

1

Theory and Method in Archaeology

THEORETICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: A PRELIMINARY AND CONVENTIONAL OUTLINE

Theory has been an important issue in archaeology since the 1960s and has taken the form of a contentious field of polemical manoeuvring within the discipline and between archaeology and other social sciences. In his essay, 'Archaeology: the loss of innocence' (1973), David Clarke, a seminal figure in British theoretical archaeology, specified different aspects of theory. He distinguished a theory of concepts from a theory of information and a theory of reasoning, terming these respectively archaeological metaphysics, epistemology and archaeological logic and explanation. For Clarke these three aspects are overlain and permeated by a series of other levels of archaeological theory; these are steps in archaeological interpretation. Predepositional and depositional theory considers the relationships between activities, social patterning, and environmental factors and the traces deposited in the archaeological record. Postdepositional theory considers what happens to the deposited traces: processes such as destruction, erosion and disturbance. Retrieval theory is predominantly a theory of the sampling of the surviving deposited traces in excavation and fieldwork. Analytical theory is concerned with retrieved information and its processing; interpretative theory considers how the traces relate to their ancient social and environmental sources which are not now open to direct observation and experience.

The literature on most of these aspects of theoretical archaeology is quite sizeable. Most of the concepts of traditional archaeology, such as 'culture' and 'diffusion', have been challenged, found wanting and replaced (e.g. Shennan, 1978; Renfrew, 1978). New

archaeology in America favoured an explicitly systemic conceptualization of the archaeological past focusing on culture systems adapting to environmental factors (e.g. Binford, 1965; Flannery, 1968). In Britain the new conceptual framework of the 1970s mirrored more functionalist anthropology with organically conceived social systems functioning within environmental milieux (see chapter 2). Since the late 1970s attention has been channelled to the boundaries of such systems. The idea of interaction between social units has developed into theories of peer polity interaction (Renfrew and Cherry (eds), 1986) and world systems theory (Gledhill and Rowlands, 1982). Varieties of neo-evolutionary theory have been the most influential frameworks utilized to account for mechanisms of social change, from simple unilineal and stadial positions to more complex multilinear or epigenetic theories (see chapter 6).

In regard to the information that archaeology might reveal about the past, the new archaeology initiated a new optimism that archaeology was not confined to description of materials and technologies with the social and ideological increasingly removed from the reach of archaeological speculation: new archaeology was constituted as a new theory of archaeological information whereby it was to become anthropology (Binford, 1962).

The theory of archaeological logic and explanatory structure has been dominated by the consideration of hypothesis-based deductive reasoning processes (involving subsuming particular occurrences under generalizations) with an equivalence of prediction and explanation (Fritz and Plog, 1970; Watson, LeBlanc and Redman, 1971). The most influential aspect of such theory **has** been procedures of rigorous and explicit testing of clearly formulated hypotheses, known as problem-oriented research (Hill, 1972; Plog, 1974).

In retrieval theory sampling procedures have been applied to excavation and fieldwork (Cherry, Gamble and Shennan (eds), 1978; Mueller (ed.), 1975). Binford's middle-range theory aspires to a statistical correlation of material culture patterning and social behaviour (Binford, 1977; 1981). Schiffer's behavioural archaeology (1976) aims at an analogous general theory, a science of material culture patterning. Ethnoarchaeological and modern material culture studies have investigated the relation of social patterning to material culture and its deposition (e.g. Hodder, 1982; Gould (ed.), 1978; Gould, 1980; Gould and Schiffer (eds), 1981; Binford, 1978).

New ways of processing data, in particular computer based, have been developed in line with the developing range of new concepts, aiming at extracting more subtle and precisely documented pat-

tering in archaeological data (Doran and Hodson, 1975; Orton, 1980; Richards and Ryan, 1985).

Two particular fields of interpretative theory can be briefly mentioned here: theories of artefact exchange and prehistoric exchange networks; and theories of the relation of mortuary practices to the society which practised them. In the former, different artefact distributions are interpreted in terms of changing patterns of exchange between individuals and/or groups (Earle and Ericson, 1977; Ericson and Earle, 1982); the latter considers the traces of mortuary practices and the ritual deposition of artefacts in terms of symbolic dimensions of social relations (see Chapman, Kinnes and Randsborg (eds), 1981; and chapter 2 below).

Clarke reckoned that the introspective fervour in archaeology of the late 1960s and 1970s amounted to 'a precipitate, unplanned and unfinished exploration of new disciplinary fieldspace . . . profound practical, theoretical and philosophical problems to which the new archaeologies have responded with diverse new methods, new observations, new paradigms and new theory' (1973, p. 17). Adapting Kuhn's notion Clarke identified four new paradigms (1972, p. 5) (characterized as being systems of assumptions, conventions, fields of concepts which specify data, significant problems and exemplary solutions for a 'community' of archaeologists): the morphological, anthropological, ecological and geographical. So, according to Clarke, some archaeologists focus on artefact systems, their specification and quantitative derivation. Anthropological archaeologists consider the relation of data to social patterning. Ecological archaeologists aim to delineate palaeoenvironments and the place of human communities within them. And archaeology's geographical paradigm is dominated by locational and spatial analysis of settlement and artefact distributions.

These 'paradigms' have developed in criticism of, and in addition to, archaeology's traditional paradigm - an artefact-based, particularizing and qualitative archaeology aiming at a culture history expressed in literary narrative clichés. The theoretical developments have also been inextricably coupled with technical advances forming the basis for, or arising in response to, new theoretical orientations: lithic and ceramic analyses (including trace element analysis); analysis of botanical, faunal, skeletal and environmental material. All of these have refined and augmented archaeological data quite considerably.

Clarke conceived a unity or a logic behind this proliferation of new archaeologies, approaches, theories, paradigms. It all

tivity and theoretical elaboration. So theory is still most frequently conceived as abstract and secondary to data acquisition, different fashions explaining the same data, while traditional archaeology's explanations are based on common sense and natural language. There has been work within an explicit systemic framework, most notably by Colin Renfrew (1972), but social archaeology in Britain has emerged predominantly as a soft functionalism, the offspring of a colonialist anthropology.

This hegemony of hard scientific fundamentalism, sceptical empiricism and soft functionalism has received serious theoretical challenges since the late 1970s. Some archaeologists have drawn on structural Marxist anthropology and emphasized a conception of the social which differs from functionalist models in stressing internal contradiction rather than states of social equilibrium (see Spriggs (ed.), 1984). Structuralist and contextual archaeologists have emphasized the meaning and symbolic dimensions of social practices, stressing the culturally specific and variable meanings of material culture rather than simply concentrating on its patterning supposedly 'explained' within a framework of reductionist cross-cultural generalization (e.g. Hodder (ed.), 1982; Hodder, 1986). Other archaeologists have begun to examine archaeological work and explanations in the context of contemporary capitalism, critically assessing the ideology of archaeology (Shanks and Tilley, 1987; Miller and Tilley (eds), 1984). However, these challenges are only beginning to be widely acknowledged.

Fragmentation, specialization, divergent approaches, 'paradigms', theories of the social: different archaeologies. Rather than enter this labyrinth and perhaps identify the most likely archaeological exit, we intend instead to take a different line. We aim to ask the meaning of the fragmentation, the significance of the theoretical hegemony; to ask what theory itself might be; to assess the questions 'theoretical' archaeology has been posing; to ask what questions should be posed. So, in this chapter we wish to begin with some *Metatheoretical* questions, questions about theory itself.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY: METHOD

The developments that have taken place in archaeology since the 1960s amount to a process of rationalization of the discipline, a reaction to fact collection, the literary narrative, and unexamined common-sense categories and concepts of traditional archaeology.

But this rationalization has, for the most part, taken the form of *methodological* inquiry, a search for methods or approaches to the data, which will give a better, more complete, more objective view or account of the past. A valid method is conceived as being as objective as possible (some would equate this with being scientific), eliminating subjective bias. Approaches may vary as to what aspects of the archaeological record they concentrate on, what different patterns in the data they isolate and claim to explain, but all must be objective, reasonable, realistic, based on the primacy of the object of investigation. Concomitantly, the primary questions of theory have been:

- 1 How to extract the maximum information from what is left of the past.
- 2 Which concepts are the most efficient at achieving the aim of establishing an objective past.
- 3 How to bring the archaeologist • into the closest possible accordance with the object of investigation; that is, with the artefact and its depositional context.

Discussions of social theory in archaeology have, until recently, been very much undertaken in the context of these questions: reference has been made to other social sciences for concepts which might be applied to archaeological data in order to gain access to a fuller and more reliable account of the past. The aim has been to establish which social (or indeed other) concepts might be most efficiently applied to archaeological data. For example, palaeoeconomy (Higgs (ed.), 1972, 1975) draws on biological and ethological theories of evolution, conceiving these as more applicable to archaeological data than social theory. Marxist archaeologists conceive their conceptualization of the social context of artefacts as more accurate than systems theory and social typologies of bands, tribes etc. (e.g. Friedman and Rowlands, 1978; Bender, 1978).

Images of the archaeologist

Within this conceptualization of theory we can sketch two dominant underlying images of the archaeologist: the archaeologist as detective and the archaeologist as therapist.

The archaeologist as detective

The simile of archaeologist as detective is one not infrequently employed in introductory texts and prefaces (e.g. de Paor, 1967;

Clark, 1969) and is undoubtedly part of the popular mythology of archaeology. The archaeologist pieces together clues in order to reconstruct the past; the archaeologist is a Sherlock Holmes. The major theme underlying Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories is the expulsion of magic and mystery. Holmes, through the rigorous application of his method, makes everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis. Holmes, an obvious genius and man of science, always manages somehow to stumble upon the deduction which unravels the subtle connections between the clues. The stories usually end with Holmes recounting with devastating simplicity how the code of the clues was broken, how he eventually arrived at his final and all-encapsulating deduction. What was initially enigma, mystery, fascination, impossibility, becomes dispelled by a simple explanation. The application of pure method renders all the mysteries and the enigmas accountable in the burning light of reason. Once the deductions are revealed the solution to the mystery always appears absurdly simple, open to the commonest common sense. Holmes' logic is applicable to all areas of human experience: his ability to predict or 'read' even Dr Watson's somewhat illogical trains of thought are repeatedly displayed. Conan Doyle's books are a celebration of the power of empiricist or positivist science - cold, calculating reason dispelling illusion, eliminating subjectivity. They are also, of course, works of literary fiction.

The parallels with archaeology are readily apparent. The past, initially mysterious and seemingly impossible to adequately grasp or comprehend from mere fragments, can be reached, probed, ultimately known, through the operation of scientific method. Archaeologists are detectives travelling in the rattling carriages of scientific logic, boarding the *Flying Scotsman*, steaming back to discover the past to shatter the illusion, to tell everyone else, all the non-archaeologists, how it really was: what happened and why, what and who created the past leading to our present. But we all know that it is really not that simple. If it was, we would already have reached the past. We could stop writing archaeology books and write science fiction instead - dream of the future. One great problem with the future is that it has an annoying tendency to always create new pasts. What has gone wrong with our logical train of positivist science, of rationalized inquiry? Rather than moving back into the past is it, in fact, shunting back and forth in a siding? Do the rails, that we are sometimes told represent the logic of a truly scientific methodology, represent a viable and coherent route back to the past?

The archaeologist as therapist

Doing archaeology, the process of acquiring knowledge of the archaeological object, has now become, with the advent of the new archaeology, a therapeutic process. Various methods represent various remedies, cures for pathological thinking, for contradiction within the process of acquiring knowledge. Most theory in archaeology today acts as a pharmacopoeia. The goal is to avoid subjectivity, the pathology. Archaeological method instills health, a healthy regard to the objective artefact. Each new approach, systems theory to middle-range theory, is an implicit or explicit remedy for the failings of the others.

It is relevant and significant to consider the roots of pharmacopoeia in the Greek *Pharmakon* meaning drug, cure, remedy and poison. *Pharmakon* is related to *pharmakeus* and *pharmakos* which mean, respectively, sorcerer or magician and one sacrificed or executed as atonement or purification for others, a scapegoat (cf. Derrida, 1981). Archaeological method consists of shamanistic cures, exorcisms resulting in the expulsion of a scapegoat, itself also poison, pollution, and remedy. Method aims at an expulsion of the subjective whose absence supposedly guarantees epistemological security. Yet method's curative powers simultaneously poison the study of the past, riddling our practice with dualisms - subject becomes split from object, fact from value, past from present. Method is to provide psychological security that we have eliminated ourselves in the present in order to return to the past. By immersing us in the object world, method tries to alleviate us from the burden of choice: choice of *alternative* meanings, *alternative* pasts. Ultimately method wants to place the archaeologist in the image of god, or alternatively as mindless automaton: god because the archaeologist is supposedly able to determine how the past was for once and all; automaton because all that is required is an application of method - the archaeologist becomes spiritual medium on earth, magical representative of the absent creator of the past.

Method and objectivity

Methods are operations on the artefact, the object, the basis for providing explanations. Ultimately everything becomes reduced to the object. The data, the material traces, stand supreme. Ideas, theories, hypotheses (call them what you will), are all refracted from that great solid bedrock of archaeological data we all know exists. Kick a megalith and it hurts! However, typologists know

their megaliths in just the same sense as witch hunters know their witches: both are social creations. Archaeology today amounts to excavating and processing artefacts according to positivist rational method. It does not matter which facts are subjected to archaeology because what matters is the quality the objects supposedly possess - objectivity. This is what the archaeologist is after: objectivity conceived as abstract, in itself. The quality of the object is considered not in concrete terms but abstractly or quantitatively. Objectivity is abstract, uniform, neutral, because it exists separately from the archaeologist, the observing subject. Objective 'facts' count and archaeological knowledge is thought to be entirely dependent on them. They are, after all, hard physical reality. So archaeological method (rational and objective) produces its object in advance. Artefacts have meaning primarily as objectivity and this is claimed to be the basis or origin of good archaeology.

On most accounts archaeology becomes the perception and experience of objectivity, the artefacts of the past. Such objectivity is regarded as sacred, disembodied, essential, as constituting an essence. The archaeological object is present to our senses, real, with immediate proximity. Furthermore, the object as object is regarded as being theory and value-free, in-itself, identical to itself, transcendent. Objects become, in such a conception, *archai* (originals), outward manifestations of implicit historical essence. History is supposedly to be found in the archaeological object. The artefact is a *punctum*, a punctual presence, piercing time; it is the mark of history, the historical moment. Possess in consciousness this absolute spiritual plenitude, this property, the past immediately present with us, and you have history. This is a deference, a deferment of meaning to the object. Write up this experience and interpretation and theory can supposedly follow.

Theory, data, practice

Few archaeologists believe in induction any more. Some, following a reading of Popper (1959), have suggested that an earlier advocacy of verification procedures must now give way to falsification (see Renfrew, Rowlands and Segreaves (eds), 1982, section I). Most realize that facts are selected and that research must be problem orientated; facts only answer the questions the archaeologist asks of them. Paradigms have been discussed at length (Meltzer, 1979; Binford and Sabloff, 1982) and there is a growing realization that data are theory-laden. However, this has made very little difference to archaeology. There is still a wide consensus in the belief in 'objective reality' or the archaeological record.

Consider *Fowler's Approaches to Archaeology* (1977), a relatively sophisticated introduction to 1970s British sceptical empiricism. In a chapter entitled 'Theoretical archaeology' he claims that 'all archaeology is theoretical' (p. 131). He argues that theory is involved from the beginning of the archaeological process, emphasizing 'models', defined as conscious and unconscious mental frameworks *applied* to the data: 'archaeological evidence does not mean anything' (p. 132), because it is dependent on the models applied by the archaeologist. The corollary is that 'there is no ultimate, finite truth revealed by archaeological evidence... all interpretation of it is relative' (p. 138). What remains in Fowler's text is an assertion of the primacy of the data, archaeological information to which theory and models are merely 'applied': 'whatever the theory, in the last resort quality of interpretation depends on the quality of the evidence' (p. 152). Fowler goes further in relating quality of the evidence to the 'quality of the archaeologist' (p. 152). Data are, after all, retrieved in the practice of excavation and theory can, perhaps, be quietly forgotten.

This position regards concrete practical method as operating on the archaeological record. In such a framework methods, approaches, are the means of doing archaeology, and archaeological theory has all too often come to refer to this 'real world' of archaeological practice. A hierarchy is implied:

Excavation	
Data processing	Technique; method
Synthesis	
Interpretation	
Theory	

Such a common-sense conception of 'theory' is of a system of ideas, concepts or statements, abstract rather than empirical, held to constitute an explanation or account of archaeological phenomena and essentially separate from those phenomena. Traditional archaeology has frequently taken an attitude that theory detracts from the real business of archaeology. Its quietude on matters of theory results not so much from a rejection of philosophical underpinnings but rather from a largely silent consensus around empiricist norms. A general characteristic of empiricism, whether the 'straight empiricism' of fact collection and subsequent description and interpretation, or in the positivist shape of hypothetico-deductive testing procedures advocated in the new archaeology, is that theoretical reflection is always systematically

discouraged in favour of the primacy of facts or methodologies geared to producing such facts. However, this suspicion of theory is ultimately itself a philosophical statement of priorities emerging in the guise of a supposedly common-sense embargo on useless speculation regarded as being a diversion from day-to-day practical work (see e.g. Flannery, 1982). This is a non-sense. Any argument that theory is irrelevant to archaeology is itself theoretical, as is another 'common-sense' proposition that the world consists of a series of observable facts whose regularities and interrelationships can only be known through observation - that the external visible aspects of artefacts exhaust their meaning.

In the new archaeology theory is similarly regarded as abstract and parasitic on method. It can sometimes be useful, but any theory which relates to the real practice of archaeology in any other way than by strengthening and perfecting the possibilities for technique and method is considered dogmatic, irrelevant or mere fantasy (Schiffer, 1981). Theory can have only one relevance to practice: perfecting method. Does it work? The question asked of us all will be: 'but what does this look like in practice?' Theory must be 'applied' to archaeological 'reality'. But this very notion of 'application' presupposes the gap between theory and practice as always already a problem. Ultimately the relation can only be conceived as arbitrary, contingent or incidental. Social theory, for example, is relevant to archaeology: it provides new models and categories which may be applied to the archaeological object world. We find patterning of structures of power and hierarchy in the neolithic where before there were tribal chiefdoms, where there were cultures and before that druids. After all, we know that we are not simply digging up objects: they must be related to their social context - eventually - or otherwise we regress into antiquarianism. However, the real practice of archaeology always tends to be separated from theory. This split is one homologous with that between mental and manual labour, decision and execution, ends and means. It is a split running throughout the capitalist division of labour. An emphasis on methodology is one on logistics, administration, management, surveillance: defining that which is 'reasonable', asserting realistic limits and goals to archaeological practice.

The effects of this relationship of theory to practice are familiar: isolated empirical, 'expert' studies; intensive empirical specialization accompanying efforts to divest concepts of empirical content; mathematical operations; use of catastrophe theory (Renfrew, 1978a); emphasis on the formulation of laws of culture

process or high-level generalization. All aim to provide an intuition of the essence of prehistory - its objectivity, its essential meaning, order and logic. But the essence so arrived at is not that different from the mythical essence of prehistory implied by ley-lines and megalith builders arriving from outer space. A rabid empiricism accompanies idealism and fantasy because empiricism is little more than an idealism of the object. Furthermore, all choice between competing archaeologies, alternative pasts, is suspended in a proliferation of archaeologies, a pluralism allowing comparison only on the terms of a conception of method which decides means of application, of execution, but not ends: there can be no comment on the social, political and philosophical meaning of particular archaeologies, particular pasts.

Idealism, fantasy, text

As a way forward into further specifying and investigating these effects of a coupling of empiricism and idealism found in contemporary archaeology, it is interesting to consider a fantasy by Jorge Luis Borges. In 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1981) he recounts his (fictional) discovery of an encyclopaedia which catalogues the planet Tlon, a reality of complete idealism.

Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlon, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hronir* and are, though awkward in form, somewhat longer. Until recently, the *hronir* were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness. It seems unbelievable that their methodological production dates back scarcely a hundred years, but this is what the Eleventh Volume tells us. The first efforts were unsuccessful. However, the *modus operandi* merits description. The director of one of the state prisons told his inmates that there were certain tombs in an ancient river bed and promised freedom to whoever might make an important discovery. During the months preceding the excavation the inmates were shown photographs of what they were to find. This first effort proved that expectation and anxiety can be inhibitory; a week's work with pick and shovel did not manage to unearth anything in the way of a *hron* except a rusty wheel of a period posterior to the experiment. But this was kept secret and the process was repeated later in four schools. In three of them the failure was almost complete; in the fourth (whose director died accidentally during the first excavations) the students unearthed - or produced - a gold

mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay urns and the mouldy and mutilated torso of a king whose chest bore an inscription which it has not yet been possible to decipher . . . The methodical fabrication of *hr&nir* (says the Eleventh Volume) has performed prodigious services for archaeologists. It has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future.

(Borges, 1981, pp. 37-8)

Peeling back the layers of text in this fantasy, we might say the following about archaeology. Traditional and new archaeology represent a desire for the past in itself and for itself; a desire for an objective past, for primary originary objectivity, the essence of the past, the essential meaning, an ideal presence of the past. The past is to be perceived by the autonomous archaeologist whose subjectivity is to be marginalized in a simple immediate experience and expression of the past.

This is an idealist fiction. The past cannot be exactly reproduced. Exact reproduction is repetition, tautology, silence. The archaeological past is not re-created as it was or in whatever approximation. It is, of course, excavated away. As such, the archaeological past must be *written*. We argue that it is vital to realize the specific form and nature of this act of writing, this form of the material production of the past. Objects are recovered in excavation. They may be lodged and displayed in museums and made to stand for the past of which they are a part (metonymy). They also need to be enshrined in books (the exhortation to publish excavations is common). The archaeological object and its context are both described and represented in the informational report (metaphor). Museum and text represent metonymy and metaphor. These are not neutral vehicles for an ideal presence of the past; equally, they are not simply rhetorical detours to a picture of the past. We have argued elsewhere (Shanks and Tilley, 1987, pp. 22-3) that fieldwork and excavation are not neutral instruments for recovering the past. Their supposed passive observation and conceptual detachment with regard to the past, equated with objectivity, is rooted in a particular vision of time, a spatial time (see chapter 5) which is treated as an independent variable separating past (conceived as a problem) from a voyeuristic present. This temporality has no way of coping with the personal, active and productive (or destructive) experience of fieldwork and excavation since 'what is historic in thought - the practice of archaeology, our experience of digging - is equated with irrelevance' (Shanks and Tilley, 1987, p. 23). We have also focused

(ibid., ch. 4) on the museum's aesthetic, its way of representing the past, and have argued the way the past is presented is profoundly part of what is represented. Forms of display, such as free-standing sculpture and 'realistic' period settings, make statements about the relation of artefacts to their social context and the manner in which space, time and history are themselves conceived. So, we have located the temporality of museum cases - where date, (an abstract dimensional co-ordinate) is represented as the time of an artefact - in the spatial and quantified time of capitalism where the factory clock organizes routine and discipline of an alienated workforce. The period room, essentially a visual inventory, represents history as information and indicates that a meaningful understanding of history may be gained through a window on the past where the social meaning of artefacts is to be seen in their 'naturalistic' spatial juxtaposition. We have questioned these and other meanings of the museum's aesthetic. Analogous arguments can be presented concerning archaeological writing, archaeological texts.

The archaeological text is a medium for the inscription of representations of artefacts and their meanings. The artefact and its context, the subject matter of archaeology, must necessarily be given metaphorical expression, be signified in a text. This textual production means archaeology is fundamentally expressive, a signifying practice which confers meaning on the past. Language and writing are not neutral, objective instruments. Rather than representing the world, they are a means of coping with it. In this way a purely objective representation of the past is a textual impossibility. Now archaeologists conceive writing ideally as a neutral and technical resource rather than a transformative medium, a medium arising from the relationship of the archaeologist to the artefact and its context, and from the relation of an archaeologist to an audience. Writing and language may intrude on the representation of the past, but they should not: this is the conventional position in archaeological discourse which remains largely silent on such issues. But instead we stress that language is a social phenomenon and as a corollary archaeological writing, as part of archaeological work more generally, has to be seen and theorized as social production. We need to consider archaeology as discourse - a structured system of rules, conventions and meanings for the production of knowledges, texts.

Despite the concern with theory that developed in the new archaeology there are still comparatively few works of general theory in archaeology. Textual production in archaeology is still overwhelmingly dominated by texts which describe specific sites,

types of data, regions or time periods. In the section which follows we present a series of comments on four archaeological texts: a site report, a pottery study, a general synopsis and an introduction to archaeology. Texts of these kinds still account for the vast majority of the world's output of archaeological textual production. We will focus on what these texts reveal about our arguments concerning the nature of theory in archaeology.

Archaeological texts

An excavation report: archival logistics

Wainwright's *Gussage All Saints* (1979) is a report on a total excavation of a settlement of the second half of the first millennium BC. The excavation is described as a 'problem orientated project within a rescue framework, designed to look back at Dr. Gerhardt Bersu's excavation of the site of Little Woodbury which, although a partial excavation, had for many years provided the pattern for Iron Age economy in southern Britain' (Wainwright, 1979, p. vii). The project, then, is clearly supposed to be in keeping with advanced (problem-orientated) principles of excavation. Such volumes as this, published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office have also been considered almost exemplary (e.g. Barker, 1977, p. 224).

In a standard work on archaeological publication, Grinsell, Rahtz and Williams remark that site reports for the most part remain unread (1974, p. 19). The site report is not meant to be read: this implies too much of an involvement of the reader; they are to be 'consulted'. The report is a textual archive and catalogue, a spectacular text making visible and textual the reality of the past. Measured drawings, tables, measurements, lists of numbered finds, scaled photographs and third person narrative - all represent a rhetoric of neutrality, of objectivity, from which subjective experience and impressions have been purged. Of the 205 pages only 23 discuss what was found. Setting; structural sequence; chronology; summary comments on artefacts, trade and external contacts; basic details of economy, environment and population: the discussion climbs Hawkes' (1954) empiricist ladder of inference culminating in the now cliched expression of caution and wariness regarding the difficulty of moving from the 'facts' to 'highly speculative matters' (Bowen, in Wainwright, p. 182) such as, in this case, settlement status. This would certainly seem to be the case judging from Bowen's and Wainwright's own inferences. Taking into account debris from a bronze foundry which produced 'prestige chariot fittings', they reckon the entrance to the settlement

was wide enough for a chariot and 'indicative of an assured position in the social order for a member or members of the community' (p. 193). They tentatively propose, referring to classical authors, the *Mabinogion* and song of Culwch and Olwen, that Gussage All Saints is a settlement 'quite high up a settlement hierarchy', perhaps even an Ilys - the residence of a Celtic lord. Wainwright also comments:

the arthritic fanners of Gussage should also be reviewed within the more general theme of Celtic society in which the traits of frankness, spirited temperament, bravery, boastfulness, personal vanity, feasting and love of eulogistic verse combine to produce a type which Professor Cunliffe has bleakly castigated as combining a 'furious impetus . . . and a total lack of forward planning' . . . It is in this context, imbued with tradition and personal example, that one should view the status of the Gussage farmers.

(Wainwright, 1979, p. 193)

But to criticize this essentially empty and sterile speculation is to miss the point. Such comments and 'interpretation' are consciously superfluous: 'Comment, interpretation, or synthesis are repeatable experiments which vary with whatever archaeological model happens to be fashionable at the time' (Grinsell, Rahtz and Williams, 1974, p. 20). Informational reports are, then, meant to avoid interpretation. 'The ideal report would enable a reader to reconstruct the whole site layer by layer, feature by feature, each with its constituents such as clay, gravel and charcoal flecks in due proportion' (ibid., p. 58). Barker, in *Principles of Archaeological Excavation*, recommends that the core of an excavation report be the illustrations, forming a 'planned guided tour' (1977, p. 228), a tour free from interpretation. In the spectacular text interpretation is superfluous.

Writing becomes the issue of publication, of record and description, what and how, and relative time and financial cost: an archival logistics. The issue is one of rescue and preservation of data. This has been a major issue especially since the advent of Rescue Archaeology in the early 1970s. Consequently, a report by a working party of the Ancient Monuments Board for England specifies four levels of data (see table 1.2). Levels I and II are considered appropriate to an archive or museum in the site's locality. Wainwright's *Gussage All Saints* is publication at level III. The issue at stake in publication is how much and how to publish. It is in this context that the extraordinary *redundancy of empirical detail* to be found in a site report should be considered. What really

TABLE 1.2 *Levels of data according to site descriptions and loose material (Ancient Monuments Board for England)*

<i>Level</i>	<i>Site Descriptions</i>	<i>Loose Material</i>
I	Site itself General Notes	Excavated finds
II	Site note books Recording forms Drawings	Finds records Photographs Negatives
III	Full illustration and description of all structural and stratigraphical relationships	Classified find lists and drawings and all specialist analyses
IV	Synthesized description and data	Selected finds and reports relevant to synthesis

Source: P. Barker (1977), p. 230.

is to be made of the 52 drawn sections (detailing layering and type of infill) of pits found within the settlement? Of the tables of measurements of bones? The authors presumably assume that such things are self-explanatory and may be of interest or use. But is this the case?

An archival logistics is, then, a logic of neutrality, literally of objectivity. The site report as archival catalogue names the object world of the archaeological site, identifying, specifying, classifying each and everything. The mark of the informational report is the category. Categories reduce the heterogeneity of the object world. The conventional sequence of categories in Wainwright is:

- 1 Structures: enclosures; pits; settlement phases.
- 2 Artefact finds: pottery; stone; metal; other.
- 3 Organic finds: animal; human; plant.

The sequence includes 'everything' found at Gussage All Saints. The sequence of categories effects closure. But what is the origin of the categories and their social meaning? Conventionally, categories are points of method, part of reducing the data to manageable units, securing a place for everything. They are part of the law of neutral archaeological reason; categories are meant to be neutral. But why should this 'neutral' categorization be used rather than another?

And is such categorization really neutral? It in no ways cures the fundamental isolation of each self-present object in the report, the assumed basic units of empirical science. The objects remain detached from a historically located materiality, from the question of their meaning other than that of objectivity (a meaning which belongs to the historical present): the objects are simply manipulated by neutral reason. So the past is, in effect, presented with identity papers and locked up. There is a place for everything and, apparently, everything is in its place. The tendency, ideal or *telos* is a total administration of the past. No ambiguity is to be allowed, no heterogeneity. Such deviance is to be banished to the margins or eliminated.

Categories gather together, but each category is not classifiable according to itself. Categories gather but *prevent* closure. They are both inside and outside the object world. Archaeology cannot be absorbed into its object. Categories imply a signifying practice, a material practice in the present. The theorization of categories *requires* their relation to archaeology as a material and political practice in the present.

A work of synthesis

The two volumes of Gibson's *Beaker Domestic Sites* (1982) are aimed at filling a gap: drawing together and examining a neglected category of data - non-ritual pottery and sites from the second millennium BC in Britain. Gibson's study is a display of archaeological reality: objects, *archai* - original sources, an originary archaeological reality, objects through which access may be gained to the past. While presenting a history of the study of beaker domestic pottery, examining typologies, chronology, traditional problems of diffusion and influence of beaker style on other ceramic design, and considering the possibility of a category 'Beaker domestic assemblage', the bulk of Gibson's book is a catalogue of 167 pages, plus 210 pages of half scale drawings of some 5,000 pot fragments of which all but 24 are 2.5 cm² or smaller.

Such work encapsulates empiricism's subjective idealism: that the archaeological object is identified with the conventional and contemporary experience of it. Here we have a fetishism of the object, a blindness towards the genesis of an object, its material and conceptual production in past and present. As such, the text, the drawings, utterly fail reality. The archaeologist becomes museum scribe, copying and copying the past: ritualistic scrutiny, display and repetition. And there is also the same redundancy of

detail as we noted in the site report - the detail of 5,000 diminutive pot sherds and . . . sites to be studied in the future?

The aim of such works is primarily synthesis, to draw together a body of data conceived as related according to archaeological categorization, to classify and reclassify. But the issue of categorization is again seriously abbreviated. Gibson's problem is that of beaker domestic pottery. We might ask the meaning of a study, a catalogue with commentary, devoted to such a category. He talks of the problem of distinguishing 'ritual from domestic' and defines domestic pottery as 'all finds not directly associated with a burial' and presents a diagram labelled as a 'Model for beaker context possibilities' (figure 1.1). All the categories he adopts - fabric, fine, coarse, burial, ritual, domestic - are categories of common sense, assumed as meaningful and self-evident. They remain unexamined, their definition regarded as essentially transparent. That there are variations in the meanings attached to different linguistic expressions of the same phenomena and differences in the meanings attached to the same words or phrases, according to who interprets them and according to their context of appearance, according that is to their inscription in textual and social practices, is forgotten. Nor are the categories of material culture, the social, ceramic production, critically theorized. The consequence is statements such as the following, taken from the conclusion to 92 pages of discussion: 'Domestic sites act as a type of cauldron for interaction between contemporary pottery styles. This interaction is, however, natural, and to be expected where individual potters are at work and producing goods which they regard as aesthetically pleasing' (Gibson, 1982, p. 92). Nowhere has Gibson considered the concept of interaction (of pottery styles?), style, the 'natural', the individual, work, goods, or the aesthetic. All are taken from common sense, all remain untheorized.

Gibson's study is certainly not exceptional in the archaeological literature, not even in the single-minded devotion to empiricism, to the aura of the archaeological find, required to produce measured drawings of 5,000 sherds 2.5 cm². Whatever the supposed value of such studies, gathering and making accessible arrays of data, they only serve to reveal the effects of the lack of critical theoretical reflection on conventional archaeological practice.

A work of synopsis

Smooth, 'readable', well-illustrated, comprehensive and relatively progressive, *Prehistoric Europe* by Champion et al. (1984) is an

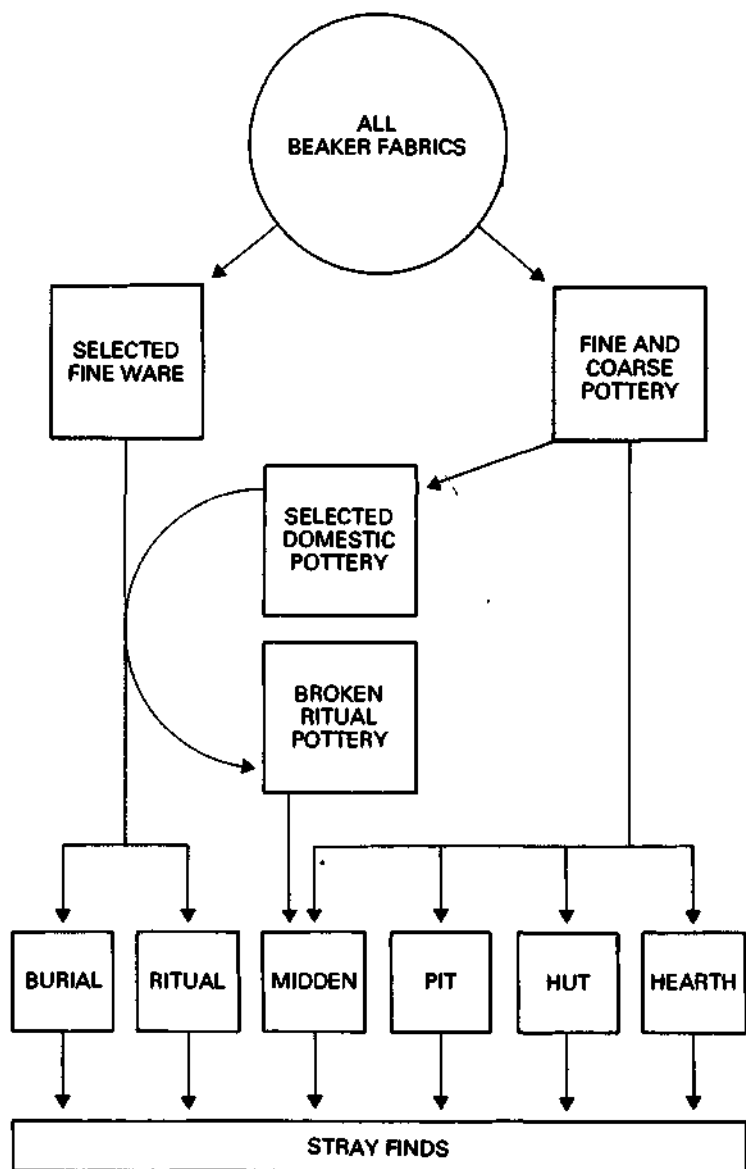


FIGURE 1.1 Gibson's 'Model for beaker context possibilities'
 Source: A Gibson (1982).

excellent textbook covering all of Europe from earliest times to the Roman Empire. It is a synoptic text, a general summarizing view from a detached viewpoint. Abridging and crystallizing, this is a withdrawal from practical engagements with the archaeological object into interpretation. It represents reason's claim to legislate a truth as synoptic, rational and conceptual, with heterogeneity marginalized in a strategy of comparison, compilation and coherence.

In this book, a sophisticated example of British processual archaeology about which we will have much to say later, prehistory is brought to coherence as a kaleidoscopic interaction of the same 'essential' categories of economy, environment, population and the social: this is conceived as socio-economic process. So each chapter is an application of this conceptual scheme to stretches of prehistory, comparing different regions, compiling patterns, trends, discontinuities. The overall result is the establishment of a pattern of 'development'.

The text attempts to produce a 'balanced' account using different archaeological approaches, from palaeoeconomy to structural Marxism, different investments in the archaeological data bearing returns in the form of synoptic width. But we argue that the width, the academic neutrality, the attempted balance of different views within an all-embracing atemporal, aspatial 'socio-economic' process is ultimately incoherent. 'Materialist' explanations of material culture-patterning according to a logic of the ecosystem do not simply stress different aspects of the same socio-economic process to those theorized in structural Marxist archaeologies which give primacy to the structuring of social relations of production; they do not simply represent different interpretations of the same data (see, for example, pp. 149-51). This narrative line, subsuming fundamentally incompatible approaches, reveals such processual archaeology as an old historicism glossed with new jargon and methods. We argue instead that it is essential to question the political status and meaning of categories and theory. This applies equally to the book's theme of European prehistory. As Rowlands has argued: 'a prehistory of Europe cannot be assumed (except ideologically) . . . it does not exist except as the presentist projection into prehistory of current interest in establishing a unified sense of a "European" past' (1984, p. 154). Indeed much evidence could be extracted from this work that 'Europe' is a coherent archaeological concept only in the terms of university courses in prehistory. The explicit intention behind the book - the authors would probably agree - is to fill a

particular gap in archaeological discourse and provide an elementary student text. Yet a text which does not appear to be critically aware of its own insertion within an established socio-economic political structure and smoothes over the social and political implications of choosing alternative frameworks for the interpretation of the 'European' or any other past, can hardly be expected to provide a stimulus for critical thought.

An introductory text

Attractively packaged and cleanly written, Greene's *Archaeology: an Introduction* (1983) is designed for an undergraduate course introducing archaeology. As with all introductions to archaeology, we find an overwhelming emphasis on method and technique - excavation, fieldwork and techniques of artefact analysis - involving the recovery and scrutiny of basic evidence (114 out of 175 pages). The unfortunate effect of such texts is to identify the discipline of archaeology with its technical instrumentation. Some primers may supplement this with a precis of archaeological achievements - discoveries - or, as in Greene's book, a history of archaeology, presented as the histories of the archaeological achievements of imaginative individuals (30 out of 175 pages).

In the final chapter, entitled 'Making sense of the past', Greene gives his account and assessment of recent developments: 'the hottest area of debate in contemporary archaeology is between traditional and new archaeology, and the applicability of various theoretical approaches and their resultant frameworks' (pp. 154-5). Different theories for Greene produce different frameworks which may be applied to the data. He comments that this is the excitement of contemporary archaeology, the fervent debate. But archaeology's fundamental unity is apparently not challenged. In the first place, theory is identified as essentially heuristic, as providing different ways of looking at the same data. So Greene comments;

the new archaeology has greatly improved the quality of information in some areas of archaeology, and has produced a better framework for seeking explanations for that very reason. It is in many ways similar to the demands made by Edward de Bono in the general field of problem solving by lateral thinking.

(p. 162)

Second, Greene follows Daniel in seeing a coherence in the history of archaeology as a discipline - not much has really changed since the eighteenth century! The history of archaeology apparently

shows that 'the terminology and preoccupations do of course change, but the objectives and attitudes to the evidence . . . have a familiar ring' (p. 174). Daniel makes almost identical assertions: 'archaeologists have always been talking about evolutionary change and cultural process' (1981, p. 191). The underlying argument is, of course, that all that really matters are the data 'sources', nothing else really changes in its fundamentals. Greene, 'liberal' and detached, is sceptical of any final answers, any certainty. There are no wholly right or wrong answers, no final truths. The only certainty we are left with is the objectivity of the past, its 'facticity'. Hence the emphasis in such introductions to archaeology on methods and techniques, and the corollary that archaeology is detached from its historical reality as academic disciplinary practice. Its history becomes, as mentioned, a succession of individual imaginative consciousnesses.

Contemporary archaeological discourse

At the moment archaeological discourse is seriously abbreviated. It doesn't matter what you say as long as you say it in the right way; as long as you conform to the rules of empiricist/positivist discourse, rational method; as long as what you say is reasonable, not fantasy or extreme, is open to 'testing' against the data, is not overtly political, is not subjective. And if you transgress these laws of discourse, the epistemology and ontology police are waiting.

A repressive pluralism holds sway; we can only decide between different archaeologies according to prescribed laws of method and discourse. Different archaeologies are conceived as simply different approaches to the same past. Consequently, decision becomes paralysed. Contemporary archaeology has no way of coping with the perceived crisis of information, the large amount of archaeological information now being amassed, and what we identify as a redundancy of detail, other than by management and archival strategies.

Archaeological discourse is practised and dominated by experts, detached academic specialists for the most part ignoring or blind to the social conditions of their practice, conceiving these and their personal subjective experiences of archaeology as theoretically irrelevant. A subjective idealism privileges essential objectivity, the transcendental origin of knowledge, identifying the object and archaeological experiences of it. This is the only manner in which subjective experience is theoretically acceptable.

A teleology specifies the transcendental goal of archaeology as the past in itself and for itself. This goal is beyond question and decision, overriding and regulating the process and method of attaining the goal. The past is the aim; the task is to follow method, keep to the laws of discourse. Generally, contemporary archaeology can be characterized as being pervaded by a set of categorical oppositions.

Practice	Theory
Object	Subject
Past	Present
Presence	Absence
Substance	Re-presentation
Reality	Rhetoric, text
<hr/>	
SECURITY	SUSPICION

Underlying and giving meaning to these oppositions are the two other terms: security and suspicion. 'Practice' through to 'reality' imply a nexus of security and, accordingly, these are considered primary in contrast to the questionability and suspicion underlying their opposites. Practice or doing archaeology via the application of method is given primacy over ideas and conceptualization. Hard facts are deemed to expel and annihilate soft ideas. The interpreting subject always becomes something to be regretted - all archaeologists ought to be suspicious of themselves and others, and the past shouldn't become infected with the present. Consequently, the past becomes conceived as a set of presences (artefacts and their associations) contrasted with the present, absented and distanced from the past. The past is felt to reside in an objective substance of its own - the reality, the presence, of the hand axe. However, the past clearly does not possess objective substance when described or re-presented in a text. The admittance of the relevance of theory, subjectivity, the present, writing, makes us feel suspicious, insecure, on weak ground. Essentially, it becomes problematic that people who write archaeology have different aspirations, live in the present and write texts.

The solution of the *aporiai* of these oppositions appears an impossible one. If we could go back in a time capsule would we not produce better archaeology? Ultimately on this line of reasoning, all archaeology must be suspicious, dangerous. But this is, as we have said, idealist fantasy.

ARCHAEOLOGY AS THEORETICAL PRACTICE

It is time to subvert these oppositions. Each opposed term in fact defines the other. No single term can be considered to stand on its own, self-referring. Each term is defined by what it excludes, what it denies. Consequently, subverting these oppositions requires their mediation. This is not simply to say, for example, that theory and data are equal and paired, each affecting the other, each as important as the other in archaeological practice (Renfrew, 1982). It is to contend that all the terms are aspects of the same material process, the same material practice. It is to accept our experience as archaeologists of producing the past now. Accordingly, theory is not something mental as opposed to practical, not an abstraction (distraction), which can be applied to objective data if so wished. Consider theory's metaphorical roots in the Greek:

Theaomai: to gaze at, spectate (with a sense of wonder).

Theoreo: spectate, review, inspect, contemplate, consider, to consult an oracle.

Theoros: a spectator at the theatre or the games.

Theorema: object of contemplation, subject of investigation.

Theatron: place for seeing, for assembly.

Theoria: mission to an oracle, contemplation, consideration.

Theory is not separate from practice. Theory is reflection, critique, performance, a theatre for action, an act and object of contemplation: these are aspects of the same material process, the theoretical practice of archaeology. So knowing the past means producing it in the present. Past and present are mediated in the practice of archaeology, in excavation and the writing of archaeological texts.

The archaeological text represents the necessary inscription of the artefact. Inscription is signifying practice which cannot be absorbed into the archaeological object. The object and its context (the subject of archaeology) must *necessarily* be given metaphorical expression, be signified in the text. As we have argued, simple, unmediated, immediate experience and expression of the past is an idealist fiction. No text is a transparent medium expressing an essential meaning of the past. Writing occurs in the present, it is a material means of production. As a social practice it is a threading together of the social, historical, linguistic and personal. There is no escape from this nexus. Archaeology is, then, immediately

theoretical, social, political and autobiographical. Subjectivity, in the sense of autobiography, relating practice to the living of which it is an aspect, is not a deviation from real archaeology; it is the gesture which defuses the power of the *public* law of archaeological reason or discourse. To express it another way: to contend that we can only know the mediated object requires the mediation of the object world and the archaeologist's subjectivity. The subjective becomes the form of the objective because both are aspects of the same material process.

To return to categorization: a materialist emphasis on theory as practice requires a redefinition of the object world, a reconceptualizing centred on mediation. Instead of self-contained objects possessing identity, there are fields of relations. Identity presupposes difference from something else. There are no conclusive categories which can incorporate the differential and relational complexity of material reality and production. No concept or category is ever adequate to that which it signifies; the world cannot be compartmentalized according to categories of consciousness. There are, then, flaws in every concept and these make it necessary to refer to other concepts. Each category, apparently self-referring and inside itself, is in reality defined by what it excludes, by its chronic relation of difference to other categories. The result is a texture of webs of meaning. Meaning is never fully present, never fully disclosed, never final or conclusive; it is always deferred, in some ways absent, subject to redefinition and negotiation.

Categories are never adequate to the past. Interpretation does not produce stability nor effect closure. In the same way there are no universal truths to be found in the past. We, as archaeologists, are not gradually piecing together a better and better or more complete account of the past. Truths apply to the historical conjuncture and are wrapped up in the historical, social and personal mediation of subject and object, theory and practice, past and present. Interpretation, rather than effecting closure, opens up or discloses, creating *discontinuity*, difference.

The past, then, is gone; it can't be recaptured in itself, relived as object. It only exists now in its connection with the present, in the present's practice of interpretation. So it is not the objects of the past and their preservation which matter so much as the relations revealed and created between them in the historical act of interpretation. Instead of a past whose meaning is transparent to enlightened reason, or lost in mystery, we emphasize the act of interpretation. Indeed, according to our contention of the

mediation of past and present, subjectivity and objectivity, theory and data, the past like an oracle *requires* interpretation.

Interpretation cannot be reduced to a methodology. We decry method as a way back to an absent past and refuse a rigorous method-ology. Method must instead be understood to arise out of a practical confrontation with the object. It is the affective as opposed to the effective. To argue that the past is chronically subject to interpretation and reinterpretation does not imply that all pasts are equally valid. Nor can it be accommodated in a shrug of the shoulders or a scepticism which would doubt the ultimate validity of any archaeology. It means the past forms an expansive space for intellectual struggle in the present and that we must accept the necessity for self-reflection and critique, situating archaeology in the present. Critique involves evaluation and makes taking sides a necessity, accepting responsibility for a decision as to why and how to write the past, and for whom. This responsibility belongs to us however much we might try to privilege the objectivity of the artefact or the neutrality of academic discourse.

What is the substance of this theoretical practice? What should be the focus of archaeology? There are the following unavoidable and crucial questions.

- 1 How is social reality created and structured?
- 2 What is the place of material culture, archaeology's object, within social reality?
- 3 How is social reality related to time; how and why does social reality change?
- 4 What is the meaning and form of gaining knowledge of past social reality?

There is no question of whether or not a consideration of social theory is needed in archaeology. The question to be asked is what kind of theory it should be - a strategic question. The questions posed above can receive no simple answers prior to being worked out in practice. So we are not proposing to replace a bad theory with a better theory, of archaeology, society, or whatever. To propose another theory to be applied, a theory reckoned to be better in some way, is to reproduce the split between theory and practice and to add to the proliferation of archaeological 'approaches' to the past. We are not going to argue that any particular method or approach or concept is automatically and wholly to be rejected. To do so abstractly would be to commit the error of theoreticism. What we shall do in the following

chapters is to consider each of the above questions and examine and emphasize theory as a practice which cannot be separated from the object of archaeology, itself indelibly social, and the present socio-political context of this practice, this mediation of past and present.