A central question, indeed a perennial quandary, for those investigating ancient societies is how do we divine political meaning from the scant remains left to us? How can leveled buildings and abandoned artifacts betray extinct systems of authority and one-time strategies of control? How do we justify interpretations of the past that can only exist here in the present? These are quests that animate the contributors to this volume and, in one guise or another, are addressed and readdressed by every generation of scholars. As time goes by, knowledge grows and understanding is enriched. Yet we know that this is not simply a product of ever-larger accumulations of data, but also of the changing conceptual frameworks within which they are interpreted. Their shifting parameters point to the ways that knowledge exists within paradigmatic matrices in the Kuhnian (1962) sense, in which both the questions we ask and the answers we get are under the influence of deeper tides.

In this concluding chapter, I will be looking at some key themes raised in preceding ones, situating them within a broader theoretical context that encompasses the past, present, and future prospects of research into ancient politics. Historical reflection allows us to perceive where we stand on time’s arrow: simultaneously cognizant of the intellectual inheritance bequeathed to us; engaged with the social, cultural, and political ideas that suffuse our own academic age; and casting our eyes forward to the ground on which further possibilities yet lie.
In her introductory chapter, Sarah Kurnick asks how rulers establish their authority in ways that both separate them from, and integrate them with, their subject communities; the two capacities sitting within the same person in a contradictory yet fruitful manner. Contradiction is a much-discussed term in social studies and it obliges us to consider the logical status of paradoxes. Immanuel Kant (1999) saw antimonies—statements that are incompatible yet equally true—as evidence that the world we know through our senses can never be reconciled with pure reason. In his dissent from this, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1991:93) argued that reality itself arises from contradictory forces, a unity of opposites in which knowledge and truth only emerge from dialectical exchange. A “unity of opposites” is a fine characterization of the social sciences, which are shot through with conceptual polarities; with individual-society, universal-particular, mental-material, and form-function some of the first that come to mind.

The underlying aim of much recent work has been to reconcile these dichotomous tendencies, and Kurnick’s chapter sets out to “advance a model [of political authority] that is all-inclusive yet allows for the great inherent variability in human practices.” Contradiction serves as a cross-cultural theme, yet she asks each author to “ascertain and delineate the specific acts and practical actions . . . among a particular group in a particular place during a particular time” (3).

Politics can be seen not simply as the pursuit and maintenance of status and resources but as a power-inflected process that works to resolve, ameliorate, or mask inherent and constantly arising contradictions. Imbalances in social position and material wealth are to be found in every complex society, but any idea that this is a truly stable situation is disabused by the innumerable ways in which such distinctions are sustained or reinforced. Indeed, consciously or not, whole armories of ideology and impositions of social constraint are mustered to achieve this end.

REASSESSING ARCHAEOPOLITICS

We have direct experience of the political in our own lives and consequently possess both discursive and practical knowledge of how power relations engage us as subjects and participants. But what is essential about the nature of politics and what is dependent on a particular context of time and place? What principles within the politics of the present can be safely projected into the past?

In his chapter about Ceibal, Takeshi Inomata is concerned with the uncritical application of Western models of politics to past societies. He points to
how both familiarity and unthinking ethnocentrism can lead us to misidentify modern constructs as universals: “An important contribution of archaeology should be disclosing . . . the historical situatedness of our taken-for-granted ideas about humanity and human society” (p. 38). For example, he critiques the Western emphasis on the individual, rational actor, arguing instead that human beings often act in ways that lack real intentionality. Rationality is often applied retrospectively as people try to explain their own actions. Similarly, in their discussion of territoriarity in the pre-Columbian past, Bryce Davenport and Charles Golden caution against taking the modern nation-state—with “juridical, political, economic, and even moral prerogatives . . . explicitly linked to and profoundly defined by the control of what are legally defined as fixed borders” as a model for political landscapes of the past (184). This is the kind of retrospective application to which archaeologists frequently join in voicing their objections but implicitly adhere to nonetheless—a point I will return to later.

To create a context for these debates, we need to consider the intellectual tools available to us and therefore how political anthropology—the domain of archaeopolitics—distinguishes itself from political science. The latter is predicated on the notion of a common heritage to Western thought and experience, tracing its origins back to the Enlightenment and further through an illustrious line of Renaissance and Classical thinkers. Its overriding mission is to understand the workings of the modern world via a conception of the “state” that is both historically real and a transcending abstraction. Political anthropology lacks this metahistorical purpose. In studying a vast array of societies dispersed across space and time, it asks not what the past contributes to the present but how plastic and context-dependent social formations and distributions of power can be, alert to how culture complicates or disrupts the idea of human universals.

This interest in politics outside the Western metahistory—that is, in the ethnographic present and the archaeological past—is much more recent, not emerging with purpose until the mid-twentieth century. Yet crucially, this coincided with the rehabilitation of the Victorian idea of universal sociocultural evolution (White 1949; Steward 1955) and a resuscitation of the typologies that gave it shape and order (Sahlins and Service 1960; Service 1962; Fried 1967). As a result, analysis was initially yoked to the same teleological enterprise and charged with providing a prequel to the modern. A concern with regional histories was regularly subordinated to the greater purpose of classification within an evolutionary scheme. Ethnographically known peoples were viewed as “contemporary ancestors” whose modest social and material complexity offered a snapshot of our own past. An archaeology dedicated to
process sought the origins of institutions, most especially the “early state”—an entity that, however qualified, could never escape its reference point in the contemporary world. Processualist archaeology played to its material strengths, focusing on how the systematics of evolutionary stages were etched into the ground (see Smith 2003:33–45). Here, the location and scale of settlements, their architectural taxonomies, and the distributions of artifactual assemblages were not simply the traces of political lives but direct stigmata of societal organization. As a result, political vision narrowed to a mechanical one in which the actualism of events, people, and the ideas that motivated them were not only seen to be beyond reach, but beyond relevance—consigned to the status of epiphenomena.

Critiques of this neoevolutionary program and its archaeological analogues are by now familiar and came not only from the vanguard of post-processualism but from those holding to an enduring cultural-historical sensibility, since joined by a generation that has absorbed and expanded the argument (e.g., Hodder 1982, 1986; Gailey and Patterson 1987; Kohl 1987; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Shennan 1993:53; Yoffee 1993, 2005; Kehoe 1998; Chapman 2003:42–45; Smith 2003; Pauketat 2007; Campbell 2009). The neoevolutionary program had been undermined on both theoretical and evidential grounds. Where direct testing against historical data was possible, it revealed the deeply blurred reality between the discretely drawn types of stage theory (e.g., Feinman and Neitzel 1984). The substantive charge, in the end, was that one-time heuristic models had ossified into “things in the world” (Wolf 1982:3; Kohl 1984:127–29; Roscoe 2000:116), generating an order to the past that was not so much exposed as imposed. A laudable ambition to understand social change in more rigorous ways had elevated the scientific to such a lofty pedestal that it had occluded the ostensible subjects of the endeavor: the people behind the artifacts, the ideas behind the distributions.

In the wake of this critique, a renewed program for exploring the social and political in the ancient world was required. It was clear that this would need to include (a) a shift in focus from disembodied systems to a peopled past; (b) a concern with ideational as much as material aspects of social life; (c) an orientation toward society as historical and contingent; (d) an engagement with politics on the level of practical effects; and (e) an approach toward internal rather than externally imposed change. This effort would be expressed in a particular group of theoretical concerns, a revised set of thematic interests, a revisiting of material and spatial engagements, and a renewed concern with documents and representations.
A Theoretical Ground

The work of three theorists, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens, would have a telling impact on this rebuilding exercise, and it is no surprise that they are referenced by a number of the authors in this book. Foucault is recognized for his contributions to the contemporary concept of power (e.g., Foucault 1978, 1979, 1980, 2003, 2007), taking a historical approach that emphasized its indivisible links to knowledge. For him, power is generated as one individual acts upon another, which, in so doing, develops into an autonomous and self-generating phenomenon. The institutions that govern us— which are neither benign nor malign—emerge, counterintuitively, less as sources of power than its products. Foucault fulfilled the post-neoevolutionary agenda for a more pervasive idea of politics, but his resolutely impersonal strictures of regulation hardly satisfied the goal of a peopled past, as Inomata, in particular, remarks.

Several of the contributors to this volume have grappled with the applicability of Foucault’s ideas to the ancient world, generating some diverse responses. Foucault is cited in Tatsuya Murakami’s chapter on Teotihuacan, where his models of regulation and disciplinary order constitute a subtext to how power structures were manifested architecturally in that city. Foucault had argued against essentialism, insisting that there are no fixed norms to human beliefs or behavior and that each epoch establishes its own values. Central to his vision of disciplinary “biopower” was its invention in the post-Enlightenment era, marking a radical departure from the sovereign control over life and death that preceded it. It was only by disputing the temporal situatedness of his concept of discipline over sovereign subjects—denying its confinement to the modern era—that Giorgio Agamben (1998) converted it into a trans-historical idea. Inomata, though generally critical of the tendency to retrofit Foucault into historical contexts, sees value in his diffuse, collective notions of power, distinguished from that focused on a central emblematic ruler. In a similar questioning of Foucault’s temporal divide, Kurnick asks whether the distinction between discipline and punishment are not modes of domination that actually coexist in all societies.

To realize the aim of a peopled past it would be necessary to step away from Foucault and employ some other strands of anthropological and sociological thinking, and this is where the theories of practice from Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and structuration from Giddens (1979, 1984) come to the fore. The essence of both is a recursiveness in which individuals and society, agents and structures, are never isolated but constantly act upon and modify the other. Kurnick and Inomata rightly highlight that this central recursive relationship between
agency and structure is too little explored in most archaeological applications. For Bourdieu, it takes place through gradual and often unconscious innovations in daily life, amendments to the internalized dispositions he calls habitus. Giddens has a different emphasis in focusing on knowledgeable actors who more consciously and strategically try to shape their place in the world. It is hard to overestimate the influence of these agency approaches to current anthropology and archaeology—largely fulfilling a prediction of paradigmatic status (Ortner 1984:127). Even so, one could be forgiven for thinking that the tangle of propositions identified with agency today indicate that it has become something of a banner under which a wide range of humanistic concerns gather (see Dobres and Robb 2000; Dornan 2002).

Bourdieu (1977:164) saw a similar temporal watershed to Foucault, with the concept of habitus situated in modern times and contrasted with doxa—in which practices are so engrained that they lack real intentionality and political orders are mistaken for natural ones—which he considered to be the norm among ancient societies. Adam T. Smith (2001) questions Bourdieu’s blanket ascription of doxa to antiquity, comparing it to a false consciousness and a view that risks stereotyping everyone who is temporally and culturally remote from us as an “Other.” In their chapter on pre-Columbian political landscapes, Davenport and Golden similarly critique Bourdieu’s related notion of “misrecognition of arbitrariness,” arguing that it denies local agents the ability to perceive their own engagement with landscape and the production of meaning within it. For them, communities have an active understanding of the relationship between physical and social, which is experienced bodily and interpreted discursively.

Giddens’s (1979:2) structuration theory was explicitly devised to address the sociology of Western capitalism and socialism and only later, and somewhat vaguely, ascribed universal qualities (Giddens 1984). The modern focus of Giddens’s model frequently passes without comment by the scholars who use it (for exceptions, see Last 1995:152; Knapp 2010:196), though its greater sense of volition and scope for innovation is often contrasted with Bourdieu’s more cognitively constrained notion of habitus. If Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power was bereft of personal agency, then, in turn, neither Giddens nor Bourdieu were overly concerned with the exercise of power. To be sure, forms of constraint and domination nominally pervaded their treatments of agency-structure dualities, but their greater focus always lay in “how to go on.” While agency approaches are clearly versatile tools, they have “holes” (Ortner 2006:129), and some important ones appear wherever political issues are at stake. As originally conceived, they are well suited to understanding
how a status quo is perpetuated, but much less so the workings of competition, resistance, or transformation, including new forms of subjection. They barely address the dynamics of politics, nor explore the pragmatics of how personal or institutional power is reified as hierarchy.5 Perhaps the most vocal complainant here has been Nicos Mouzelis (1995:100–26), who describes the absence of an adequate conception of hierarchy in agency models as “like swimming in an empty pool” (126). Hierarchy is indispensable to any full political analysis because it is the prime structural condition enabling and constraining action, with social status and role affecting both what types of actions are feasible and the scale of their effects.

The issue is whether the dualistic conflation of subject and object in Bourdieu and Giddens makes hierarchy inherently problematic, as Mouzelis would have it, or whether hierarchy can be accommodated by recognizing its integral role in social structure as real life (Williams 1977:108–10; Sewell 1992:20–21).6 In regard to the latter, John C. Barrett (2001:161) characterizes polities and their differential empowerment as “the structuring of large-scale and vertically ranked political systems within which certain elites worked explicitly to define the conditions under which other forms of agency could operate.” In other words, the terms of agency-structure relationships differ, allowing more powerful agents to secure their positions and profit by ensuring that the system restricts the opportunities of others. All individuals have agency, but some have more agency than others. But how do these asymmetries come about in the first place and how do elites sustain their structural advantages and therefore political power? How is power itself to be understood within an agency-led perspective?

This takes us to an important but under-specified feature of Giddens’s work: his model of structure as composed of two parts, “rules” and “resources,” the latter described as “the media through which power is exercised” (Giddens 1979:91). Commentators have long pointed to how elites succeed by harnessing and manipulating resources in the widest sense—everything from raw materials to recondite knowledge—but the innovation here is to fuse them to their mobilizing ideas within a single model of structure.7 This proposal has been refined and expanded by William H. Sewell (1992:9–13), who recasts rules as “schemas” to evade the implication of rigidity and express a more adaptive and inventive potential. Most importantly, he insists on a recursive relationship between the two components not found in Giddens. For Sewell, there can be no schemas without the resources that make them possible, and, in turn, resources are recognized as resources only because they are created or utilized by schemas. As with the capacity for agency, resources are universal. All actors
possess capacities of mind and material, however vast or meager they might be. From here, Sewell develops this rationale to show how a duality of schemas and resources can generate inequalities, and how the unpredictability in their relationship through time opens a mechanism for transformation (Sewell 1992:16–19). It is their purposeful allocation, including the transposability of schemas from one set of resources to another, which allows power to be distributed disproportionately and used to enact practical domination. Of the chapters in this volume, only Helen Perlstein Pollard’s makes reference to Sewell’s construct. Her interest lies in how elites in the Postclassic Tarascan state mobilized material objects and discourses of ethnogenesis as resources to create hierarchical distinctions between different social segments. Sewell’s understanding of how mental and material resources are joined recursively to ideas offers additional range to what agency approaches can achieve in analytical terms—not by overlying a separate concept of power but by expanding the logic of some of the existing features of the concept. It is especially important to see a model of power in practice that does more than provide a definition based on effects, concluding with its familiar, though true, underpinning in violence. There is a great deal more to explain about how practical political effects are achieved, taking account of how they are manufactured within webs of motivations, norms, capacities, strategies, methods, and tangible materials.

**Thematic Directions**

Theories of power and agency established a grounding for the post-neoevolutionary program, but shifts of topic and theme have been hardly less significant. Major influences here have been the intellectual traditions that have always taken an analytical and historical perspective on politics—namely, the various shades of Marxism and the sociology of Max Weber. Thus, the realms of ideology, authority, legitimacy, sovereignty, conflict, and order, for example, have moved to the foreground, largely displacing objects of analysis such as the state, city, government, economy, religious organizations, and so forth (see especially Baines and Yoffee 1998). With no small debt to Foucault, the political is no longer taken to be a discrete activity emanating from just a central source but is also a flow of power relations crosscutting and permeating society as a whole, linking its many active domains in both durable and dynamic configurations.

That ideology has taken so prominent a place among these topics is little wonder, given its inherent promise to fuse the cultural and political, with the added attraction that its symbolic expression might be open to archaeological,
historical, and iconological investigation (see Kurnick’s overview of the topic). Ideology has multiple definitions but minimally describes a set of interrelated ideas that condition how social participants interpret their world and conduct political action. There are still two major senses in which it is used: either as a Marxist false consciousness (Marx and Engels 1970)—a knowing conspiracy of the powerful to mystify and entrench their position by duping the wider public—or a more encompassing conception of a social and political worldview (e.g., Conrad and Demarest 1984; Miller and Tilley 1984; Demarest and Conrad 1992). In this second sense, a nexus of ideas legitimize authority, including collective processes of naturalization in which a constructed political artifact projects itself as some innate and unquestionable order to the world. Although the first sense has been richly critiqued (e.g., Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1980), it is still a vein that maintains a strong influence in anthropological understandings of exploitation. Most of the chapters in this volume, when they use the term, adhere to the second definition of ideology, as does most recent work on the topic. However, over time this form has acquired a worryingly diffuse series of applications. Almost every aspect of social operation has been described as ideological in nature, rendering the term at best slippery, at worst devoid of distinctive meaning. While it remains a useful and at times essential term, it is one that demands explicit qualification.

Ideology plays a major role in Murakami’s contribution, but there it is largely broken down from a monolithic single entity to pluralistic “ideologies,” each addressed to a specific purpose and realm. This is not necessarily antithetical to his concern for an encompassing “state ideology” that operates on a higher, or at least more overtly political, level. Davenport and Golden express the more radical view that ideology is entirely secondary to performed action: “it is practice—not intent, not belief—that is central.” This draws liberally on the referential practice for which William F. Hanks (1990) is best known, which explores how people orient themselves according to the people and things around them rather than to a set of guiding notions.

Looking at political society from an ideological perspective offered one way out of the evolutionary mind-set, and a notable effort in this direction was the model of dual-processualism (Blanton et al. 1996; see also Kurnick, this volume). This examines modes of leadership and distinguishes an exclusionary network strategy from a more inclusive corporate strategy—which is to say, regimes centered on individuals who concentrate power as opposed to regimes that distribute it among a collective elite. Dual-processualism necessarily features in Murakami’s chapter on Teotihuacan since this great metropolis was the model’s exemplar of corporate governance. Yet his reanalysis serves to
highlight how recent data argues for a more complex picture and an inter-penetration of strategic practice throughout all levels of society. Similarly, Christopher S. Beekman’s chapter questions dual-processualism’s claim that corporate and exclusionary strategies could not coexist. He shows that in the Tequila valleys of Jalisco, lineage self-aggrandizement and rituals of community cohesion existed side by side, often in the same architectural spaces. Public performances were used to mitigate the “cognitive dissonance” that this would have produced. Both contributors concur with a wider skepticism toward dual-processualism’s utility—principally because it fails to explicate the relationship between its two strategies, its analytical ambition quickly dissolving into a pair of totalizing categories following the style, if not the goals, of the neoevolutionists (Yoffee 2005:177–79; Campbell 2009:822). More generously, it might be best to see the model in historical terms as an intermediate step, a halfway house on the path to more elemental understandings.

For the most part, a reorientation toward the thematic in political life had left one object untouched or, better perhaps, hidden in plain sight. The pinnacle of neoevolutionary pyramids and the core feature of social scientific thought since the Enlightenment, the state has deep foundations and a tenacious hold on our collective imagination. Yet Robert H. Lowie (1927), as others before him, thought that the emergence of what we call states in history introduced no “qualitative transformations to human society” (Kohl 1987:27), while Arthur R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940: xxiii) called the state a “fiction of the philosophers,” claiming that only governments as groups of empowered actors truly exist. But the most serious challenges have come from within the spiritual home of the state—political science—which began to wonder if the object that had consumed so much of its energies was quite what it seemed. In one influential assessment, the success of the state stems from its very lack of substance—that its purpose is to serve as an artful façade or “mask” obscuring the real functioning of politics (Abrams 1988). What is real is not the state but the idea of a state, which works to legitimize otherwise unacceptable forms of domination. Even those political scientists who believe that the state is more just than an idea see an entity of extreme variation, filled with so many complexities and contradictions that it is “largely useless for theory-building” (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996:10). If these doubts and caveats are valid for the modern state, how much more so must they be of the ancient one, an object entirely dependent on backward projection? As Yale H. Ferguson (2002:83–84) puts it, “Where we differ strongly with most archaeologists and anthropologists is with regard to their persistent use of the term ‘state’ to refer to a host of different polities in the ancient and medieval (pre-Westphalian) worlds . . . It
is the political equivalent of talking about the wheeled carts on Roman roads being automobiles.”

Smith (2003:78–102) reaches this same conclusion in his comprehensive, not to say surgical, extirpation of the archaic state from anthropological and archaeological thought. Even those who similarly reject stage theories feel the need to retain the state as a real and necessary artifact (e.g., Chapman 2003; Yoffee 2005). Yet Smith assails it on several fronts, concluding that it is an illusion that impedes the necessary reflection on what early complex societies actually did and how they were constituted: “In placing the State at the heart of investigations into early complex polities, political analysis—the investigation of the formation, administration, and transformation of civil relationships—is replaced by a political cladistics in which typological classification suffices for explanation” (Smith 2003:81). This is in part because the significance accorded the state in neoevolutionary models was not heuristic at all; it was openly considered the end result of a qualitative leap forward crossing a “great divide” (Fried 1967:236; Service 1975:3–10). Smith is among those who dispute the reality of this historical boundary, whose arbitrary criteria artificially cleave state from non-state within the series of contingent transformations that produce greater social and political complexity. The object offered in place of the archaic state is the “early complex polity,” an entity concentrated on a governing authority formed through mutually sustaining relations of power and legitimation. This triumvirate of authority, power, and legitimacy becomes the pivot from which to transfer analytical attention away from type/form and toward content, an attempt to peer within the “black box” and perceive the relational principles that constitute political life (see also Campbell 2009; Johansen and Bauer 2011; Smith 2011).

The steady rise of polity as a term of choice in the study of ancient politics has been (a) a way of traversing the contentious transition between chiefdom and state (without denying the viability of either); (b) an attempt to sidestep evolutionary issues altogether; or, now, (c) an overt challenge to the utility of the archaic state concept. The current volume duly reflects the lexical shift in its chapters, while its bibliographical entries, by contrast, abound with titles incorporating state/states—a clear reflection of the word’s conceptual legacy.

What we often find in Mesoamerica are forms of political cohesion that challenge the assumptions inherent to many universalistic types, compelling us to define local configurations of community. Arthur A. Joyce et al. (this volume:59), for example, note that the Río Viejo polity, while exhibiting many of the features that archaeologists have traditionally used to identify archaic states, was in fact a fragile political formation that lasted only a century or two:
Río Viejo exhibits many of the hallmarks that archaeologists have traditionally attributed to the kinds of politically centralized and tightly integrated societies normally defined as states. In the case of Río Viejo, these characteristics include a five-tiered settlement hierarchy, urbanism, monumental public architecture, and rulers who were sufficiently powerful to sponsor large labor projects and public ceremonies. Yet a closer reading of the evidence shows that people in outlying communities . . . exhibited considerable independence from the regional center in ritual practices and architectural techniques and styles. In contrast to traditional archaeological models of complex political formations as strongly hierarchical and tightly integrated, our view of the later Formative Río Viejo polity is that it was neither highly integrated nor significantly coercive. While Río Viejo challenges assumptions about complex polities, it was far from being an isolated case.

Both Murakami and Pollard, on the other hand, continue to apply the term state to their subjects of Teotihuacan and the Tarascan empire, respectively. These large, centralized polities have the scale and presence we commonly associate with modern nation-states. Davenport and Golden, on the other hand, seem to want to reclaim state as a neutral term for comparative purposes, but it would be preferable for the authors of all three of these chapters to explicitly define and defend their usage in light of the theoretical currents that have moved against it.

Of late, interest in legitimatized authority has coalesced around the idea of sovereignty. Although a number of contributors to this volume refer to sovereigns or sovereignty, their conceptual grounding remains largely unexamined. Debated since Classical times, sovereignty is traditionally defined as supreme authority over a specific territory and its population (e.g., Hinsley 1966). It has always had a presence in political science but has recently blossomed within a political anthropology shedding its origins in colonialist ethnography and staking ground outside its familiar terrains of kingship and kinship. Vital here is the aforementioned work by Agamben and his understanding of sovereignty as a single constituting/constituted power rooted in violence (Humphrey 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Sovereign will is imposed through judgments and sanctions to which it is not itself subject (murder is a crime but capital punishment is justice). Given, however, that violence underpins all political power, especially the illegitimate, the truly distinguishing qualities of sovereignty lie in its two forms of corporality—vested in the person of a ruler or in a communal body politic—and its implied possession of some moral dimension speaking to an idealized or transcendent identity.
Whether it draws on a potent mythology, antique tradition, or legal statute all depends on a legitimacy that ultimately rests in public acceptance, or at least acquiescence. Sovereignty is now forwarded as an agenda within archaeology that involves “practical regimes of authorization and subjection . . . the embodied regimens, rituals, habits, and activities that reproduce, and undo, sovereignty in interactions from the spectacular to the everyday” (Smith 2011:419).

What remains to be more thoroughly developed is a view of the pragmatics of sovereignty that lies between high ideals and base violence. There is more to sustaining authority than ideological beguilement and the threat, or use, of brute force. The successful mobilization of resources in their widest sense can be considered a given, but this is not a phenomenon that can go unexamined (as several authors in this volume show). We need to know more about how leaders use their resources to energize the agency of subjects who, in proffering up their resources, reflexively generate the empowerment of leaders. It is here that the previously noted addition of schemas as ideas dedicated to this end offers a productive tool. Ideology may supply an overarching framework, but practical politics work on the microscale engineering of stimulus: with action and compliance motivated by the fear of retribution and the promise of reward, not simply by how to go on. Schemas are crafted to the production and utilization of every resource, be it human, material, or informational—supplying the necessary discursive knowledge of how to use them to furnish power.

Because agency theories see structure as an undifferentiated whole for analytical purposes, they cannot offer insights into social divisions of the kind that isolate the elite from the masses. We therefore need to keep attending to status and role, meaning that the functionalism of Parsons (1951) has a part to play and is not entirely upstaged or eclipsed by practice and structuration (Mouzelis 1995). Similarly, we need to pursue the means by which status distinctions were realized throughout the political community. Worldwide, the elite are consistently adept at sustaining their differentiation through the “dramaturgy of power” (Cohen 1981; Wengrow 2001:169), part of which is expressed in elaborate public performances (see Inomata and Coben 2006). This performative aspect of politics is emphasized in several chapters of this volume. Thus, at Ceibal, Inomata sees in its grand plazas evidence for spectacles of violence that were important in shaping social differentiation at the very beginning of settled life at the site. For Beekman, the control of such open performative spaces enabled the socially powerful to compete for recruits, whether for descent groups or community associations. While for Davenport and Golden, the public demarcation of boundaries by performance was central to establishing territorial claims. The elaborate and institutionalized feasting
described by both Joyce et al. and Joanne Baron were similarly acts of drama with their own scripts and stage directions.

All social actors seek to make the most of their structural position, and we should not assume that only the elite possessed discursive consciousness and critical reflection. We also need to move away from the assumption that elites were in some way immune to the processes of naturalization. There is little reason to doubt that they believed themselves specially selected to rule by means of bloodline and divine will, judging themselves uniquely capable in the bargain. What agency brings to the table here is a more holistic view of power in society that is neither top-down nor bottom-up. Rulers obviously cannot exist in isolation but are embedded in a social matrix where all participants are contributing agents, and all events performed by the ruler “connote collective actions” (Houston and Escobedo 1997:467). Monarchs need not only armies but also porters, fan-bearers, potters, farmers, and laborers, each contributing to the political community to the extent that their differing access to resources permit: “Recognition of this requires de-privileging the position of elites in archaeological and historical analyses and reconsidering a multiplicity of actors in a multiplicity of arenas.” (Porter 2010:168)

Inomata (this volume:35) is also interested in the integrative function of monarchy and “an important implication we might draw from broad cross-cultural studies is that the central property of the divine king is . . . his symbolic nature as the embodiment of the political community.” While all authors acknowledge the role of commoners in the ongoing negotiation of authority, several also move beyond the simple dichotomy with rulers to discuss other interest groups. Joyce et al. discuss the tensions between the centralizing motives of the rulers at Río Viejo, as opposed to the regional elite that resisted this. Murakami discusses the rise of a class of bureaucrats who were tasked with the administration of the Teotihuacan polity and their intermediary relationship between rulers and commoners at the site. Baron and Beekman both discuss competing elite lineages within communities and the ramifications of this competition for other community members. In dealing with the only multiethnic system under discussion here, Pollard describes how different ethnic groups held different statuses within the Tarascan polity and how the manipulation of ethnic identity was a key tool in the creation of the empire.

The Materiality of Politics

The call to switch from static understandings of political structure to those of ongoing acts of authorization, regularization, and subjugation is, to varying
degrees of emphasis, supported by all the authors in this volume. But how is
this archaeology of practice distinguished from its predecessors? To address
such a question we must begin with its approach toward the “archaeological
record,” a notion that sounds stable enough but in fact differs significantly
depending on the paradigm in play (Patrik 1985). John C. Barrett (2001) cri-
tiques the label itself for its implication of coherence and narrative; he sees
nothing in the taphonomic processes of deposition that resembles a text of
the kind pursued in hermeneutic archaeology (Hodder 1986:122–24, 1988; for
critiques, see Keesing 1987:169 and Preucel 1991:23). For Barrett, an agency-led
archaeology sees material remains not as the vestiges of past social practices,
the vast majority of which leave no trace, but of the facilities that enabled them.

This perspective joins a rich contemporary tradition in which architecture
and artifacts are seen as collaborators with humans in the making of social acts,
ranging from the spectacular and episodic to the prosaic and routine.11 This link
between practices and materials appears in Bourdieu (1977), who describes how
both the animate and inanimate contribute to processes of socialization (Miller
2005:6). “Materiality” has come to define recent thinking on this topic—which
is not a theory of things so much as a theory of the way things are enmeshed in
human lives, reaching beyond the mundanely practical to the cognitive, emo-
tional, and sensual (e.g., Miller 1998, 2005; Boivin 2004, 2008; Hodder 2012;
Renfrew 2004; Meskell 2005a, 2005b). Objects occupy space and have weight,
form, size, color, and texture but are also set in time, decaying rapidly or imper-
ceptibly, discarded or renewed—some long outliving their creators or appropri-
ators, others made and unmade within a day. Archaeology retrieves the durable
portion of what was once a far richer material world and asks it questions of
function and meaning. A commonsensical division between the practical and
the symbolic quickly breaks down, as the closer one looks, the distinction can
only be one of emphasis. A question of function demands that we address
meaning in the hands of whom, to what purpose, and directed at whom?

An explicit effort to fuse politics with the object world came in the model of
“materialization,” which describes the “transformation of ideas, values, stories,
myths and the like into a physical reality—a ceremonial event, a symbolic object,
a monument, or a writing system” (DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle 1996:16).
The argument here is that ideologies do not reside “in people’s heads” and
that to come into being they must be realized in some tangible form beyond
language. The construct seeks to register the role of meaningful objects in the
furtherance of power but sees them working reflectively rather than reflexively,
with materializations still vehicles at the command of a higher mental order
(Pauketat 2001:85).12 This differs from a political materiality, which considers
how practices create, manipulate, or engage objects for specific effects, while they simultaneously reproduce the conditions and necessity for those practices (see Johansen and Bauer 2011:12–16; Smith 2011:425–26). Objects and built environments pattern human actions by means of their physicality and spatiality, structuring to some extent how they should be handled and moved within and between, resisting many, though never all, alternatives.13

We have already noted the manufacture and control of ceramics at Monte Albán that allowed elites to structure debts and obligations within and beyond the polity (Joyce et al., this volume). This depended on assigning value to objects that, like fired clay, have no intrinsic worth or scarcity and must be deliberately empowered to achieve their effects. This is a very common, conceivably universal expression of materiality—analogous to how we decide that small metal disks constitute money. To choose another example from Michoacán (Pollard, this volume), portable objects such as ceramic pipes, metal ornaments, spouted vessels, obsidian blades and ornaments, and cotton spindle whorls allowed a newly unified elite class to mark their status within the context of the newly unified state. When Murakami describes the relationship between the bureaucratic requirements of the Teotihuacan polity and the physical facilities that housed them, we need to contemplate the self-generating properties of those institutional forms—that is, not only how needs generate facilities by means of a certain kind of mental model, but the way facilities condition and operationalize the conduct of their users, thus engendering additional needs and operations. Any built environment has this same reflexive potential—not simply as products but as producers of meaning.

In such contexts, objects and spaces can be seen as active rather than passive contributors, taking us close to ascribing them agency—the notion that the material can achieve autonomy from its makers and act on its own account. Object agency is associated with Alfred Gell (1998), who concentrated on effects generated in the mind of the viewer, a perspective that is altogether more palatable to realists than that of Bruno Latour (2005), whose version implies a sentience compatible with animism. Every intentionally made or selected artifact is imbued with sense and purpose, but once let loose into the world, its interpretation depends on how successfully it conforms to cultural understandings and systems of coding, themselves dependent on the strength of social forces that work to maintain them. There may well be a dominant reading, but this can erode over time if the “interpretive community” (Fish 1980) to which it speaks changes or the message lost entirely if that community is decisively disrupted or displaced.14 Objects can be co-opted and can acquire new meanings, with the patina of time making them all the more
compliant to revisionism. These are convoluted processes of semiosis, not agency, and the manner in which materials appear so agent-like is more a comment on how we are cognitively predisposed to see the world (e.g., J. L. Barrett 1998; Boyer 2001). Political materiality envelops acculturated participants in a “semiosphere” (Lotman 1990) of meaningful places and things that subliminally condition as much as they openly propound. 

A final aspect of materiality, though one overlapping with other thematic concerns, is landscape. In his compelling case for the constitutive role of landscape in all forms of political authority, Smith (2003) notes not only its obvious spatial dimensions but its role as an anchor for historical experience, meaning, representation, and therefore belonging. Landscape, which includes built or otherwise modified environments, is not natural space but a human production like any other artifact, though here its limits are as much conceptual as they are pragmatic. The only chapter to address landscape directly is that by Davenport and Golden, whose topic of territoriality highlights how the recent emphasis on elite networks in Mesoamerican archaeology has come at the expense of examining bounded and possessed spaces. The essence of this argument is that political relations and perceptions operate at different scales and that a concentration on diffuse webs of political allegiance at the regional or pan-regional level are not appropriate to lower levels—where the logics of local sovereignty works very differently and physical contact with a sustaining environment provokes different mental constructs.

Beyond the Archaeological

Recovering practices may be a new generalized goal, but it does not magically render the archaeological record more transparent or meaningful. Indeed, a move away from perceiving imprints of sociopolitical order to an engagement between the material and immaterial, ascribing value and importance to even fleeting acts and perceptions, sets the bar for archaeological inference even higher. Investigators therefore remain as reliant as ever on external sources of information that inspire, expand, support, or corroborate interpretation. I refer here to the contributions of analogy on one hand and the analysis of word and image on the other.

All statements about the past are either explicitly or implicitly analogical in character. We can assign meaning to the unknown only by comparison with the known (Wylie 1985). But analogy is as problematic as it is indispensable (Clark 1951; Hawkes 1954; Ascher 1961; Gould and Watson 1982). The criteria by which a given parallel is selected, applied, and assessed can never be
consistent or truly objective. Analogies fall into general and specific categories. The former is universalistic and consists of choosing a counterpart deemed appropriate by its environmental or cultural resemblance, while the latter is particularistic, referencing descendent or otherwise related societies. In the first case, the problem lies in the subjectivity of the selection, which introduces all sorts of a priori assumptions; in the second (“direct historical analogy”), the greater concern is essentialism, the presumptive notion that a defined cultural group possesses some inherent characteristics that persist through time. The sources used can vary enormously, from societies deep in the prehistoric past to those rich in historical documentation, to contemporary people open to observation and interlocution—each with its own subjectivities. Processualism was wary of analogy despite its regard for a neo-evolutionary logic that would seem to make it a highly compatible line of reasoning. The preference was to employ parallels for the purpose of hypothesis forming, but not to use them to seek confirmation or validation of results. Post-processualism was generally much more open to the debt owed to comparative data, switching from the traditional role of neutral observers to one of active engagement in living communities. This approach is popular in Mesoamerica because of the survival of some socially relevant indigenous documents from the early Spanish occupation and a greater number produced by and for the colonial administrations. The existence of many “traditional” societies (leaving the problematic use of that label and the way anthropologists act as its arbiters to one side) also offers opportunities for ethnographic fieldwork.

Ethnohistorical and ethnographic analogies take a significant role in the chapters by Beekman, Baron, and Davenport and Golden, where they serve to contextualize arguments and establish precedents. The modern and historical Náyari are used by Beekman to interpret the purposes of architectural spaces and artifactual remains in the Tequila valleys of Jalisco, not through overt commonalities of form but through perceived commonalities of practice. In documented tensions between the concepts of lineage and community in modern towns, as well as rituals that concern fertility and the seasonal cycle, Beekman detects persuasive analogues for his archaeological material. Baron uses colonial and contemporary accounts of Maya ritual practice, and specifically the beliefs and rituals involving Catholic saints, to trace antecedents in ancient Maya patron deities. By establishing indigenous reinterpretations of imposed Christian concepts, she supports both her general arguments about the links between present and past usage and the specific political roles that the supernatural takes in community and kin competition. Especially rich literary sources and living traditions in Oaxaca allow Davenport and Golden
to explore indigenous concepts with considerable time-depth. These strong continuities open comparative vistas that seem to shed light on other parts of Mesoamerica, where they discern analogous concepts of territoriality and boundary making.

Word and image, having languished under the same epiphenomenal tag as ideology under processualism, made a comeback under post-processualism. While open to the possibilities of “reading” ancient art in a manner akin to their readings of architectonics and other material as text (see above), practitioners were riven by doubts about its validity as a decontextualized source (e.g., Tilley 1991; Johnson 2010:111). Within Mesoamerica, this left most of the relevant research to be conducted by less theoretically directed epigraphers and iconologists, usually as part of multidisciplinary programs. It was within this context that the revolutionary decipherment of Maya script took place, and major advances were made in the understanding of motifs and narrative art in that tradition and elsewhere. Indeed, the very limited impact of openly post-processualist theory in the region (with the notable exception of gender studies) was in no small measure because the high point of its intrinsically subjective hermeneutics coincided with the actual reading of art and writing. While European prehistory was enlivened by phenomenological interpretations of its landscapes, mounds, and monuments, the names of Maya buildings and their functions—often with that of their owner or commissioning king included for good measure—were being read with demonstrable clarity. For Baron, hieroglyphic texts are a vital connective tool with which to illuminate and contextualize material remains. There is no space here to discuss the wider ramifications of these developments, but they share close correspondences to the material and text advances that revolutionized the study of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in the nineteenth century.

An engagement with political practice has, as anticipated, brought a renewed enthusiasm for studying written documents and symbolic and narrative images. Indeed, if one looks at recent work exploring the constitution of ancient political relations through practice, one is struck by the degree to which their focal points are not architectural or artifactual finds per se, but narrative texts and images (e.g., Smith 2001; Wengrow 2001; Campbell 2009). On one level this engagement of archaeology with epigraphy and iconology is the kind of synergistic approach we should expect within the ambit of anthropological archaeology, but on another it points to the difficulty of pursuing the ephemera of ideas, experience, and events outside such communicative technologies. Semiotic systems were in large part expressly devoted to memorializing practices. Elsewhere, in architectonic analysis, there can still be
disquieting leaps of faith, as the content and orientation of a cache or alignment of a building takes on the mantle of weighty evidence pointing to one form of political system or another. Emphasis is usually placed on a search for meaning, yet the essential problem is often not too few potential meanings but too many. The task for the investigator is to limit the inherent ambiguity of the record, to see how the best available evidence can restrict the free play of speculation.

**Nature of the Universal**

The final part of this chapter takes a different tack, looking beyond the past and present of investigating ancient politics to ask what lines of inquiry might contribute to its future. Of all the oppositions noted at the outset of this chapter, none is more fundamental than the contrast between its positivist and idealist orientations—separating those aspects of the field subject to natural laws from those that can only be intuited through the human mind. This is the central dialectic of social science, without which the field would collapse into sterile data collection on the one hand and tether-less postulation on the other. These oscillations from one side of the dichotomy to the other, enacted over spans of decades, can be seen as a macroscale mirror to the to-and-fro reasoning that researchers perform at the level of personal psyche. Each domain offers a check and a control on the other, and in their sharply contrasting, often conflicting, mappings of phenomena there arise new possibilities for making sense of human engagement with the world and each other. Each side of the equation is in a constant state of development, however punctuated progress may be, and as a result, constantly revivifies the interaction.

Although the balance between positivism and idealism in social studies has shifted through time, it has lately been strongly skewed to the latter, exerting a powerful influence over what ideas are productive or permissible in paradigmatic terms. This raises the question of whether the current idealist preeminence is permanent or simply a stage in the ongoing process of knowledge formation. Could we be approaching the point where scientific epistemologies return to the arena, and this time as protagonists in the debate rather than simply as sources of metaphor?

As we have seen, contemporary configurations of the archaeopolitical shift attention from idealized types to a series of elemental articulations. What both share, however, is their universalistic ambition. Where there was once a ubiquity of forms scattered across the world and through time (e.g., band, tribe, chiefdom, state), there is now a ubiquity of relational principles (e.g.,
authority, power, legitimacy, sovereignty). This universal currency of political life is seen to underlay all societies, no matter their size, antiquity, or myriad of cultural particularities. But a necessary question must follow: Where do we locate the universal in this analysis? Is it to be found in impersonal processes—patterns that spill from the logics of mathematics or physics—or is it inherently embodied? If we assert the latter then we have not resolved the matter, only brought the problematic issue of “nature” into play. Anthropology has always struggled with its dual mission to understand both body and mind, vacillating between a vision of humans as the highest form of ape, and therefore part of the natural order, and as unique cultural beings that exist somewhere above or beyond it.

To explore extracultural explanation in society is to invite a charge of reductionism. This is ironic, since an accusation designed to admonish anthropologists is one that scientists find themselves at ease with, given their avowed interest in reducing surface complexities to core principles, a key tenet of all scientific method and “more a virtue than a sin” (Laland and Brown 2011:66). If we identify recurring behaviors in human societies worldwide, and therefore espouse universalism, we are obliged to search out a source beyond the idiosyncrasies of local cultures, turning to fields that deal with the macro-patterning of people and the world.

Complexity and Chaos

A number of mechanistic strands from the natural sciences have influenced recent thinking on social life. One example is heterarchy, an idea that was originally developed to explain certain neurological functions (McCulloch 1945) that has now been taken up for its sociological implications (Crumley 1979, 1987, 1995, 2003). Countering some deep-seated assumptions about the ubiquity of hierarchy, heterarchy describes forms of organization in which elements are unranked or capable of being ranked in different ways. Political formations certainly appear to combine hierarchical and heterarchical orders. The latter is evident, for example, in the interaction of parallel institutions or in the shifts in power relations between autonomous entities, although many are as easily explained as nested or competing hierarchies (Yoffee 2005:179).

Heterarchy is one of several concepts to fall under the general sobriquet of complexity theory (Crumley 2001, see also Kehoe 1998:216–18). This reimagining of systems thinking emerged from attempts to better understand bioevolutionary change and argues for previously unrecognized processes of “self-organization” (Kauffman 1993, 1995; Casti 1994; Lansing 2003). As
such, it stresses the ways in which systems develop holistically and collaboratively rather than by the individual roles of components, this “self-creation” emerging from nonhierarchic communication between all of their elements (Luhmann 1995). Complexity theory is not without its problems, but its ideas engender useful reflection on certain types of political issue. Models of political formation, maintenance, and reproduction usually place emphasis on intentionality—on structures as the realized ambitions of individuals or groups. We are familiar with actions having unintended consequences, but complexity goes further to question whether structures are the products of planning in any straightforward sense, opening the door to ways in which they emerge and are regulated by self-organizing principles. Anthropologists and historians alike are much concerned with personal motivations, cost-benefit analysis, and rational choice, for example, and these continue to be factors we can associate with knowledgeable agents at the microscale. Yet complexity posits that intentions coexist with “systems effects” at the micro- and macroscale that are neither designed nor under any sentient control.

Another approach often considered under the umbrella of complexity is chaos theory, which began as a branch of mathematics but has since been identified in a range of scientific disciplines (Waldrop 1992). Chaos, or nonlinear dynamics, describes how minuscule variations in the initial conditions of processes lead to radically different outcomes. As a result, wherever the starting conditions of a given system cannot be fully known, there are significant limits to predicting its future behavior. The popular notoriety of chaos can detract from serious attention to its principles and it can be misapplied—it is not, for example, a synonym for stochastic behavior—but its effects are consistent with what we see in highly unpredictable phenomena such as history (McCloskey 1991; Reisch 1991; Shermer 1993, 1995) and, in a pioneering collected volume, archaeology (Beekman and Baden 2005). Despite a determined search for covering laws to history (Hempel 1942), none have been demonstrated, blocking all conventional attempts to absorb historical studies within the domain of science. Because humans both act and perceive effects and reflexively respond by adapting their behavior, society functions as a constant exercise in feedback (e.g., Giddens 1979:25). While we can trace the trajectory of a social system through time to a given present, chaos casts severe doubt on our ability to deduce exactly why it took one path rather than another or predict how it would develop in the future. The value of the approach therefore lies less in its ability to prescribe fresh avenues of research than the ways it poses restrictions to what we can know of the past—limits that even an unimaginably large dataset could not overcome. Chaos is a
science of unpredictability that steers our attention toward problems that are solvable and away from those that are, more than likely, not.

Applying these modes of thinking to human societies past or present smacks of antihumanism. We intuitively resist the idea that our existence amounts to the play of impenetrable statistical probabilities and the whims of unseen hands, yet we can recognize the synergy they present with the autonomous power structures of Foucault, for example, who was interested in precisely these kinds of disembodied processes. Foucault’s victims, the “docile bodies” of his disciplinary biopower, demonstrate his awareness of the real life beyond the abstractions. It is to this kind of corporality that we should now move.

**Biology and Society**

There is no questioning that the power of culture dominates our experience and perception of the world. But this has led to a widely held, but actually quite radical, proposition that cultural development has so superseded natural processes that it renders them all but redundant. In John Locke’s well-worn metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, the human brain is conceived as a blank slate onto which our mental superstructure is uniquely inscribed anew through active and passive learning. To become civilized is to somehow leave biology at the door.

But a swathe of empirical data from cognitive and genetic research dispute these assumptions, establishing a prefigured mind that challenges us to find new ways of understanding the relationship between human nature and human culture. A range of biological specializations and subfields, including human sociobiology, evolutionary anthropology, and evolutionary psychology, has developed to explore the relationships between the innate and the acquired (for an overview, see Laland and Brown 2011). Their studies produce no deterministic laws reducing people to programmed automata but rather a growing appreciation that it is the coevolution of genes, culture, and environment that has produced the rich diversity of human expression we see in both past and present. At the heart of sociobiology and its sister disciplines is the recognition that our genus, *Homo*, has spent 99.5 percent of its past living in small groups of hunter-gatherers and that our minds and bodies alike have been shaped by that lifestyle and its imperatives. Cultural evolution may have vastly outstripped its biological counterpart in recent millennia, but the embedded traits and propensities we once relied upon for survival in a “state of nature” have not disappeared and remain with us in the radically different milieu of the modern world. Our environment is so transformed that these
traits may no longer have functional roles, their original purposes obscured or altered by the dazzling power of culture (Tooby andCosmides 1992). The one-time charge of determinism misunderstands the extraordinarily intricate and malleable interplay between biology and culture (Boyd and Richardson 1985, 2005), where to exclude either renders us helpless to explore some of the more profound issues in social and political life.

If we are to answer the truly important social questions—why human societies are hierarchical; why conflict occurs but not all the time, why individuals will risk their lives for the sake of others; why ethnocentrism is pervasive and hard to overcome; why materialism matters so much and is so rarely satisfied—then we need to look into our own deep past. Here, it is disciplines outside anthropology—most notably, the fields of political science and international relations—which have taken up Darwinian approaches to these problems and produced persuasive and logically consistent responses (e.g., Masters 1983, 1989, 1990; Thayer 2000, 2004). Darwinian evolution operates at the level of ultimate causation, not on the proximate causation at which historical actions or events are manifested.21 It speaks instead to elemental features of the human motivational complex, which are outwardly diverse but ultimately reducible to the familiar goals of somatic survival and reproductive success.

Aiding the move toward dialectical exchange is the recognition that biological evolution is more complex, contingent, and probabilistic that many specialists once believed (see Levins and Lewontin 1985), and this understanding of evolution as a historical process has opened new points of contact with the humanities. Nicole Boivin (2008) has made a bold and innovative effort to demonstrate how decisive the implications of these developments can be for social studies. One she highlights is “niche construction,” which was developed to describe how animals do not only exploit environments but shape them to their own specifications with demonstrable evolutionary consequences (Lewontin 2000:51–55). This has obvious applications to humankind—the niche constructors par excellence (Laland, Odling-Smee, and Feldman 2001; Laland and Brown 2006). This ability to determine the conditions of existence is critical because it alters selection pressures and provides a motor for the coevolution of people, places, and things. Archaeology has spent a great deal of time examining the impact of environmental effects on social development and not nearly enough on how those same environments are very often the result of human modification stretching back for millennia. Yet the issue of coevolution runs deeper when we consider the potential for technology to reflexively shape the cognitive capacities of hominids—in effect, materiality producing a “self-made” species (Kingdon 1993; Boivin 2008:190–97). This is
especially relevant given that the pace of certain evolved traits has proved to be significantly faster than expected—some operating on the short timescales relevant to complex society (Laland and Brown 2006:101) and even, through epigenetics, in gene-expression changes within a single lifetime. Culture itself is increasingly seen in evolutionary scholarship as both a manifestation and a facilitator of human self-construction, a merging of mind and body that renders many long-standing disagreements somewhat moot.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The aim of this chapter has been to seek a broader setting for the preceding contributions, to show how they are linked by common threads and shared concerns and that, while they may be geographically circumscribed, they are not theoretically isolated. They address questions of broad relevance to current thinking about political practice as it has developed in recent years, taking inspiration from a range of subject areas—theoretical, thematic, material, analogical, textual, and imagistic. They collectively offer a time capsule of where the study of Mesoamerican archaeopolitics currently stands, conscious of the enabling and constraining effect of current paradigms, working within local, regional, and worldwide traditions, yet also innovating and moving the field forward.

My chapter is loosely structured as a historical narrative, describing how contemporary archaeopolitics emerged from the post-processualist critique of processualism and seeks alternative ways to conceive of past lifeways. To the degree that it takes a stand of its own, it is that the universalism inherent in that vision cannot be left as a disembodied abstraction. We are compelled to explain why human communities that were widely distributed across the globe and through time generated recurring patterns of power articulations and practice. There are doubtless several factors at work, but the most obvious is simply our common humanity. But this is not some vague notion of human nature but a very specific instantiation of the long evolution of mind that allowed us to navigate and shape our environment and fellow humans, as they shaped us. The political cannot be subsumed within the humanities but, like all questions of social study, straddles an epistemological divide of central importance to the discipline.

The social sciences are, in this understanding, innately dialectical because they encompass two logically incompatible components. Their friction, expressed as contradiction, is a source for the working versions of reality that need to find some accommodation between them. Latour (1993) usefully paints the
scientific–humanistic dialectic not as communication or negotiation but as a series of “translations.” This captures the idea that such exchanges cannot be perfect. Each gains some impression of the other’s conceptual realm but never a verbatim one. Since they lack a common vocabulary, share no grammatical or syntactical principles, their dialogue is unpredictable and inventive. Calls to dissolve the boundary between science and the humanities have an immediate appeal: they appear redolent of remaking our crusty, sedimented categorizations and breaking through to new conceptual territories. But on closer inspection, what they generally propose are strategies for rethinking existing translations and engineering new ones.

Hegel (1991) saw his dialectic as the explanation for the churn of intellectual paradigms and the successive revolutions in systems of knowledge. It was the meeting of contradictions that led to an unfolding process of renewal and creation. As soon as we seem to have reached resolution—the identification of some timeless and essential truth—it is dispelled by the realization that it is, after all, just another artifact of our consciousness, another contradiction to solve. The cycle is initiated once more, the onward march of a world ever reinventing itself.

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NOTES

1. For a summary of how the unity of opposites concept has been employed within different strands of philosophy, see McGill and Parry (1948).

2. This term is most often associated with Elman R. Service (1968, 1975), although it was earlier ascribed to William I. Thomas (in Dorsey 1931:21).

3. For an exception to the general tenor of processualism regarding ideology, see Flannery (1972).


5. The key texts (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1979, 1984) show only a handful of references to *hierarchy* and most of these are unrelated to political concerns.

6. For a discussion of Raymond Williams and his contribution to practice theory, see Ortner (1984:149).
7. Resources take a wide variety of forms but fall into categories that Giddens called “authoritative” and “allocative,” recast and clarified by Sewell as “human” and “nonhuman”: “Nonhuman resources are objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured, that can be used to enhance or maintain power; human resources are physical strength, dexterity, knowledge, and emotional commitments that can be used to enhance or maintain power, including knowledge of the means of gaining, retaining, controlling, and propagating either human or nonhuman resources” (Sewell 1992:9).

8. Barrett (2001:149–50) explains this point, although without the input of schemas per se: “Agency is always situated in the structural conditions which facilitate its actions because agency requires a medium through which to work. Practice is therefore structured by the resources which are its medium and its outcome. These resources extend from material and symbolic resources to traditions of execution and expression. The effectiveness of the mobilization of such resources in practice depends partly upon the degree of control and knowledgeability exercised by the agent, partly upon the power of the agent over these resources, and partly upon the agent’s expertise to communicate effectively.”

9. For another ideologically driven perspective, see Joyce and Winter (1996), which also focuses on elite strategies of control.

10. This is part of a wider sea change in the perception of Teotihuacan, which questions whether impressionistic evaluations of art and architecture can offer reliable equations to a political system, including doubts that political leadership was as impersonal as long assumed (see Taube 2000).

11. Here we might note Inomata and Coben (2006), for case studies worldwide on the intersection of human performance with designed spaces and dedicated paraphernalia.

12. In response to this and similar approaches, a group of scholars, following Renfrew (2004), elaborated a highly recursive notion of “material engagement” under the broader aegis of cognitive archaeology (see Malafouris 2004; Knappett 2004).

13. For this kind of reflexivity in Maya architecture, see Martin (2001:168–69).

14. For interpretive communities in Mesoamerica, see Martin 2006.

15. I use this term in a more restrictive sense than Lotman intended. Rather than a whole world of human-made meaning, I apply it only to the object world of a given society.

16. A broad definition appears in Ascher (1961:317): “In its most general sense interpreting by analogy is assaying any belief about non-observed behavior by referral to observed behavior which is thought to be relevant.”

17. There are a good number of overviews of this history as well as more detailed treatments of its phases. See, for example, relevant sections of Vincent (1990), Kehoe (1998), Trigger (2006), and Johnson (2010).
18. For treatments of heterarchy in the Maya region, see Potter and King (1995), Scarborough, Valdez, and Dunning (2003), and Becker (2004).

19. For a concise history of the tentative efforts to understand history through nonlinear dynamics, see Shermer (1995:59–69).

20. The initial programmatic claims of Wilson (1975) were quickly rejected by Sahlins (1976), although his charges of biological determinism were in turn rebutted by Alexander (1977, 1979). Weaknesses within Wilson’s original exposition were critiqued from within biology, although these have subsided with the growing consensus about the mechanisms at work in sociobiology (see Losco 2011:81).

21. To illustrate this contrast: the proximate cause of thirst is that you have gone without drinking for a while, while the ultimate cause of thirst is that our metabolism requires water and the sensation has evolved to motivate a sufficient intake (see Gat 2006).

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