

The asymmetries of disentanglement Konrad A. Antczak*

In this dialogue, Hodder and Lucas skilfully manoeuvre the winding trails of archaeological theory during the last decades and critically juxtapose the discussion of symmetry and asymmetry of relations between entities with that of entanglement. Their provocative dialogue compellingly leads to the conclusion that most entanglements are in fact asymmetrical. Whereas I mostly concur with the conclusions of the dialogue, addressing the authors' closing statements I would like to highlight the need to equally (in some ways, symmetrically) consider *disentanglement* as the process opposite to entanglement, along with the consequences of such disentanglement. If we are to understand better the contexts and politics of entanglements – concerns that this dialogue brings to the fore – I furthermore suggest that we more closely scrutinize the *density* (quantity) and *joining* (quality) of entanglements, as well as pay closer attention to memory, emotion and affect in entanglements.

Lucas argues that 'the archaeological record is living proof of all the things which humans disentangled themselves from and which ultimately died out' (p. XX), an important point which is then left undeveloped. Even though disentanglement has been recently approached by Hodder (2016b), in the dialogue's concluding paragraphs disentanglement is largely subsumed under reversibility. Disentanglement, however, could be considered as a process that coexists with entanglement and is not entirely equivalent to reversibility. Reversibility may be defined as returning to the 'original' historically contingent condition, whereas disentanglement includes this possibility, but also incorporates a host of other forms of *dis*-entangling. Entanglements may be abruptly severed, or unravelled more slowly. They can be frayed and whittled down persistently, until they quite literally 'hang by a

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thread'. Disentangling can also entail the cutting of an entanglement and its grafting in with another human or thing. Reversibility and disentanglement should then not be merged, but instead clearly distinguished.

It has been convincingly argued by Hodder (2012; 2016a) that over the course of the last millennia humans and things have become increasingly entangled; by and large irreversibly entrapped in their relations to things. Yet has the rate of entanglement really outpaced that of disentanglement? Landfills are swelling, the seas are filling with rubbish, and globally what we throw away is becoming an increasingly alarming and pressing social and environmental hazard. In the West, we have a knack for rapidly entangling with things such as smartphones, sneakers and Starbucks cups only to disentangle from them with reckless abandon when new things take their place. Furthermore, whereas past entanglements may have been replaced, the process of replacement often required a wholesale cutting away of old entanglements. In the dialogue, Hodder remarks, 'The "walking away" may not result in a disentangling, just a disentangling from one context and into another, as indeed in the case of the migrants who have little choice but to make dangerous sea crossings' (p. XX). Yet this remark only partly gets at the nature of the disentanglement, because as per Hodder's example, the 'choices' (if they can be called that) of migrants and refugees fleeing from war or sociopolitical turmoil are most often a difficult and painful series of cuts applied to many long-term entanglements formed throughout their lives in their homelands. This disentangling is precisely so difficult and painful to undertake because of the immediate negative consequences of cutting entanglements and the distressing uncertainty of new entanglements to come. These disentanglements are not, then, merely a disentanglement and entanglement into another context, but a wholesale severing of entanglements before a dive into completely new ones in a different context.

It should be considered that the ease with which entanglements may be disentangled gradually or abruptly, partially or completely, temporarily or in a lasting fashion, is also dependent on the *density* (quantity) and *joining* (quality) of the given entanglement. I consider that a quantitative measure of thickness and thinness of HH, HT and TT entanglements is the density of entanglements between the two entities. This is by no means something new, as density has already been discussed in entanglement theory as a concept borrowed from network theory (Hodder and Mol 2016). Network theory is therefore especially well poised to explore the densities of entanglements. However, density is only a largely quantitative aspect of entanglement, and most qualitative aspects must be explored via different means.

The qualities of entanglements may then be seen as the degree of care invested in an HH or HT relationship (notice this does not apply to TT relationships). When discussing the quality of entanglements, we are then referring to the *nature* of their attachments or joints. Whereas the joints of some entanglements may be merely articulations resulting in solely exterior interactions of betweenness among two entities, others are knots of sympathetic correspondence resulting in *in-betweenness* (Ingold 2015, 22–26, 155–56). Returning to an example from the dialogue, in HT entanglements there may be a particular attachment between a human and a hammer

that makes the hammer seem to the human something more than a solely functional hammering tool. For instance, if the hammer is an heirloom, it remains in the possession of the human as an important memento. The hammer is therefore a thing with which the human, through emotional attachment, creates a more sympathetically and tightly knotted entanglement. Such an entanglement is potentially more difficult to cut once the hammer's handle breaks and the thing becomes functionally less useful or is rendered altogether useless. It is thus easier for the human to cut an entanglement with another hammer to which the she/he is not emotionally attached, and we can imagine that she/he flings it away on a discard pile. In HH relations, examples of such qualities of entanglements are much more easily conjured. It is often the case that the relationships in which we are most invested and to which we give most care through time become the most sympathetically entwined and robust entanglements. Disentangling them, or having them disentangled, is therefore more difficult – as is the case, for example, with divorce or the death of a loved one. On the other hand, relationships in which we are less invested and which are rather merely articulations and not knots, for example a recent acquaintance, may be simpler to cut and forget.

Hodder (2016a) has recently subsumed some of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of entanglements I have discussed above under the term 'degrees of entanglement'. Further explanation of what these degrees entail by way of *density* and *joining* could prove fruitful for entanglement studies. Furthermore, the nature of the joining of entanglements is also intimately tied to the dialectic of dependence and dependency that is central to entanglements and their asymmetries. Relations of enabling dependence and entrapping dependency may be either articulated or knotted. However, it is possible that it is the more knotted entanglements that tend to produce more significant relations of dependence and dependency, and thus it is these entanglements that have the greatest entrapping effects and have the most immediate consequences on human lives when disentangled. In sum, by better understanding the density, and especially the joining, of entanglements we can then more accurately contextualize them and make better-informed statements on the politics of entanglements at different scales of density, space and time.

Taking the above into consideration, I challenge the authors' conclusion, 'The greater the entanglement, the greater the irreversibility', especially in contexts of humans with power who have asymmetrically delegated the care of humans and things to other humans below them on a hierarchical ladder. I would argue that the asymmetrical entanglements of powerful people – even though they may be denser – are often more articulated at their joints. They are less knotted in sympathetic relations with humans and things that originate from direct and increased human care which often result in entrapping dependency. For elites, it may be initially easier to disentangle, as noted by Hodder. Yet, given their positioning in entanglements, it is rather the negative consequences of cutting cables and making a run for it that often limit disentanglement and reversibility.

I consider that a greater entanglement does not necessarily concord with greater irreversibility, but instead with greater potential consequences of

reversal or disentanglement. The consequences of disentangling asymmetric entanglements where humans and things are caught up in double binds must be deliberated. If humans were to completely disentangle from their relations to bulldogs and chihuahuas, in time these breeds would largely die out. This looming miasma of negative consequences, however, does not prevent disentanglements as these have occurred at all scales throughout human history. As a result, both humans and things have faced the consequences of such changes to entanglements. As an example, civil war within a country may often abruptly cut HH and HT entanglements as a wide array of labour-oriented entanglements shift to a limited set of combat-oriented ones, bringing about fewer entanglements of humans with material things as well as new and often violent HH dependencies. In the wake of the 1492 encounter with Europeans, the highly entangled indigenous state-level societies of the Americas collapsed and a multitude of ancestral entanglements were severed, the dramatic consequences of which rippled through the continent for centuries. Disentanglement not directly caused by humans, such as that produced by natural disasters, may also have serious long-term consequences on the existence and stability of HH, HT and TT entanglements as has been the case with New Orleans during and after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina (Dawdy 2016).

As a last point, human memory and emotion, which I have alluded to above, are further aspects of entanglement and disentanglement that should be more thoroughly explored. Returning to the example of migrants, we must ask ourselves, what about the entanglements from which migrants were cut off, which were then lost, perhaps for generations or forever? Can a no-longer connected entanglement still ‘haunt’ humans in the form of a spectral entanglement? Certainly, human memory, emotion and affect (Hamilakis 2017; Tarlow 2012) play importantly into the density and joining of entanglements and their capacity to be easily severed or gradually disentangled and then forgotten. When inserting human memory, emotion and affect into the authors’ dialogue on entanglement asymmetry, politics and power – still largely devoid of such considerations – we reach much more personal and messy human terrain. It is here that we can begin to approximate the qualities of entanglements and obtain deeper insights into the nature of their joining. We should address, where possible, how humans of the past perceived their own HH and HT entanglements and those of other humans and things, and not only determine the density of such entanglements.

To conclude, I raise the importance of a more lifelike and human ‘H’ in entanglements, especially if we are to understand better the contexts and politics of entanglements at different scales. This is more easily said than done, and often the resolution of available archaeological data does not provide for detailed glimpses into such micro-historical, intimate and subjective human aspects – if it offers insights at all. This, however, is not an entirely unattainable goal. Historical archaeology, for example, is especially well equipped to approach such aspects of entanglement when independent evidentiary sources such as documents and oral histories are available. Perhaps, long-term and large-scale archaeological studies of entanglement may not need to consider the micro-scale of human memory, emotion and

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affect, yet I maintain that having more archaeological investigations approach such deeply human terrain can only sophisticate and enrich future multi-scalar studies of entanglement within the discipline.
