Workshop, Oslo 11 – 14 November 2014

The Social in the Past

Things, Networks, and Texts: A Material Approach to the Pre-Modern Past

The project *Local Dynamics of Globalization in the Pre-Modern Levant* (LDG[1]) is for the academic year 2014-15 located at the *Centre for Advanced Study* at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters.[2] In our research we pay attention to local practices that persisted or transformed underneath the successive waves of grand ideologies and political regimes that swept across the Eastern Mediterranean throughout pre-modern times.[3] One of our aims is to investigate how local cultures may have adopted, adapted, or rejected policies, practices, and technologies that reached them through imperial and other globalizing channels, and also to explore how local and regional political forces negotiated their space between globalising discourse and local habits and *habitus*.

While recent studies of the Ancient Near East have shifted their emphasis from metropolitan to regional and local perspectives, arguably most research continues to cast representatives of imperial rule as protagonists or antagonists in narratives of dominion, resistance, integration and fragmentation. Imperial policies and other ideological factors still play important roles in much of this interpretation. Archaeological and textual sources, however, indicate that local dynamics were more complex than is often perceived from the perspectives of imperial agency. People kept performing earlier practices and social associations, not least because of the slow change in material culture and the relative stability of networks and clusters around artefacts and social habits. Novel technologies, practices, and ways of life were distributed along imperial channels, but they could assume new context and significance when they were adapted locally and came to interact with things and people that were already in social formations. Imperialising or globalising initiatives and efforts had to find form across materially and socially conservative and resilient groups, formations that were quite diverse and often convoluted. The success of

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[1] www.stordalen.info/LDG/Home.html.
[2] www.cas.uio.no.
[3] The *Digital Archaeological Atlas of the Holy Land* gives a graphic illustration of the 19 relevant empires, starting with the Old Babylonian around 2000 BCE, ending with the Mamluk Empire in 1517 CE. daahl.ucsd.edu/DAAHL/GML.php.

globalising initiatives became subject to specific agencies of things, people, and social formations; early globalization must have been a complex and quite fragile phenomenon, calling for a more material and bottom-up interpretation.

Recent social science perspectives would be suited for addressing the kind of complex situations still lingering in the historical source material. The challenge is, of course, that the full and actual agencies of ancient things, people, and social formations are not easily perceivable in the source material, so the strong *empirical* demand in social science research cannot easily be redeemed in historical study. This workshop is meant to provide a space where scholars of past texts and artefacts can meet social science scholars to deliberate on the interface between historical and social science analysis in explorations of the deep past. Mirroring the material approach of LDG research we will do that mainly through case studies addressing the nexus of artefacts (*things*) and *texts*, and also that of things/texts and *networks* (social associations).

Backgrounds

The attitude, dubbed in social anthropology as a refusal of 'guesswork history' (Radcliffe-Brown), assumed different names and strategies in other academic traditions, but the uneasiness in several disciplines with attempts to reconstruct past social discourse to be used as an interpretive framework has been felt for quite some time. However, historical disciplines will simply not be able to disregard questions about the social discourses in which the available historical sources were embedded. This is even more so as questions of historical conditions and processes become increasingly important also in social science study.[4] So what might be good strategies for a materially oriented interpretation addressing a deep past in which fundamental social conditions must have been very different from those we can observe today? How could we profess to understand ancient life-worlds and interplay between things, thoughts, feelings, texts, and practices without jeopardizing our methodical integrity and return once again to a, perhaps more sophisticated, form of 'guesswork history'?

To exemplify what kind of discussion we are hoping for in this workshop, take Bruno Latour's *Actor-Network-Theory* (ANT). Precisely because of its material

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[4] For one large-scale theory addressing the historical dimension in anthropology, see M. Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992.

orientation this perspective has gained some momentum in recent archaeological discourse, often in dialogue with other social science approaches.[5] One central point in Latour's research is the need to avoid preconceived (modernist) notions of how people and things perform social associations. Latour's field method is to observe meticulously the precise action that takes place. Time and again he shows there is no way in advance to predict how a network of associations may play out in a given case. In the empirical material of historians and archaeologists, on the other hand, the actual practices are at best implicitly contained in the source material. The performance of associations between people and things can no longer be observed, and in the archaeological record things are often bereaved even of their most immediate material context. The historian might wish to resort to some model of expected social associations, perhaps inspired by Latour's fieldwork. But substituting the empirical for a model is something that Latour would very much like to avoid. So how, precisely, can we use this perspective in interpreting ancient artefacts and material networks?

A lack of empirical data, and also a challenge on the adequacy of social models, can be encountered when turning to the theoretical universe of one of the most influential social science scholars of our time, Pierre Bourdieu. Arguments have been forwarded to see him as a useful conversation partner for historical study.[6] And he did indeed pursue a historical dimension for instance in his sociology of art.[7] Several LDG studies will relate to his theoretical universe, but it remains a challenge that the social dynamics he described were to a large extent characterised by modern

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[5] The most comprehensive presentation is found in B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press 2005. For adaption in archaeology, see for instance B. Olsen, *In Defence of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, Lanham: AltaMira 2010; Hodder, Ian. *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships Between Humans and Things*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012; C. Knappett, *An Archaeology of Interaction: Network Perspectives on Material Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

[6] See entries in P. S. Gorski, ed. *Bourdieu and History*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2013., especially those of Goldberg, Sapiro, Nye, and Defrance.

[7] See P. Bourdieu, "Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works", in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity 1993, 176-91, p. 186-89.

conditions, such as mass culture, a monetary market, and a large public space.[8] His reflection did not comprehensively address the challenge of analysing social fields no longer in existence.

The Workshop

The program will be a mixture between more theoretical lectures and case studies. The presentations will include LDG related works, but there will be options for other scholars to make presentations as well. Presenters are invited to bring their expertise to bear on theoretical and methodical challenges in applying social science perspectives to an analysis of a past in which social formation occurred under conditions and paradigms that we can no longer observe. In order to facilitate potential progress in the conversation, all are asked to keep a focus on the analytical nexus of artefacts (*things*) and *texts*, and also of things/texts and *networks* (social associations). Presenters should aim to include social as well as historical reflection. Also, since this is a pointedly cross-disciplinary workshop, presenters are asked to avoid academic tribal language. The use of examples is welcome. We aim to appoint respondents to all presentations and to distribute abstracts of all lectures and presentations to all participants in advance. Some of the lectures may be open to the general public. Depending on the development of the workshop, we will consider proposing a conference volume containing a selection of lectures and presentations.

Questions like these could be addressed:
- Would it be feasible to infer back to past social formations or dynamics behind written and / or archaeological records by way of analogies found for instance in social anthropological research? If so, how could these analogies best be verified as historically sound?
- Is it, for instance, feasible to use Bourdieu's theory of practice to predict the exchange around symbolical capital in reconstructed social fields of the pre-modern Levant?
- Could historians – despite Latour's emphasis upon his theory's distinctiveness – wed some of his insights and analytical positions with other theoretical visions of social

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[8] As one example, important for LDG research, the reflection in P. Bourdieu, "Genèse et structure du champ religieux." *Revue française de sociologie* 12/3, 1971: 295–334, clearly relies on modern social conditions and on modernist perceptions of religion.

interaction? For instance in terms of network analysis, could ANT be combined and supplemented with theory such as Social Network Analysis or Michael Mann's Power Networks?