Why the history of archaeology is essential to theoretical archaeology

Razones por las que la historia de la arqueología es esencial para la teoría arqueológica

Tim Murray

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University
Melbourne, Australia 3086
t.murray@latrobe.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship between the historiography of archaeology and the building and evaluation of archaeological theory. Although it is common for archaeologists to employ partial histories of archaeology to support claims for significant changes to archaeological theory, it is nonetheless the case that there is strong evidence for a counter claim – that theoretical archaeology needs to be more strongly grounded in the history of archaeology. This claim is supported by a close analysis of the value of alternative histories of archaeology to demonstrate that current theoretical orthodoxies have histories and are not necessarily 'natural' for the discipline.

KEY WORDS: *History of Archaeology. Archaeological Theory. Social Studies of Science.*

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza el papel de la historiografía de la arqueología en la construcción y evaluación de la teoría arqueológica. Aunque es común entre arqueólogos utilizar la historia de la arqueología de manera parcial para justificar determinadas interpretaciones sobre la teoría arqueológica, en este artículo considero que existen razones importantes para sostener el punto de vista contrario, i.e. que la teoría arqueológica tiene que fundamentarse sobre la historia de la arqueología. Este punto de vista está respaldado por un análisis detallado del valor que tienen las historias de la arqueología alternativas para demostrar que las ortodoxias dominantes en teoría arqueológica están históricamente constituidas y no son necesariamente 'naturales'.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Historia de la arqueología. Teoría arqueológica. Sociología de la ciencia.*

Introduction

While histories of archaeology necessarily consider the history of archaeological theory or 'thought' as the late Bruce Trigger (1987, 2006) would have it, the discourse of theoretical archaeology has a far less natural, and less productive, relationship with the history of archaeology. My case in this paper is that theoretical archaeology needs to be more strongly grounded in disciplinary history. Indeed I will sometimes throw caution to the winds and advance a still more contentious argument, being that theoretical archaeology needs to be more strongly grounded in *archaeology,* than it has been for much of the last thirty years. Along the way I will champion the value of induction as a vital element in theory building, advocate *theory building* as an important but rarely explored consequence of *theory borrowing*, dwell on the significant difference between analogies and homologies in inferential reasoning, and investigate why it is vital that archaeological data meaningfully constrain interpretation, in other words why archaeological data are theoretically and philosophically consequential. All of these issues (along with a host of others I can only merely nod towards) I take to be vital elements of a philosophy of archaeology, which is a rather bigger canvass to work on than I have space for here.

Several factors have shaped the content of this paper. Since the late 1980s, I have been arguing for the importance of the history of archaeology to theoretical archaeology (e.g. Murray 1987, 1990, 1996, 1999, 2002). 5 years ago, while being interviewed by Gavin Lucas for *Archaeological Dialogues*, I was reminded that this remains an abnormal position in theoretical archaeology, sparking reflection about whether it was my problem or everybody else's! (Lucas 2007). Another factor stems from the experience of teaching theoretical archaeology to students at the University of Peking, with my former colleague Liu Li. Our goal was to present a general survey, with plenty of worked examples, of the various strands that have made up archaeological theory since the mid-nineteenth century. The lectures required us to look closely at how theory is taught around the world. This meant trawling departmental websites and the various textbooks on theory that have sprung up over the years. Of course there is tremendous variety out there, from contexts where instructors seem to resolutely eschew having any opinions, to those where there is precious little else beyond a post-modern stroll down the hall of mirrors. Striking the happy medium where students are educated rather than indoctrinated, and where instructors really understand the essence of currently unfashionable approaches, as distinct from retail-

ing accounts that have now lurked in the literature for so long as to have gained almost mythological status, became rather more of a challenge than we had first thought.

A third factor has been working on two new book projects on the history of archaeology. The first, now completed, is a single-volume history *Milestones in Archaeology* (Murray 2007). *Milestones* seeks the core of the archaeological perspective over the past few hundred years. It is a book all about generalisations, and it takes a global view of what archaeology has been, is, and might yet become. It is not an exploration of local colour and might be, I suppose, considered deeply suspect by subscribers to postcolonial perspectives, but histories of archaeology can hardly be all things to everyone. The local colour side of things is more fully addressed in the other project. This is a *History of British Prehistoric Archaeology* (Murray *in prep.*) that will chart the evolution of Prehistoric archaeology in the British Isles since the AD thirteenth century.

The final factor has to do with problems with contemporary archaeological theory, both with the specifics of creating and applying it (in my case to archaeological contexts over the last two hundred and fifty years), as with the general discourse of theoretical archaeology – its abstraction, the circularity of its reasoning, the instability of its concepts and categories, and the psychology of its practice.

1. Some issues in contemporary theoretical archaeology

Over the last forty years prehistoric archaeologists have sought to promote or oppose a number of redefinitions of archaeological goals and approaches that have emphasized, variously, the liberating or constraining power of critical self-reflection. Indeed, while practitioners have continued to expand the storehouse of archaeological data, they have also been engaged in active investigation of archaeological goals and approaches, and in intensifying debate over what it is proper or relevant for practitioners to do. Archaeology is now much more than a method of data collection and analysis that is transformed into history (or exemplifications of material culture theory) by the acts of comparison and interpretation. Archaeology is also about the expansion of our understanding of human nature, both past and present.

As a result the 'culture' of archaeology, i.e. background knowledge, experience, and the givens of its practice, can no longer be considered to be widely shared among practitioners. How are we to respond to this? Do we return archaeology to its former

status of being primarily a method for retrieving historical information, or do we strive to realise its potential to create new knowledge about human beings? It seems likely that if we adopt this second course of action then we will need to create new 'cultural' frameworks, if the discipline is to retain cohesion through a common sense of problem and purpose that overarches potentially disparate uses of the past or different contexts of practice.

Obtaining a clear picture of just where dispute and differentiation lie in contemporary archaeology can prove to be difficult, if only because of a tendency to simplify or overdraw distinctions into 'schools' such as processual or post-processual archaeology, or to quarantine core elements (such as concepts and categories) from rigorous examination. Nonetheless it seems to me that if we are to move forward and attempt to resolve disputes, or indeed, if necessary, to dismember the discipline, then we need to identify contemporary debates about concepts, epistemology and interests, to analyse their rationales, and then to propose strategies that apply to both the ontological and epistemological realms of archaeology.

There is no shortage of points of fracture or dispute in contemporary theoretical archaeology. In the present context I want to focus on just a couple which I take to be fundamental. The first and most important of these is the relationship between present and past.

It has long been understood that the past is different to the present, and this perception of difference is one of the spurs to the writing of history as well as to the practice of archaeology. Yet it has also long been recognized that differences between present and past are tempered by the fact that the past is in some way or another antecedent to the present. Consequently it has been argued that we are the inheritors of a rich and diverse past that in some way or another has helped shape the nature of the present itself. On the other hand there has been a similar recognition that the instruments we use to perceive the present also structure our perception of the past. This has prompted us to consider the following question: is the past thus created by the present, or does it have the power to turn the tables on the present and force a reconsideration of those instruments of perception?

Added to this, since the AD sixteenth century and the beginning of continuous contact with the ethnographic 'other' outside the borders of metropolitan Europe and the classical world, it has been acknowledged that there are a variety of presents, each with histories potentially different to our own. But how different are those presents and pasts? Do they lie beyond the bounds of our understanding?

Is there information vital to the apprehension of our own deeper past locked away in these different presents and pasts?

Notwithstanding a wide variety of answers to these fundamental questions, we have also long been aware of the methodological assumption that the most effective way of making the prehistoric past intelligible, of saturating its phenomena with meaning and value, has been to write the history of the past in terms of the concepts, categories, and preoccupations of the present. In this sense an intelligible past is critically dependent on an intelligible present (see eg Stocking 1965).

Even bearing in mind the various meanings of the concept of uniformitarianism that argue for more than a purely conventional basis for interpreting the nature of the past in the terms of the present (see e.g. Bailey 1983; Hooykas 1963, 1970; Rudwick 1971; Simpson 1970), there have long been doubts about whether the concepts, categories and methods routinely deployed to understand the present can have their validity as bases for knowing the past assessed in anything other than circular terms. Significantly, despite the fact that observers have been in general agreement that such 'structures of knowing' the present are central elements of our structures of knowing the past, there has been considerable disagreement about which particular reading of the present is the most appropriate to the job at hand. The sources of divergent readings of the present span perspectival aspects such as disciplines or specific orientations within disciplines, and the interests of observers derived from a broad range of cultural or socio-political factors. Furthermore, these sources are in dynamic interaction, as disciplinary perspectives and the interests of practitioners thoroughly interpenetrate each other.

If there is more than one present, there must be more than one past. Given the fact that the theories that help to make the present intelligible also impregnate the observation predicates of our approaches to the past, and recognizing that constructed pasts are used to support the validity of approaches to the present, it is small wonder that the practitioners and consumers of history, anthropology, and archaeology have had doubts about whether the propriety of these alternative pasts and presents can be reliably assessed in ways that allow us to make rational and informed judgments about them. This sense of uncertainty is heightened by the recognition that images of the past can (and do) have considerable political impact in the present.

This brings me to the second point of fracture – the evaluation of theory and the significance of empirical data. Some observers have noted that many of these theories I have been speaking about

are underdeveloped, that is, that their orienting assumptions are too distant from the hurly-burly of empirical phenomena to be effectively assessed by those means and are, therefore, inherently insecure as bases for knowledge. Others have argued that the validity of these assumptions can be assessed on theoretical grounds, denying the view that only knowledge derived from the observation of empirical phenomena can have any worthwhile degree of security. Notwithstanding these differences of opinion, it is widely believed that the present is so powerful, both as an interpretative and explanatory standard (what is to be known and how knowing is to be achieved) as well as a source of models and inspiration, that issues of assessment are often best 'sorted out' in the present.

This latter view does not imply that all historians and archaeologists reject the notion that historical and archaeological data can, by virtue of their being empirical phenomena, critically constrain the application of perspectives from the present. However, it is also true that the past can never be known in precisely the same ways as the present. Despite Collingwood's advocacy of empathetic reconstruction, re-enacting the past is not the same as an experience of the present. Nowhere has that awareness been more powerful than in discussions of the nature and limitations of archaeological inference and analogy.

We have also realized that intelligibility and meaning have their price. Two important issues, here phrased as questions, arise as additional points of fracture:

> (1) Does the prehistoric past have phenomenal existence external to the concepts, categories, and methodologies we articulate to construct it? and

> (2) Is it possible for archaeologists to convincingly demonstrate that our reconstructions of the prehistoric past, or our determinations of the nature of human behaviour during prehistory, are more than conventional fictions in the sense that they are both the product and the support of our structures of knowing the present?

If the problematic nature of the past, its 'pastness' being in a sense also its 'presentness', has raised issues of evaluation and ethics, it has continued to be the centre of discussion and debate precisely because of its importance. The Western intellectual tradition (see Baumer 1977; Bronowski and Mazlish 1960) has continually urged the value of the past as an arena for the contemplation of the present for three fundamental reasons. First, by learning from experience contemporary humans may avoid repeating the same mistakes (the doctrine of history repeating itself). Second, a contemplation of the past can serve as a focus for judging the attitudes and accomplishments of the present (the acquisition of a critical standard). Third, the notion that the past and the present are linked as a historical process (understanding the history of human beings is also to understand human nature itself).

A discussion of the ways in which and the terms under which claims to knowledge of the prehistoric past are justified as being reliable and rational is a central concern of theoretical archaeology. Here too there are points of fracture with the bulk of discussion tending to focus on the technical aspects of explanatory logic (the context of justification), rather than a broader and deeper inquiry into the sources of models and approaches used by archaeologists (the context of discovery). My own approach flows from a view that both contexts are in dynamic interaction. I have consciously linked this discussion of the terms of justification to a consideration of present fears and disputes within contemporary archaeology, because I will argue that those fears primarily stem from a recognition among the community of practitioners that convincing justification is increasingly difficult to achieve in a world where there is no determinate scientific method with fixed rational criteria, and where the interests of the community of practitioners increasingly diverge. A more complete understanding of other points of fracture in theoretical archaeology relies on deploying the history of archaeology in our analyses.

2. How can the history of archaeology help?

Since the establishment of the Three Age System many archaeologists have accepted that scientific knowledge is the most rational and reliable (hence meaningful) form of knowledge, and that the scientific method (best seen in the practice of the natural sciences as codified by philosophers) is the true path to science itself. Perceptions of the nature of scientific knowledge have changed since then, and archaeologists, to a greater or lesser extent have attempted to keep pace with them. However, through all of this change and accommodation the tension between what archaeologists have desired to know of the past, and what they have considered it possible to know, has in part been constrained by their understandings of the nature of scientific knowledge itself. Even in the post-positivist era the dominant perceptions of the nature of scientific knowledge held by archaeologists have come from analyses of the experiences of other sciences or fields of inquiry, thereby perpetuating the view that scientific

knowledge is a universal kind of knowledge, existing independently of the histories of many sciences.

From the 1960s this began to change, the most important symptom of which has been the shift from logical to historical and sociological models of scientific epistemology. All participants in this critical project have been agreed that the assumptions that powered the logical empiricist justification of science have been seriously disturbed by the proposals of Quine (1951) and Duhem (1954). These assumptions are: naive realism, the possibility of a universal scientific language without presupposition, and the correspondence theory of truth. Embedded in these assumptions is the notion that the natural sciences are different in kind from the 'social' sciences. For convenience of exposition these assumptions can be restated as four separate areas of concern: the uniformity of nature, the distinction between fact and theory, the role of observation in science, and the assessment of knowledge claims. In all four areas, what previously seemed to be strong justifications for the assumptions mentioned above, were demonstrated to be the result of contingent circumstances related to the traditions of scientific practice. It is now accepted by the bulk of commentators that scientific representations are not simply determined by the nature of reality. Thus our understanding of the nature of scientific explanation has turned towards a historical and sociological analysis of the production of scientific knowledge. The primary impact of this reorientation has been a greater concern with the mechanics of conviction and plausibility in the assessment of knowledge claims. Historians and sociologists of science have sought the mechanics of legitimation and conviction in the institutional structures of sciences (government policies, scientific societies etc.), the background cognitive presuppositions of scientists that determine, to some extent, the plausibility of knowledge claims, and the influence of epistemologies prevailing at any time.

Archaeology has rarely figured in these studies primarily because historians of the discipline have tended to continue to conceptualize both science and archaeology in positivist terms. These positivist approaches have allowed scientists to see the history of science and the philosophy of science as two mutually exclusive fields of inquiry. Those same approaches have led to a similar pattern of relationship between the history and philosophy of archaeology.

All this philosophy talk has some powerful implications for archaeology and the psychology of its practice. For a start the history of archaeology becomes vital for defining archaeological epistemologies through an open investigation of how archaeologists have warranted knowledge claims. It also becomes vital for defining disciplinary metaphysics and the ways in which knowledge created by archaeologists about human beings is located on the cognitive map of the human sciences. These new investigations, hardly even begun, have the clear capacity to increase the number of points of fracture within the discipline, and between archaeology and its cognate disciplines. By stressing that archaeological reasoning has to more closely connect with the phenomenology of archaeological data, and that it is archaeologists who in the first instance have to hammer out fundamental ontological and epistemological issues in ways that make sense to them, these new approaches to the philosophy of archaeology might well profoundly affect the discourse of theoretical archaeology. Indeed the ways in which archaeologists create and use theory become even more important, and the discourse of theoretical archaeology itself becomes more consequential than finding ways of extending the hegemony of the present into the past.

Note that I have not said that they *must* or that they *will*. Let me explain why. It is perfectly possible for histories of archaeology to be written that tend to support the status quo, in that they might argue that there is no real crisis in contemporary archaeology, and that we can legitimately continue doing what we have always done, either because we can't think of anything else to do (which sits well with the cultural traditions of archaeology) or that to seriously consider alternatives would make it more difficult to connect knowledge created by archaeologists to that created in cognate disciplines. We should never underestimate the power of the inertia of tradition, but I think it is becoming clearer that the unity of archaeology cannot be sustained under our existing cultural regime, and that to stifle the exploration of alternatives based on different readings of the phenomenology of archaeological records, or indeed of disciplinary epistemology, would make the situation worse not better. Archaeology lost its innocence some time ago and there can be no going back. Going forward presents some interesting challenges and the history of archaeology can help here too.

3. Hidden histories: Alternative presents and futures

I came to the history of archaeology through undergraduate research in the history of anthropology, specifically the history of nineteenth century race theory. My first work focused on the monogenist/polygenist debate, as exemplified by the Scottish

anatomist Robert Knox and his English disciple, James Hunt. Understanding Knox's most famous work *The Races of Men* (1850) posed significant intellectual challenges, not because so much of what he was saying was repugnant, but because at its core it represented a coherent and marvellous rich intellectual tradition spanning anatomy, philosophy, biology, ethnology, archaeology, and of course philology, that was radically at odds with my own training as an anthropologist. Robert Knox's search for a scientific English anthropology that was both polygenist and anti-evolutionist provides an excellent example of how disciplines lose their histories, as dominant readings of disciplinary approach and purpose reinforce their influence through the socialising power of disciplinary history.

But a case could be made that although it was distinctly marginal to contemporary philosophical orthodoxies in the mid- nineteenth century, the transcendentalism of *naturphilosophie* played a significant role in the development of ethnology (particularly in the construction of the concept of culture). A close analysis of Knox's *The Races of Men* reveals something of the spirit that drove this alternative anthropology, and the conflict between these alternative anthropologies and archaeologies in mid-nineteenth century England also provides an opportunity to explore the ways in which the participants sought support from science and society, and the conditions under which that support was given. I continued to explore these ideas in doctoral research focused on an inquiry into the authorities archaeologists appeal to in order to justify their knowledge claims in contemporary archaeology. The existence of such hidden histories in anthropology persuaded me that such were likely to exist unnoticed in archaeology too, and that the naturalness of contemporary views of the archaeologist's project was illusory. In my view denaturalising such views could provide a basis on which to seriously address problems within contemporary archaeological theory. Historical research has helped broaden my approach to this problem from being narrowly epistemological to asking a more encompassing question: what makes archaeological accounts of the past plausible? A consideration of plausibility then led me to more detailed investigations of the links between archaeology, and the societies that sustain its practice. This, in turn, has greatly increased the significance of the history of archaeology as a primary source of information about related inquiries into disciplinary traditions and the 'culture' of archaeology.

What happened as a result of this research into the authority of archaeological knowledge claims (and related reflections on the nature of contempo-

rary theoretical archaeology) is much more than I have room discuss here, but they are more fully discussed in *Milestones in Archaeology* (Murray 2007). What I can do is to very briefly introduce the themes that have underwritten aspects of this inquiry under the very broad umbrella raised by George Stocking some thirty years ago. My account of the history of archaeology is directed towards the identification of enduring structures of archaeological knowledge, those structures that provide the criteria in terms of which knowledge claims are justified as being both rational and reliable, and that also provide practitioners with the ability to distinguish meaningful knowledge and the relevance of models, theories and approaches drawn from archaeology's cognate disciplines. Stocking's cogent summary of the 'ethos' of anthropology as we have come to know it has been a great help here:

> Another way of looking at the matter is to suggest that the general tradition we call retrospectively 'anthropological' embodies a number of antinomies logically inherent or historically embedded in the Western intellectual tradition: an ontological opposition between materialism and idealism, an epistemological opposition between empiricism and apriorism, a substantive opposition between the biological and the cultural, a methodological opposition between the nomothetic and the idiographic, an attitudinal opposition between the racialist and the egalitarian, an evaluational opposition between the progressivist and the primitivist - among others (1984: 4).

Archaeology, through its close connections to anthropology and history, has inherited these longstanding epistemological and ontological antinomies, which have at various times in the history of the discipline sanctioned historicist or universalist, materialist or idealist, empiricist or rationalist emphases within practice – precisely as they have done in our cognate disciplines. In this view by the end of the nineteenth century the connections and distinctions between archaeology and anthropology, and archaeology and history, had essentially been established. Archaeology, its conceptual field defined and secure within various traditions of anthropological and historical research, and its methodology developed to a stage where the discussion of temporal and cultural classifications could appeal to a widening store of empirical phenomena, was free to pursue problems of largely internal moment. Although in the United States the predominance of cultural rather than social anthropology, meant that the boundaries between archaeology and 'historical' anthropology were somewhat blurred, the same

emphasis on the writing of prehistory, and on technical matters of classification and data retrieval was still present.

Over the next century changes in fashion and orientation in anthropology and history directly affected the interests and approaches of archaeologists working under the aegis of either anthropological tradition, and practitioners could keep pace with such changes in meaning by changing the terms of their translations of material phenomena into first, archaeological and subsequently anthropological, data. These changes were readily accomplished for four reasons.

> a) First, archaeological data were considered to be impoverished testaments of human action in comparison with the richer data derived from socio-cultural anthropology. Meaning and the power to convince thus lay with the disciplines that 'managed' that latter data set.

> b) Second, archaeological methodologies of description and classification were substantially relative rather than absolute. Given the anthropological and historical construction of archaeological data, there were few empirical grounds upon which those data, of themselves, could seriously disturb the intentions of their interpreters.

> c) Third, despite the overt theorizing of the few, the bulk of archaeologists were largely implicit consumers of theory, devoting their energies to methodological and technical issues of data collection and classification.

> d) Fourth, given the essentially empiricist orientation of archaeologists in the years before the 1960s theoretical disputes were either settled on the authority of the archaeologists involved, rarely explicitly discussed because they were considered to be speculative and lacking the possibility of an archaeological contribution to their solution, or were simply set aside for some future time when the data were in. Thus, again with notable exceptions, few archaeologists recognized that extant conceptual and epistemological relativisms within the source areas of archaeological theory could act as spurs to the development of such theory.

I have previously described the long and intense association between archaeology and anthropology, and between archaeology and history as being one of enrolment and symbiosis, beginning in the nineteenth century when all three disciplines began to take on their modern forms, and concluding around the end of that century (see e.g. Murray 1987). This association, although differing in particulars over the course of the twentieth century, continues to provide substantial aspects of the archaeological agenda and by far the most important body of theory used by archaeologists in their day-to-day practice.

But it is also the case that the process of translating archaeological data into anthropological or historical information (or indeed of applying the perspectives of those disciplines to archaeological data) did not (and does not) always go smoothly, and archaeologists might have had to take seriously the idea that such simple translations might be problematic. But has this really affected the psychology of archaeological research – for example by increasing scepticism about the value of existing approaches?

I have sought to understand whether the plausibility of archaeological knowledge claims has been gauged primarily in terms of determinate rules of scientific method, or whether the real determinants of plausibility were 'cognitive' or 'cultural'. It was something of a surprise to find that even at the high point of empiricism in the mid-nineteenth century where the methodological rhetoric held that archaeology contributed to the development of an approach to understanding human prehistory that explicitly shunned myth and the *a priori* in favour of the objectivity of science, that the performance of practitioners fell way short of the mark (see eg. Murray 1990). This difference between rhetoric and performance (especially as it applies to claims for the scientific or indeed the unscientific status of archaeology) continues to this day and remains mostly unremarked. The history of archaeology supports the view that practitioners rarely explore the consequences of the very significant disconnects between the theories they deploy and the structural properties of the data they subject to analysis.

Let's take this a bit further. While histories of archaeology should be sensitive to histories of other disciplines such as anthropology and history, historians of those disciplines should also not ignore what is happening in archaeology. Many prehistoric archaeologists in the English-speaking world still adhere to the tenets of anthropological archaeology and the proposition that archaeology is a subset of anthropology, particularly in terms of the theories it deploys. Yet in recent times the naturalness of this relationship has been questioned as practitioners begin to comprehend that the archaeological record poses significant problems and issues that have never been considered part of anthropology or historiography. Thus archaeologists might yet face the prospect that other archaeologies are possible and possibly desirable, and new histories

that might conceivably reassess the history of relations with anthropology and history will need to be written.

Many of these problems stem from changing perceptions about the phenomenology of archaeological data, or archaeological records if you will. These new perceptions stress that archaeological records are much more complex than the simplistic fossil layer-cake approach that has sustained archaeology for so long. Flowing from Schiffer's (1987) important work on formation processes (particularly the notion of records as palimpsests) and Binford's discussion of the 'Pompeii Premise' (1981), time perspectivism as first proposed by Bailey (1983), is now much more focused on understanding the importance of the structural properties of archaeological records, and the implications these have for the building and evaluation of archaeological theories. Much attention has been focused on the problems encountered in operationalising social theories, particularly those sourced to social/cultural anthropology, and the technical and theoretical challenges practitioners face in adapting those theories to archaeological contexts. But I think that it would be fair comment that no current body of archaeological theory (or indeed source of inspiration for theory), not even evolutionary theory, is immune from such phenomenological (and ultimately ontological) considerations. The history of archaeology (particularly discussions about the inertia of tradition) helps explain why evidence of archaeologists adapting those theories is very thin on the ground, with practitioners either ignoring or explaining away the many points where things don't fit. The great cognitive plausibility of existing approaches makes this possible. Sometimes this is explicit, but most often it's implicit, a product of the last one hundred and fifty years of disciplinary history that now seems natural and completely unremarkable.

The hierarchy is straightforward. Theories (or more correctly sets of *a priori* assumptions) have such strong cognitive plausibility as a means of understanding the present and linking archaeological knowledge with other types of knowledge about human beings, that it makes methodological shortcomings seem pretty inconsequential. Meaning has been established in conventional terms – who cares if it lacks methodological virtue, or indeed if it is categorically at odds with the structural properties of the data under review? Hence not much of a focus on adapting or 'working through' the theories we have to hand, even thought these practical measures of 'hammering out' difficulties provide a viable and creative basis of theory building. Instead archaeological theories most often are borrowed from outside and remain as cognitively plausible abstractions that add little to the sum total of knowledge about the past or the present, beyond the warm glow we get from making things intelligible. Let me stress that I am not arguing that all archaeological theory (to be viable) has to be generated out of archaeological phenomena (although I am by no means opposed to theory building via induction). Of course we have to start somewhere and it is simply silly to postulate otherwise. But there is more to it than this.

We also need to understand that the current dominance of social theory derived from those disciplines exploring the contemporary world, is not natural. It is a product of history. The best place to start exploring this is the nineteenth century, when anthropology and archaeology came into being. Anthropology was originally conceived of as having a four-field structure comprising prehistoric archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology and social/cultural anthropology. However in practice social/cultural anthropology has come to dominate the other three, an outcome at odds with its original conception, which was to produce a higher order integration where anthropological theory would be the product of all these different disciplines. This old idea of anthropology did not privilege any one of those bodies of work theoretically, and you can see it in action if you look in the records of the Royal Anthropological Institute for example, for the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. Its first president was Sir John Lubbock, its second president was his son-in-law General Augustus Pitt-Rivers. Throughout that period their presidential addresses to the institute all approach anthropology as a higher order integration of perspectives drawn from the sub-fields. However, by the end of the nineteenth century the presidential addresses are all about the individual interests of the presidents, and which particular anthropological group they are representing.

The possibility of alternative approaches to those that currently dominate our discipline makes it at least possible that archaeological theories can be built that do not violate the structural properties of archaeological phenomena, or suppress the ways in which archaeological data can be translated into information about human action. Indeed it is hard to think that archaeology can make a lasting contribution to anthropological theory *without* doing this. But I think its fair to say that our colleagues in social cultural anthropology will not see things the same way, given that it is very likely that decentering the analysis of contemporary human action might well mean a transformation of anthropological theory generally. On that basis it is also likely

that archaeologists are going to have to do this for themselves against significant opposition from both inside and outside the discipline. Can the history of archaeology help us move forward?

4. Theory-building: a way to effect change and to create community?

I think that the history of archaeology can foster change in several ways. For example it can demonstrate that archaeology is a product of its history and allow us to follow the implications this has for the psychology of research in our discipline. It can allow us to probe deeper into disciplinary epistemology and metaphysics to more clearly understand the mechanics of plausibility and the status of theoretical knowledge in archaeology. It can also support a more open discussion of the relationships between archaeology and other cognate disciplines. But how to put these possibilities into practice?

For a start we can make archaeological data more consequential. By paying attention to the structural properties of archaeological phenomena, and by answering basic questions about them such as: 'what are the observable (hence analysable) units of time?' archaeologists can then take the theory or theories that allowed them to ask the questions, design the methodologies and collect the data, and develop them (through a process of recursive reasoning), so that they more closely connect with the empirical information we try to make sense of. This is much more than building Middle Range theories, which are more often than not methodological strategies. Recursive reasoning can (and should) build theories at all levels, but it does require practitioners to be properly sceptical about the validity of the theoretical instruments they are using, rather than to preserve them intact, as seems to be the current psychology of research. In this account current theories act as heuristic devices, frameworks of inference or analogy, as points of growth rather than the endpoints of ratiocination. To put it bluntly we need to move beyond the interestingly ambiguous, the highly suggestive, the superficially meaningful and the approaches that are conservative of existing ideas, and audit the effectiveness of contemporary theory so that we can work out what to do next.

Another practical step is to recognise that there is no magic body of theory lurking as yet undiscovered in the social theory shelves of the library that can be applied directly to archaeological contexts, and that will make all the pain go away. That is not to say that the inspiration for theory might be there – or anywhere else. Indeed a changed psychology of research would indicate that higher level anthro-

pological theory needs a significant archaeological contribution, even though it need not necessarily be built only by archaeologists. It is also interesting to consider that while we spend much of our time exploring the problems of adapting social theory to archaeological phenomena (usually seeking to deal with short-term issues), we are still largely bereft of theories that operate at the mid and long terms, the very things that archaeologists are supposed to have a mortgage on.

This absence raises the questions of what those theories might be like, and whether archaeologists should be the ones to build them. I can't offer any sensible answers here, but it is worth making a final observation. The history of archaeology demonstrates the value of archaeologists seeking inspiration and theoretical insights from wherever they might. The *source* of theories is not the issue here (although I believe as time passes and more archaeological theories are built that archaeology might become a more popular source). The issue turns on what archaeologists *do* with the theories or perspectives they deploy. Given the distinctiveness of archaeological records as records of human action I think that these imported theories have to change and be adapted. I also think that those new archaeological theories should then be reapplied to their source areas. The effects of that might be extremely interesting!

5. A few concluding remarks

I began this discussion by stressing the importance of theory *building* as distinct from theory *borrowing*. It seems to me that a vital part of this process is critical self-reflection about the 'taken-for-granteds' of archaeological approaches and practices, the currently privileged, unexamined assumptions which power much of archaeological practice and link archaeological knowledge with other types of knowledge about human beings. One important site of critical self-reflection has to do with antinomies that lie at the root of presently divergent views about the nature and meaning of archaeological data, in fact about the nature and meaning of archaeology as a discipline. Critical self-reflection about these antinomies carries clear implications for the building of archaeological theory at all levels. The history of archaeology has a vital role to play in this process of reflection and of re-imagining the nature and purpose of archaeology.

In this paper I have been careful not to argue that disputes among archaeologists would be resolved by proposing a single view of the goals of archaeology or the conditions of its practice. I have also de-

liberately avoided a claim that the presence of relativisms within the conceptual and epistemological realms of the discipline would be eradicated by applying determinate rules of the scientific method, or some notion of universal rationality. This is the true value of a historical perspective. What I have argued for is that an investigation of the terms under which archaeological knowledge claims are produced and justified by the disputant parties (throughout the history of our discipline) will materially aid our efforts to facilitate communication between them, and assist in the process of theory building, so that rival positions could be clear enough to allow informed judgments to be made by practitioners about their strengths and weaknesses.

For me the core lies in the quite recent perception that archaeological records comprise special kinds of data about human action, just how special we are still to find out. A reassessment of the discipline that recognizes this should also stress the importance of those data as the spur for a concomitant reassessment of social and cultural theory - the very terms within which we seek knowledge of human nature. The possibilities are there and the rewards are likely to be great. We should proceed towards such a reassessment with a sense of anticipation rather than of dread. Let me quote Richard Bernstein in conclusion:

> When individuals sense they are living through a period of crisis, when foundations seem to be cracking and orthodoxies breaking up, then a public space is created in which basic questions about the human condition can be raised anew (1976: xiii).

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