

RESPONSE TO APEL AND DARMARK: EVOLUTION AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Johan Hegardt

Evolution is, and has been throughout the history of archaeology, a tempting perspective for many archaeologists. However, unlike most other sciences archaeology has seldom had to stand responsible for the political and social consequences of a wrongly used evolutionary theory. Instead archaeology has fed and tempted politicians, scientists from other disciplines, the media, the public, popular culture and so forth with its evolutionary hypotheses that are mostly related to a remote Stone Age, a time period often described in a very simplistic and straightforward manner. It is respectable that Apel and Darmark agree that older cultural evolutionary theory had problematic faults. However, in their opinion the evolutionary theory of today has a high scientific level and any faults done in the past will never be repeated.

In this reply I will show that this is not the case. I will also explain why cultural evolutionary theory is a dangerous temptation that should undergo a serious examination by an international board of experts in ethics and scientific theory. To give some perspectives on the depth of the problem, let me start with a question: we would hardly make use of today's cultural evolutionary theory to explain the election of Barack Obama, so why use it on a remote Stone Age?

In a liberal world that accepts different interpretations there is always a risk that some cannot resist the temptation to dominate. I am not stressing that this is what Apel and Darmark wish to do, but the perspective that they argue for cannot exist side by side with other

perspectives. This is so because cultural evolutionary theory seeks the foundational.

The connection between culture and evolution will make us core-seeking foundationalists, a perspective that we already have seen enough of in history and in the present-day world. Evolutionary archaeology is in search of a foundational or, in a cultural language, fundamental definition of culture. This definition must be universal and useable on any cultural or social phenomenon, even the election of Barack Obama, otherwise it will disqualify itself. This implies that, if cultural evolutionary theory is interesting and relevant for us in the present, we are very close to dangerous thoughts. Remember that we are not dealing with atoms or genes here but culture, and in culture there are ‘fundamentalists’ in all camps, not only in Afghanistan.

It is a truism that if science and knowledge are not significant for the present they are insignificant. Apel and Darmark, referring to Foucault, make a big deal out of this truism, arguing that it proves the point with cultural evolutionary theory. They have misunderstood Foucault, who argued that after Kant philosophy had to define itself in the present. Neither philosophy nor science could depend on God or the King. Today, every serious scientist knows that there is no transcendental truth (God). However, this doesn’t mean that we need a stand-in. Yet, some still believe that there is a fundamental principle in culture that serves as the base or foundation of inquiry and knowledge. Even though Apel and Darmark dismiss the idea of essence, they use the word ‘fundamental’, meaning a necessary base or core. Cultural evolutionary theory is in search of the core – the essence – in culture, and by this Apel and Darmark want ‘to create an interesting and relevant archaeology’ (p. 3) in the present. Yet, this science must also be a science that dismisses all other perspectives in science at large. An interesting and relevant archaeology – science – is closely linked to this ‘victory’.

In evolutionary cultural theory ‘culture’ is a combination of randomly acting well-informed social agents, context, and underlying evolutionary processes. Humans [you and I] think and argue actively/ randomly and by trial and error inside a context, but in the long evolutionary perspective they [you and I] hardly have any choice. Evolutionary processes define how they [you and I] think and argue, and the same processes will one day battle out if their [your and my] ideas survived. The question is whether cultural evolutionary theorists willingly subordinate themselves to this transcendental and metaphysical

force or if they stand outside of it as their predecessors in the 19th and 20th centuries declared.

In Darwin's theory of natural selection nature is neutral. *Nature has of course no meaning whatsoever for nature.* Nature doesn't care, cannot be teleological, and there are no winners or losers and of course no innovators, active agents, social positions, no future or past, no thoughts, no form of planning or any values, and of course no God. Nature is Nature and the 'engine' (a human word, a metaphor) is natural selection (a human theory). The theory of natural selection is a human theory that we need in order to explain or *bring nature into our world of understanding.* To make the idea of natural selection significant we humans have to actively make use of it, for example in biology or medicine. Knowledge of how the systems work enables us to cure diseases or solve environmental problems. This turns the neutrality in the system into political, scientific or cultural decisions. From a cultural evolutionary point of view, however, it is these decisions that are studied and understood as parts of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In the long cultural evolutionary perspective all such decisions are completely neutral and random, comparable with genes or processes in nature. They are a consequence of natural selection, and so is the election of Barack Obama. Strangely, Apel's and Darmark's perspectives are also neutral – not neutral as in natural selection but rather in a logical and scientific sense. They argue that their core-seeking pursuit is value-free and pure, contrary to all other scientific perspectives including genetics, because genetics is a part of present-day culture and therefore only a part of a randomly working natural selection. This clearly shows that Apel and Darmark lack insight into how the theory of natural selection works and should be applied.

The theory of natural selection applies to nature, not culture. The birds outside my window, as an example, are there because of natural selection. Some of them are sparrows. We, however, know that they are 'sparrows' not because they look like sparrows but because their DNA tells us so. It is, nonetheless, of no meaning that the word 'sparrow' is equivalent with some DNA strings if we don't make use of it. More interesting would be if the sparrows suddenly disappeared. The theory of natural selection might help us find an answer. The sparrows on the other hand don't care. Nature and natural selection are, as we have seen, neutral. Contrary to sparrows, we humans have the capacity to ask 'why'. This positions all of us

humans including Darwin outside the neutrality in the theory of natural selection, which means that all human culture – and science – is something other than nature and natural selection. I would like to put it like this: nature is nature and neutral in a transcendental meaning; culture/science is culture/science and not at all neutral (not even over time or in its relationship to nature).

Even though Darwin did appreciate cultural evolutionary theory in other sciences such as anthropology and archaeology he didn't really know how we should make use of his theory on human culture. He did of course realise that he himself would be sucked up by his own theory and disappear into the black hole of neutrality. He would be turned into a sparrow. This means that scientists such as Apel and Darmark must place themselves outside of the system that they construct, contradicting any other kind of scientific practice. We all know that there is no God, so someone must take his place, and this is exactly what Apel and Darmark want to do and this is why cultural evolutionary theory is so tempting to those who express it. However, we are now not only very far away from neo-Darwinist theory, but we are also misusing serious science which we need in our present-day world, and this underlines once again the dark and troublesome connection between evolution, culture, core, the present and significance.

In the best of worlds science is a wonderful thing. However, science can take an unwanted turn without anyone being able to stop it. The examples are uncountable. Cultural evolutionary theorists emphasise that they are doing something else than what was done during the 19th and 20th centuries. For some reason they keep on repeating this. If there are no similarities at all, why even have the discussion? So there must be similarities. One similarity is the temptation of foundational/transcendental truths. Most of us agree that colonialism, Nazism and eugenics were not something beyond or in opposition to the Enlightenment but a part of it and that the Enlightenment, science and culture are unreliable. We must therefore be able to tackle our desire to express foundational or fundamental ideas. Cultural evolutionary theory might be tempting, but like most temptations it is dangerous. Cultural evolutionary theory must make sense in the present and it does. It makes sense among politicians, the public, and in the media. Many people in the Western world believe that cultural evolution – natural (cultural) selec-

tion – explains why they live in the rich world and why others are poor. Film, the computer game industry, and the media make use of evolutionary theory to create foundational differences between people. There is a world out there – mostly conservative – waiting for the results of cultural evolutionary research and this world will make use of the results. I don't think that Apel and Darmark can guarantee that politicians, media people, the public and so on will not find similarities between 19th- and 20th-century thought and today's cultural evolutionary theory if they find it interesting and relevant. Therefore, I would like to suggest that, as in any other serious science when dealing with problematic questions and perspectives, evolutionary archaeology undergo an international ethical inquiry.

Johan Hegardt, Museum of National Antiquities,
114 84 Stockholm, Sweden

