

A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE ON BJØRNAR OLSEN'S "AFTER INTERPRETATION"

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I have very much enjoyed Bjørnar Olsen's insightful reflections on the present condition of theory in archaeology, and have found much to agree with in his text. Convention demands, though, that I should take issue with his arguments, and there are certainly areas in which I would wish to qualify his account of developments in archaeological thought over the past three decades. Olsen contends that when it first emerged, post-processual archaeological thinking was perceived as transgressive, illicit, and dangerous. At some point during the 1990s, it lost its radical edge, and was normalized in such a way as to enable it to be incorporated into a new consensus. With the ending of the "theory wars" of the 1980s in a kind of truce, theoretical debate in archaeology has declined and become comparatively trivial in its content, to the extent that some authorities have felt entitled to identify a "death of theory" within the discipline. However, says Olsen, the moderate consensus is now beginning to fragment, and a newly radicalized archaeology is starting to emerge, based upon a return to things, a reining-in of interpretation, a revalorization of archaeology itself, and the emergence of a global discourse in place of the old "core areas" of archaeological thought.

Much of this I am in sympathy with, but it strikes me that what is missing from Olsen's picture of the loss of archaeological radicalism in the 1990s is the question of the discipline's progressive de-politicization. He notes that Britain has ceased to be a self-evident centre of philosophical debate in archaeology, but this leaves hanging the issue of why the

critique of the New Archaeology should have developed in the UK in the first place, rather than in the US. Now, Britain has a long history of antiquarian and archaeological research, had amassed large numbers of academic archaeologists as a consequence of the expansion of the university sector in the 1960s, and had seen an exponential growth in field archaeology as a result of post-war redevelopment. But none of these factors in itself explains why a distinctive tradition of archaeological thinking should have been sparked on a small island in the throes of post-imperial decline. One way of characterizing the post-processual era is to say that while the New Archaeology had sought to make the discipline more rigorous by introducing the epistemology of the natural sciences, the developments of the 1980s complemented this move by broadening the interpretive possibilities of archaeology, in opening the discipline to the social and cultural sciences in general. I suggest that this turn was facilitated (but by no means determined) by the specific political circumstances of Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This period saw the collapse of the “post-war consensus”, in which both ends of the conventional political spectrum agreed on the fundamentals of the way that the British state would be managed: full employment, a cradle-to-grave social security system, free education and health care, collective bargaining between trade unions and industrial management, and the nationalization of power, transport and key industries. From 1979 onwards, in reaction to the first shocks of globalization, the UK became a kind of laboratory for a radical free-market alternative: deregulation, de-industrialization, privatization, outsourcing, de-unionization. This sea change in policy led to a polarization of British society in general, and academia in particular. The actions of Margaret Thatcher’s government were resisted by a lively, if thoroughly disorganized left (something that is rather less in evidence in the present). The British universities had been affected by the waves of student militancy that had followed the events of 1968 in Paris and Chicago, and the social science departments were often home to debates on Western Marxism, feminism, and a range of other radical perspectives. Any university town in the 1970s and 1980s would have had a radical bookshop full of works by French and German thinkers. This was the backdrop to the emergence of post-processual thinking: a country locked in political struggle, where police and miners fought pitched battles, and where volumes of radical philosophy fell readily into the hands of any sceptical graduate student.

This is not to say that everyone who became interested in the critique of established modes of archaeological analysis during this time had any level of political commitment. Far from it. But one of the key notions that developed in the early 1980s was the understanding that as a form

of cultural practice, archaeology formed part of a "war of position" in which common conceptions of humanity and society were constructed and contested. Looking back now at the titles of TAG sessions and issues of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* from that long-ago era, it is striking how many address "The Politics of..." some aspect of archaeology, from heritage and museums to fieldwork, landscape and interpretation. This is obviously much less the case now. Indeed, I would suggest that it was the decline of a concern with archaeology as a subject that was potentially political in all of its aspects that was intimately connected with the loss of critical edge that Olsen notes. By the middle of the 1990s, British society had entered the "post-political" era of the neoliberal consensus. Left and right appeared to agree that mass unemployment and growing social inequality were the new facts of life, that the financial services industry should be completely deregulated and allowed to "create wealth", and they only differed on whether this wealth should be taxed and used to compensate those out of work or on low wages, or allowed to "trickle down" from the tables of the affluent. Irony of ironies: the radical bookshop where I had bought my volumes of Foucault and Althusser during the 1980s had by now become a Starbucks. I do not wish to imply too straightforward a "read across" between political reality and academic discourse, but it was certainly during this time that it began to be seen as vaguely embarrassing to talk about a critical or engaged archaeology, that issues of power and social inequality in the past started to be dismissed as a bit boring and *passé*, and feminist archaeology began to be eclipsed by the less contentious gender archaeology. The lesson that I take from all this is that archaeology is unlikely to ever be as exciting again as it was during the 1980s if it cloisters itself in the academy, and neglects the broader cultural implications of its practice.

This is not to say that the recent developments that Olsen points to could not be a source of renewed archaeological radicalism. But I am sceptical that they represent a new "revolution" in the sense that the New Archaeology and post-processual archaeology were. Indeed, it may be that a new revolution isn't actually what we need at this point. What we may be seeing instead is the slow realization of some of the unfulfilled promise of the 1980s. One way in which Olsen's four trends differ from previous archaeological "revolutions" is that they do not involve the introduction of any new "isms" into the discipline. Post-processual archaeology in particular drew on Marxism, structuralism, post-structuralism, structuration theory and feminism. The classic format for an academic paper in the heyday of both processual and post-processual archaeology involved a preamble in which a new theoretical framework was introduced, an outline of an archaeological problem, and the ap-

plication of the theory to create a new analysis. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, and it did result in a series of stimulating new interpretations, but it sometimes meant that the theory involved was only partially digested. This is why I think that Olsen is mistaken in arguing that British archaeologists “pretended” that phenomenology was “just another interpretive device”. There was no pretence involved: of course this was how the tradition was initially apprehended, because that was how theoretical archaeology worked in the 1960s to 1990s: new ideas were there to be found in proliferation, and each could potentially deliver fresh perspectives on our evidence.

Now, however, things are different. There are fewer new philosophies left “out there” for archaeologists to investigate, and the option of flitting on to the “next big thing” no longer exists. The alternative is to turn back to the ideas that we have sometimes passed over in a cursory way, and to try to work with them with much greater commitment. Phenomenology is a case in point: if the initial engagement with this framework was all about monuments and landscapes, that is fine. The work of a thinker like Heidegger is rich and complex, and it takes a long time for its implications to be fully appreciated. After a quarter of a century, it is clear that this strand of thought is not leading us in the direction that we might initially have anticipated, and that is all to the good. Phenomenology is a special case, because it explicitly attempts to overcome the effects of an abstracted theorization of everyday life. But a related issue is that a weakness of much of the early post-processual archaeology was that it often attempted to apply bodies of complex theory to archaeological evidence without first recasting them in relation to material things. In this respect, it repeated some of the naivety of the early New Archaeology.

I suspect that the “revolution” that Olsen refers to does not actually represent a new development, but the long-term outcome of thinking hard about things. None of the tendencies that Olsen points to are really new. “Material culture studies” dates back to the 1980s, and there has been a *Journal of Material Culture* since 1996. But as Olsen implies, the perspectives on the material world that are now emerging are far removed from the Hegelian objectification theory of Miller’s *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), for example. Similarly, post-humanism is not exactly a recent development, and we can easily cite precedents like Donna Haraway’s “cyborg manifesto” (1991). In both cases, what we are seeing is the maturation of processes that have been underway for some time. Undoubtedly, the implication of these developments is that we should return to material things in a much more serious way. But I would want to resist the binary division that Olsen appears to make between the mundane, everyday significance of things and the

more "airy" interpretive meanings that he sees as foisted upon them. Equally, I think it is dubious to associate the former with Heidegger's category of the "ready-to-hand", implying that the latter fall into the "present-at-hand" realm of detached deliberation. For ethnography often demonstrates that what may seem to us to be the most recondite of spiritual or cosmological associations are often treated as unexceptional, matter-of-fact, and barely worthy of note. It may be the case that recent archaeologies have been too single-minded in the pursuit of deep symbolic meanings, passing over the rich texture of the evidence, but I think that it may be more fruitful to re-embed meaning in the densities of material substance and habitual practice than to declare it off limits.

Equally, I have reservations about Olsen's call for us to stop rushing past the material world in pursuit of history and society. In a curious way, his appeal to "archaeology as archaeology" recalls David Clarke's arguments of 1968. Where for Olsen, the fragmentary, superimposed traces of the past resist narrative order and purified time, Clarke rejected the "attempt to convey smooth historical narrative... in the total absence of the record appropriate to that art" (1978:11). Yet somehow, the desire to write a different kind of history does not seem to have declined at any point in the past 45 years. To some extent this is because, if we allow that history is something that can only be written by historians, who have written sources at their disposal, it means that the pre-literate eras are condemned to the abject condition of being without history. I am fully in agreement with Olsen that the fragmentary, incomplete and gathering nature of the archaeological past is something to be celebrated rather than regretted, but is this not equally true of the historical record? And if we are genuinely trying to adopt a post-humanist position, is it not self-contradictory to claim that we cannot write history if we have no people or texts, and only things at our disposal? Does this not concede the argument that history is an exclusively inter-subjective process? Olsen notes that it has by now become almost conventional to refer to societies as heterogeneous assemblages of people and things. When we are faced with the wrecked and overlapping remains of such an assemblage, are we limited to writing something like a memory? I would suggest that a more radical proposal, and one that we have barely begun to explore, is to consider what history might look like if it were written from the point of view of the things rather than the people.

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