

Archaeological theory and practice today

At the present archaeology is pervaded by two conflicting attitudes: a radical scepticism opposes a crude scientism seeking objectivity and reducing the archaeological record to the effect of mechanical adaptive process. The sceptical and empirically minded 'dirt' archaeologist digs and 'rescues' the past, describes and lodges the finds in a museum or archive. These sceptics, at heart, believe that all statements about the past (with possible exceptions when dealing in the realms of economy and technology) are little more than subjective whim enlivened by empathy. Those advocating scientism believe it possible to read off the past from its traces in the present without too much trouble providing a suitable technical apparatus can be developed. We replace scepticism with an optimism based on an intervention which denies the polarization of objectivity and subjectivity. For the subjective idealism of scientific archaeology we substitute a view of the discipline as an hermeneutically informed dialectical science of past and present unremittingly embracing and attempting to understand the polyvalent qualities of the socially constructed world of the past and the world in which we live. We sustain throughout a rejection of the past as presented in archaeological texts as objective, or alternatively, as subjective. There is no question of choosing one or the other. Archaeological theory and practice as labour in the present completely transcend this artificial division, labour which draws past and present into a fresh perspective, a perspective which serves to rearticulate their interrelationship. The study presented in Chapter 7 does not pretend to be an account of what the past was really like, nor does Chapter 8 claim to be a pure and unsullied account of present social processes. Neither are the analytical narratives or 'stones' presented a pure figment of our imagination. They tie together past and present through a political interpretation of the materials, an interpretation which ultimately aims to write our lived present into a past. Archaeology is a particular and active relation between past and present.

In expressing a strong dissatisfaction with the project of modelling archaeology on the natural sciences, we have no intention of erecting the old division between the natural and social sciences. By stressing the need to move beyond the opposed terms subjectivity and objectivity, to hermeneutic interpretative processes, dialectics, praxis, and archaeology as critique, we are not proposing that archaeology as a social science provides a weak and in some way inferior kind of knowledge. Our rejection of empiricism is not simply a rejection in terms of its suitability or otherwise for archaeology. It also is not simply a rejection of assertions that natural science relies on empiricist procedures and knowledge claims. Recent post-empiricist philosophy of science is engaged in putting forth, in a large number of different expositions, some version or other of realism (e.g.,

Hesse 1974, Bhaskar 1978; which has led to a curious convergence with what might be termed analytical Marxist philosophy (Ruben 1977, Collier 1978, Callinicos 1983) and we adopted some essential realist tenets in Chapter 5. However, realism in an unrevised form(s) provides no panacea and there are a number of central flaws in the approach such as the embodiment in one form or another of a correspondence theory of truth, i.e. the notion that propositions are either true or false by virtue of the state of the world rather than of human knowledge, with the concomitant that thought is, in some sense, a reflection or mirror of the world rather than at least in part constitutive of what that world is. In this book we have stressed a subject-object dialectic which questions both these realist assumptions and reveals truth and knowledge as essentially mediatory. Meaning is considered to be neither given to the world to be passively revealed by the operations of science nor as solely constituted by a 'knowing' subject. Knowledge instead is acquired through practice, through a subject-object dialectic, in which primacy is granted to neither. The essential question is not whether science is applicable to the study of human individuals and societies but what sort of science this should be. In so far as archaeology *is* concerned to study past social systems as the product of sentient social beings it becomes irrevocably a social science and should contribute towards social science as a whole.

This raises the question: what difference is there between sociology or geography or history or psychology and archaeology?⁵ Archaeology is archaeology as Clarke (1968, p. 13) asserted only if archaeologists are to do no more than measure or describe artifacts while making no reference whatsoever to their meaning and significance, worth and value. Archaeologists have never been content to restrict their activities to this level and Clarke certainly was not. Attempting to reduce archaeology to the science of the artifact would entail silence. The attributes ascribed to artifacts are a product of social relations existing both in the past and the present, amongst dead social actors and the living archaeological community. They are always produced and the natural sciences can provide no exact guidelines on the basis of which the ascriptions of meanings might be made. Chemical reactions may be granted significance but they can never have any meaning in the sense that there is any purpose to them. It is above all the notion of purpose or intentional agency that distinguishes human beings and requires a framework which is not isomorphic with those of the natural sciences, although many features may well be shared. To underline the fact that human agency is intentional agency does not mean, of course, that explanation should be left at that level, as was discussed in Chapter 6. In terms of principles and procedures, we would argue that there is no difference between archaeology and sociology and geography or any other social science. In claiming this we are, of course, arguing that the fundamental characteristic of forms of knowledge are not based upon the empirical materials with which they may deal but instead on the problems that are posed and tackled and the kinds of concepts employed. The essential concern of all the social sciences is the manner in which people construct and deconstruct their own social worlds in various ways. Understanding the nature of this process crucially requires conceptualizations of the nature of social action of the unintended and intended consequences of this action of structure, power, ideology, symbolism and the creation and recreation of meaningful frameworks in

which to live and work. Seen in this light archaeology can have no unique problems, concepts, or disciplinary structure, and in human geography a similar realization has developed **with** the widespread abandonment of the notion that geography might constitute an independent disciplinary structure, a 'science of space'

There are no essentially archaeological ramifications of geographical, psychological or sociological conceptual structures. These should be commonly shared by all the social sciences and worked through in various ways in relation to different bodies of evidence. In archaeology this will involve a view of material culture-patterning as a *resource* employed in social strategies. The corollary is that the work of Freud or Foucault, Douglas or Derrida, Barthes or Bourdieu, Weber or Wittgenstein, or any other 'non-archaeological' writer, should be of essential concern to all archaeologists in all their practical work and not considered as **totally** or partially irrelevant distractions from the business of the discipline.

A mathematical archaeology which would explain material culture as an aspect of a logical relation, which would attempt to explain the complex data we investigate using statistical tests and procedures externally applied to the data is incompatible with archaeology being an active mediation of past and present. However, as we indicate in Chapters 7 and 8, statistical procedures, especially those which are computer-based, are a valuable heuristic device, manipulating large bodies of data, summarizing variability, redescribing, but in no way explaining anything or providing the basis for contentions.

We criticized many varieties of archaeology as ideology, as a passive function of the present, producing pasts relevant to and/or in support of particular interest groups. We are not passing judgement by claiming that we have established a viewpoint which is objective and value-free (no archaeology can be value-free and stand outside history). Nor are we claiming ours to be a framework simply based on another set of values. The criticisms made of cultural resource management were not directed at whether or not it is important to safeguard the past. They were criticisms levelled at the practice of archaeology (as were those of museum displays in Chapter 4) in the present.

In the arguments we presented for archaeology as an active mediation of past and present, we suggested that the discipline should rest on understanding, critique and commitment. Understanding: archaeology should consider the manner in which material culture forms a component of the social construction of reality, and the social reality it studies and within which it is located. Critique: archaeology should subject itself and that which it seeks to understand to criticism, self-reflection into the contemporary meanings and significance of the archaeological project. This negative moment implies a denial of finality, a denial of there being a final orthodoxy to grope towards, an unalterable past. Archaeology is primarily a critical contemporary discussion on the past (or the present; which has no logical end. Archaeology is historical and history has no end. A unitary and monolithic past is an illusion. What is required is a radical pluralism, a pluralism which recognizes that there are multiple pasts produced actively in accordance with ethnic, cultural, social and political views, orientations and beliefs. Asserting a crude scientism in the discipline merely fragments concerns and will never be productive.

We do not mean to suggest that all pasts are equal. Clearly, some pasts are inferior to

others, especially those which are a non-reflective mirror of the present. A feminist archaeology, to mention one area, is likely to be substantially different in orientation from current archaeological practice. It remains the case that archaeology has been and is written substantially by men. Homo Artifex (Chapter 4) is not Femina Artifex, such concepts are male and do refer to a *mankind*. To obscure this may be to perform an ideological service for *mankind*. Archaeology, significantly, although eminently well placed to do so, has not paid much attention to the origins, nature and development of sexual repression and exploitation.

We can also mention in this context the conflicts of interests between American Indian groups and archaeologists. This conflict of concerns has its roots not only in the issue of whether or not archaeologists have the right to uncover Indian remains but also in the images created of the constructors of those remains (Trigger 1980). The white American having dispossessed the indigenous inhabitants of their land and possessions and virtually destroyed their culture now requires that the Indians respect his or her 'right' to reconstruct their past and if this involves the violation of sacred remains the type of empiricist science subscribed to ensures that this action is eminently justifiable (*cf* Cheek and Keel 1984). Archaeological discourse may or may not have truth value. It certainly can have power effects operating to reproduce the relationship between (the dominant and the dominated in contemporary society). It is this which must be opened to critique.

A radical pluralism involves discussion and critique according to an assessment of commitment. Subjecting particular archaeologies to ideology critique is in part to assess their commitment to the present, to assess the present and future worlds contained within any archaeological project. To repeat, propositional truth hinges on the intention of a true society.

We cannot stand outside history and arrest the past and present. What is important is that archaeology recognizes its temporality and fragility, recognizes itself as a contemporary practice in which men and women engage in discussions and debates and establish positions which *need* to be criticized and transcended.

September 1981