

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY, CHRISTMAS PORK AND RED HERRINGS

## Reply to Comments

Bjørnar Olsen

Life is mostly a quite unspectacular exercise but now and then something unusual and thrilling happens – such as having to spend your Christmas reading comments on a paper on theoretical archaeology you submitted in September. Digesting these vivid contributions between plates of herring and pork, I was surprised to note how much energy some of the commentators spend on my personal retrospective account, treating it as an attempted in-depth study of the disciplinary past – and one which upon scrutiny sadly fails to properly address Global, British, Scandinavian, Swedish, Social, Gender, and Political perspectives, to mention but a few. Indeed, most of these perspectives *are* wanting, but my ambition was far more modest: “It is important to state that this is not – NOT – a scrutinizing review of theoretical trends in Scandinavian archaeology or elsewhere. Rather it is more of a personal excursion into a disciplinary landscape of the recent past”. Obviously there is a lot that does not fit into this format, though I understand the temptation to pretend very otherwise. For example, I totally agree with Yannis Hamilakis that the differences between processual and postprocessual archaeology are vastly overdramatized, and I have argued for the similarities between these positions, including their shared ontology, in a number of works. However, this was not on the agenda this time along with numerous other issues that my colleagues seem to think I either have – or should have – addressed.

Leaving that aside, I am impressed by many of their pertinent comments offered and I think they contribute significantly to the discussion currently taking shape in the discipline. Rather than going into each of them specifically, which would have required another volume of CSA, I shall use most of my reply to address what I regard as some recurrent and interesting issues in these remarks.

The *first* issue relates to political engagement, radicalism, and the “socio-political context” of archaeology, issues which several of my commentators think I have ignored. Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, referring to an earlier statement from me regarding a “programme for the 1990s”, finds that a “discussion of the power position of the discipline and the researching subject is avoided” in my current prospects. Avoided? For various reasons I am less inclined to headline it today – and in this particular context also because my objective was to write about some *new* (future) trends, and I am not sure that a topic discussed rather intensively over the last thirty years (at least) belongs to that category. This reservation notwithstanding, my section on a new archaeological geography explicitly addresses at least some aspects of this discussion where I contended that what we are witnessing is the emergence of a new, less imperialist and less nationally confined, archaeological landscape. To what extent is admittedly always a matter of discussion and, as stated, I do share Brit Solli’s opinion on the increasing dominance of English as an academic language as well as that of British and American publishing houses (though their ownership may be less obviously confined). However, in terms of authorship and intellectual influence the situation is far more diverse. The Ivy League universities in the US may be rich and powerful, but does their power radiate to discourses on archaeological theory, making them contemporary centres of debate and influence? Hardly. And just to mention another “disturbing” fact, US archaeologists do actually spend their sabbaticals in Finland and Oulu, making the situation of academic exchange today far less predictable and self-confirming than Solli seems to suggest. Thus, I restate my assertion that the concept of archaeological metropolises is a dated and ruining concept.

I have great sympathy with Hamilakis’ rich and thoughtful line of argument regarding the “political nature” of archaeology, and also share many of his general concerns. However, I am troubled by the self-justifying claim that there is no way to understand archaeology and disciplinary changes outside the social and political conditions that “gave rise” to them. Given that perspective, how could one? Julian Thomas adopts a similar position and explicitly suggests that the decline in debate in the 1990s (or what he terms “the loss of archaeological radicalism”) was a

“question of the discipline’s progressive de-politicization”. There may be something to this argument, but I remain sceptical to the idea of explaining the states of archaeological affairs as something directly related to or even caused by “external” social and political conditions. Though issues such as the role of archaeology in society, questions about interests and objectivity, conceptions of knowledge, cultural values, etc., can be seen as more or less intimately related to wider socio-political discourses, to apply this to archaeological reasoning more generally would be an unproductive reductionist stance. For example, what are the specific interlocutors and connections between, on the one hand, archaeological debates on analogical reasoning, middle-range theory, style, or “material culture as text”, to mention but a few hot issues of the 1980s, and, on the other hand, leftist reactions towards Thatcherism? I am not saying that such connections necessarily are non-existent but without being specified and explained they seem quite enigmatic to me. More generally, I think the common trope of explaining archaeology and the disciplinary past by contextualizing it against a backdrop of supposedly self-explanatory socio-political conditions leaves most of it unexplained.

Regarding the changes and disciplinary issues addressed in my retrospective account, I am more convinced by the perspectives proposed by Kuhn, Foucault, and Latour, who all in different ways have argued that scientific changes and disciplinary trajectories cannot be satisfactorily understood without taking into account the internal dynamics and forces of research, such as rivalries, alliances and networks (Latour, Kuhn), disciplinary technologies, institutional frameworks, discursive formations and effective traditions (Foucault, Latour, Kuhn), as well as aesthetic judgements, personal well-being and security (Kuhn). Still, this enduring quest for something “more” to explain our disciplinary doings strikes me as very similar to the way we have approached things and the everydayness of life, where the immediate and obvious never seems enough and therefore either has to be justified by some bigger and more honourable humanistic, social or political project or, if not, has to be subjected to all kinds of suspicious hermeneutics. Thus, and with the obvious risk of sounding irresponsibly banal and dated, may it not be – sometimes at least – that what we do, debate and write about (also) is motivated by scholarly curiosity, engagement, and enthusiasm for the topics actually dealt with rather than by some grander political or strategic agendas, whether hidden or not?

Having said this, I would like to state that I do not at all find questions about politics uninteresting or irrelevant. However, as already stated, I remain unconvinced about the straightforward links that are proposed between political commitment and the archaeology we conduct. I also

find it difficult to pretend as if the world, archaeology and we haven't changed, and which in my opinion has made what it is to be political and "radical" today something quite different than it was thirty years ago. The new concern with things may exemplify the difference (which also relates to Wienberg's somewhat surprising plea for "action archaeology"). Though the epistemological and ontological grounding for this concern is a perfectly sufficient justification in itself, it clearly has several important political and ethical implications. According to the dominant modern conception, things have value only if they are of human concern; things are little but *things-for-us*, and whatever ethical and political issues may pertain to them in archaeology, heritage, and more generally, have been motivated by their beneficial value to past or present peoples. While postprocessualists (and post-structuralists) talked much about the de-centring of the subject, and even criticized anthropocentrism, there was little that suggested any destabilization of the modern hierarchy of beings or that the progressives' empathy and care extended beyond people. What an alternative materialist position involves, and which it shares with many "premodern" and indigenous conceptions (as Hamilakis rightly asserts), is precisely to allow for a more egalitarian or flat ontology, one in which humans feature as more humble and democratized being amongst other beings, and which also acknowledges that things may be valuable in and of themselves (Introna 2009; Olsen *et al.* 2012, chapter 9; Pétursdóttir, in press). In other words, that they do not need a human concern to justify their being and even may have a *right* to exist (Ouzman 2006). One challenging ethical implication of this ontology is thus to refit the radicals' (and humanism's) attentiveness and care for people to also embrace things and other non-humans. Faced with the issues of global warming, environmental destruction and the insanely accelerated exhaustion of what the planet has given us, such an extended ethics based on a notion of care and of humans as a companion species residing among millions of others, may even prove imperative. And contrary to Thomas, who does not find that the new materialism is "revolutionary" in the sense that the New Archaeology and postprocessual archaeology were, I find this position far more radical and challenging in both political and theoretical terms.

A *second* issue that I would like to address is the role of theory and the question of how knowledge is arrived at. Some commentators are worried that my position may be conflated with old-fashioned empiricist archaeology. I am not so worried, since I actually think there is a lot to be learnt from the material sensibility characterizing this archaeology, and that the challenge is not to abolish this sensibility but rather to develop it further. And in undertaking this task I find the *related* project

of phenomenology helpful. Originally launched as a way of “relearning to look at the world”, a reclaimed “seeing” grounded in our lived experience rather than in abstract philosophical concepts and theories, phenomenology can be described as a project committed to restoring to things their integrity by respecting their native ways of manifesting themselves. As paradoxical as it may sound (but it should bring further support to Burström’s Zen wisdom), this “theory” may help us realize and become confident with the fact that our direct and material engagements with sites and things bring forth a mode of familiarity and understanding that cannot be achieved through a detached intellectual stance alone. However theoretically informed we are, whatever nicely formulated hypotheses or research questions we bring along, the sites and places we travel to do not just sit in silence passively waiting to be tested, explored and informed. They bring to these encounters their own unique qualities and competences, which make our fieldwork far less predictable and controlled than suggested by any research design model.

Acknowledging this material impact, that the sites and things themselves affect us and “speak back”, clearly involves an attitude which recalls earlier days of inductive archaeology and what is sometimes condemned as naïve empiricism. And this should be no source of embarrassment. Unfortunately, learning by encountering, by hand, from things, lost its role in the subsequent theoretical tropes of deduction, hypothesis formation, testing, interpretation, and “reading”. And the mantra that all knowledge is theory-dependent made the practice and experience that emerged from our direct involvement with things and landscapes, the *archaeological experience*, more or less irrelevant (Olsen *et al.* 2012:64–65). I think it is time to reconsider these issues and adopt a far more humble and open attitude to how the immediacy of experience affects and informs our research, an attitude which may well be called naïve or banal empiricism – and which I sincerely think is more in tune with the way things and places are *sensed* – and made sense of – by most people (which hardly are “unwitting slaves of some defunct theorist”, to borrow Keynes/Solli’s characteristic of “practical men”). Such naïve empiricism, based on an attentive and open attitude, may be crucial to leave room for wonderment and affection (Stengers 2011), for the “presence effects” that are normally silenced or explained away as irrational disturbances in the scientific and hermeneutic chase for meaning. This empiricism, furthermore, also leaves room for the almost forgotten possibility that knowledge sometimes is revealed or discovered rather than produced.

This has nothing to do with abolishing theory, as Brit Solli seems to suggest. Neither do I think that any formal definition is helpful for

the questions dealt with in my paper. Theory operates on a number of levels, and my concern was mainly with what normally are considered as ontological and epistemological issues. Here I would like to add that the changes associated with the recent turn to things also challenge us to rethink their epistemological status as “data”. By no longer being treated as epiphenomenal witnesses of society but as its indispensable constituents, and thus fundamentally involved in human conduct and social trajectories, the previously “fundamental” gaps between humans/society and things, between dynamics and statics, have withered and largely made redundant many of the bridging arguments formerly required. Thus, rather than engaging in disentanglement and purification, entrenching archaeological theory into an abstract domain of reasoning, I suggest that we should start doing away with the discriminating separation between theory, methodology and data to replace it with an epistemological openness to how each feeds into and thus affords the other. In other words, start attending to a common ground where theory is not applied but interacts, and is infused by data, and thereby also refrain from arbitrarily separating the “what” from the “how”.

A *third* issue is the reaction provoked by my claim that we should opt for archaeology rather than (culture) history. Referring to David Clarke’s seemingly related but in reality very different assertion, Julian Thomas notes that the archaeologists’ desire to write a “different kind of history” has not declined in the decades that have passed since this proposal. Some of the rationale for this historical commitment, he adds, is that “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 don’t think being “without history” is a great loss or disaster to people who never knew about such a conceptualization of the past, and I do not share the paternalistic inclination that this is something everyone – and everything – *should* have. To continue down this avenue is to reinforce the ingrained confusion of the past with history, made possible by ignoring that history is but one and actually a quite peculiar way of comprehending the past. As argued by Ashis Nandy (1995) in his discussion of postmodernist critique of history and the problem of integrating “the other”, the main remedy for all those who have been sceptical of history has been to improve it, to democratize history and thus to allow for alternative histories. However radical these other histories are, there has been no room for anything other than history, for alternatives *to* history (Nandy 1995:50–53). I think archaeology provide such an alternative for a different conception of the past.

Brit Solli seems to rely on a similar conception of history – and historical narratives – as indispensable. She criticizes me for supposedly having argued that the past we encounter in our excavations is too messy to be ordered. Thus she reassures, “it is certainly difficult to order... but it is not impossible... The stratigraphic analysis of deep cultural layers is based on finding order in that which appears disorderly, e.g. by using the Harris matrix as a tool.” To this I can do nothing but agree; order has indeed been found. Through ever more fine-grained dating methods and advanced stratigraphical and typological sequencing, past settlements and sites have indeed been successfully cut into increasingly thinner slices of time, which again have been nicely and orderly sequenced. And I am deeply impressed by these advances. However, my whole point was to question to what extent this common strategy captures how we (and people before us) engage with and experience the past. Does the past come to us as divorced from the present, as sequenced orders or flow charts, as disentangled entities neatly arranged chronologically relative to each other? Think of a contemporary site, for example Oslo, and how this town manifests itself, is lived in and experienced by Solli and near a half a million of other people. What is concretely manifested and experienced is a chronological hybrid, a multi-temporal material mixture formed due to the durable and thus gathering qualities of things. The past is what makes the present Oslo what it is; people live *with* this past as contemporary and are affected by it.

As little as this town can be divorced from its past without depriving it of what grounds its present, and thereby without depriving the people who live there of their taken-for-granted contemporary “habitat”, as little can we divorce the medieval carpenter and farmer from their enmeshment with the material past. Their life did not unfold in a seriated moment or encapsulated in a single context. Humans and non-humans alike have always been enmeshed with their pasts. Thus, to repeat the plea from my paper: Rather than seeing the hybridized material record as a distortion of an originally pure historical order existing beyond and prior to the entangled mess we excavate – and which we thus need to restore, we should start taking it seriously as an expression of how the past actually gathers in the present, defying the temporal specificity, sequential order, and finitude that we have been obsessed with. It is an “archaeological statement” which is to be taken seriously and to be worked on in our endeavour for a new archaeology. As Hamilakis argues “a new discipline needs to demonstrate, following a Bergsonian philosophy... that a fundamental property of matter is its ability to last, its duration... matter is multi-temporal, it cannot be contained and imprisoned within a single chronological bracket.” As this, in fact, is what

I have tried to argue – in the CSA paper and in far more detail elsewhere (e.g. Olsen 2010:107–128).

A *fourth* issue is whether things speak or not, or even are “full of stories” as Solli asserts. Mats Burström pertinently asks “what language(s) do things themselves speak? And how are we to hear what they say? ...will things really cry out if we – the archaeologists – are quiet?” To briefly recapitulate some of my main arguments, one concern was with the tendency to anthropomorphize things in the current campaign to turn to their favour. Though understandable as an initial strategy to include things, this domestication easily ends up erasing their thingly difference, whereby they end up very much like us – exhibiting a range of positive human qualities. Treating things as storytellers may be seen as one aspect of this appropriation, which precludes their own genuinely material way of “articulating” themselves. Another and related concern was with how we in our urge to conduct social analysis have weighted things with interpretative burdens they often are unfit to carry – and that this urge also have made us indifferent to their own being and what things *qua things* actually may reveal about themselves, the past and the present. If we encounter things full of stories or hear them speak clear and loudly, it may be wise to consider whose voices are actually heard.

Nevertheless, things do express themselves and they strongly affect us through their enormously varied register of manifestations. Some of these material affordances are explicitly and implicitly used in human communication, and things clearly play an important role in “social messaging”. However, this more or less intentional aspect of social communication embraces only a small part of how things “address” us in our inescapable bond of cohabitation. By their ubiquitous and constant presence things affect us in innumerable ineffable and immediate ways and thereby also play a crucial and indispensable role for our well-being and existential security. Yet, do they speak? At least in a figurative sense it may be claimed that things argue and enter into a dialogue with us – and with other things. Yet such “speech” is vastly different from human language; it is a physiognomic “discourse” – and if it were translated into our language it would, on the one hand, appear highly banal, yet also effective and imperative: “walk here”, “sit there”, “drive like this”, “use that entrance”, “lower your speed”, “stop”, “turn”, “lie down”, “queue”! All our everyday activities, from our morning toilet through our entire working day until bedtime, are affected or governed by things uttering such concise messages. Our habitual practices and memory, indeed that which is termed social and cultural forms would be unthinkable without such a physical rhetoric. Yet at the same time this “dialogue” is also about intimacy and familiarity, belonging and remembering; a



rich and multivalent “conversation” that involves all our senses. Sight is just one such sense; things touch us, grab us. We know their materiality, their texture; we smell them and can taste and hear the sound of them. These affective encounters create affinity with the world; they evoke the symmetry crucial for our common being *in* it. This, I find, is decisive not only for how things affect us in our everydayness, but also for our archaeological attentiveness to them. If we regard our relationship with things primarily as an intellectual encounter, viewing things as signs or texts we should read and interpret, or as something we need to look “behind”, we also run the risk of stripping the objects of their otherness and thus of their true nature. In so doing we may also deny them the opportunity of turning to us, of “talking back” in their very own material way.

Returning to Burström’s inquiry, the matter is not for the archaeologists to be quiet but rather to be attentive to the way things *are* and articulate themselves, and thus – to lapse into another anthropocentric parable – to refrain from putting words in their mouths. And in particular in those cases where they are asked to witness about issues they don’t know much or even anything about, we should respect their right to remain silent. Our attentiveness to things as archaeologists and scholars importantly also involves the question about translation, how it impacts on the way we document, represent, write and disseminate. How to record in order to faithfully represent the things and sites encountered; how to attend to and mediate their affective presence? How do we translate and “prolong” these things and our encounters with them into an archive for subsequently extending their presence to analysis and dissemination? These are all very challenging questions that we just have started to address and discuss seriously, and which of course involve a range of means other than conventional archaeological prose. However, despite the bad press that texts and language have received lately, I am still confident that things can also be cared for in writing and speech. I do not subscribe to the “abyss” doctrine grounding many social constructivist approaches, arguing that things (and the “world”) are separated from language by some untraversable abyss, making any statement just a linguistic construction. Siding with theorists as varied as Benjamin, Gadamer and Latour, I believe things also contain their own articulations which can be carefully and attentively translated into language as well as being productively mediated by other means of expression.

I am very grateful to Solli, Hamilakis, Thomas, Arwill-Nordbladh and Burström for their sincere attempt to engage with my paper and the arguments herein. Their criticism has been explicit and fair and it has made me rethink a number of issues, and I am also happy to see more

agreement than anticipated. This has made this a rewarding undertaking and hopefully also made this discussion a positive contribution to the current debate in archaeology. I am less sure what to say about the contributions from the three remaining commentators. Cornelius Holtorf and I have such a fundamentally different conception of what archaeology is, and why we do archaeology, that it is difficult to find much common ground for a productive discussion. Indicative of this difference is Holtorf's statement about our book on *Pyramiden* (Andreassen, Bjerck & Olsen 2010). What he found most interesting and compelling was not the site, the masses of stranded things or what they revealed about the town and those who lived here, but Bjerck's short account about our personal doings during fieldwork here. What interest could there be in the site, its things and the material memories they hold, compared to that of the archaeologists' presence – of archaeologists documenting themselves? Indicative, if amusing, is also Holtorf's classic remark about what he considered the most precious artefact found during the investigation of a megalith at Monte da Igrejada, Portugal: a finger ring lost by one of the team members the day before (Holtorf 2006). Why do we need to be curious about things and the past when we can study archaeologists in the present?

While Holtorf finds my account “not particularly interesting to discuss”, Anna Källén is “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”. I shall not repeat what I earlier (re)stated about my ambitions, but just add that her comments made me realize that my prediction about “the diminishing of national and regional frames for identifying archaeologies” and that “labels such as Swedish or Scandinavian archaeology will gradually lose their meaning as signifiers for ways of doing archaeology” obviously was a bit too premature. I must admit that I have problems following her arguments and serial attacks, and I shall confine myself to one rather randomly selected example. In a section of my paper I briefly discussed things' inherent qualities – that an axe is significant primarily due to its unique axe qualities, likewise that a reindeer has become valuable to people (and other beings) because of its immanent and multiple reindeer qualities. I ended the section by referring the readers to my book (Olsen 2010) where I have explored this issue in far more detail, upon which Källén remarks “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.” If this is representative of the Swedish archaeology she claims I have ignored, I am quite happy to be illiterate.

Ignorance is also the remedy prescribed by the last commentator, Jes Wienberg. However, he doesn't follow his own advice, and the tone of his exegesis made me wonder about his agenda and how to reply to some of his otherwise quite interesting remarks. We may agree upon the limitations of the keynote genre but I am somewhat perplexed to be made responsible for it. I was asked by this journal to write a discussion paper, a discussion to which also Wienberg – quite surprisingly given his flagged aversion – agreed to take part in (and thus, I suppose, is co-responsible for continuing the genre he dislikes?). I may have been flattered, even happy, to get this invitation from a respected Swedish journal but I also found it an interesting opportunity to write about some topics that engage me. And regarding the inclusion of two of my own publications in the Nordic anniversary list (one co-authored), this was – as stated in vain “to those already agitated” – not an exclusive or well-researched list. Still, as their inclusion indicates, it was actually quite difficult to find obvious candidates among Nordic contributions to theoretical archaeology published in a year ending with 2 or 7 (my anniversary criteria!). However, I am happy to see nominations for more influential and important books or papers to replace them.

When trying to formulate a reply to Wienberg it is tempting to lapse into the same sarcastic style, ironizing over the never-ending trend among middle-aged academics to try in vain to jazz up their otherwise dull texts with pop-cultural references; over scholars who perhaps disappointed over not being chosen to write the keynote paper still cannot refuse the offer to comment on it (and where they naturally begin by confessing how much they dislike the genre); over scholars who claim to always have observed intellectual battles with ironic distance, and who haven't showed much esteem for archaeology's “relevance” or any revolutions, now suddenly (of all things) are promoting “action archaeology”, having “the key questions of the present at the forefront of archaeological debate”, etc. However, what kind of debate and discursive community would that amount to? Contribute to collegiality and academic decency? Serve as an invitation to debate over arguments? Contrary to Holtorf and Källén, I am sure I could have had a productive dialogue with Wienberg over some of the issues brought to the table. However, being covered with heaps of red herrings, it is often difficult to understand what is meant and to find consistency in his argumentation, such as when he starts out claiming that all keynote predictions in general will prove “misleading, wrong or ridiculous”, while on the next page accepting my four trends as “reasonable observations”. One of them

even splendid! Or despite describing my paper as “a text of great interest for its reflections on theoretical archaeology”, mainly dismisses it as an unashamed example of power exercising and personal self-gratification. Thus at this point on the evening of 31 December 2012 I do not feel very tempted to continue this exchange. Anyway, in a few hours we will have a new year, new anniversaries, and a new chance to get it right.

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