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DIALECTICS, HETERARCHY, AND WESTERN PUEBLO SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Dean J. Saitta and Randall H. McGuire

Rautman's critique of our article "Although They Have Petty Captains They Obey Them Badly: The Dialectics of Prehispanic Western Pueblo Social Organization" (McGuire and Saitta 1996) provides us with an opportunity to clarify some points about our theoretical perspective. Rautman shares our dissatisfaction with attempts to characterize Prehispanic western pueblo social organization as either egalitarian or hierarchical. She, however, questions our dismissal of processual theory and our advocacy of a dialectical approach to the problem. She proposes instead an alternative approach that relies on the concept of heterarchy. We have little problem with the use of heterarchy as a descriptive label for late Prehispanic pueblo social organization, but we desire a more dynamic understanding of that organization than the concept of heterarchy allows. We find that understanding in a dialectical approach.

La crítica de Rautman de nuestro artículo "Although They Have Petty Captains They Obey Them Badly: The Dialectics of Prehispanic Western Pueblo Social Organization" (McGuire and Saitta 1996) nos ofrece una oportunidad de clarificar nuestra perspectiva teórica. Rautman está de acuerdo con nuestra crítica de los intentos de calificar la organización social de los Indios prehispánicos de los Pueblos Occidentales como una sociedad igualitaria o como sociedad jerárquica. Sin embargo, ella desconfia de nuestro rechazo de teoría procesual y nuestro apoyo del uso de una teoría dialéctica para explicar la organización social de estos Indios prehispánicos. Alternativamente, ella propone el concepto de heterarquía. Nos gusta el concepto de heterarquía para describir la organización social de los Indios Pueblo en el época prehispánica tardía, pero deseamos un conocimiento de esa organización más dinámica de lo ofrecido por el concepto de heterarquía. Encontramos este conocimiento en una teoría dialéctica.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to Rautman's thoughtful and constructive comment on our paper. Our major goal in the initial paper was to redirect the debate about Prehispanic pueblo social organization away from unproductive bipolar positions to more nuanced considerations of the nature and dynamics of that organization. Rautman's critique fulfills that goal for us. Along with Rautman, we start from the very important position that late western pueblo social organization was complex and contradictory. Addressing the points of disagreement that Rautman raises allows us to better clarify some aspects of our conceptual framework. We hope that this exchange of ideas will extend the discussion of aboriginal social organization in the Southwest/Northwest¹ in new and productive directions.

Our article challenged the oppositional thinking

about pueblo social organization that, in our view, is reflected by the Grasshopper–Chavez Pass debate and that has hindered thinking about the meaning of the puebloan archaeological record. Rautman agrees with us that oppositional thinking is unproductive. She disagrees, however, in claiming that this sort of thinking is not a necessary consequence of a processual analytical framework. Rautman proposes that the concept of heterarchy—a concept borne of processualist commitments to the study of social “systems”—can capture the sort of organizational variability and interplay between puebloan egalitarianism and hierarchy that we explored in our article. She also argues that we should not ask *if* societies are complex, but rather *how* they are complex.

We think that Rautman makes good points on both counts. To the extent that the concept of heterarchy allows that the constituent “elements” or

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“variables” in a system can be related in different ways, it directs us to think in terms of organizational *variability*, and the suggestion of organizational variability is what’s most interesting about the archaeological record. We especially agree with Rautman’s claim that organizational *complexity* is to be found in any society and that our task is to illuminate the nature and transformative potential of that complexity.

However, the difficulty for us is that, although useful as a general framing concept, heterarchy as an analytical concept is static and silent on the issue of causality. It does not direct us to think in terms of particular causal powers, nor does it address the sorts of internal dynamics that we see organizing pueblo social life. Put another way, heterarchy is an abstraction that does not capture our interest in the “lived experience” of ancestral puebloan peoples. Rautman is aware of this limitation, we think, where she states that “proposing a heterarchical organization in a given society does not uniquely identify any single organizational structure.” And, in the same sentence Rautman recognizes that heterarchy is just a beginning in understanding: “the concept forces us to specify more clearly the context and temporal duration of the relationships we are describing.” Thus, we have little problem with the use of heterarchy as a descriptive label for late Prehispanic pueblo social organization, but we desire a more particular and dynamic understanding of that organization than the concept of heterarchy allows.

The reason why we value the concept of heterarchy differently than Rautman relates to some differences we have with her concerning larger epistemological commitments. As discussed in our article, we are committed to dialectics as an organizing principle for building social theory. As an organizing epistemological commitment, dialectics directs us to theoretical concepts that are useful for simultaneously explaining *and* transforming the world. Processualist commitments to concepts like “system” and “self-organization” are less useful for us in this dual purpose than are concepts such as “social formation” and social “struggle.” We view social life in terms of bundles of processes that are locked in complex and contradictory interplay, rather than (as stipulated by the concept of heterarchy) a set of systemic “elements” that can be ranked or unranked

in different ways and that usually require external inputs to produce change. Our preferred concepts imply an interest in particular kinds of causal dynamics, and they have a particular “critical” edge that is not associated with the concept of heterarchy. Thus, while processualist archaeology may not, as Rautman suggests, necessarily stipulate oppositional thinking, this critical edge is certainly still missing from its largely functionalist and evolutionist conceptual framework.

Hence our view of the pueblos as “communal” rather than heterarchical. Use of the term “communal” sends a message about the specific kinds of social processes that are of analytical interest to us. The concept makes a specific statement about how we see these societies being organized; i.e., as involving the collective appropriation of surplus labor. This in turn allows us to distinguish communal forms from other arrangements for mobilizing surplus, e.g., tributary and capitalist forms. By qualifying the term “communal” with “complex” we send an additional message that collective appropriation of surplus is neither “simple” nor “egalitarian,” but rather can involve multiple and even competing political hierarchies, various forms of productive specialization and, in certain times and places, uneasy articulation with *non*-communal relations of surplus appropriation.

In this view communalism becomes much more than, as Rautman suggests, “just one form of heterarchical organization in a middle-range society.” For us, “middle-range society” does not exist. Although it is now commonplace to think about societies as occupying places along continua of organizational variation, this perspective can dull appreciation of some important features that radically differentiate societies from each other. As noted above, of special interest to us is how societies vary in the ways they appropriate social surplus labor. A typology of social formations incorporating, minimally, communal, tributary, and capitalist forms captures important differences in the ways that human groups produce and distribute social surplus. These concepts in turn invite investigation of how these relations are variously created and reproduced across time and space. Some relations can be reproduced via fairly rigid political hierarchy while others can involve more flexible “heterarchies” of various sorts. Understanding these relationships, as well as the

specific tensions and contradictions that can change social formations from within, is the object of empirical research. Rautman is with us in recognizing such variability, but in our view a concept of heterarchy is neither essential to understanding it, nor necessarily preferable to other ways of proceeding.

In sum, we share with Rautman an interest in organizational variability, but we have different ways of thinking about it and, perhaps, different ultimate goals for archaeological inquiry. We can study the past with concepts borne of an objectivist interest in making sense of "what happened," or we can study the past with concepts that, dialectically, also remind us of (and confront us with) the historical contingency of our own lived experience. The difference is important. We think that analysis of the intellectual and *social* causes and consequences of concepts used to interpret the archaeological record is an important piece of neglected business in our discipline. It is time to evaluate the merits and limitations of concepts and

typologies not only in terms of how they help us interpret and explain the past, but also in terms of their productivity for creating certain subjectivities or consciousnesses about the nature of lived experience across time and space. It is this notion that gives our dialectical approach its "critical" edge. We did not allude to this idea in our original paper, let alone develop it. Rautman's comment brings the issue to the foreground, however, and thus her intervention is an important and constructive contribution to the discussion. We look forward to helping sustain it.

Note

1. The cultural area that archaeologists have traditionally called the Southwest includes the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. From the perspective of Mexico this is the Northwest. The label Southwest/Northwest preserves the traditional term but also breaks down the chauvinism of only viewing the area from a North American perspective.

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