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

It was just a matter of time, however, before the concept of human agency would itself come under fire. Charles Orser (2003, 131), worried that agency had become an ‘all inclusive buzzword’ for archaeologists, covering so many diverse human actions that the

term was ‘rapidly acquiring non-meaning’. Critiques of agency start with the observation that individual agency is just one form of agency (Johnson 1989; Hodder & Hutson 2003). Thomas (2000), drawing on Foucault, notes that the idea of the autonomous individual exercising rational choice and free will is a relatively recent invention, specific to modernity. He argues that humans always carry out their projects in the context of a concrete material world that includes other people. Thus, it is inadequate to consider human beings apart from the relationships in which they find themselves. Barrett (2001) agrees, noting that agency must include the operation of social collectives that extend beyond the individual’s own body and life-span. Indeed, Johannes Fabian (1994) has noted that human acting is always acting in company. Hodder (2004) helpfully suggests that agency, like power, is less a thing we possess than a capacity that we exercise. With Thomas, he sees the group as forming part of the resources used for individual agency, and thus views group behaviour as another form of individual agency.

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

Alternatively — and building on McGuire & Wurst — we can see individuals as always thoroughly enmeshed in a web of social relations. Collective action results from the shared consciousness or solidarity

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

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