

ON THE LACK OF THE NEW IN ARCHAEOLOGY OR MICROARCHAEOLOGY AND GRAND-THEORY

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How can we reach new or previously unknown knowledge in archaeology? It should be fairly evident that this would imply a complex procedure, involving “empirics”, “methods” and “theory”. Lucas addresses this issue in his interesting article on the “mobility of theory”. Theory is always present in any archaeological argument, and implicitly, at least, in any archaeological practice. This assertion, which I find entirely correct, is one of the important arguments in Lucas’s article. I find this assertion not only correct, but also highly relevant and important. It is far too common to find archaeologists stating that they use no theory. I would argue that archaeologists making such statements actually are more theory-dependent than other archaeologists. Thinking you work without theory actually implies using some old, traditional theory without any kind of reflection or consideration. Such an archaeologist will produce a mechanical quasi-repetition of a theory of which he or she is not consciously aware, and in many cases, a theory with wide-ranging effects at different levels (even *outside* the field of archaeology in certain cases).

At times there are – not seldom, I am afraid – texts which start with a short “theoretical” discussion, which has no link whatsoever to the rest of the text, which simply follows a given traditional procedure. A

case in point is a number of texts from Eastern Europe from the 1950s, which open with a short theory chapter with references to Marx and often to a ruling political party. The rest is just a conventional archaeological work, based largely on the work of the German archaeologist Kossinna, albeit with certain particularities. There is almost no link whatsoever between the two sections, but both are highly and fairly directly linked to politics.

Theory is an abstract level of argument, which is not only necessary for the systematic construction of knowledge and argument, but which also helps in communicating between different fields of knowledge. There is no possibility for the making of a general uniform theory integrating all knowledge. But there are fields of similar theory, and fields of theoretical debate. Social Theory, a *particular* kind of theory (in several respects different from theory in e.g. physics), is a field of debate, I would argue, in which a wide range of different fields of knowledge contribute. There is a certain agreement on topics to be addressed, but highly varied ways of addressing them. I do not believe simplistic arguments like that of concept-metaphor (Moore) produce a good characterization of social theory today. Further, concept-metaphor is, I would say, dangerously close to the Weberian ideal-type. There are, and must be, different levels and spheres of theorizing, but since theory is largely about demarcations and fissures, the way a particular theoretical framework is phrased, so to say, must remain open. Thus, I am not entirely convinced that “Grand-Theories” are outdated or – more importantly – still not used extensively, and I do not believe they necessarily stand in direct contradiction to other levels of theory.

MICROARCHAEOLOGY, STUFF AND THEORY

When Fredrik Fahlander and I discussed Microarchaeology (2002a, 2002b and later studies), we actually insisted on the importance of closely addressing the archaeological “stuff”, looking at various archaeological locales, comparing and contrasting the evidence. Yet this was not an end in itself, but rather a tool for making arguments at various levels, both at a “particular” level and at more general levels. We saw a high potential in the archaeological stuff,¹ the material we elaborate our data on, which was not exploited sufficiently. Rather, archaeologists often looked at variability merely as a problem, rather than a basic productive element

1 I use this word in a similar way to Lucas. To me it is a concept, used by several scholars, notably in Germany, e.g. by Karl Marx (Stoffe).

in an archaeological analysis of a socio-economic setting. Further, we explicitly insisted on the relevance and importance of theory at every level of archaeological research. One of the major contributions of theory to us was to make it possible to observe new dimensions in the stuff. Our main argument was, actually, to insist on making contributions to the general discussions on humans, environment and society from an archaeological perspective; *an archaeology working in-depth into the "stuff", using various tools, including advanced theory, which it largely borrows, but also an archaeology which through its elaborations contributes productively to the debate in social theory, thus producing theory*. I am in some disagreement with Lucas in his concluding remarks, where archaeology seems to be given a highly autonomous life; I do not believe it is productive to "bracket" away archaeology. I rather believe the link to a general debate to be crucial and vital for archaeology, in order to avoid isolation, but also for improving the quality of archaeology.

To insist on the importance of the theoretical dimension of archaeology is not to state that other dimensions are irrelevant or non-existent. Rather, microarchaeology insisted of the importance of a direct engagement with the physical remains, and in a sense insisted on the importance of different kinds of fieldwork or laboratory studies, in which the evidence is found/produced. For such engagement, practical, technical and methodological elements are of major importance, and these elements cannot be *reduced* to theory. But the theoretical dimension is always present in all these aspects of fieldwork or laboratory analysis. I would, further, add to this argument the necessity of a *general theoretical dimension* for obtaining archaeological information. As discussed in the microarchaeological perspective, *controlled fictions* are necessary in the archaeological process. Archaeological material does not give information immediately; it does not "speak" directly to us. In other words, the stuff we address is not straightforward or easy to handle. The archaeological encounter with evidence produces data, which are complex constructions. Falsification, in the sense of Popper's deductionism can be a help in demonstrating certain impossible arguments, but will never be a sufficient tool in archaeological analysis. There are always several "hypotheses" which cannot be falsified. Further, the construction of data is outside the scope of traditional deduction. Binford, discussed by Lucas, started off as a die-hard deductionist and ended up an inductivist. Evidently, as discussed frequently, also in archaeology, these traditional epistemological models are not sufficient. In the end there is mainly a question of constructing good, logically consistent, fairly complex arguments with external referents. It is not possible to go into details on this process, but I do not believe general symmetry or other

similar models are a solution in this context; they are simplistic models, and impossible to apply rigorously.

When it comes to Binford, I still find many of his engagements with archaeological stuff highly productive and interesting. Beyond the problem of his traditional epistemology, however, it must also be recalled that he sought generally applicable relations between human action and the archaeological evidence, which I still find to be an impossible dream, which ultimately presupposes a very general universal “Grand Theory” defining a strictly limited set of possible human forms of action. In Binford’s scheme, there is also the idea of the mirror. The archaeological evidence is supposed to reflect directly abstract social forms, a kind of general representation, and general symmetry. Hodder’s famous critical discussion on such an approach is still relevant, though I would not choose the same alternative approach as suggested in *Symbols in Action* (1982).

The concept of materiality, which had a sort of interesting “liberating” effect on archaeology, has not solved our problems, and there are several largely different ways to address the concept. In recent discussions in social theory, however, there is a renewed interest in the concept of time. The Faculty of Art at the University of Gothenburg has recently launched a conference (Parse), in which they suggested a temporal turn, which I find an interesting suggestion, if time is considered in an open way, in which there are several dimensions to time. Derrida’s arguments on time-space relations (e.g. 1967; cf. Cornell, Rosén & Öbrink 2014) might well have relevance here, not least to archaeology.

COHERENCE AND THE ROLE OF GRAND THEORY

At this point, I believe it is fundamental to add an important point to the argument, fairly traditional, some will say, but I still insist on its importance. It is the question of theoretical coherence. Lucas touches on this point, addressing commensurability, and in a (negative) sense it is a key point in his argument, since he tries to solve it through the concept of hybridity (and I will come back to that), but still it remains a question which is never directly addressed. I will briefly try to explain what coherence is about, and why it is important.

First it is important to stress, and I think Lucas has a point here, that there are several, explicit or implicit, fairly different theoretical elements in any complex archaeological argument. Most archaeological arguments involve statements based on fieldwork and/or laboratory analysis, and involve, thus, already at this stage, a wide range of implicit theoretic-

cal positions. Using a particular measurement technique involves several implicit theoretical positions, some of them taken from mathematics. Using stratigraphy similarly implies theoretical arguments, which are seldom made explicit. If there is in archaeology a certain tendency to paradigms (complex shared positions) it appears above all in this sphere, even if there is homogeneity also in other spheres. I would not argue that this unanimity about measurement and stratigraphy in general is bad practice. It is possibly even a positive element. But this theoretical element should be made more explicit, at least in the discipline at large.

Second, it is necessary to return to the discussion on Grand Theory. I would perhaps dare to state that it is impossible to advance in science or humanities without Grand Theory (cf. Žižek 2013). But we must also reflect about what this is. Lucas mentions three main examples of Grand Theory, namely Comte, Marx and Spencer, and also hints at the importance of Evolutionism, Structuralism and Darwinism. Several other perspectives could be mentioned. It will immediately be evident that such examples will enumerate theoretical constructions of varied character and scope. I would like to stress the importance of Neo-Classical Economic Theory, which has influenced an enormous amount of archaeology, and still does, but also the *Kulturkreislehre*, which still has a strong influence on archaeology, not least in Europe. Phenomenology could also be mentioned, a perspective used in archaeology at least since the 1920s. Weberianism is a major theoretical influence on contemporary archaeology, above all in Anglo-Saxon traditions. Without any more detailed analysis, it is interesting to note that all Lucas's references are in English, and most of them produced within the Anglo-Saxon intellectual sphere. Our geographical and intellectual position still has a strong effect on our theoretical choices. I am myself no exception, although I try to integrate arguments from different environments.

An important aspect of grand theories is that they seldom produce only one given result. Looking at productions related to Neo-Classical Economic Theory, Darwinism, Weberianism or Marxism, we see a rampant variability in the production *within* each theoretical framework. This is not to say that a grand theory has no influence on the way we go about doing archaeology (or science or humanities in general), but that the effects are somewhat more subtle than certain textbooks make us believe. All these approaches require a set of procedures which are not clearly defined, which allows for the production of different results.

The presence of traditional "Grand Theories" is strong in contemporary archaeology. Even in texts produced by scholars from different and supposedly "new" perspectives the traditional archaeological Grand Theories still play an important role. To quote just one example, Elman

Service's evolutionary discussion on the emergence of state, which relies heavily on Weberian notions of Political Authority and the Ideal-Type concept (e.g. Chiefdom), turns out to be of paramount importance to both Stephen Shennan (2002, supposedly Darwinian) and Manuel De Landa (2002) in his so-called Assemblage theory. Similar examples can also be found in the Posthuman camp, and among adherents of Object Oriented Ontology.

While, as I mentioned above, Grand Theory can produce varied results, this is not, I am afraid, common in archaeology. Rather than portraying the contemporary archaeological debate as manifold and multi-vocal, I would say that it is dominated by a *lack* of newness, and relatively homogeneous. There are at the same time superficial concepts related to recent trends of fashion, often established outside archaeology at general socio-economic and political levels. Archaeology is still dominated by a *limited* number of Grand Theories, used in rather *similar ways*. There is a strong uniformity rather than a wide range of positions. The metaphor of a supermarket of theories, launched by Lucas, could thus be taken a step further; almost *all* the available goods are related to a particular socio-economic, discursive and even rhetorical context. Making new knowledge requires going beyond the given "supermarket" in your vicinity, and even venturing to find new products elsewhere.² However, the joining of elements relates to one of the most important parts of constructing new knowledge: the question of commensurability. It seems my position differs from Lucas's on this point. In my vocabulary eclectic stands for the construction of a combination of theories which cannot work. Hybridity is in many ways a difficult concept, and is in my opinion of little value. Recently, Silliman (2015) has noted the sterility of the concept (and, by the way, sterility is often an implication of hybridity when applied in biology).

To establish a new idea or position is difficult and it seldom happens. We cannot require all archaeologists to reach truly new results. But we can demand that archaeology as a discipline has as a major and important goal to reach new and different perspectives on the past and the present, which may help us to think differently about the future. Making archaeology requires collaboration, the involvement of special knowledge in various fields, and it involves particular kinds of practice, but also individual theoretical thinking. It must be about quality and originality, and it must be given time. Like the Slow Food movement, we need Slow Science, Slow Humanities, Slow Archaeology.

2 Taking a metaphor a step further is dangerous, however, and these phrases must be taken primarily as a joke.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

My point, of course, is that in order to establish new knowledge one important component is the theoretical dimension. The sources of new thinking are varied. An advanced archaeological analysis, including a study of stuff and theoretical elements, can, in certain cases, produce new theory, as a result of the general archaeological process. The in-depth engagement with the stuff is certainly of the utmost importance. But theory is likewise of key importance. Working on theory makes us aware of the dominance and limitations of certain perspectives, and helps us to argue differently. The capacity to discover new dimensions in the “empirics” in part depends on theory (borrowed or new). In order to question previously dominating perspectives it is necessary to see these dominating perspectives and to be able to suggest (or rather hint at) alternatives which could fundamentally alter “present” thinking. In order to do this we must see relations between elements of theory and how they interrelate and produce effects. Thus, the question of coherence is of greatest importance. A “new” theoretical block includes several “borrowed” elements and certain new elements, but it is largely in their interrelation a “newness” is established. Each archaeologist must be responsible for the coherence of his or her argument – while full coherence will never be achieved, we must do as good as we can. The question of coherence is, of course, not only related to internal theoretical coherency, but also in the relation to “empirics”.

Learning abstraction and theory is difficult. It is at least as difficult as learning to master new techniques or administrative procedures. But theoretical work is seldom recognized in time-sheets for archaeological projects, rather “hidden” below labels such as “writing”. Writing is fundamental in theory making, but theory making is not only a mechanical process of typing.

The choices of theoretical frameworks are never “innocent”. They always carry a number of effects on our archaeological practice and its effects. For my part I am heavily influenced by scholars like Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Enrique Dussel, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Slavoj Žižek. Reading Marx’s *Capital* closely, for example, makes us aware of a scholar rejecting the idea of a world in which only one given form of social and economic organization exists (as is claimed by several neo-classical economic theorists). Marx even suggests that there could be several socio-economic spheres operating simultaneously in the same society (which he called modes of production), with different processes and logics. And Marx even insists that there are other factors, beyond

these basic socio-economic contexts, which may play an important role. Such a perspective allows for looking at the archaeological material in new ways, and the end result of an application of such a “Grand Theory” is not given prior to our study.

Common to all these scholars is a critical stance, and an effort at finding or reaching the hitherto “unknown” or “new” in one way or the other (e.g. de Beauvoir 1949a, 1949b; Spivak 1999; Derrida 2000; cf. Cornell 2007, 2015 for small efforts in such a direction). A search of this kind involves a lot of “borrowing”, often in unexpected ways, but it also involves “newness” and will – if successful – put us in a situation in which we are bewildered and confused. Archaeology should not always be about the confirmation of established ideas, but as much about finding out new, previously unknown aspects of humans, the socio-economic and the environment.

CONSEQUENCES OF A-THEORETICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

As noted briefly by Lucas, there are not only “internal” factors to archaeology. It is a discipline very much present in society in various ways and often used as a major instrument in political rhetoric. Our theoretical choices have effects. Even if it is impossible to be fully be aware of all potential uses of our arguments, we still have the obligation of trying to have some sort of idea about it. Lacking an explicit theoretical and critical approach, and even thinking that we operate without theory, may well be the archaeology most exposed and used for particular political purposes. Claiming to have no theory is, as mentioned above, not the same as operating without theory, but rather implies an uncritical use of old traditions, generally a repetition of established knowledge, and often associated with a lack of interest in any wider variability of the archaeological evidence.

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