Abstract

Archaeologists who seek to examine people’s roles in past societies have long assumed, consciously or unconsciously, the existence of individuals. In this study, we explore various concepts and dimensions of ‘the individual’, both ethnographic and archaeological. We show that many protagonists in the debate over the existence of ‘individuals’ in prehistory use the same ethnographic examples to argue their positions. These positions range from the claim that any suggestion of individuals prior to 500 years ago simply projects a construct of western modernity onto the past, to the view that individual identities are culturally specific social constructs, both past and present. Like most contributors to the debate, we too are sceptical of an unchanging humanity in the past, but we feel that thinking on the topic has become somewhat inflexible. As a counterpoint to this debate, therefore, we discuss Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in association with Foucault’s notion of power. We conclude that experiencing oneself as a living individual is part of human nature, and that archaeologists should reconsider the individual’s social, spatial and ideological importance, as well as the existence of individual, embodied lives in prehistoric as well as historical contexts.