Comparative Archaeology: A Commitment to Understanding Variation

March 14, 2008

An advanced seminar dedicated to exploring new approaches in comparative archaeology was held at the Amerind Foundation in Dragoon, Arizona, March 3–7, 2008. The session was organized by Michael E. Smith and sponsored by the Amerind Foundation and Arizona State University. The participants were: Robert D. Drennan (University of Pittsburgh), Timothy Earle (Northwestern University), Gary M. Feinman (Field Museum of Natural History), Roland Fletcher (University of Sydney), Michael J. Kolb (Northern Illinois University), Peter Peregrine (Lawrence University), Christian E. Peterson (University of Pittsburgh), Carla Sinopoli (University of Michigan), Michael E. Smith (Arizona State University), Monica L. Smith (UCLA), Barbara L. Stark (Arizona State University), and Miriam T. Stark (University of Hawai‘i). A strong consensus was reached about the importance of comparative analysis in archaeology and about the need for new approaches that encompass the vast variation within and between societies of different kinds.

As archaeologists we seek to understand variation and change in past human societies. This goal necessitates a comparative approach, and comparisons justify the broad cross-cultural and diachronic scope of our work. Without comparisons we sink into the culture-bound theorizing against which anthropology and archaeology have long sought to broaden social science research. By undertaking comparisons that incorporate long term social variability, archaeologists not only improve our understanding of the past, but also open the door to meaningful transdisciplinary research. Archaeologists have unique and comprehensive datasets whose analysis can contribute to dialogues surrounding contemporary issues and the myriad challenges of our era.

In the past two decades the pendulum seems to have swung away from comparative research in archaeology. Many archaeologists focus on detailed contextual descriptions of individual cases, and only a few have dedicated themselves to explicit comparative work. Yet in that same time span fieldwork has expanded tremendously throughout the world, leading to an explosion of well documented diachronic data on sites and regions. We now have substantial detail on the variation inherent in phenomena such as cultural assemblages, settlement patterns and economic activity. New methods, from dating techniques to digital data processing, promote comparative analysis and greatly advance our understanding of human societies and change. The time is ripe for a renewed commitment to comparative research in archaeology.

Rigorous new methods are needed to achieve an explicit comparative understanding of the past. Particularly fruitful domains for comparative research in archaeology include households, settlement patterns, and the built landscape. These are categories of data that are both widely available in the archaeological literature and important for understanding the dynamics of past societies. It is a healthy sign that a variety of approaches to comparative research are now being pursued, including the documentation and exploration of the range of variation over time, the evaluation of potential causes for variation and change, and the exploration of the impact of particular variations on long term patterns of stability and change. Productive comparative research ranges from statistical analysis of large samples to rich contextual comparisons of a few cases; there is no single best method. A holistic perspective for studying the past requires a range of comparative approaches in concert.

Work presented at the seminar focused on explicit comparative analyses of archaeological (and other) data and the participants plan to continue an approach that encompasses multiple regions or contexts in a single study rather than merely juxtaposing case
studies in an edited volume. Seminar papers compared, for example, the process of Spanish colonization in different continents, the development of chiefdom-level settlement patterns and monuments in multiple world regions, the artifact inventories of households in diverse settings, tropical low-density urban centers across the globe, and the variation in political dynamics across and within polities. Such comparative research not only illuminates the past, but also produces surprising findings and identifies commonly held notions that may be incorrect or misleading.

Some archaeologists may associate the comparative method with the neo-evolutionism of Steward, Service, and Fried. In fact, the comparative method and neo-evolutionism are separate arenas of thought and activity; one does not imply the other. A central problem with neo-evolutionism was its focus on normative societal types such as bands and tribes that tended to compress or ignore variation and concentrated on generalized similarities. As archaeological data have expanded at the end of the twentieth century, the utility of such societal types has declined because they mask the variation that is one of the most obvious aspects of human societies, past and present. The most productive comparative approaches do not focus on general societal types; instead they involve the analysis of archaeological data at multiple spatial and social scales and they emphasize societal variability and change.

Comparative archaeology can lead to the re-evaluation of conventional categories such as community, polity, or urbanism. Its varied approaches have the potential to provide powerful syntheses that focus on and analyze the true complexity of past human life and society. Comparative methods are essential if archaeologists are to contribute to transdisciplinary research in the historical and social sciences and thereby broaden the scientific understanding of the past, the present, and the future of human society.

A volume containing the revised seminar papers is currently in preparation.