

RECENT TRENDS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY: SOME COMMENTS

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This paper is a selective review of some recent themes in archaeological theory since c.2000. It deals first with a philosophical pragmatism and its application to archaeological thought and practice. The paper then examines a turn to materiality, sometimes glossed as an 'ontological turn', and its implications for different aspects of theory and practice. Thirdly, the paper discusses the understanding the past in the context of the present and the need for archaeology to maintain and extend its engagement with issues of diversity. The argument of the paper concludes with some reflective comments on the author's *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, first published in 1999, in advance of the third revised edition. Two key themes in this reflection are first, issues arising from a pluralism and democracy of interpretation, and second, the tension between a generalizing survey of 'world archaeology' and the need to acknowledge and develop perspectives situated within diverse local contexts.

Keywords: *Archaeology; theory; pragmatism; materiality; politics; diversity*

Introduction

This paper provides a brief set of comments on some selected recent trends in archaeological theory. It is primarily focused on discussion in Anglophone contexts, and refers to debates that have been going on in the European and North American literature. I hope that, nevertheless, some of the discussion in this paper will be of interest and relevance to a wider audience.

First, a general comment: the years 2000-2016 have seen archaeologists turn away from the 'theory wars' of the 1990s. The very sharp and strident divisions between processual and postprocessual movements that characterized much theoretical debate in the 1990s have become considerably softened in tone. Indeed, labels like 'processual' and 'postprocessual' have lost much of their meaning, and should now in the view of the author be regarded as terms for intellectual movements that were part of the history of archaeology, rather than terms that carry much meaning today (Trigger 2006). This loss of stridency has been the focus of regret for a few (as discussed in Lucas 2016 and ensuing comments), but is probably regarded as a positive development by many. This does not mean that important dif-

ferences and debates, often very sharply expressed, do not continue or re-emerge in new forms (for example, Kintigh *et al.* 2014 versus Cobb 2014 on different views of the future of archaeology).

I will group my comments around three trends or interpretive turns. First a move towards a philosophical pragmatism; second, an engagement with materiality; and third, a growing maturity in understanding the past in the present.

An Archaeological Pragmatism

The word 'pragmatism' has several distinct, though related, meanings. Its usage in everyday life is associated with a concern for practicality over dogmatism or principle; thus, an action is considered 'pragmatic' if it is considered realistic or a practical compromise, or more specifically if its consequences in the real world are prioritised over questions of abstract morality or ideology. However, I am using the term 'pragmatism' in a more specialised or philosophical sense here.

As a philosophical position, pragmatism gives priority to the practical consequences of holding a belief or proposition about the world (West 1989; Misak 2007 and 2013; Baert 2005). It is suspicious of strong claims to absolute Truth. Rather, it asks

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the question: if a particular philosophical belief or proposition is adopted, what are the practical consequences of adopting that belief in the real world? As a result of placing this principle first, pragmatists tend to be wary of what they view as excessively abstract or theoretical formulations of a world-view, especially when those formulations seem to have little consequence for everyday action.

Historically, a pragmatist position has been associated with North American philosophers such as William James, John Dewey, Charles Pierce and others, such that it is often termed ‘American pragmatism’. Historians of philosophy have traced a close link between pragmatist suspicion of transcendental Truth and the values of pluralism, democracy and citizenship (West 1989). More recently Richard Rorty has advocated a form of pragmatism, though Rorty’s pragmatism is associated with a stronger skepticism towards claims of objectivity and a greater comfort with positions tending towards relativism than many pragmatists would advocate (Rorty 1999).

An archaeological pragmatism offers several related attractions. First, pragmatism takes us back to a focus on what archaeologists actually do: archaeology, when viewed through the lens of the pragmatist, is first and foremost a field discipline. As such, it insists that everyday archaeological practice comes first. Now if we reflect for a moment on what archaeologists actually do – excavating sites, observing and recording landscapes, washing and labelling finds, working in the laboratory – it becomes apparent that being an archaeologist is rooted not simply or only in purely intellectual endeavor, nor on the other hand in the repeatable experiment in the laboratory, but in particular kinds of field condition and experience (Andrews *et al.* 2000; Chadwick 2003). The experience of the field is not repeatable – once excavated, a site cannot be excavated all over again – but equally it is a gathering of data that involves a suite of field skills, skills that are akin to craft practice rather than purely scholarly endeavor (Shanks and McGuire 1996).

Second, pragmatism offers a way beyond sterile debates over objectivity and subjectivity, or between an unrestrained idealism and an unrestrained

empiricism. Historically, pragmatist philosophy emerged from a critical response to empiricism, and in their shared skepticism over abstract claims, traditions of empiricism and pragmatism share a common legacy (Johnson 2011). It is worth stressing that pragmatism tends to be skeptical towards claims of absolute Truth, claims which it associates with Platonic philosophy; all knowledge, pragmatists assert, is humanly conditioned; in the words of the early pragmatist William James, the ‘trail of the human serpent is over everything’ (James 2008 [1907]: 34). However, this skepticism does not mean that pragmatists forsake objectivity, standards of empirical research or the systematic pursuit of reliable knowledge about the world. If the trail of the human serpent is over everything, scholars can still aspire to critical ways of knowing about the world. Indeed, these ways are strengthened, since their goals are more limited and realistic than those of the Platonic philosophers, and as I have argued above, rest on a secure and realistic grounding in archaeological practice. I would re-state this more modest and realistic goal as one of learning about the world, rather than seeking to attain an absolute understanding of Truth. The latter aim may be unrealistic and/or unattainable, but the goal of learning, in both its research and pedagogical senses, is one that can be shared by archaeology as a whole – students, professors, professionals, theorists.

As a philosophical movement, pragmatism is over a century old, but archaeological engagement with pragmatist philosophy has tended to be much more recent. In particular, it has become associated with a group of North American scholars associated with ideas originating from postprocessualism but also committed to practical engagement with diverse perspectives including Indigenous knowledge and interests (these contributions have been gathered in Preucel and Mrozowski 2011). I will return to these concerns below, in my third section.

The Turn to Materiality

If pragmatism has marked a philosophical turn towards archaeological interests, the growing interest in ‘materiality’ has marked a methodological turn in the same direction (Miller 2005). Material-



ity is an interest in things. This may sound like a strange statement to make; haven't archaeologists always been interested in things? Archaeology is, after all, a discipline which concerns itself with understanding things (artifacts, buildings, landscapes) in terms of the past.

The turn to materiality proposes, first, that things are important. Until recently, many archaeologists adopted the paradoxical position that things were secondary. As a result, they fought theoretical battles with one hand tied behind their back, because archaeologists were constantly using ideas and models which downgraded the material. In traditional archaeology, material things like objects, traits, styles, features, were interpreted in terms of their expression of prior cultural identities, and were grouped in terms of immaterial classificatory concepts: 'This pottery decoration is a reflection of this culture', 'the values of this period/culture are expressed in this set of practices'. New Archaeology again took material data and explained those data in terms of, for example state formation, adaptation, morphogenesis... again, all immaterial items. And postprocessual archaeology did the same thing – the material record was explained in terms of culture, symbolism and belief, again, immaterial and intangible phenomena. In each case, the beliefs, values or social forms were put first, and the material culture second, as an indirect or imperfect reflection or expression of those prior beliefs, values or forms (Lucas 2012).

This observation gives us the key to understanding why archaeology has so often been ignored or marginalized in the social sciences as a whole. Given our own extraordinary aptitude and ability to trivialize and render secondary the subject matter of archaeology, is it any surprise that other disciplines have often tended to ignore archaeology's potential contribution to wider theoretical debates?

Materiality, then, is about a turn to seeing the material properties of objects as important. However, if objects are important, then understanding those objects is a correspondingly more complex exercise. How do things come to carry meaning? Do things have agency – can they influence the world in their own right? How do things shape humans? What

of non-humans who are not things – animals, the qualities of the natural world? Can humans break free of the grip of things? If things are essential to the constitution of humans, what are the boundaries between the human and the material? Is there an historical direction to human engagement to things – have we become more and more dependent on, or entangled with, things, and if so why?

These questions are extremely complex. They do not have easy answers, and answers that might be given tend to be very nuanced and qualified. Answers also need to be referenced in to quite difficult philosophical questions about the nature of the world and the nature of being (in other words, ontological questions: Harris 2016, Weismantel forthcoming). For this reason, the concern with materiality, both in archaeology and in the human sciences generally, has also been called the ontological turn. Ontology is defined as the philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, or existence.

The turn to materiality has had several theoretical consequences. First, it has been closely related to the ongoing interest in the phenomenology of landscape (Johnson 2011 summarises and critically evaluates this interest). Archaeologists have turned away from questions of the abstract or symbolic meanings of landscapes. Instead, they have asked questions about embodied human experience – what is a landscape like, to walk through? How is experience conditioned by different conditions, the weather?

A second consequence has been a growing interest in the body. Human bodies are biological and material, but they are also experienced subjectively. Different kinds of human activity link bodies with the wider world – walking, the consumption of food, clothing, human shelter (Ingold and Verglund 2016). All these activities both fulfil biological needs and are also the basis of human culture and human subjectivity. As a result, the study of the human body through the archaeological sciences has become one of the most exciting areas on inquiry in recent times, and the body has been reclassified as part of material culture (Sofaer 2006).

Third, there has been an interest in exploring the



links between human and objects in the very recent past, as a form of ethnoarchaeology or modern material culture studies. If we think about modernity, it is clear that the nature of modernity is bound up with the sheer number and complexity of material objects that modernity has generated and the complexity of the entanglements thus generated (Hodder 2012). Archaeologists surely has something important and relevant to say about this (Buchli and Lucas 2002).

Fourth, there has been an exploration of the way humans and objects become entangled with one another. This exploration has been prompted by anthropologist Alfred Gell's examination of art and agency (Gell 1998) and interdisciplinary work in the human sciences (Miller 2005). Ian Hodder (2012) has explored issues of human/thing entanglement, for example at Catal Hoyuk. He has gone on to ask about how these entanglements become ones that are impossible for humans to extricate themselves from (for example, the domestication of plants and animals). There is, then, in this view, a necessary directionality to human history. In other words, the more deeply human are entangled with things, the more complex the interrelations are, the less possible it is to extricate human life from ever more complex material patterns. Hodder has thus had some success in re-engaging with larger theories of human evolution in a way that places material culture at centre stage.

For Hodder, the material turn leads to larger evolutionary questions; for some, however, the turn to materiality can be seen as a re-turn to traditional modes of archaeology. Traditional archaeologists often contented themselves with describing the material, noting patterns and associations, and building up chronology. For some, the turn to objects is part of a new archaeological humility, 'archaeology after interpretation' (Jones and Alberti 2013). Previous generations, particularly the New Archaeology, wanted to develop grand explanatory schemes in relation to Big Questions defined cross-culturally, such as the origins of social complexity. Some of those involved in the material turn wish to move away from Big Questions towards a more modest enterprise of description.

However, the material turn remains a strongly theoretical enterprise. Tim Ingold has made the provocative point that some of the archaeologists who claim to be interested in materiality are not actually interested in materials very much (Ingold 2007). The properties of raw materials, the affordances, possibilities and constraints offered by those raw materials, the organization of technologies of craft production are all areas where theory can be and is fruitfully combined with practice, and an understanding of materiality can be combined with materials science and experimental archaeology.

In relation to theory and practice, it is worth pointing out that much of this work brings together concerns in archaeological theory on the one hand with recent work in archaeological science on the other. I commented in the Introduction on how debate in archaeology has become less polarized and more open to drawing on a variety of theoretical perspectives to address a problem. To take one example: archaeologists are increasingly engaging with the science of long-term climate change, but we cannot talk about human experience of landscape without talking about the weather (Ingold 2010). Therefore, studies of phenomenology and studies of climate and climate change, often seen as competing or very different modes of understanding, are in fact complimentary.

Part of the context of the turn to materiality is that the nature of materiality itself, in the modern world, is changing. Digital technologies have transformed the nature of people's engagement with the world, and in the process caused them to reflect in new ways. In archaeology, a growing consciousness of how visualization is used is linked with the use of new technology in visualization. For many of a senior generation, including the author of this article, the ability to think visually, to draw with a pencil were closely related skills that lay at the heart of what it meant to be a certain kind of archaeologist. For a younger generation, a very different suite of skills is in the process of development, particularly in the field of digital representation. As a result of this very rapid change, theoretical reflection is developing on new ways of presenting, new ways of visualizing, and consequently new ways of think-



ing in the field, as well as developing engagements with social media (Cooper 2014; Perry and Beale 2015).

Politics: Intersectionality and Practice

The third key development lies in the area of understanding the past in the present. From the 1980s, the proposition that the past is always studied in the present, and that the practice of understanding the past is bound up with contemporary social, cultural and political concerns, has become generally accepted. There have been two key contributing elements to this acceptance: first, the arguments of postprocessual archaeologists, that to paraphrase Shank and Tilley (1987: 15) we are always on a 'return ticket' when we study the past, and second, the increased diversity of contributions to archaeological knowledge. In other words, archaeology is no longer simply or only performed and produced by able-bodied white European men.

Explicit interest in the politics of the past mushroomed in the 1980s onwards, in particular following the formation of the World Archaeological Congress in 1986 in the wake of controversy over the academic boycott of apartheid South Africa. From the start, however, it ran into intellectual and practical issues. There were two related tensions in its study. First, the call for a greater diversity of agendas and forms of knowledge came, paradoxically, from within a more general attempt to construct a 'world archaeology'. The World Archaeological Congress has always had difficulty reconciling a call for universal cultural values on the one hand, with respect for the integrity of local and Indigenous traditions on the other (Smith 2004). Such a reconciliation was much easier to advocate the more abstract one kept the arguments, but became more difficult and problematic when specific examples and places were addressed, most infamously Ayodha (Shaw 2000).

A second, related tension lay in theory and practice. In North America, many archaeologists rejected the postprocessual critique or were at least skeptical of many of its claims. Nevertheless, engagement with diversity became a professional ne-

cessity for the same archaeologists. The passage of the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) made consultation with Indigenous groups, specifically American Indians, a necessary part of museum and archaeological practice. Twenty years on, many of the archaeologists involved in these dialogues comment that they have found this dialogue to be productive and enriching (Wilcox 2010; see Bruchac 2010 for a more critical view).

Consequently, much of archaeology now finds itself in a position of embracing intellectual diversity and engagement with communities and publics (Marshall 2002), whether it has reached that position through abstract theoretical critique or through practical experience or the necessity of compliance with government legislation. The issue facing the discipline now (and for the last 20 years) is: what to do about it? The discipline went through a quite lengthy period of anger and generalised complaint; traditional archaeology was condemned as imperialist, nationalist, colonialist, and even racist. Arguably, this period of anger was necessary: the issue now is how to move forward – to develop ways of understanding the past that respect and engage with diversity, but which also retain responsibility and rigour.

One key concept in this endeavour is that of intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to the way different intellectual movements, viewpoints, and groups of people – feminism, Indigenous knowledge, postcolonial thinking – share particular points or nodes of common interest and concern. To take the practice of theory itself – where feminists have seen theoretical practice as marginalizing women, others have seen it as dominated by Anglophone scholars or as part of an hegemonic Euro-American discourse (Lutz 1995; Conkey 2007 and 2005).

A second key concept is that of diversity – the acknowledgement and affirmation of difference, whether classified as cultural, racial, or ethnic, and also embracing dimensions of gender, ability status, and age, and the need to take active steps to foster inclusion. With this acknowledgement comes the proposition that the more diverse the standpoints or viewpoints are brought to bear on a problem, the



more critical the thinking will be on it and the higher the overall standard of enquiry (Wylie 2000 and 2003). Issues then, of scientific knowledge production and intellectual standards, and equity issues of gender, race and cultural identity, the broader political project of opening archaeology up to people of different classes, origins, and identities, are not either/or options; they fit like lock and key.

The tension between global propositions, and sensitivity to local contexts and issues of diversity and equity, continues. For example, there is a major divide in the understanding of Indigenous knowledge and interests between Old and New Worlds. In the New World, Indigenous people have suffered long histories of dispossession and often genocide. Respect for Indigenous views in this context tends to be linked closely to the political claims and perspectives of oppressed groups, and with the political Left (Atalay 2006). In the Old World, and particularly in Europe, indigeneity is much more complex and is often associated with groups with questionable and unsavoury political agendas (Holtorf 2009).

Conclusion: Personal Reflections

As I write these words, I am thinking towards the future third edition of my book *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* (Johnson 2010). I am aware from social media, correspondence and from personal contacts that the first and second editions of this book have attracted some attention within the archaeological community in Iran, particularly amongst a younger generation of archaeologists.

A continuing tension within successive editions of this book has been the desire, on the one hand, to write an even-handed and objective survey of archaeological theory, and on the other hand, to make evaluative judgements about the future of theory at a series of scales including the widest, global scale. These two desires are contradictory to an extent, yet both are necessary. No introductory survey of theory should be consciously biased, or seek to summarily dismiss, rule out or 'redline' theories that the writer happens to dislike. On the other hand, it has long been established (not least by the pragmatist philosophers discussed above) that absolute objectivity

is always illusory, and claims to absolute objectivity always mask underlying bias. Writing an introduction necessarily involves evaluation, for example of what to put in and what to leave out; doing theory necessarily involves taking a position. The claim to stand outside theory in order to make objective judgments about it is sometimes made, particularly by a senior generation of archaeologists, but cannot survive ten minutes' serious scrutiny (Johnson 2011).

There is a further contradiction. The first edition of *Archaeological Theory*, in particular, stressed the importance of thinking for yourself (Johnson 1999). It prioritized independent thinking, and the need for students to make their own judgements, free from the strictures of professors and others in positions of authority. This stress on independent thinking was closely related to a belief in the benefits of diversity and pluralism in archaeological thought. The second edition (Johnson 2010) shared this priority, but it moderated and qualified this call somewhat. Through my experience of archaeology and changing public discourse between the first and second editions, I became conscious that calls to 'think for yourself!' had to be balanced with 'do the hard work of the research/reading first!'. In society at large, by the time of the second edition in 2010, too many people were willfully misreading the freedom to have your own beliefs with the ability to have just the beliefs you wanted to have, regardless of how much reading or research effort you had put in, the correspondence of those beliefs to empirical evidence or the consequences of holding those beliefs to the lives of others.

Where to go with the third edition? First, I am increasingly interested less in theory versus practice and more in what I see as an interpretive triangle. The three points of such a triangle are theory, field practice and what I loosely call 'habits of thought'. Theory and practice are well known, but the way in which habits of thought form is much less so. I have in mind here the sort of work being done by Lucas (2012), and also some of the practices mentioned above – how a walk through a landscape meshes with its interpretation, why this argument is considered coherent and plausible and that argument not,



the relationship between different technologies of representation (visual, digital, three-dimensional, LIDAR) impact on and are impacted by other elements of theory and practice.

The third edition will also deal at greater length with the vexed issue of linguistic and geographical scope. In previous editions, particularly the first edition, I was diffident about commenting on or drawing in important archaeological traditions around the world, particularly those beyond Anglophone contexts. There were several reasons for my caution: first, language limitations; second, a recognition of very deep cultural-intellectual differences in the configuration of 'archaeological theory' and wider intellectual currents and training (Gramsch 2011; Sommer 2000; Coudart 1999); and third, consciousness of a continuing divide between academic and professional worlds in many parts of the globe. These reasons and more increased this caution.

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Consequently, the task remains to write a coherent account of theory across the world that respects different intellectual and cultural traditions, without being reduced to an uncritical shopping-list or encyclopaedia with insufficient evaluation and critique, or a region-by-region account that is not analytical and lacks a sense of the whole. How to do this in the incredibly diverse, complex world we live in, and to do so, moreover, while avoiding the sins of a totalizing 'world survey' with the self-aggrandizing and potentially imperialist connotations that might have? This is the question I will be struggling with in the next few months and years.

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