

KNOCKING AT FUTURE'S DOOR

Encouraging a Critique of Hegemonic Orders

Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh

Twenty-three years ago, Bjørnar Olsen (1989:18–21), together with a handful of colleagues, commented on Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley's vision of "Archaeology into the 1990s" (Shanks & Tilley 1989:1–12, 42–54), a view that had its background in their books *Re-constructing Archaeology* and *Social Theory and Archaeology*. The set-up was slightly more limited than the broader scope of the current text. However, a reminder of the earlier debate may be of some interest, as Olsen and the other debaters of 1989 were placed in the centre of the vibrant research context that Olsen in his vivid and personal style captures in "After Interpretation: Remembering Archaeology".

Jointly, the two debates construe the formation of a research landscape, postprocessual archaeology – it may be worth noting that Ian Hodder (1989:15–18), who is one of the leading figures that Olsen relates to in the current text, was one of the scholars who was asked to treat and maybe counter Shanks and Tilley's red and blue books. Olsen's present text makes it clear that these two books of the 1980s certainly were important contributions, but that they were surpassed by maybe even more influential works from a general theoretical point of view. Nevertheless, the positive attitude towards the postprocessual archaeology that marked Olsen's own formative years, remains in 2012. It is inevitable, though, that even postprocessual archaeology changes and takes on other shapes over time. Olsen predicts four desirable trends for the future: *a new geography, a turn to things themselves, a farewell to*

interpretation and an attempt to make the archaeological disciplinary characteristics explicit by linking past to present, a trend to acknowledge *archaeology as archaeology*.

Olsen's text – the introductory sketches of the past fifty years of theoretical debate, the section with the four prospects for archaeological thought, and the conclusion – possesses many clear and well expressed arguments. Personally I appreciate the introductory questioning of the hegemonic position of theory in relation to practice, a view that can be traced back to a dualistic thinking of modernity, “where theory is the head and practice is the obedient acting body”. Likewise I agree on the summons to turn to and affirm the material aspects of things, something that ought to be particularly well suited to archaeology. Another important appeal is to elaborate the understanding of specific archaeological characteristics, such as field situations, with their close relations between the researcher as a subject, the growing and forming field material, the surrounding landscape with its flora, fauna and the elements of nature, and the local community. Another feature is the discipline's incipient attempts to explore the past as memory, or perhaps more rightly as memory work instead of just understanding the past as history.

However, Olsen's interesting and thought-provoking text lacks one perspective that was present in the comments of 1989. In the older text Olsen refers to Edward Said's critique of certain anthropological perspective from without and from above, and not reflecting on the social conditions of the production of knowledge. In Olsen's own words: “I think that a programme for the 1990s should include also [...] critical discussions of our own voices and objectives: why and for whom do we write?” (Olsen 1989:20–21). However, in the prospects for the future that Olsen now sketches, a discussion of the power position of the discipline and the researching subject is avoided, in that he fails to ask who formulates the questions and why they are asked. Who has an influence on research and what are the purposes of the production of knowledge? What does the financial framework look like?

This deficiency might have been avoided if Olsen had included yet another text in his exposé of works published in years ending with the number two or seven, namely Margaret W. Conkey and Joan Gero's article “Programme to Practice: Gender and Feminism in Archaeology” (1997). One of the issues explored in Conkey and Gero's text concerns the situated production of knowledge; what are the research questions, how are they formulated, what does the research practice look like, how and by whom is the research financed, and who are the subjects that conduct the research? An attendant question is, how do such factors affect the result of the research (see also Tuhiwai Smith 1999)? Such ques-

tions, which concern situated knowledge, are to some extent already observed in the archaeological research process – Olsen's introductory section where he recalls his own archaeological scholarly journey is an obvious example of highlighting the situated researching subject. It is less common, though, to follow this perspective further, by acknowledging and making explicit that the situated subjects, as individuals or as groups, are placed in specific positions in various orders of power. Yet another step further in such a process of argumentation is to clarify how such positions intersect with other positions on various axes of power, affecting the knowledge-producing subject. Still such a quest was opened, albeit modestly, in the two decades old discussion, for example in the section where Olsen reflects on the importance of the academic research geography in relation to the spread of research achievements (Olsen 1989:21). By clarifying the knowledge-producing subject's various positions in different orders of power, a power perspective would be easier to include in research that would promote an emancipating knowledge production.

Discussions which include a power perspective could be carried on in many contexts, but such a theme might be more significant in some connections than in others. One such area is the one that Olsen labels *a new geography*. Here attention is focused on break-ups; metaphorically, away from a few hegemonic disciplinary schools and in particular some which have their origin in the English-speaking scholarly world, and literally from predominant academic core areas towards smaller research milieus, forming nodes linked up in networks over the globe. This creates pluralism and different “archaeologies”, making a centre/periphery perspective irrelevant.

Such a process is facilitated by the digital development and by new, less prestigious scientific meeting places like the EAA and WAC. However, Olsen characterizes such a process as an *internationalization* of archaeology. This term rather implies cooperation which is connected to the nation and the state. It might be more suitable for discussions of, for example, heritage organizations connected to UNESCO treaties and the like, which are also important and necessary for archaeology. I have the feeling, though, that the academic geographical reorganization which Olsen describes and sees as a desirable scenario for the future should rather be understood in terms of *transnational* archaeological practices. This implies flexible and action-oriented joint practices which can be understood by analogy with transnational feminism, acknowledging local differences and allowing various articulations within overriding cooperation projects to be performed in a dialogical manner (Mohanty 2003). Archaeology in particular seems to be appropriate for

transnational projects, as the kind of remains that now constitute the archaeological record often have local settings that cross geographical-national hegemonies and therefore evoke border-crossing networking. Transnational practices can also be highly relevant in our time and during decades to come, showing increasing migration mobility. At least in Sweden such events might feed a xenophobia that in some ways is linked to nationalistic notions of the past, legitimating such ideas with the archaeological record. In this context, the emancipating practices that signify transnational movements could be of importance.

In his text Olsen emphasizes the distinct characteristics of material phenomena. I agree that today's intellectual "material turn to thing theory" constitutes what could be "an *archaeological moment*", and that archaeology in this respect could give considerable contributions to the intellectual scene. However, Olsen seems to be critical of notions of the agency of material things, ideas that have been and still are important issues in the archaeological debate. Olsen questions the eagerness to ascribe material things an "anthropomorphized role" such as *actors* or *delegates*. Concerning the active position of material phenomena, Olsen seems to be somewhat inconsistent, as he also admits. In the passage that advocates an archaeology that liberates itself from the norm of history's narrative sequences, it is the material things that are connected to these active and emancipating verbs; they are unruly, behave in banal ways, refuse, object, conspire and defy. This can hardly be understood as anything but an object-related agency, but according to Olsen, this is only in respect of the things' "very own positivistic manner". While pleading for an archaeological understanding and "repatriation" of the material's "otherness" – with a romantic formulation described as "not tamed or concealed", this approach may mystify the material phenomena. But to mystify such agential dynamics of which material things may be part, is too obscuring a perspective from my point of view. Also concerning object-related agency, feminist research can contribute and demonstrate social dynamics where material phenomena play a vital role, for example about ethic materiality (Alaimo & Hekman 2008:7–8, Arwill-Nordbladh in press) or agential realism (Barad 2003). And through this "material turn" archaeologists too can make important contributions to feminist scholarship (Spencer-Wood in press).

In Olsen's opinion, the archaeologists' approach to understanding things merely as things would incite a trend that implies a *farewell to (over)interpretation*. Here I have some difficulties following Olsen's argumentation. As I understand the text, Olsen thinks that this approach would encourage an understanding of things as a "source of their own signification. That a boat, for example, is mostly significant for what it

is – that is, being a boat”. According to Olsen, such a “thingly” significant would not be meaningful in interpretations connected to cultural or symbolic issues (something on which I can't agree, but leave aside in this discussion). Instead they would be relevant for “ordinary, everyday, and real”, phenomenological perceptions. Focusing on this latter issue, in my opinion, phenomenological perceptions would not only invite everyday sensations, but encourage several more dimensions of interpretation. On one hand, the acting subject would interpret his or her perceptions based on his/her cultural, social, and gendered experiences, to mention just a few of all possible situated positions – any pre-discursive perception is hardly likely. Thus a situated interpretation also appears in everyday phenomenological perceptions. Moreover, the perception puts the acting subject on a specific spot in an order of power connected to body normativity and bodily variations related to abilities and disabilities. In this manner we must include the physically and corporally situated subject in discussions of phenomenological perceptions (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012a). A phenomenological perspective, which is highly relevant when the material values of things are recognized, does not reduce the dimension of interpretation, but guides the interpretations to various levels. And for such discussions of phenomenological perceptions that include notions of a hegemonic body normativity, a perspective that include power issues is self-evident.

Here and there Olsen's text is somewhat contradictory, but for that reason it is also challenging in an interesting way. At the same time as it lacks an attempt to shed light on the production of knowledge in relation to the situated researcher, in spite of the presentation of his own disciplinary background, Olsen evokes the emancipating force of archaeology's distinctive mark *par excellence*, things. It seems as if the things are inciting to their own liberation, a liberation that is of an ontological or epistemological character. This drive can be understood as a critique of modernity, which has shaped the scholarly discipline of archaeology and thus also archaeology's normative treatment of material phenomena. With this interpretation, the absence of a critique of hegemonies that I have pointed out may still be understood in a progressive way; studies of the history of archaeology can demonstrate how archaeological practice, through the enactment *per se*, has the possibility to create a qualitative and emancipating difference (see for example Arwill-Nordbladh 2012b).

The kind of archaeological practice that is supposed to be performed in Olsen's land of future prospects could not be carved out in an ontological and epistemological void. To be successful, it would be working in a world full of practices that both form and are formed by inter-

actions and mutual agency that are connected to the emancipation of things and the emancipation of social understanding.

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