
Carneiro's Long Tirade

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ABSTRACT

Robert Carneiro's review is written from a vantage point untenable in many anthropological circles today, one which essentializes societies and, thereby, insists that we begin with an a priori definition of one type of society, the chiefdom. His is the very approach rejected in my book. Recent theories in archaeology – named historical-processual, phenomenological, or practice-based – better fit the rich empirical datasets from pre-Columbian eastern North America. Carneiro is unfamiliar with these data, and gives the overview of them in my book scant attention.

I am grateful to the editors of *Social Evolution and History* for allowing me to respond to Robert Carneiro's lengthy invective against *Chiefdoms and Other Archaeological Delusions* (hereafter, *Delusions* [AltaMira, 2007]). I will keep my comments brief, in large part because I believe Carneiro's argument, like his particular sort of evolutionary perspective, to be moot. Carneiro's point of view might have been valid and productive given the state of archaeological knowledge in the 1960s. But today archaeologists in North America – both the Southeast and the Southwest – have vastly improved data sets that permit tracking change within and between communities sometimes at resolutions of decades, years, or even seasons (for example, Pauketat 2008; Pauketat *et al.* 2002). We know more than we did in the 1960s.

I do agree wholeheartedly with Carneiro that much is at stake, namely the 'entire intellectual structure of Southeastern prehistory...' But he is quite wrong in asserting that this structure is based on 'evolutionary ideas', which did not enter into the explanations of southeastern archaeologists until the 1960s. Most of the major,

federally funded data-producing archaeological projects in eastern North America have been firmly based in 'cultural-historical' modes of explanation (see, for example, Bareis and Porter 1984; Phillips *et al.* 1951).

In any event, perhaps readers will not be surprised at Carneiro's positions or the strength of his convictions, but we should be clear that they are based on a view of social groups – usually whole societies – as the principal units of analysis. Of course, since the sixties, anthropology has passed through a number of phases that moved most researchers past Carneiro's position. Most anthropologists (and this includes archaeologists) now understand that societies – including chiefdoms – are social constructs or political projects in the past and the present that obfuscate rather than reveal the causes of social change (*e.g.*, Wolf 1982). To his credit, and unlike other evolutionists of the 1960s and 1970s, Carneiro's early emphasis on political change began to redress such problems with the evolutionary perspectives of the day. But that is where he stopped.

And from his fixed vantage point, *Delusions* clearly worries if not angers Robert Carneiro so much so that he overlooks and misunderstands certain points and positions of mine and others (he confuses Flannery and Yoffee, for instance, also overlooking the fact that Yoffee's [2005] excellent book offers a social-evolutionary perspective). Such slips are bad enough, but worse is (1) his disingenuous ascription of positions to me that I do not hold (*e.g.*, that I believe Mississippian societies are democracies, that I eschew a comparative scientific approach, or that I reject the search for and explanation of patterns), and (2) his failure to mention large sections of the book that provide the empirical basis for my actual positions. Please read chapters 3, 4, 5, and 7. Mounting evidence of pre-Columbian complexity in North America disables any simplistic assertions that any 16th century analog might suffice as a model for all Mississippian societies (Alt 2010). The same applies to Amazonia (Heckenberger *et al.* 2003)!

Of course, similar sorts of abuses of societal typologizing and analogizing are precisely the reason why I wrote *Delusions* in the first place! But note too that *Delusions* was written for another reason, that being to counter all-too-common views (by non-archaeologists) that archaeology cannot explain '[c]rucial elements of the structure and function of chiefdoms'. It is my position that

newer approaches in archaeology yet offer great insights into human history (Pauketat 2001a, 2001b). My purpose in *Delusions* – which I made clear in the opening pages – is not to explicate these approaches, but to move readers to a point at which they might consider the productive newer theorizing in archaeology concerning **how** organizations or societies or ideologies were produced via the materiality and spatiality of human experience (Joyce and Gillespie 2000; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Pauketat and Meskell 2010; Renfrew *et al.* 2004). In the book, I argue that we dispense with those naïve, delusional constructs derived from ethnographic readings of ‘documentary history’ that, by projecting a societal analogy derived from one time or place onto another in the distant past, block the way forward.

But such constructs undergird Carneiro's starting point, and so one might understand the frothing outrage and rabid derision directed by Carneiro at *Delusions*. But allow me to wipe the slaver from the page and explain one more key point, his biggest concern: the charge of ‘anti-evolutionism’. Let me be clear at the outset that my position is not opposed to biological evolution and the theories traced to the work of Charles Darwin. Of course, this is not the evolutionary theory of Carneiro (admittedly, he leaves evolution undefined). If by evolution, one simply means to describe historically contingent social change through time without implying a set of mechanisms, then I have no issue with the word. It is simply a synonym for history, and that is fine. But if, on the other hand, one means – as Carneiro repeatedly states – an abstract process that happens once in time, or a set of factors that affect a certain type of society, then I strongly disagree. So too, one might add, do other evolutionary theorists, of which there are multiple schools of thought (see review by Pauketat 2001b).

But Carneiro is and will undoubtedly remain unconvinced. ‘Like it or not’, he assures us, ‘the fact remains – unavoidable and ineluctable – that at some point in time there *were* first-generation chiefdoms, and that they arose from *non*-chiefdoms by some specifiable process’. Unfortunately, this assertion is a statement of religious faith, the source of most delusional thinking, and not an accurate recounting of scientific facts as known archaeologically in eastern North America. The integrated constellation of organizational and cultural traits that people have variously used to identify

chiefdoms in eastern North America never existed the same in any two places (consider Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Sassaman 2004)! Archaeologists endured two decades – the 1970s and 1980s – of silly arguments over what was or was not a chiefdom. But we are now past that.

Any definition of chiefdom is arbitrary and cannot capture the full range of organizational realities in ancient North America, from the centralized and mounded Middle Archaic complex of Watson Brake (ca. 3600 BCE) or the equally singular Poverty Point phenomenon (ca. 1500 BCE) to the densely populated Timucua of south Florida, the complex ‘tribal’ hereditary societies of the midcontinent's Plains, or the small-scale warlike Micmac on the lower St. Lawrence. By first imposing the arbitrary definition of ‘chiefdom’ on all of these peoples (which Carneiro then assumes were like the 16th century Coosa), and then inferring how various factors might have affected the inferred organizations, we will have gone about our scientific investigation precisely backwards. My issue is not with the word ‘chiefdom’, which I say in *Delusions* might be used or not used in a descriptive sense as you like. Rather, my issue is with naïve teleological argumentation which fails to identify much less explain actual historical processes.

These processes are explicable, and will be elucidated if we re-think the location, effective scale, and character of history's causes and effects. Of course **these processes involve agency** which, by my definition is that which causes change (Dobres and Robb 2000)! Of course **these processes involve politics**. Of course **these processes are to be understood through comparative, scientific procedures** that begin at scales of analysis detectible as patterns by archaeologists! And, of course, **the scientific process entails learning, altering, and advancing beyond that which we thought we knew last year, last decade, or three decades ago**. I am not sure that Carneiro appreciates this simple scientific fact. Schools of thought evolve or become extinct. Which will it be?

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