

# A PLEA FOR CRITIQUE

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Reading Bjørnar Olsen's article makes me sad. I am sad about the lack of will and passion, and the gloomy disillusionment that took its place. I am sad to witness such an arrogant dismissal of archaeology in Sweden in general, and *Current Swedish Archaeology* in particular, with only eleven of the hundred works in the bibliography by archaeologists with affiliations in Sweden (which could be compared with the fourteen listed works by Olsen himself), and zero references to CSA in an article that was meant to mark the occasion of its twentieth anniversary. This makes me sad, not because Swedish archaeology, or CSA, necessarily deserves to be described as cutting-edge for archaeological theory development on a global scale, but because such a dismissal by means of silence is the enemy of critical conversation. On the same note, it is sad to see someone who was not so very long ago a voice of importance in Scandinavian archaeology, talking with axes and reindeers, and referring to himself for answers. I sincerely hope that this is not what is written in the stars for the future of archaeology.

I can discern one theme that I really like and that seems reasonable among Olsen's four proposed ways for the future. It has to do with the acknowledgement (of *alternative*, hitherto silent, or at least not so loud voices outside of the immediate radar of Anglo-Saxon archaeology), and resurrection (of the fragments and dirty small pieces of materiality that are at the heart of archaeological practice) of people and things at, or off, the margins of mainstream, well-funded, tourist-magnetic and award-winning archaeology. All very well, so far. But how this is going to be done without theory and without critique, I simply cannot understand.

In my life as an archaeologist (which has mainly been connected to Southeast Asia), theory has been like a really good friend, offering al-

ternative ways to see and appreciate new, unexpected, complementary qualities of the materials at my hands. Theory has been my saviour in moments of delirious omnipotence, when I thought I saw and knew it all. At such moments theory has intervened, like an honest friend, with its complicating, annoying, enriching insistency, reminding me of other views, other perspectives. I have now and then seen theory being used in straightjacket interpretations suffocating archaeological materials (and this, of course, deserves profound criticism), but these occasions are by far outnumbered by the instances where theory has opened up and relieved archaeological material from the narrow vision and monophonic voice of *The Archaeologist* (some examples from the recent history of Swedish archaeology and *CSA* are Burström 1990; Hjørungdal 1994; Ojala 2006; Fernstål 2008). Without theory there will be no challenges to claims of knowledge from those who are already in the safe centre of the discourse and discipline of archaeology. For all these reasons, I cannot see any sense in Olsen's portrayal of theory as something entirely aloof and elitist, only creating unfortunate hierarchies. On the contrary, theory can still do wonderful things if you are interested in marginal perspectives and are up for a challenge.

The material turn, at least since the place-the-stone-on-your-desk article by Tim Ingold in *Archaeological Dialogues* (2007), has been embraced more widely as a golden opportunity for archaeologists, and a future way forward for a meaningful archaeology. The (re)turn to things proposed here by Olsen stands out from the crowd by his claim that the archaeologist's relation to the thing is direct and emancipated from theory. Put simply, that the way forward is to "trust in our own perception". An "axe is significant primarily due to its unique axe qualities; a reindeer due to its inherent and multiple reindeer qualities". And here follows a reference – not to the axe or the reindeer itself, but to Olsen 2010. To me, this is a pretty strong indication that, no matter how much we hope for the stone to speak, there is no other way to express our knowledge about the axe and the reindeer than via our own situated bodies. It is now twenty-four years since Donna Haraway wrote her *Situated Knowledges*, and it seems as topical as ever. Haraway says that the common notion of the scientist's infinite vision is "an illusion, a god-trick". It is a "false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility". A scientist who pursues the god-trick of seeing everything without taking responsibility for his or her own partial perspective, fails to create responsible knowledge (Haraway 1988:582f). "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (*ibid.*, 586, italics in original).

I cannot see how Olsen's (re)turn to things would revolutionize archaeology. More than anything it reminds me of nineteenth- and pre-criticism twentieth-century (white middle-age middle-class male) archaeologists mediating like magicians true stories about things from the past. Here I recall Gayatri Spivak's warnings about representations of subaltern people (i.e. extremely marginalized people without autonomous voice or even space in official discourse). Spivak warns against claims from intellectuals to fully represent (i.e. speak for) the subaltern, which she says is a claim for control that will primarily benefit the intellectual at the expense of the subaltern (Spivak 1988). The god-trick approach in the (re)turn to things similarly allows the archaeologist to claim full control of the artefact. It reduces and closes the thing into the realm of the archaeologist himself, rather than opening it up to the world and letting it be appreciated as the complicated indefinable assemblage or "gathering" that Bruno Latour and others talk about. I then find Donna Haraway's 24-year-old plea for the partial perspective more hopeful for the future, with its understanding of the knowing archaeologist as partial, never finished, imperfect, and *therefore* able to join with another (such as a thing, or indeed a reindeer, which I hesitate to talk about as a thing). To be able to talk about things as assemblages or gatherings of innumerable aspects that reach far beyond the restricted knowledge and partial perspective of a single archaeologist, there is no doubt need for both theory and critique (Latour 2004).

Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* and Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* are two key texts in critical theory. Its main two branches, critical gender theory and postcolonial theory, have not been included at all in Olsen's résumé of the past and premonitions for the future of Scandinavian archaeology. I find his exclusion of gender studies almost offensive, considering the great impact it has had on archaeology and society in general over the past decades, and how much of importance still remains to be done in that field. The omission of postcolonial theory is perhaps less serious, because it has not had much impact on Scandinavian archaeology so far. But I think there are good reasons to keep it in mind for the future.

Compared with other academic disciplines, archaeology has been hesitant about embracing postcolonial theory (although it was considered already by Shanks & Tilley in *Social Theory in Archaeology*), which has now been around and been very influential for 35 years. Generally, postcolonial theory is about revealing invisible structures of power and inequality in our mundane discourses, and offering concepts and tools to create alternative images. It is characterized by its passionate criticism, and some key concepts are Orientalism, the Other, Hybridity, Third

Space, and the Subaltern. Swedish archaeologists have so far mainly used these concepts to create alternative interpretations of prehistoric materials (e.g. Fahlander & Cornell 2007; Peterson 2011). Internationally it has also been used in discussions that relate more to archaeological heritage (e.g. Meskell 2009). In such discussions you find also more of the burning will to reveal, and make better, the critical frenzy that is characteristic of postcolonialism (e.g. González-Ruibal, in Meskell 2009).

Contrary to Olsen, to me the idea of international homogenization and a diminished role for nation states in the wake of globalization seems but a chimera. Only a couple of years ago, the French government issued a new heritage law claiming rightful ownership and repatriation of artefacts that have at some point been removed from the patria. On a global scale, repatriation claims from France and other nations or communities are more common than ever before. In Scandinavia, the attraction of extreme nationalist politics to narratives of archaeology and national heritage is difficult to ignore. Both Sweden and Denmark currently have strong (but not necessarily welcome) parliamentary support for heritage issues. And in Norway, a man of claimed Viking descent recently pursued a horrendous crusade against what he saw as a multicultural socialist society. So there is every reason for Scandinavian archaeology to take questions of heritage and contemporary culture seriously, to work with constant criticism against resilient images of cultural purity, essence and development, and to work passionately for the possibilities of alternative understandings of things and people of the past.

I can see two main ways that that future archaeology in Sweden can benefit from critical perspectives such as critical gender theory and post-colonial theory. In archaeological research that aims to say something about sites, things, and people from the distant past, such perspectives can contribute critical analyses of the narratives and deep structures of archaeological knowledge, with the aim of finding hitherto silent groups and question unfortunate power imbalances (between men and women, between humans and reindeer, between evolved and primitive...). These perspectives also come with a toolkit of alternative concepts (such as queer, subaltern, the Other, hybridity, the uncanny, palimpsest, provenance...) which are useful in the creation of alternative conceptions of the past that work against the ideas of cultural essentialism and linear teleological development that have for so long been at the heart of traditional archaeological narratives and archaeology as popular culture. With such a critical engagement with materials, structures, and bodies of the past, archaeologists will also have a lot to offer to the material turn in the social sciences, with our tested and questioned methods for material analysis (such as typology, stratigraphy, reuse, and site formation).

Secondly, critical perspectives have much to offer to the research and practice of archaeological heritage management. Critical discourse analysis can here be used to question the normative ways of archaeological knowledge production that have for a very long time privileged the perspectives of white Anglo-Saxon, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual men. Its engaged criticism works to reveal that such predominance is not due to matters of fact, but is historically contingent and due to the strength and resilience of dominant discourses. The alternative concepts from gender theory and postcolonial theory can allow the material that we study to resist such narratives, and help us create alternative ones. Moreover, with their focus on discourse analysis, these critical perspectives allow us to see that normative narratives reside not only in readable texts, but just as much in the choreographies of visitors moving through sites and museums, in the expected communication between the archaeologists, the museum and its visitors, and in the very structure of the artefact collections that is maintained through standardized forms filled in at archaeological excavations and later becoming the foundations of archaeological museums. Such criticism has the potential to reach much further than add-women-(or immigrants, or LGBT-persons, or...)-and-stir, since it works against the very structure of hegemonic normative narratives in archaeological texts, heritage sites, and museums.

“Criticism is an act of love”, said Paul Bové in a remembrance volume for Edward Said, founding father of postcolonial theory and one of the most influential academics of the twentieth century. Edward Said had a passionate, sometimes political, always critical voice debating historical structures of thought as well as contemporary political conflicts. Paul Bové said that he had learned from Said that honest criticism is not about destruction and negative persecution, although it is sometimes conceived as such. Criticism that matters is about real engagement and desire to reveal, in order to make better (Bové 2005:39). Such real engagement and passion to reveal unfortunate structures in our language and discourse, linking past with present in order to create better ways ahead, is for me a great inspiration. It should be a great framework to use in work with people and things at, or off, the margins of mainstream, well-funded, tourist-magnetic and award-winning archaeology. It would in any case be an interesting and totally worthwhile way to go for the future of Scandinavian archaeology.

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