

SCIENCE, EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A response to Ingold (this issue)

We are delighted that Tim Ingold has sought to draw our article to the attention of anthropologists.¹ Our intention in publishing in a multidisciplinary, peer-commentary journal was to stimulate discussion with others interested in the study of culture. We hoped our article would encourage anthropologists to appreciate the diversity of methods and findings that draw on cultural evolutionary theory, and to consider such methods and findings in a constructive and unbiased manner. However, productive engagement is hardly likely to be facilitated by the inflammatory tone of Ingold's article, which egregiously distorts our arguments. We feel he does anthropology a disservice by propagating false oppositions between our approach and some of the best work in the discipline he purports to represent. In this brief comment, we would like to point out some of Ingold's major misrepresentations (summarized in italics).

1. *We present anthropology negatively.* While we did lament a lack of progress and faltering reputation in anthropology relative to other disciplines, Ingold grossly exaggerates our stance. Nowhere did we describe anthropology as 'nihilistic', 'self-destructive' or 'introspective', nor did we state that it had 'lost all credibility'. We took pains to justify our measured and constructive criticism of anthropology by citing and quoting anthropologists themselves. Indeed, we might also have cited Ingold's own position on the scientific status of anthropology: 'It would be a fair reflection of the current state of affairs in [anthropology] to observe that [...] [anthropologists] have pushed the issue of anthropology as science to the sidelines, if not excluded it altogether' (Ingold 2004: 177). Ingold's exaggeration only further perpetuates divisions between anthropology and other disciplines.

2. *We seek to 'biologize' anthropology.* Ingold fosters the false impression that we seek to reduce all cultural processes to biology or genetics. In fact, we argued that researchers can take advantage of the parallels between biological and cultural change to model a science of culture along the lines of evolutionary biology, with these biological and cultural sciences afforded equal status. This claim was explicitly non-reductive, and Ingold's portrayal of our exercise as no more than sociobiology, evolutionary psychology or memetics is misleading.

3. *We present a distorted, idiosyncratic and flawed version of 'evolutionary biology'.* We presented the accepted, mainstream version of evolutionary biology, explicitly taken from the leading evolutionary biology textbook of Futuyma (1998). To the extent that our perspective differs from the mainstream, it is in stressing the active role of organisms in constructing developmental and selective

environments (Odling Smee et al. 2003). We advocated the integration of development into our theoretical framework, and noted with approval the emergence of 'evo-devo', niche construction theory and DST (one of us even contributed to the same DST volume as Ingold; see Laland et al. 2001).

4. *We reduce people to 'trait-bearing cultural clones whose only role in life is to express[...] information'.* Nowhere did we make any such claim. In fact, we wrote that '[b]rains are not empty vessels that simply store (or are 'infected by') memes; rather, there are rich, biologically evolved, developmentally generated cognitive structures in the brain that shape cultural transmission' (MWL: 369).

5. *Our 'entire scientific project is based [on the distinction] between people in 'traditional' communities, whose behaviour is governed by evolved traits, and rational people like [MWL] who are in a position to study them'.* We cited numerous psychological, economic and sociological studies of cultural evolution in Western populations, who are subject to the same fundamental processes of cultural change as people elsewhere in the world. Ingold's attempt to ascribe false political motives to our work does him no credit.

6. *'Studies of culture change inspired by neo-Darwinian models have signally failed to account for anything that could not be far more satisfactorily explained by other means'.*

We cited numerous studies where evolutionary methods have been used to address specific problems. Many of these studies use evolutionary methods to extend and enrich (not replace) existing anthropological work. Interested readers who wish to judge for themselves might begin by reading Aunger's (2000) quantitative ethnography of Congolese food taboo transmission, Henrich's (2004) model of Tasmanian culture loss, Holden and Mace's (2003) coevolutionary analysis of farming and matrilineal descent, Mesoudi and Laland's (2007) coevolutionary analysis of partible paternity, Tehrani and Collard's (2002) phylogenetic analysis of Turkmen textiles, or Whiten et al.'s (2001) ethnography of chimpanzee culture. Ingold, in contrast, does not cite a single empirical study that uses his 'relational' theory to improve our understanding of a phenomenon.

Unfortunately we do not have space to highlight the many other distortions in Ingold's article. We encourage readers of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY to consult our article and judge for themselves. It would be lamentable if anthropology were to be further ignored and decried by members of other disciplines because of unhelpful misrepresentation and scaremongering such as this. ●

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1. Like Ingold, by 'anthropology' and 'anthropologists' we refer here to social and cultural anthropology/ anthropologists. 'MWL' refers to Mesoudi, Whiten and Laland (2006).

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'WHAT DOES WHAT I AM DOING MEAN TO YOU?'

A response to the recent discussion on Tribe

As an archaeologist who has recently completed a study about the meanings of archaeology in contemporary popular culture (Holtorf 2007), I have been following the discussion about *Tribe* in the pages of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY with great interest. As Paul Rainbird (2006) notes, archaeology, unlike anthropology, is well established on our TV screens. The film historian Karol Kulik has even argued that the late 1990s and early 2000s should be considered a 'golden age' of archaeology in the British mass media. Between 1998 and 2002, an astonishing 651 archaeological documentary programmes (including repeats and episodes within series) were scheduled on the four British channels BBC1, BBC2, Channel 4 and ITV, the most popular attracting over 5 million viewers (Kulik 2006). Data collected by the Council for British Archaeology indicate that the five terrestrial TV channels taken together broadcast 31 series and 19 one-off documentaries with archaeological content in 2001 alone. Many of these series are being sold internationally and can be seen around the world.

Like anthropology, archaeology has its stereotypes and clichés in films and the media. Most common are references to the adventure

hero Indiana Jones. Reminiscent of ‘imperial adventure tales for boys’, the famous trilogy starring Harrison Ford is predicated on ‘an imperialized globe, in which archaeology professors can “rescue” artefacts from the colonized world for the greater benefit of science and civilization’ (Shohat and Stam 1994: 124). What is more, the Indiana Jones films represent gender relations in terms of strong, macho men and attractive attribute-women that are, to say the least, unhelpful in present society. The widely popularized image of the archaeologist as adventurer even has an impact on the self-perception of archaeologists, affecting recruitment, specialization and preferences for certain professional activities. In the past, women have sometimes been actively discouraged from going into the field at all. Although much has improved and female students are now often in the majority in archaeology degree programmes, they may occasionally still feel pressure (or a desire) to act in a more ‘masculine’ way on excavations. All this makes me want to agree with Pat Caplan (2005) and Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2006) that the media presentation of anthropology (or, as in my example, archaeology) needs to be carefully scrutinized and that existing popular images may not be appropriate as indications of what anthropology or archaeology have to offer society.

Having said that, many archaeologists still seem to feel that the most important criterion for evaluating the way they are depicted in the mass media is the degree to which these representations conform to their own perception of being an archaeologist – ‘but *in reality* it’s not as shown in that programme’; the extent to which the information conveyed would be academically defensible – ‘but you simply cannot put it *as simplistically as that*’; or whether it might harm their own professional interests in



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- "Archaeology? Digging? That's only the half of it there's also troweling, mattocking, barrowing, backfilling, shoring, sectioning, shovelling, draining, de-turfing...."

society – ‘but this implies that *anybody* could go and retrieve ancient artefacts’. For many archaeologists the key issue appears to be that they feel fundamentally misrepresented in the depiction of both the existing knowledge about the past and their own occupation. Complaints about inaccuracies and misunderstandings in films and the mass media are therefore very common. The question, however, is whether it is not the archaeologists themselves who misunderstand the role and function of the media. Arguably, these relate to perceptual rather than referential realities, presenting dramatic rather than strictly veritable truths. In other words, ‘the audience’s perceived reality is more important than the scientists’ referential reality’ (Frank 2003: 453).

The overwhelming majority of people seem to have little difficulty in distinguishing film realities from lived realities, past or present.

I do not believe that more than a very few think that all professional archaeologists literally seek golden treasures in the jungle. But the most important point here is not the fact that professional archaeology and popular culture operate within very different frames of reference that are widely recognized for what they are. Rather, it is crucial to step back and consider some of the bigger issues at stake.

Archaeology’s positive appeal provides an enormous opportunity for the entire

discipline in that it can create a lot of goodwill and interest. There is one crucial condition though. Archaeologists will only be able to use the wide appeal of their own brand if they themselves stand behind it and embrace its connotations in their work. As André Singer (2006) argued with reference to *Tribe*, it makes little sense to condemn programming that provokes welcome interest in the discipline. It simply astonishes me that a fairly large proportion of archaeologists still seem to find nothing more urgent than to distance themselves from popular heroes like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft. It is deeply ironic that archaeologists appear to find little harder than coming to terms with the seemingly limitless and virtually unrivalled popularity of their own subject in the mainstream. The archaeologists’ gut reaction is the equivalent to Greenpeace beginning a public presentation about its work by stating that ‘real Greenpeace activists practically never work in a small rubber dinghy fighting illegal whalers’. Although true, this would achieve nothing except to alienate an initially favourable audience before it has had an opportunity to hear what *else* you have to offer to them.

Arguably, the most important question that archaeologists in public contexts need to ask their audiences is not ‘How can I best persuade you of the merits of my project or discipline?’ but ‘What does what I am doing mean to you?’ (Ascherson 2004: 157). Yet to date these meanings have been little investigated by archaeologists. As I argue in my book (Holtorf 2007), archaeology is meaningful because it tells stories that are both exciting and relevant to many. Archaeological stories are about heroes who overcome adversities and solve mysteries. Like detectives, archaeologists analyse hidden clues, paying meticulous attention to detail. Their research often addresses, and sometimes offers tentative answers to, major existential questions or other issues of great significance to many people. What is more, archaeologists are increasingly seen as taking responsibility for scarce resources on behalf of future generations. As all this indicates, the process of *doing* archaeology, whether in the field, in the laboratory or on a construction



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- "Oh this, we find this sort of stuff all the time"

site, dominates archaeology's popular image – just as fieldwork is crucial in the depiction of anthropology (MacClancy 2005, Fish and Evershed 2006). In short, for a majority of people archaeology (like anthropology) is a verb.

Archaeological characters and the stories they live matter to people, for they reflect not only some of their own dreams and aspirations but also issues of concern and immediate relevance to their own lives. We all live through adventures in which we need to overcome adversity, hoping to emerge as heroes. We all need to attend to detail occasionally, hoping to solve complex cases. We all wonder about what it all means and where it will all end, hoping to gain some certainty and peace of mind in an uncertain world. We all need to take care of our resources, whether personally, as employees or as world citizens, hoping that we will manage. In other words, archaeology tells us stories that relate directly to our lives. It is these stories that give archaeology currency in the contemporary world. They show to what extent people in Western cultures relish certain dreams and experiences that transform us as human beings and give our lives meaning. The best of media archaeology evokes some of these dreams and experiences while at the same time addressing issues of concern to us all.

The issue is thus not how professional archaeologists can make those people who love Heinrich Schliemann, Indiana Jones, Lara Croft or *Time Team* more interested in their own version of archaeology. The issue is rather what the popularity of figures such as these can tell the professionals about the themes and interests they need to address themselves (Moore 2006).

As a major report stated, the problem is not one of a lack of 'public understanding of science' but increasingly a lack of scientific understanding of the public (Hargreaves and Ferguson 2000). Regrettably, archaeologists themselves often have a fairly limited understanding of what an archaeologist actually is, or does, in Western societies and what archaeological stories in the media are ultimately all about.

Eventually they may find that much of the public appeal – and much of the social relevance – of archaeology lies on a level other than they have been used to assume. I wonder if something similar might also be said about anthropology.

As recent analysis by Jeremy MacClancy (2005) suggests, it could be said that for too long both archaeologists and anthropologists have wrongly regarded the academic versions of their disciplines as the only kind of archaeology and anthropology worthy of the name. This view is no longer adequate. ●

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CULTURE, CRITIQUE AND CREDIBILITY

Speaking truth to power during the long war

In the 'long war', it seems, anthropologists are a hot property. I am surely not the only anthropologist whose position on involvement vacillates uneasily between the poles of a debate that is unlikely to go away anytime soon. My career has me smack inside what George Marcus refers to as the 'intell/security apparatus',¹ where I watch policy-makers' quest for the computational equivalent of a crystal ball. The work I have cut out for myself is to develop a cogent critique of attempts to apply complexity mathematics to culture for the purposes of decision-making (see McNamara 2006).

Whether or not anyone will listen is another question: history says I will have minimal impact working from inside these institutions,² while Jeremy Keenan (2006:9) warns that we should 'remain located outside the corrupting sphere of intelligence agencies and government bodies' so that we can credibly act as witnesses, recorders and interpreters of truth. And yet, as we follow Keenan's exhortations to witness truth against the official 'conspiracy theories' about terrorism and war, I wonder if we shouldn't be more stringent in applying the same standards of intellectual credibility to ourselves.

On two recent occasions, I have heard PhD-level anthropologists make claims about 9/11 hijackers currently hiding under the protection of the US government. Wacky fringe? Consider Houtman's recent *AT* editorial, which summarizes two 'alternative' explanations for 9/11 (Houtman 2006). One of the theories alleges 'massive complicity in this attack by US government operatives', while another claims that the Twin Towers were taken down by thermite explosive charges. Houtman writes: 'It is deplorable that academics critical of incomplete, often inaccurate versions of

these disasters are professionally ridiculed.'³ Reading this article, a physicist colleague of mine was aghast. 'Whatever happened to Occam's Razor?' he asked.

Similarly troubling is the belief that there is some special connection between Raphael Patai's book *The Arab mind* and torture at Abu Ghraib. Journalist Seymour Hersh raised this spectre, though he never quite committed himself to the claim. Yes, he says that Patai's book was 'frequently cited' by neoconservative hawks, referencing an 'academic source' who described Patai's book as the 'bible of the neocons on Arab behavior' (Hersh 2004). But nowhere does he give us anything even approaching the 'smoking book'.

Most anthropologists, it seems, would beg to differ with me. At the 2006 business meeting of the American Anthropological Association,⁴ a full quorum passed a resolution decrying the war in Iraq and specifically condemning the use of 'anthropological knowledge as an element of physical and psychological torture'. *Inside Higher Education* quoted Gerald Sider applauding his colleagues for taking a stand against 'mealy-mouthed policies that don't hold responsible those scum with PhDs who stand beside torturers' (Jaschik 2006). Later, David Price (2006) identified 'rogue anthropologists and CIA contract torturers' as two groups of intended recipients for the resolution's message. The latest salvo came when Robert Gonzalez published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which he cited Hersh's essay to warn against a 'new and dangerous phase in applied anthropology' (Gonzalez 2007).

Yet it is worth questioning the extent to which ethnography played a specific role in detainee abuse. Even assuming that ideas drawn from Patai fed torture strategies, generals and anthropologists alike might be giving his ethnography too much credit. As Gregory Starrett recently commented, '[c]ould one seriously suggest that the ritual impurity of dogs is the key to understanding why naked Muslim prisoners are frightened by their snarling?' (Starrett 2005; see also Smith 2004). The work of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo has much more to say about what happened at Abu Ghraib than does a dated ethnography (Zimbardo 1971).

Neither ethnography nor ethnographers are required for torture. Moreover, no special connection to ethnography is necessary for us to say, simply, that torture is unacceptable as a practice of liberal democracies.⁵ And that statement is about as far as we can credibly go: despite an allegedly 'growing body of evidence' that anthropological writings are being used in 'torture' (Jaschik 2006), no one has yet offered any direct evidence of individual anthropologists engaged in, supporting, or advocating torture in the context of Iraq, Afghanistan, or Guantánamo. It's not impossible, of course, but even David Price agrees that there is no evidence linking any specific anthropologist to the design or implementation of torture techniques today.⁶

Sweeping, poorly supported claims and allegations, even those made in the heat of a rhe-