a second set of distinctions and practices. The two most prominent categories of Neolithic foods were bulk carbohydrates from grains and pulses, on one hand, and meat, on the other hand. Isotopic evidence suggests that vegetable foods accounted for the overwhelming bulk of what was consumed. Yet it would be wrong to regard meat as 'prestigious' and starches as simply the calories which kept people alive; the two formed different registers of culinary meaning. In many, perhaps most, cultures, staples such as bread, rice and maize embody the very concept of food and are loaded with meanings of home, family, hospitality, nourishing and sharing within the community, and this was probably the case in Neolithic Italy as well. Meat, in contrast, formed the food of inter-household sociality. Several lines of evidence suggest the sociality of animal foods. Animals, particularly cattle, were social valuables, guarded, managed and traded; building

Plate 1 The detritus of daily life in Neolithic Southern Italy: six artefacts from the sites of Umbro and Penitenzeria, Bova Marina, Calabria (all photos: Bova Marina Archaeological Project): (a) house daub from Penitenzeria (upper left); (b) cattle bone with cut marks from Umbro (upper right); (c) fragment of small decorated bowl from Penitenzeria (middle left); (d) obsidian bladelet from Penitenzeria (middle right); (e) fragment of broken polished stone axe from Penitenzeria (bottom left); (f) figurine from Penitenzeria (bottom right).

up a household herd would have been a long-term project of careful planning and management of both animals and obligations. At the end of the animal's social biography, consumption was an equally social event. Meat was eaten infrequently, but when an animal was slaughtered, meat – particularly beef – became available in quantities much greater than an immediate household could consume. There is some suggestion of

particular ways of cooking associated with feasts, and it is not hard to imagine the social performance involved in killing, cooking and sharing out an animal among kin and associates who have come together for the event. We may also imagine that the distinctive flavours, colours and smells of these two contrasting categories of foods (meat and grains) would have formed part of the Neolithic sensorium and marked people's experience and memories of the social occasions of eating. Here, at our sites, cattle are particularly rare, with most animals being sheep, goats or pigs, and probably no more than a couple of dozen people lived here. If the sharing of meat among a group called together from surrounding communities was a rule-bound festive occasion, consuming the 250–500kg of beef which accompanied this cow bone must have been particularly special.

Besides creating a spatial world and eating, people make things. Pottery is the quintessential Neolithic craft. Here the typical wares – 'Stentinello' finewares with dark burnished surfaces and stamped geometric decorations (Plate 1c) – lead us in contradictory directions. On one hand, they are highly ornate and made with great skill. They incorporate a detailed knowledge of local clays and how they behave when worked and fired; they are regularly formed and attentively decorated in complex patterns often highlighted with white or red pastes to create striking colour contrasts. It is clear that pottery-making was done by experienced people employing expertise, intelligence, patience and hard work. On the other hand, given the needs of a very small community, this handful of potters probably made very few pots, and there is nothing to suggest that these potters were specialists in any sense besides being recognized locally for their skill. These pots were not objects of political patronage or particular ritual contexts. Nor do the vessels seem to have been circulated or treated as particularly prestigious wares. We are left with three insights. First, pottery-making was a strongly rule-bound field of practice, governed by a long-standing tradition; while every vessel is unique, it is unique in carefully modulated minor differences, so that prescribed creative divergence is intrinsic to the canon. Second, pots do not seem to have been the objects of exchange or of particular care; rather, beyond providing useful containers, potting seems to have been a field of practice in which skill was exercised basically for its own sake – for the satisfaction of the potter, as an exercise of agency within a small network of practitioners, effectively a local conversation. Third, of all the fields of practice, potting was the most local; the elaborate designs show geographically nested styles and micro-styles, and two people's ability to 'read' a vessel would clearly show up the gaps in local knowledge and the social distance separating them.

Other tools formed parts of other fields of action. With some exceptions, lithic industries in Neolithic Italy in general seem to have been regarded as a relatively uninteresting, basically functional field of practice – a culturally particular way of producing a functional cutting edge which contrasts with (for example) the much greater interest in elaborate lithics in Upper Palaeolithic Europe. Much of the social interest involved with stone tools probably revolved around either the few examples of overt high skill involved – particularly fashioning dedicated blade cores – or the journeys they represent to get the raw material. For obsidian (Plate 1d), there was also the added interest of their striking colour and transparency which seems to have been valued, and contextual evidence at some sites suggests that these tools may have been used for particular social purposes too. These generalizations remain true in our Calabrian sites, but there is a bit more to add. Because these sites are only about 100km from Lipari, the obsidian source supplying an

exchange network reaching up to 1000km away, obsidian is common here. It was probably collected directly in seasonal trips via canoe to the Lipari Islands (Farr 2008). While relatively close, such trips were not trivial. Besides requiring boats and detailed navigational knowledge, they could take up to weeks and involved negotiating intricate, sometimes dangerous weather conditions in the Straits of Messina as well as managing social contacts with other groups en route. Such journeys were probably socially significant group projects. Once obtained, skilled hands reduced obsidian to prismatic blade cores which were either used up locally or traded on; the latter depended upon a network of individuals extending across peninsular Italy and sharing a similar valuation of obsidian's colour, translucency and sharpness and probably of its social uses as well.

Axes travelled too: from stone sources in northern Calabria and the Alps, they were traded throughout Italy. Axes had three uses: they were daily tools for woodworking and similar tasks and probably were weapons as well, they could be exchanged as social valuables and they could be deposited ritually in caves and possibly in open air contexts as well. Virtually all axes found on habitation sites, like the one pictured as Plate 1e, are heavily fragmented and many show long life spans of remodelling and re-sharpening. This suggests that deciding to use an axe as a working tool meant breaking it and consuming it, probably within a few years. On the other hand, axes in ritual contexts, while sometimes smaller, are normally in perfect condition, and axes kept for trade presumably were too, as axes in perfect condition are found in regions far from axe sources. For our purposes here, what is interesting is how axes moved between fields of practice. When one obtained or produced an axe, one would have been faced with a choice of which form of social action to direct it into; occasional finds such as the cache of five new axes outside a house at Capo Alfiere in northern Calabria show moments in this process, when axes are frozen as social valuables before being committed to either fate. Inasmuch as both exchange and working with axes were socially important, we can see axe biographies entwined with and helping to shape human biographies.

The most unusual artefact at Penitenzeria turned out to be a small figurine (Plate 1f), barely 3cm high and made of fired clay. Technologically, this piece was made using the same techniques and materials as the pots and probably by the same people, providing an instance of habituated skills being employed across distinct fields of action. What is it? It falls into the genre of female figurines known throughout Neolithic Italy, but this only becomes apparent through extensive formal comparison, because a cardinal feature of this genre is the remarkable variation it shows in how the female body is abstracted and represented. Figurines such as this were probably used in small, perhaps private rites performed across Italy but relatively infrequently. They attest both to participation in a common ritual practice which linked together very widespread communities – some female life-cycle event is a plausible conjecture perhaps – and to the extremely local character of the communities of practice involved in which each local community made up its own form of representation.

Agency and history

I would take two major points from this about agency. First, the busy, relentlessly quotidian archaeological record of Neolithic Italy is really telling us not about 'economy'

or 'social structure' but about projects – about people choosing to plan and performing, often over years or decades, some task, which also defined them, their knowledge and abilities and their relations with others socially, which changes them. Agency is an ability to act to some effect in a particular context. Here, each artefact we have discussed can be placed in a field of action such as building, residing in and destroying a house (and perhaps creating and dissolving the social unit it represents), nourishing oneself and others in ways which created social relations as well as bodies, and making and exchanging things in ways which positioned oneself with relationship to things, traditions and other practitioners. And there are many others we could mention – violence and warfare, burial, village architecture, ritual, and hunting, for instance. In many examples, we can discern something of the nature and meaning of the field of action, but also get a sense of the individual action underlying the particular instance illustrated here – and sometimes how the two relate.

Second, such projects are fundamentally relational, not only in that they always involve the participation of others who are themselves carrying out their own projects, but also in the ways which the material practices dictate for carrying them out. Within each field of action, producing and using each object depended upon and recreated particular relationships between people (in defining a household, in eating together, in recognizing and discussing each others' pottery, in carrying out ritual practices), between people and objects, and even between objects. In a sense, the person deciding to build a house or hold a feast supplies the agency of why; the field of action defining what building a house or holding a feast consists of and how it has to be done supplies the agency of how. And the bundling together, overlap and coherence between life projects is where social reproduction occurs.

Coherences and the big picture   All of this is relatively straightforward to demonstrate for individual objects and projects. A much more ambitious project, and one to which archaeologists must aspire, is to see how such projects accumulate to form historicized forms of agency. Sets of coherences build such projects into an absorbing social world, a social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). One obvious set of coherences is material and social chains binding different fields of action together. Trading for axes was necessary to build houses and boats, boats were necessary to obtain obsidian and obsidian was needed both for a basic cutting edge and for trade. Home bases were necessary to keep herds, and herds were necessary to form social relations with kin and neighbours, which in turn could help recruit support for social purposes such as building houses, getting married, trading, ritual and fighting. A second kind of coherence involves cross-cutting meanings. Gender symbolism is attested in burial position, in body modification (intentional tooth removal) and in figurines. Colours, wild animals and places such as caves probably provided fertile sources of symbolism, deployed in specific ritual contexts.

Probably the greatest vehicle of experiential coherence, however, was the complex Neolithic Italian social landscape. It was defined through frequentation, through daily circulation among villages, gardens, foraging grounds and other places, some quite unusual (e.g. high mountains, deep caves). The landscape was a locus of knowledge about resources and histories; it was the way social relations between spatially situated communities happened, whether amicably through trade and visiting or through hostile

raiding and xenophobia. The landscape was an externalized locus of knowledge, but it was so to different people in different ways. To the extent that effective and appropriate action depended upon social relations and knowledge, the ability to be an agent was highly localized rather than inherent and translatable.

Building upon this, we can in some places sense the kinds of persons this process of social reproduction created. As noted above, if we consider people as moving between multiple, contextually situated forms of agency, then it is worth considering how these forms of agency related to each other to present the possibilities of personhood. Consider the contextual bounding of agency in Neolithic Italy. Neolithic Italians traded widely, but this trade does not seem to have been aimed at getting and displaying particularly prestigious goods. Neolithic people were gendered, but in most contexts (for instance, burial treatment) gender distinctions seem scarcely marked. Neolithic people fought and wounded each other, but violence and warfare were not integrated into general political symbolisms and the targets of skeletal harm seem to have been equally males and females. Neolithic people lavished care on pottery but they did so in ways which limited its intelligibility outside the immediate local group. All of these patterns, and more, are striking by contrast with the end of the Neolithic and the Copper and Bronze Ages, when a much more (to us) comprehensible pattern emerges: traded goods were also politically prestigious icons which were also deposited as grave goods and so on. The general picture is that, in the Neolithic, people acted with agency but not as the kind of individuals we expect to encounter on the basis of our own experience. The pattern of social aesthetics was a kind of heterarchy of agencies, the multiplication of social difference for its own sake. Many activities and symbolisms were socially valued but, unlike later periods such as the Copper and Bronze Ages, these were not aligned around a few simple, 'political' values such as prestige and hierarchy (Robb 1999, 2007, 2008, 2009). In effect, as changes in prehistoric art themselves suggest, there was a shift from an idea of personhood as a highly variable assemblage of qualities, experiences and citations to a much more uniform idea in which difference is subordinated to a relatively simple, singular idea of wholeness. In turn, such historically situated possibilities for action themselves had consequences for how history unfolded on a larger scale. Heterarchical Neolithic personhood, with its many forms of status and prestige, tended to diffuse the impact of innovations by maintaining them within bounded contexts, underwriting several millennia of busy but relatively stable social life. In contrast, later forms of personhood, by allowing translation of concepts such as 'prestige' from one context to another, allowed a mechanism for amplifying change, allowing change to spread much more rapidly and providing a potential basis for the growth of extensive social hierarchies.

Where are we now? An archaeology with agency

Understanding forms of agency different from our own is perhaps the most difficult challenge we face as prehistoric anthropologists. Here ancient people appear as a kind of holographic presence, emerging from the intersection of many distinct fields of action. Cultural agency is visible in the spaces in which we expect to see familiar kinds of people – and we do not see them.

Buzzwords have different trajectories. Some remain central and prominent concepts for decades. Some are comprehensively demolished by critique and fade or sink like a stone. Some enter the mainstream of thought as their usefulness is recognized and they facilitate other, newer thoughts. 'Agency' has really followed this latter path. It was introduced into archaeological theory primarily as a corrective, a way of turning from system-oriented views back to views centred on individual people. If one tracks publications foregrounding the concept since about 1990, they seem to peak in the late 1990s; outside Barrett's work, the term really did not form a prominent part of post-processualist terminology, although it was more prominent in processualism. However, the model of the actor involved – particularly the concepts of the duality of structure and of habitus – have become almost universally used in almost all strains of Anglophone archaeological theory. In effect, from being 'flavour of the month', agency has been digested and entered the bloodstream of normal archaeological practice. We are well beyond 'finding agency in the past' as the issue was sometimes put in the 1990s. Rather than doing an 'archaeology of agency', we are really practising an 'archaeology with agency'. Indeed, we have internalized the lessons of agency as social reproduction and as relationality in the current reflexive focus upon archaeological practice, in our own agency as archaeologists (for example, among others, Yarrow 2008).

In many ways, therefore, we are beyond agency; we have learned what we can from the concept and can move on. However, it is worth retaining the concept in our field's discursive consciousness. It is argued here that agency – the capacity for effective and meaningful action – is really a quality of the relationships in which humans act. This is so regardless of the elements forming them (people in specific contexts, people acting across contexts, groups, things). Hence, in thinking about how people are able to act, we open the door to lots of new questions which, with previous versions of agency theory, were very difficult to think – multiple agencies, collective agencies and material agencies.

Acknowledgements

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John Robb
University of Cambridge

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Notes

1 For example, Turner's work on dramas and fields of symbolism parallels some of Bourdieu's on habitus and strategy (see Turner (1988) on the role of performance in social reproduction), and Turner's insights on polysemy approach Bourdieu's discussion of the 'loose logic' of symbols.

2 'Doxa is the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a habitus and the field to which it is attuned, the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense' (Bourdieu 1990: 68). Habitus as a system of bodily dispositions is thus both a sub-area of doxa, in the sense that we can have doxic beliefs about things not immediately of the body, and the medium through which doxa is generated (e.g. in Bourdieu's example of the Kabyle house, the meanings of space are generated through the action of bodily movement through it).

3 Interestingly, there has also been a countervailing strand of common-sense interpretation which attributes transformative powers to things. This historically turns up in social campaigns against 'agents of destruction' such as weapons, drugs or alcohol or for practices of improvement such as cleanliness and hygienic practices.

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John Robb is Reader in European Prehistory at the University of Cambridge. He researches archaeological theory, Mediterranean prehistory and human skeletal remains and funerary rituals. He is the author of *The Early Mediterranean Village: Agency, Material Culture and Social Change in Neolithic Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).