

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Re-Constructing Archaeology was written in the five years to September 1985 and was published in April 1987. As might be expected, much has developed in the discipline since then, but we present this second edition largely unchanged. We consider that the book can still contribute to the ongoing debate about the character of archaeology and the forms its practices take, to what extent it is humanity or science, indeed the very meaning of those terms. Some of the critique presented here, of positivism and science in the humanities (Chapters 2 and 3), appeared somewhat old-fashioned to us when we first refashioned it for archaeology some ten years ago; archaeology was lagging behind on issues long superseded in other disciplines. But there are still many, and particularly in the United States, who consider archaeology a scientific enterprise. Perhaps because of the complexity and range of archaeology, there is still much disagreement among its practitioners concerning the forms that archaeological explanation or understanding, analysis or interpretation should take. In this context *Re-Constructing Archaeology* can continue to serve its original purpose - to challenge and provoke reflection.

We have included, as an appendix, a revised version of an article which appeared in *Norwegian Archaeological Review* (Shanks and Tilley 1989a). In that journal, which is a significant forum for theoretical debate in archaeology, a paper of ours was subject to comment from some archaeologists to whom we replied in a second statement. These comments do not appear here, but this revised version is an amalgam including parts of our reply to criticisms of a general nature (Shanks and Tilley 1989b). It is included because we think that it will clarify some of the arguments of the book, widen and update them, and answer some criticisms.

In the remainder of this preface we will complement the appendix with some summary of our aims and intentions in *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, with a further response to criticisms, some autocritique, and reference to some significant developments in the discipline.

Re-constructing archaeology: some summary remarks

Theory and re-construction

The title of the book, containing a subjective and objective genitive, refers to a discipline which reconstructs its object, and to the reconstruction of that discipline which has been taking place for nearly three decades. We hope that the book will help raise the level of theoretical debate in archaeology, contributing to what David Clarke called its critical self-consciousness. We also intend to sketch an archaeology which is not a passive reflection or representation of the things it unearths, but actively re-constructs the past,

that is, constructs pasts anew. In this we stress that archaeology is a constructive project, a part of the present as well as of the past.

Experiencing archaeology

As much as a series of sometimes abstract arguments and descriptions, *Re-Constructing Archaeology* is, to us, elaboration of some perceptions about what archaeologists do. These are that archaeologists bring the past into the present, archaeology being something people do now with old (usually) artifacts and things, that archaeology can never produce a purely objective account of what happened in the past, that archaeologists write the past, representing material remains in written and graphical form, that the material past is experienced as archaeological work (one among many media of experience). It was these unexceptional premises which led us to explore relationships between time, the self and the work of archaeology, and in particular to develop those philosophical foundations for method which would deny or overcome the split between an objective past and a subjective archaeologist in the present. We conceive this opposition as one which still runs deep into the discipline and does more than hinder attempts to produce edifying archaeologies which are more than of the form 'knowledge that something happened in the past' or proposed explanation of something-in-the-past.

Finding a place for the ethical

As part of overcoming splits between an objective past and a subjective present striving to know, we wish to find a place for the ethical, for values inherent in archaeological work, rather than tacked on as an afterthought, and an ethics which is wider than qualities such as those which are held to lie within scientific knowledge and enterprise (such as precision, efficiency and comprehensiveness). This has involved an acceptance or, rather, an embrace of the subjective and political dimensions of archaeological work. Our living today, with its attendant biases, slants, values, politics, projects and aspirations is the condition of knowing the objective and material past. Some archaeological projects are better, some worse, on these terms, we have not hesitated to apply political and ideology critique to different archaeologies. We also accord great importance to the expressive dimensions of archaeological practice, so present in writing and communicating work to others. Chapter 4, on how museums present their aesthetics, is part of this evaluation.

Conceptions of the social

We propose that archaeology be guided less by epistemological and methodological principles, or what should constitute knowledge and what counts as acceptable method, than be conceived as a material practice in and of the present. Archaeology is one of our projects and focuses on particular experiences of the material past. We would avoid any abstract specification (philosophical or otherwise) of what archaeological knowledge should look like (such as hypothesis formation and testing), and how archaeological projects should proceed (such as 'scientifically'). Given that we nevertheless aim to come to an understanding of the *real* and *material past* with which we deal in archaeology, and this involves social reconstruction (putting archaeological finds into context), we set about devising conceptions of the social which would enable flexible and interpretative

approaches to data, without accommodating the past within a pre-set methodological framework. We wish to devise a set of theoretical tools which enable us to be sensitive to the archaeological object. This is the purpose of Chapter 6.

Style and the dispersal of the archaeological object

Chapter 7 is about the style or art of ceramics found outside early farmers' tombs in southern Sweden. It tackles the character of a basic category of archaeological data and aims to locate style and design within the social through the terms and concepts we outline earlier in the book.

The issue of context and material culture is foregrounded in the study of beer cans from the earlier 1980s in Britain and Sweden. Interpreting the cans led us on a great odyssey through the industrialized welfare state, through advertising and marketing, brewing practices, psychiatric ideologies as well as attending to the minutiae of lettering on cans, colour and imagery. The character of the artifact, object of archaeological study, is one of dispersal - from can to its advertising imagery to its industrialized production to its contents and connotations to sites of consumption ... This, we argue, is more than the realization that things are connected with others. Context has long been acknowledged as essential in understanding the archaeological record, be it simply material context of discovery - site and stratigraphy - or the notions of systems context of the new archaeology, or the meaning-giving social contexts of post-processual archaeology. But how is context to be denned? It cannot be denned: lines of connection and association forever lead us, interpreting, away from any stable object within its context, social or otherwise. The choice of a context, sets of relationships which bestow meaning, is entirely an interpretive decision, not epistemological or methodological; it depends on what our purpose and interests are, and these, of course, belong with us in the present. In our essay on beer cans we chose to present an analytic, but broken, narrative, setting design within two historical trajectories of liberal capitalist welfare states.

Reactions and criticisms

Messianic propagandists purveying pretentious irrelevancies and extremist pedantry, playing sceptical and cant-like word-games, deliberately misrepresenting in fallacious, illogical and inconsistent rhetoric, verging on exuberant intellectual dishonesty. These are some reactions to our work in *Re-Constructing Archaeology* and the later *Social Theory and Archaeology* (1987). Considered and critical discussion and review can be found in articles by Kristiansen (1988), Watson (1990) and in *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 22.1 (1989). We will present some general points of critique.

Style

Much of the opposition has concentrated on style. We chose to be confrontational, polemical, anti-dogmatic and critical, and not simply as a rhetorical gesture. Style of writing and presentation refer us to the expressive dimension of archaeological work; we were ready to push supposed liberal academic debate to its limits, and to operate the techniques of ideology critique in archaeology. We make no apology for this, nor for breaking the rules of conventional archaeological discourse, concerning, for example,

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the range of work we cite there has been criticism of our use of 'literary' writing such as that of Borges in Chapter 1

Knee-jerk reactions

We were concerned, in writing *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, not to misrepresent the process which brought us to the position we were upholding We read works of philosophy, social theory and anthropology in so far as they provided tools for thinking through the basic questions and issues that we have already outlined in this preface, we were careful to avoid expressing unnecessary allegiance to an intellectual movement or position So we used Adorno, Benjamin, Derrida, Foucault, Giddens and many others in an eclectic but, we would argue, not a contradictory mix Nevertheless, as we anticipated (Introduction, p i) there are some who have made knee-jerk reactions, assimilating our work to a type, label or position

We cite Foucault, Barthes and Derrida and become nihilist post-structuralist literary critics We write of politics and commitment and become political propagandists We criticize aspects of our late capitalist society and its ideologies and become apologists for Soviet communism We reject generalization and cultural evolution and become historical particularists

We have undoubtedly been influenced by some work of Jacques Derrida This seems to form the basis of claims that we are importing techniques of literary criticism into archaeology, that we are nihilists, 'deconstructionists', criticizing everything, pulling everything to bits It is assumed that this is what 'post-structuralism' is all about, and we are post-structuralists, surely' We suggest that this is somewhat simplistic

Because we stress that archaeology is of the present, it has been claimed that we reduce archaeology to an appendage of contemporary political interest, and we become latter-day Kosinnas, who, of course, was read as providing an archaeological apology for Nazi racial policy Questions are raised how can archaeological knowledge be political (assuming the premise that knowledge is of a non-temporal realm)' Does not the admittance of the present into (objective) knowledge of the past also open the gates to political manipulation of the past' And with our advocacy of an ethical critique of archaeologies - judging approaches to the past on the basis of their implied attitudes to social values and change - we are accused of an intellectual Stalinism, judging an archaeological approach according to whether or not it agrees with our political ideology

The charge of political pamphleteering is also widened when we criticize the present Our questioning of the commodity form, of consumerism brought into archaeology, of unchecked instrumental and technical reason, and of the more deleterious aspects of our contemporary society are taken as an advocacy of Soviet communism(!) And now with the political modernization of eastern Europe, we are clearly shown to be very mistaken, surely'

We consider these charges of 'importing' politics into archaeology (always already covertly political) to be over-hasty reactions to what we propose is a more subtle attempt to grapple with the interplay of past and present, social context and values in the work of archaeology

We question the role of generalization, cross-cultural schemes of explanation, and

cultural evolution On analogy with changes in anthropology earlier in this century we have been labelled Boasian particularists, focusing on individuals and free-will The history of ideas goes through another cycle, and we are just part of it, a middle road, bits of both generalization and particularism, is best

Our arguments, on the grounds of a *dialectical* relationship, against such polarizations (necessity free-will society individual, and emic etic explanation, or substantivist formalist) prevent us from accepting this labelling There is a great deal in *Re-Constructing Archaeology* about how we believe such polarizations, historical or other, are best conceived and acted upon

Upholding the old standards of objectivity

Some criticisms of *Re-Constructing Archaeology* involve a refusal to move beyond the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity Because we question objectivity and argue for a subjective reconstruction of the past, we are accused of idealism (proposing that archaeologists simply invent the past), and of relativism (proposing that every subjectivity, every present has its own past) This connects with the accusation that we are political propagandists We argue that archaeology is of the present and so involves taking an ethical or political stand on the past in the present, we advocate an archaeology committed to the present This argument is claimed to be subjective The premise is that the present and values are insubstantial and subjective We ask 'surely values are not merely subjective'

These issues are all taken up in *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, we also refer to our later work (Shanks and Tilley 1987, Tilley 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, Shanks 1992 Here we repeat that we are attempting to think through this thorny network of issues by questioning the categories and oppositions they assume

The problem of application

For some, the matters raised in our work are irrelevant, red herrings, theoretical waffle And it has all been said before It makes no difference We should just get on with doing real archaeology

There is a difficult problem here concerning the relation between theory and practice Indeed a lot of theory appears abstract and a world-unto-itself separate from the realities of the digging dirt archaeologist As we comment below, we approach the problem from a limited perspective in *Re-Constructing Archaeology* We emphasize the need to question the divide and exhort a grass-roots theory (theoretical reflection applied to particular aspects of archaeological work) rather than top-down application

Nobody believes in what we criticize

The difficulty of writing, theoretically, of what archaeologists do comes out in the criticism that the processual archaeology we take to task does not exist and hardly ever did 'Who ever was a positivist' 'Who ever believed in mathematics and statistics as saviours'¹ 'Who ever thought they could be absolutely objective-'¹ We fight an illusion It may be asked that if this is conceded, what is left of our criticisms' And what is wrong with empirical science' It appears very reasonable (see, for example, Trigger 1989,

Renfrew 1989, Watson 1990) - accepting that there is a real world and trying out our ideas upon it. Archaeologists may never get to know past reality objectively, but science works. We are not even fighting an illusion, we have invented the enemy ourselves, perhaps for motives of furthering our own political ends.

To these criticisms we reply that we believe that we address a significant body of archaeological writing in *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, even if some authors did not really believe what *they* wrote. The scale and nature of the reaction to the book shows this, we think. TV sets do work, but science is a subtle field of practice and is only one mode of perception and explanation. There are others perhaps more appropriate to an archaeological past and this we aim to show.

An autocritique

It is clear from criticism and reaction to our work that there are great gulfs of understanding within and between archaeologists. The culture of the discipline is a very varied one. We certainly underestimated this variety in the mid-1980s, though there is now a wider community and audience for theoretical discussion. Some of the variety in European archaeology can be gauged in a recent book edited by Ian Hodder, *Archaeological Theory in Europe the last Three Decades* (1991).

The variegated character of the discipline relates also to our over-estimation of the value of academic debate. It does not reach many in the discipline and alienates some. The separation of theory and practice is not one that will easily be overcome by academic and philosophical critique, however necessary and important these are. And this relation of the theory and practice of archaeology is one which *Re-Constructing Archaeology* does not, we feel, successfully resolve. We do not successfully make it clear how some of the more abstract discussions of the first chapters relate to the substantive studies of the final chapters, it is left implicit. We have, however, continued to reflect on the relationship (Tilley 1991, Shanks 1992).

Given our stand for self-reflection, we might certainly have made more of the academic location of our work for the book, in particular extending our critique to include the structure of academic archaeology in Britain and the United States (but see the comments on our replies in *Norwegian Archaeological Review*).

Changes and developments in the discipline

The World Archaeological Congress of 1986 and its subsequent multi-volume publication made archaeology's contemporary and international location very obvious (see Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (eds) 1989, Layton (ed.) 1989a, 1989b, Gathercole and Lowenthal (eds) 1990). The disputes over South African involvement in the congress and academic freedom foregrounded questions of the politics of the discipline (Ucko 1988). Relations between pasts and presents. Native American claims on 'archaeological' material and remains of ancestor sites and cemeteries have become significant matters in North America. Considerations of heritage and museum presentation have increased in sophistication, certainly in Britain (Hewison 1987, Lumley (ed.) 1988, Pearce (ed.) 1989). We consider heritage and public and commercial archaeology key topics for archaeology in the 1990s. Gender archaeology and feminist perspectives have been a

most significant development in the discipline (see, for example, Gero and Conkey (eds) 1991) We might have made more of gender issues in the present work Critical archaeology (for a definition see Leone, Potter and Shackel 1987) has continued to produce work of radical historical archaeology (Leone and Potter (eds) 1988, Paynter and McGuire (eds) 1991) Post-structuralist archaeology has culminated, perhaps, in the volume edited by Bapty and Yates (1990)

On the whole, the discipline is more wide-ranging and richer in the social accounts it produces of the archaeological past The sort of problems, particularly of relations between theory and practice, which we address here in *Re-Constructing Archaeology* are being tackled with increasing sophistication The role of scientific understanding in a humanities discipline is open to serious consideration Writing and presenting the past are being subject to tentative experiment If *Re-Constructing Archaeology* can continue to inform or stimulate on any of these and other dimensions of archaeological experience and work, we will be more than satisfied

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