

Around the category ‘prestige’ and the archaeology of the ‘social complexity’ in Prehistoric societies

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Resumé

Selon les paradigmes du néo-évolutionnisme et le fonctionnalisme systémique de l'archéologie processuelle l'étude de l'évolution sociale des sociétés a été enrichie avec des nouvelles méthodologies et catégories d'analyse. En utilisant des catégories telles que «la complexité sociale», ou avec des typologies de classification descriptives de cette évolution sociale, ethnographes et archéologues ont cherché des preuves de «grands hommes» ou «chefs», entre autres, lesquels ont été associés à certaines fonctions et des comportements sociaux, ainsi que le «prestige». Nous allons essayer de fournir des nouvelles perspectives d'analyse à partir des études du matérialisme historique et du féminisme, mettant l'accent sur le concept de «prestige», lequel est considérée comme une production sociale.

Mots Clés

Catégories; Néo-évolutionnisme; évolution sociale; complexité sociale; prestige.

Abstract

Under the paradigms of neoevolutionism and the systemic functionalism of processual archaeology the study of the social evolution of societies has been enriched with new methodologies and categories of analysis. Using categories such as ‘social complexity’, or with descriptive classificatory typologies of this social evolution, ethnographers and archaeologists looked for evidence of ‘Big men’ or ‘chiefs’, among others, who were associated with certain functions and social behaviours, as well as ‘prestige’. We will try to provide new perspectives of analysis from historical materialism and feminist studies, focusing on the concept ‘prestige’, which is understood as a social production.

Keywords

Categories; Neoevolutionism; social evolution; social complexity; prestige.

1. Introduction

Our aim is to explore some terms and expressions such as ‘prestige’, ‘prestige objects’, ‘economies of prestige goods’ or ‘prestigious people’, that usually appear in the archaeological bibliography. However, these terms are rarely defined, nor do they refer to a specific definition and they are often employed in a non-critical way.

Although this issue may be controversial, we believe it is necessary to address the theoretical discussion in terms of some of the concepts and categories we usually employ. Furthermore, it is necessary and important to review the epistemological and ideological implications of these concepts in the scientific process of knowledge creation in archaeology.

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These appreciations can be applied across the board to the various dominant paradigms in archaeology and, naturally, to the ones that have been hegemonic roughly since the 1950s, such as neo-evolutionism and the systemic functionalism of processual archaeology. But it is also evident in the critiques of these schools made by postprocessual or postmodern archaeology since the closing decades of the last century.

Significantly, the criteria applied to consider an object, person, structure or context as prestigious are not usually specified. There appears to be an implicit acceptance that the use of a rare raw material or of specific technologies in the production of an item automatically categorizes it as a 'prestige object'.

In addition, we often employ other categories like 'simple societies' and 'complex societies', or talk about 'social complexity', often with the same level of ambiguity.

2. Simple and complex societies

If we focus on the hegemonic paradigms such as neoevolutionism, functionalism and systemic approaches and processual archeology, which gained influence in the USA after the 2nd World War, we can confirm these claims.

An example can be taken from the evolutionary proposals in which it became common to distinguish between 'simple' and 'complex' societies. In this sense, the cultural anthropologist Elman Service created in 1962 his famous classification of the evolution of societies into 'bands', 'tribes', 'chiefdoms' and 'states' in a process of social and historical change from simple to increasingly complex (1962, p. 107, 140-142, 170-177). In a similar way, Morton Fried elaborated his own classification, with the social types: 'egalitarian', 'ranked', 'stratified societies' and 'states' (1967, x-xi).

Some years later, in 1972, Kent Flannery, from his systemic approach, offered us his definition of complexity. In his proposal he addressed the evolutionary development of societies, following the schemes of Service and Fried, with the emergence of processes of 'segregation' and 'centralization' be-

tween the different subsystems that make up any society (Flannery, 1972, p. 409). However, the model of Flannery has been criticized because it does not define the specific elements needed to qualify a society as complex. In practice, this term was reserved for those classifiable in the stages of leadership, stratification and civilization or State, while the term simple was associated with bands and tribes (Lull and Micó, 2007, p. 208).

In this context, the ethnography was used to create these categories and classifications in the process of social and historical evolution. At the same time, processual archaeology proceeded to classify objects found in the archaeological record in agreement with those classificatory typologies, associating some particular objects into a level or stage of evolution. But some criticisms argued that these proceedings accepted the premise that the variety of the previously classified ethnographic record comprised all existing human diversity, present and past. Furthermore, the heuristics limitations of this approach led to the proliferation of new categories of classifications and subdivisions, in an attempt to include those phenomena that did not fit inside the previous classifications (Lull and Micó, 2007, p. 219, 226).

But there is another approach to define complexity. In this sense, it is usually used to refer those societies with inequalities, hierarchies or social stratification. However, this approach also poses problems. Usually, it refers to the existence of exploitation of certain people based on the idea of 'surplus'. The term surplus is usually understood in the sense of excess production, once a society's basic needs have been satisfied (*i.e.* Hayden, 1995, p. 24; Johnson and Earle, 2000). But from the perspective of historical materialism surplus refers to a situation in which one person or group appropriates part of the product and achieves a social position of domination over the rest of the society (Gassiot, 2002, p. 8; Chapman, 2003, p. 97).

At this point we want to stress that, despite the critical tone of the above paragraphs, we recognize the importance of these attempted explanations of social phenomena. Especially because systemic approaches represented a break with the previous paradigm, the historical particularism, which avoided

proposing explanatory laws of social change. But this acknowledgement does not imply that we reject some of the criticisms made in recent decades. Our aim is to review this functionalist/adaptative perspective by starting from another proposal, also materialist, but with a greater presence of the 'social' (Soares, 2013, p. 60), as we will argue below.

We focus our work in hunter-gatherer-fisher societies (HGFS). In this framework, we note that, in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was common to see these groups as bands or simple societies, and some ethnographies were used to describe their basic characteristics (e.g. Bushmen, Australians, Eskimos, etc). However, other HGFS were described as complex and they were considered as an 'anomaly' or 'exception' (Testart, 1982, p. 11; Pálsson, 1995/1988, p. 190-191; Burch and Ellanna, 1996/1994, p. 61-62; Chapman, 2003, p. 85; Sassaman 2004, p. 228; Vila and Estévez 2010a, p. 11), such as some archaeological studies of the Mesolithic, or ethnographic and archaeological examples from the northwest coast of America (NWC) (e.g. Service, 1966, p. 3 or Murdock, 1968, p. 15). This began to change in the 1970s, when many archaeologists focused their attention on these groups. Since then NWC studies are considered as the most important example of complex hunters and gatherers, they are not an anomaly; they are now seen as the paradigmatic example of complexity and as the 'origins of inequalities', a subject of study that has become progressively more important among archaeologists.

These examples can now serve to illustrate our subject and how certain terms are commonly used. Moreover, these cases serve to define complex HGFS, as opposed to bands. They are defined by the existence of individuals with different social positions: 'status' or 'high status'; 'social inequalities' and 'social hierarchies'; various forms of 'authority' and 'power', and finally 'prestige'.

3. The sociology of power of Max Weber

The term prestige is often accompanied by other concepts such as 'power' and 'status'. The

underlying source of reference here, often not mentioned, is Max Weber and his sociology of power. His influence has been felt throughout the twentieth century and was introduced into American archeology and cultural anthropology from the work of the sociologist Talcott Parsons, after 2nd World War (Keyes, 2002, p. 236-237).

As we know, Weber's sociology of power was developed around the 'social action' of individuals, based on the notions of 'authority', 'power' (*Match*) and 'domination' (*Herrschaft*). Weber defined domination (*Herrschaft*) as:

'the probability that certain commands (or-all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons. It thus does not include every mode of exercising "power" (*Match*) or "influence" over other persons. Domination (*Autorität*) in this sense may be based on the most diverse motives of compliance: all the way from simple habituation to the most purely rational calculation of advantage. Hence every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience.'" (Weber, 1978/1921, p. 212).

Weber paid special attention to the legitimacy of the exercise of power. He developed a classification of 'types of domination', which had great influence later. He distinguished three types of 'legitimate domination' (Weber, 1978/1921, p. 215):

- 1 - 'Rational': based on the belief in the legality of an established order.
- 2 - 'Traditional': based on the belief of the sanctity of the traditions.
- 3 - And finally 'charismatic': based on the characteristics of heroism or exemplarity shown by one person. In charismatic domination, some qualities or attributes of individuals sustain trust, belief and follow-up of others.

It was precisely in the simple societies (bands and tribes, as we saw above) where Weber's notion of 'charisma' and 'charismatic leader' was applied. Furthermore, as it is well known, evolutionary cultural anthropology developed certain types of characters, the 'Big Men'- individuals without the capacity of

coercive power who were capable of organizing production, exercising influence on others and taking a differential position within their social groups.

These individuals are characterized by 'high status'. For Weber the status is understood as a specific situation inside the network of social relationships ('status situation') which is associated with a specific 'social estimation of honor', positive or negative (Weber, 1978/1921, p. 932). 'Status', 'honor' and 'prestige' are terms often used interchangeably and they are understood as having a particular social value in some individuals or groups who occupy a specific position in society, but who are not necessarily correlated with the accumulation of wealth. Numerous ethnographic examples of mentioned Big Men show us these features: society bestow them renown but they do not accumulate a distinct level of wealth, a practice that would lead to social sanction or rejection.

However, numerous ethnographic examples as well show that the 'charismatic leader', in its various forms (hero, leader, ruler), will accumulate material wealth in order to consolidate his prestige (Weber, 1978/1921, p. 244). This brings us back again to Weber's proposal of legitimation in all forms of domination:

'In general, it should be kept clearly in mind that the basis of every authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a *belief*, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige' (Weber, 1978/1921, p. 263).

Up to this point we have briefly reviewed some of the terms and concepts used and developed in recent decades by evolutionary anthropology and processual archeology, and also the sociology of power of Weber. Now we will try to expose some examples to illustrate these concerns.

4. An example of the archaeology of prestige from the NWC

We have just described above the particularly illustrative case of the NWC, which accumulates an

extensive ethno-historical and archaeological record that documents the existence of social inequality, unusual in HGFS. The Canadian archaeologist Brian Hayden is one of the authors who has focused on this area and he has been widely quoted in recent decades, with regard to the NWC itself, and in analyses of other archaeological sites as a general reference point for the study of social complexity in HGFS, and in the origin of inequalities.

Hayden's approach is a clear example of the functionalist, neo-evolutionary and ecological paradigms that we introduced above. He calls his proposal 'political ecology' or 'paleo-political ecology', and argues that economic inequalities appear and become consolidated due to the rise of certain individuals who pursue their own interest (Hayden, 2008, p. 28-29; 2010, p. 93).

His idea is that in all societies there is a genetic disposition that appears in certain subjects who display a characteristically selfish personality which searches to accumulate power and wealth; a personality he calls 'triple A', because they are 'ambitious', 'aggressive', and 'accumulative'. These individuals are known as 'aggrandizers' (1995, p. 18-20; 2008, p. 49-50; 2010, p. 97-98; Hayden and Villeneuve, 2010, p. 99).

For Hayden, the existence of a certain abundance of resources and a certain level of technological development (e.g. the ability to store goods) which allows the management of surplus –in the sense described above of excess production once the minimal needs of the community have been satisfied - eventually triggers a series of social changes which initially provide more security and stability in times of scarcity, but inevitably lead to the emergence of social complexity and inequality (Hayden, 1996/1994, p. 227-229).

In this dynamic of social evolution Hayden distinguishes between different kinds of leaders, depending on their level of control and influence, which he calls 'despots', 'reciprocators' and 'entrepreneurs' and compares them with the ethnographical terms 'great men', 'head men' and 'big men', respectively (Hayden, 1995, p. 25). In this sense Hayden created his own evolutionary categories, parallel to the Service and Fried classifications. He distinguished between 'egalitarian' and 'trans-egalitarian' HGFS,

associating the firsts with the traditional bands and the latter as an evolution of those when the requisites of resources and technological development are acquired. Then aggrandizers appear with his strategies to persuade relatives and friends to cede part of the surplus and promoting competitive feasting and creating networks with neighbouring communities (Hayden, 1995, p. 24; 2010, p. 90; Owens and Hayden, 1997, p. 125).

In the context of competitive feasts, Hayden defined his concept of ‘prestige technology’:

‘Prestige technology refers to the production of goods that maximizes available labor inputs and that only loosely meets performance requirements, as opposed to practical technology that maximizes efficient manufacturing and tool performance’ (Hayden, 1995, p. 24).

The presence of prestige objects is an indicator of the existence of private property in trans-egalitarian societies. They are highly valued and are produced by intensive labor. They are also used as strategy by aggrandizers in feasts, exchanging them for other products and creating debts. Prestige technology serves, in contrast to practical technology, to resolve socio-political problems (Hayden, 2010, p. 98, 104).

Other approaches to the archaeological study of social complexity and the origin of inequalities follow a similar line, for example Blanton (1995), Ames (1995) or Matson (2010), also in the NWC; or Jeanne Arnold (1992, 1995) in the archaeology of sites in the northern islands of the Santa Barbara Channel in California. With some differences between them, all these authors quote Hayden in their works. From neo-Darwinian approaches, some authors also use some of these proposals but in these cases highlighting the natural selection in the emergence of prestige as an adaptation in human evolution (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001, p. 167; Plourde, 2009, p. 267).

5. Outline for a definition of prestige relevant in Prehistoric archaeology

We will dedicate the rest of the article to propose a definition of prestige to be applied in Pre-

historic archaeology. This proposal is based on the thesis provided by historical materialism and some studies by anthropologist and archaeologist feminists in recent decades.

5.1. Social production and reproduction

Historical materialism provides us with some concepts and categories, as well as theoretical and methodological tools, which are clearly useful in the historical study of humans as social species. Humans live in society, although, as argued by Godelier (1981), we should say that humans produce society in order to live. Along these lines, Marx’ sociological theory offers an analysis of social production, with work as its central process. Work is a process; it is a relationship between people and matter. In this sense, human beings establish social relationships with each other and with nature in a dialectical process composed by the subprocesses of production (*stricto sensu*), distribution and consumption (Marx, 2002/1857-58; 1904/1859, p. 11; 1976/1867, p. 283; Castro *et al.*, 1998, p. 173-174). In all societies, past or present, we organize production by means of work to survive.

On the other hand, some feminist studies have highlighted the great importance of reproduction, which Marx paid attention to in relation with the reproduction of the labor force in capitalist production, but in a limited form (Haug, 2010). As a society, we need to produce but we also need to reproduce ourselves: as individuals, as a species, and to reproduce the social and material conditions for our existence. Without the reproduction of people and society, human beings obviously cannot exist.

These feminist approaches (Bouvier, 1949; Caulfield, 1985; Wylie, 1991) maintain that reproduction is a particular form of production, however, with their own characteristics. Considering production and reproduction separately has a methodological and operational purpose, it is often difficult to distinguish them, but it will help us to highlight the dialectical character of the two processes: the production of goods and objects, and the reproduction of people.

Also, the analysis of the contradiction that

exists between both processes and possible ways of its resolution will be of great importance to us, especially in hunter-gatherer societies. In this case, the reproduction of people is decisive compared with the production of goods and the conditions that allow it. However, the production of goods compromises reproduction. This is the 'Theses of the Principal Contradiction' which exists between both productions production (Estévez *et al.*, 1998, p. 11-12; Barceló *et al.*, 2006, p. 191).

Traditionally the study of human reproduction has been mainly analyzed from its biological aspects (Harris and Young, 1979, p. 28; Echarid, 1985, p. 37-38; Tabet, 1985, p. 62), ignoring the social elements that are also present. Various phenomena such as human sexuality, relationships between women and men or the sexual division of labor, have often been studied from their genital and biological characters (Bouvois, 1949; Harris and Young, 1979, p. 28; 1981, p. 110-111; Moore, 1988, p. 20; Conkey and Gero, 1991, p. 8, 12; Wyle, 1991, p. 34; Lewontin *et al.*, 1984; Lewontin, 2000; Vila *et al.*, 2010, p. 202). However, social aspects have rarely been addressed in reproduction. In addition, some areas of human existence, as subsistence, have been used as an explanatory factor of change in societies, rather than reproduction (Vila and Estévez, 2010b, p. 11).

These criticisms also stress that human sexuality is expressed with great flexibility and diversity, as is easily verifiable from the historical and ethnographical record. Recognizing biological factors does not preclude ignoring historical and social elements in which human sexuality shows great plasticity; it is culturally conditioned and it is clearly characterized by the symbolic (Tabet, 1985, p. 98-100; Davis, 1985, p. 343-344).

This may seem surprising or strange because we usually consider reproduction as something essentially biological. But in human reproduction, we understand that we establish social relationships as well, between women and men, and around work. In this case, we invest work in the production of people.

Finally, we highlight the importance of some theoretical and methodological aspects of these approaches, because many of the explanations we

provide become ways to naturalize the phenomena we study; and there are serious social and political implications in our work.

Reproduction, as a type of production, can result from social relationships of exploitation and domination (Tabet, 1985). Ethnographical, archaeological or historical records show us different social and historical forms of how human societies organize social relations of production and reproduction, with the possible presence of different degrees of exploitation. They are the particular manifestation, the phenomenal expression, of different ways of establishing social production and reproduction relationships.

These forms of exploitation can also be seen in the ideological constructs created to legitimize this domination. In this sense, myths and symbolic representations are an important source of analysis (Mathieu, 1985, p. 226-227), and in this case ethnoarchaeology becomes an important discipline for implementing and contrasting archaeological models (Vila, 2006, p. 61). The study of particular societies that organize their social relations of production and reproduction in a specific (historical) manner can help us to carry out this implementation. However, we should avoid using these examples as mere ethnographic analogies to project into the past.

5.2. The value of the processes of production and reproduction

In speaking of the production of objects or people, the next step is to address the question of value, the production of value, or the value of production. Here we distinguish between two types of value (Barceló *et al.*, 2006, p. 192):

Objective value. As the classical economists, from Adam Smith to Marx argued, the value of producing something is defined by the amount of labor invested in its production process (Marx, 1976/1867, p. 129). It is, more or less, easy to obtain: the number of hours of labor, number of workers, etc.

Assigned value. The second kind of value is more difficult to define. At first it derives from the

use value of the product, but it is not surprising to note that it may be relatively independent of it. This is because it is an assessment of political character.

By comparing the two types of value, we can deduce the possible degree of exploitation in a particular way of organizing the social relationships of production and reproduction. For example, we can compare two objects that have the same objective value, the same amount of work invested to obtain them, such as food obtained by hunting or gathering. Usually we observe in ethnographical record that meat is more appreciated than gathered products. Perhaps this can be explained by different reasons, but usually we can see that different products are valued differently by social subjects. This is because social subjects assign different values to different objects, depending on their position in the network of social relationships in production and reproduction.

The way in which the two kinds of values are quantified archaeologically poses various problems. The objective value can be estimated approximately from the material remains in the archaeological record as the average quantity of hours invested using a specific technology, by applying techniques of experimental archaeology, traceology and ethnoarchaeology (Barceló *et al.*, 2006, p. 192-193; Vila *et al.*, 2010, p. 203, 205). However, the assigned value is much more difficult to estimate because of its symbolic nature, and therefore difficult to detect in the archaeological record in regard of our methodologies.

From the perspective of historical materialism, we understand that social subjects develop their subjectivities on the basis of processes of experiences within the material conditions of their existence, creating different forms of consciousness from their particular position in the world both inside and outside the network of social relationships of production and reproduction in which subjects are both 'agents' and 'products'. They are agents because they participate actively in the institution of social relationships; they are also products, since they are the result of these processes (Castro *et al.*, 1998, p. 173). As Marx said (1904/1859: 11), we establish social relationships of production that finally become independent of us. Living predates our thinking; life is thought of from

the specific position that we occupy in the world and from the objective conditions that we contribute structurally to build it (Lull, 2005, p. 9).

6. Defining prestige

Finally, with the theoretical tools just discussed, we can now propose a definition of prestige:

a) In the (re)production of people we can distinguish between two types of value:

1 - The objective value: in the production of social subjects through the appropriated investment of work and socialization, for their insertion as women/men within the social organization with a specific position in the network of social relationships, participating in production, distribution and consumption, in a clearly differentiated form from other social subjects.

2 - The assigned value: politically determined, given by individuals in a particular way of establishing social relations within a given social organization. The comparison of the assigned value with the objective value can give us the degree of exploitation.

b) In connection with the production of objects. Associating these objects with certain social subjects, allows them to become 'prestigious people' or people 'with prestige'. These productions are also subdivided in objective value and assigned value.

Thus, our thesis is that prestige is a form of double valorization, objective and assigned, which can appear (as a possibility) in production processes: in the reproduction of people, in the production of goods or in the conditions of existence concerning them.

The consequence of all this legitimizes these people, but only these people, to perform certain actions in the processes of production, distribution and consumption, such as the organization of the tasks associated with the production, the management of

the distribution, or trade, etc. Similarly, the community here is entitled to require such persons to perform these activities, which is only possible or permitted by the legitimate position that these subjects occupy in the network of historically instituted social relations.

With regard to reproduction of people, prestige also legitimizes the position of women and men who participate in this process, which may include domination and exploitation.

Thus, prestige is understood here not as an 'aura' of certain people because of their 'innate' attributes or some 'economic logic' governing the behavior of human beings by their particular nature, but 'prestige' is understood here from and for social production and reproduction. It allows for social and individual survival and, ultimately, the survival of the species itself. It has the character of both 'product' and 'instrument'.

Prestige, as we understand, is a product because it is the consequence of the processes of production and reproduction that social subjects perform in order to produce society. But prestige is also an instrument because it constitutes a 'technology' that contributes to maintaining and reproducing society, allowing society to legitimize certain social behaviors, to create rules and norms, prohibitions and sanctions. It also enables society to generate and maintain social differences, to create forms of regulation of social relationships and, finally, to organize the running of society for its continuity. Its instrumental character allows for the survival of society.

7. Conclusions

In the previous pages we analyzed synthetically some of the categories created by systemic-functional approaches during the last decades around the term adaptation, and their point of view of social evolution from simple to various forms of increasing complexity. In this context, complex societies, related with the emergence of inequalities, were described by the sociology of power provided by Max Weber, around terms such as status, leaders, charisma, and others. Most models combine a mix-

ture of different patterns: ecological, environmental, social and political and also genetic, paying attention in the behavior of individuals and their social actions.

Here, we have provided a new definition for the term prestige from a different point of view, using historical materialism and feminist approaches. Thus, we understand prestige from and for social production and reproduction, as a product, consequence of the processes of work that human beings, as social subjects, perform to survive; and as an instrument, because it allows the continuity of a society over time.

In this sense, we understand that nobody exists isolated in the world as mere autonomous individuals in 'adaptation'; but we understand humans as people producing ourselves in the process of producing society in order to live.

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