

**Review of: Crellin, R. J. (2020). Change and Archaeology. Themes in Archaeology. London: Routledge.** Paperback and eBook, 250 pages, 30 figures. ISBN 978-1-138-29253-6.

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Change is everywhere. It is a constant reality in organisms (humans, animals, virus, bacteria...), things, nature and even in the universe we live in. This is being particularly felt, experienced and accepted nowadays, due to the notorious speed that it acquired in the last decades. Technology is one of the reasons to “blame”, also working as a fantastic example of what a frantic alteration is and feels like. It changes every year, if not every single day. Things that we used, knew and considered vital and indispensable a few years back, are no longer useful in 2020, making change more humanly perceptible each day. Climate change is another fact that has been in our public agendas (and social media) due to its increasing instability and higher unpredictability, alongside social movements of inclusion and “emancipation” of minorities and the political resurgence of right-wing nationalists.

This means that we are currently in an endless shifting loop that acts and impacts at a never seen before scale, making us aware and more susceptible and sensible to other fluctuating realities like climate changes. A broader perception and acceptance of change (mainly in the Northern Hemisphere) is allowing us as individuals, societies or communities to rethink – in association with other social, environmental and political movements – the time and scale in which we exist and what makes us human, what it means to be one today and what it meant in the past, with a necessarily more inclusive and socially committed attitude and perspective.

It is in this context that archaeology can act, giving unmatched contributions. Besides, change is archaeology “business”. It has been since its appearance, being this a problem that lies at its “heart”, as stated by Rachel J. Crellin (2020). However, archaeology, as a social science, is socially committed and responsible for the symbiosis of both ancient and “modern” humans, human societies and their dynamics (in my point of view), not being immune to the currently shifting context in which is practised. As such, and as an almost direct answer to this mainly occidental transformative social environment, new lines of work, questions and problems are marking the scientific agendas, impacting and enriching the archaeological debate, not only the theoretical one, ques-

tioning the “superior” and central ontological status assigned to humans (mainly white males), but also the practical side. This made some researchers (not the entire archaeological community) more aware of biased discourses that, through time, perpetuated and normalised a non-inclusive archaeological approach to more invisible realities, like the already mentioned minorities – women, indigenous, LGBTI and so on.

With this currently ongoing and highly effusive social context, the book “Change and Archaeology” by Rachel J. Crellin is a much necessary reflection that can be summed up in the following sentence: change is messy and is constant. This work profoundly embraces, explores and reflects the context in which it was written, using it to approach our past. It is a book of its time, that resorts to current cases of change (like climate change, feminism, indigenous communities and endangered species), in order to highlight how archaeology can contribute to current politics and social shifts. The primary aim of this book that reflects part of the eight years of work and the PhD thesis of the author is to draw attention to how “we have under-theorised how we describe, interpret and explain [change]” (p. 232). To contradict this tendency, Crellin outlines “the strengths and weaknesses of the existing approaches to change” (p. 236) while simultaneously introducing their methods and theoretical framework to explore this question, highlighting structural disciplinary problems like time and scale. With an assumed, clearly stated and explained post-anthropocentric and post-humanist perspective, the author resorts to the ontological concept of “assemblage” to approach change in the archaeological record, giving it a robust relational character. In this sense, and as specified in the work, the concept of “assemblage” has a theoretical affinity with the New Materialistic approaches.

Summarising, Crellin’s approach tries to fight and dilute the generalised and robust tendency to emphasise the human being in the archaeological theories and dialogues by decentralising it. By doing so, space is created for the emergence of other performers, namely non-human elements. All the possible actors, which can correspond to animals, plants, things, materials and humans, are approached (in the author’s methodology) based on a flat ontology. This exercise is recognised as being quite problematic, mainly due to the hard untying of the influence of the structuring role that humans have had, and still have, in the archaeological approaches to change. Still, it is not a futile exercise, which is complemented by the on-

tological concept of assemblage, that allows Crellin to understand the world as *"being made up of temporary gatherings of diverse, heterogeneous parts"* (p. 165). The distinct parts are looked at from a relational standpoint that rejects dichotomies and dualisms like nature/culture and simplistic, linear, progressive and mono-casual methods and explanations. There is not only one history of humanity, but instead, several histories that are made by the success and progress of every actor (humans, animals, things and so on), but also by destruction, disappearance and, in numerous cases, failure. As such, and although the author confirms that history is not anti-anthropocentric, it is recognised that the anthropocentrism that characterises the archaeological disciplines (and the world in general) is causing a perpetuation of partial and unilateral narratives. This idea and the followed theoretical frameworks dictate the content of the book. Nevertheless, they are presented and explored in a quite comprehensible and straightforward way (not overwhelmingly and excessively), grounding the author's perspective in solid arguments, even if the reader does not entirely subscribe to some of the ideas.

More practically and descriptively, Crellin's work consists of nine chapters that are unevenly distributed over three distinct parts. These correspond to large thematic blocks that explore and try to answer to the already mentioned theoretical problems that arise from the current approaches to change in archaeology.

Part I, that is named as Introduction, lists a set of hurdles that *"hinder us from writing more nuanced and complex narratives"* (p. 5) and *"impede archaeologist from studying change effectively"* (p. 156), according to the author's viewpoint. The first obstacle (block-time approach) reflects the long-lasting tradition in which we structure, organise and think time: in *"cultural"* blocks that also reflect a chronological, linear order. These periods are usually assumed as being relatively stable with distress moments in the transition between the previous and subsequent moments, creating an opposition between static and dynamic moments within the same period. Also, archaeologists tend, according to Crellin's 3<sup>rd</sup> hurdle, to fall into teleological narratives – *"when we suggest that change was less constant or less significant in the past..."* (p. 9) – which intersects with the theoretical and practical construction of moments in which shifts are caused by *"revolutions"* (4<sup>th</sup> hurdle).

Allied to that, is the tendency to establish progressive narratives (2<sup>nd</sup> hurdle). With an evolutionary matrix uncountable approaches assume

that our past presents a single linear path from more straightforward social organisations to more complex societies, skewing the interpretations. As such, and assuming this broader conceptual framework, it is not surprising that there is an unceasing search for both origins and the already mentioned revolutions (4<sup>th</sup> hurdle), being subjects that are currently quite present in our agendas due to the recent advances in aDNA studies. The need to pinpoint an origin is closely connected to the necessity to create a single grand narrative. According to Crellin, who agrees that smaller-scale approaches must be written by archaeologists, *"because if we do not others will"* (p. 233), we should not try to create and validate a single narrative, but instead multiple, inclusive and politically/socially implicated stories. Other *"errors"*, and those can be explained by the relational framework followed by the author, are the existence of both determinisms (5<sup>th</sup> hurdle), majorly climatic and technological, and singular causations (6<sup>th</sup> hurdle). Both can be in the origin of *"totalising narratives"* that are equally *"progressive and teleological in nature"*, simplifying the complexity of our continually shifting past.

The 7<sup>th</sup> and last hurdle, which is once again justified by Crellin's methodological approach, is the excessive spotlight that shines upon humans, which is the same as saying: anthropocentrism that outshines all the other possible actors, besides humans, in our (now and in the past) continually changing world. Regardless whether we agree – or not – with all the hurdles, this *"tactic"* provides the necessary hints to comprehend the starting point of the author's theoretical and practical approach to the study of change in archaeology, right at the start of the work.

Part II, entitled as *"How do we study change"*, can be roughly understood as a moment where a state of the art is presented. However, and although to the naked eye it might seem that the traditional approach to archaeological thought is followed in chapter 2, presenting the different theoretical approaches in a chronological/sequential way (from Culture History to Postcolonial perspectives), the several ideas and methods to address change are brought to us in an entangled and relational way. In this sense, and by interconnecting them, it is possible to identify *"strengths and weaknesses"*, while intersecting them with the hurdles stated in part I.

Additionally, critically complementing this exercise, there is a focus on three key themes (chapters 3 to 5) that both interrelate with most of the hurdles and are going to be continuously

brought up during the remaining book. The first one is time and *"how universal, unilinear, uniform and progressive models of time produce models of change with the same shape"* (p. 236). Secondly, scale and the opposition between large-scale and small-scale archaeological works. Lastly, biography and how it can be applied in the construction of *"narratives of change about both humans and non-humans"* (p. 237). According to the author, we have to avoid falling onto the fallacy of assuming that *"change can be fixed into singular moments"* (p. 236) and explained by *"single causation models"*. Instead, an approach that assumes that scales are *"folding together in a complex way"* (p. 237) and that *"change is constantly ongoing in our world"* (p. 237), mingling everything in it.

This is the point of departure for Part III - *"Time for a new approach to change"*. In this last moment of the book, *"emerging theoretical approaches"* are explored. Those ideas and methods to explore change are separated from chapter 2 (part II) due to their theoretical advantages (as stated by the author) to deal with change, namely their intrinsically relational nature, from which Crellin is undoubtedly a supporter. Perspectives from Latour (actor-network theory), symmetrical archaeology and Hodders' entanglement theory are tested against the seven hurdles stated in Part I. Still, none fully replied and ultimately overcame those same problems to approach change in archaeology. As such, and in this same part, Crellin stated and presented her viewpoint (chapter 7), gathering several hints and thoughts given throughout the book.

A post-anthropocentric approach that *"does not exclude humans but instead asks us to rethink them"* (p. 238), imbued with a post-humanist critique to *"human exceptionalism... [removing them] from the 'ontological apex'"* (p. 238). This position aims to cease a predominance of historical approaches and narratives in which *"white, Euro-American, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied men"* (p. 238) are the *"ideal model of what [it] means to be human"* (p. 238). Also, the methodological link with the assemblage concept from New Materialism aids in the *"fight"* started by the author to include minorities in the archaeological thought and speech. By considering that *"all matter is in process"* and that assemblages *"are relational, temporary gatherings of heterogeneous components"* (p. 239), multiple scales can be brought to the analysis, preventing single causality explanations to change.

In order to consolidate and materialise its perspective, an extensive case study is developed through chapter 8. Curiously, Crellin chooses a *"transition"* (or revolution) period between two

*"blocks of time"*. This choice, if not intentional, is particularly interesting since it allows the author to break with a long-lasting tradition of approach to the transition between the European Neolithic and Bronze Age.

Finishing both this part and the book itself, chapter 9 gathers some final notes concerning the nature, aims and constraints that might be mirrored in this work, giving the reader critical thoughts to re-read this work once again.

Nevertheless, some brief notes can be brought up concerning this work. As I already mentioned, this is a book of its time, meaning that most of the current social altercations and shifts are reflected in its pages, clearly dictating the perspectives and narratives developed. This is particularly true for both the post-anthropocentric and post-humanistic character it defends. I do not fully agree that we can *"start from a place of ontological flatness"* (p. 159) since we are not blank sheets. Each and every single researcher, professor and archaeologist, in essence every individual human being, has a past, foresees a future and is part of a specific culture, quite different from the temporalities and communities we study. As such, it is almost unavoidable that our conditionalities, prejudices, biographies and even feelings dictate, limit and/or enhance the relationships we establish with the things we study (humans or non-humans), influencing the paths and perspective we chose to follow and highlight. It's a challenging exercise to give equal relevance to all the exiting archaeological variables, if not by the fact that we have dissimilar data to each and single one of them. In this sense, even if we do not choose to assume it, archaeologists will always be (by default) anthropocentric. Nonetheless, and by recognising our limitation as humans and self-centred creatures, we should be more aware of the problems developed in this book and try to minimise their impact in our work, particularly the biased narratives that we tend to construct about humans while not excluding any minorities.

In this line, the idea that *"our job is to explain how things got to be the way they were and how they went on to change"* (p. 2) is, according to my perspective, incomplete, since our job should also focus (if not primarily) on humans, human societies and their dynamics (independently of its chronology). However, these brief notes derive from my perspective and position as a researcher, as a 21st-century woman and as a human being that is currently experiencing quite rapid (and almost violent) shifts, while trying to study societies with widely different rhythms.

Still, it must be recognised that this is an essential theme for all archaeologists (since change is our “thing”), that is presented here quite synthetically and in an impressively accessible manner, being surprisingly easy to read. The structural organisation followed through the book works, with a noteworthy effort made by the author concerning its clarity. There is a recognisable worry not only seen in the stating and restating of its aims, but also in the attempt to explain and demystify some of the used concepts. Adding to this, the constant presence of case-studies helps to extinguish remaining doubts while also engaging the reader.

As a final line, the work “*Change and Archaeology*” by Rachel J. Crellin is a book not only for archaeologists, but also for people who worry about our current changing world. It continuously highlights how change is complicated and messy (I would risk saying that this is the most used word in the book to refer to change – messy). At the same time, it provides the necessary concepts that will allow us to untangle and demystify our human past (from my anthropocentric perspective), while simultaneously answering to the subjects that are currently being called into question in our 21<sup>st</sup>-century society.

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