

ARE WE THERE YET?

Archaeology and the postmodern in the new millennium

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The present text discusses the significance of the postmodern condition in contemporary archaeology. Five themes associated with postmodernism are discussed (a) the relativization of truth, knowledge, and meaning, (b) the fragmentation of the grand narrative, (c) the relation between agency and discourse, (d) pluralism, multivocality, and heterogeneity, and (e) rhetoric and styles of writing. In contemporary debate it has been suggested that postmodernism is a past phase and that these contested issues have become less important. It is, however, argued here that these are by no means resolved, but rather bypassed by shifting focus to archaeology as a contemporary practice or, in theoretical terms, towards particularistic neo-materialist ontologies.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, Grand narratives, Multivocality, Heterogeneity, Relativism, Relational ontologies, Neo-materialism

The last decades of the 20th century witnessed a great turmoil in the humanities and the social sciences that is generally referred to as the “postmodern turn”. In archaeology the debate was at its height during the late 1980s and early 1990s. At that point, postmodern relativism was considered a severe threat, which led some to paint the future in dark colours (Breisach 2009:3). Yoffee & Sherratt, for instance, warned that archaeology was about to be hijacked by certain factions abusing archaeology for various political aims (1993:7). In the early 1990s, postmodernism was primarily associated with the birth of post-processual archaeologies (e.g. Hodder 1990; Bintliff 1991; Shanks & Tilley

1992:xx; Thomas 1995:343, 351; Flannery 2006:9; Urban & Schortman 2012:95). It is now twenty years since that particular debate was at its peak, and it is interesting to ponder in retrospect on what it really was about and what impact it actually had in archaeology at large.

In contemporary archaeology, the term “postmodern” is nowadays only rarely mentioned. There seems to be an unspoken notion that we are past that particular phase and possibly on the brink of a new one (e.g. Ingold 2003:7; Solli 2011:43). During the new millennium in the aftermath of 9/11 there has been some discussion of a “death of theory”, the end of the postmodern phase and even predictions of a “post-post-modern” era (Eagleton 2003; cf. Bintliff & Pearce 2011). In archaeology, it has been argued that we face yet another “turn” – an ontological shift towards a post-human materialism (e.g. Webmoore & Whitmore 2008; Normark 2010; Bille & Flohr Sørensen 2012:60). In many ways the current situation resembles the insecurity and ambivalence of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Is there something to be learned from the old debate in our current situation? The big cataclysm obviously did not occur (like most catastrophic predictions seldom do) – or did it? Are we in fact postmodern without fully realizing it? Or maybe we have yet to experience its full ramifications? In this text I attempt to discuss some common themes that are generally associated with postmodern epistemology, evaluating how they have been received and discussing their relevance for the current situation.

MODERNIST DREAMS AND THE POSTMODERN SPECTRE

In his book *The Savage Mind* (1966:89) Claude Lévi-Strauss had a dream of a day in a near future when all available data about all the Australian tribes would be coded on punch cards. When properly registered, he foresaw how computers could finally enlighten us about the multi-dimensional relations between the tribes’ techno-economic, social, and religious structures. Today, a half a century later, only a few would consider such an endeavour particularly rewarding; the aspiration to capture a totality, the idea of a continuously progressing science, and the ambition to reach objective and definite knowledge, are all scientific ideals that characterize modernism.

The same virtues are also what the postmodern turn argued against: Instead of seeking order, coherence, regularity, and general laws, postmodernism celebrates diversity and plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy (Harvey 1989:9; Hassan 1995:131f; Eagleton 2003:13). From

a postmodern perspective, the total and objective knowledge that Levi-Strauss dreamed of is nothing than a mirage; wishful thinking.

Whether postmodernism constitutes an epistemic shift (postmodernity) from modernism is thus up for debate, but it is also comprehended as a continuity, possibly a late stage, of the modernist project rather than the emergence of a new epoch (Lyotard 1991:34; Brown 1994:13). Many thus prefer more descriptive terms such as Late-modernity, Hyper-modernity, Super-modernity, Late-Capitalism, Hyper-Capitalism, Post-industrialism, Information Age, and more recently, Neo-Modernism, and Liquid Modernism. The abundance of terms indicates a general insecurity about what constitutes the present times, but it is also obvious that many scholars recognize that something has happened, although unsure of what it actually is and where it will lead us.

Although the status of postmodernity may be uncertain we can still refer to postmodernism as an umbrella for various anti-essential standpoints. The forms and expressions it may take vary, but can on the one hand be characterized by a certain kind of reasoning about the world in which truth no longer can be verified, and on the other, by playfulness, blurring of genres (fact and fiction), ambiguity and irony (Jameson 1984; Lyotard 1984). The definitions differ depending on whether the focus is on its epistemology or on its forms of articulation. Postmodernism is thus not a coherent, elaborated system of thought that can easily be defined, but is rather a related set of concepts that take different shapes in different subject areas. It is expressed differently and follows different trajectories in art, architecture, literary theory, cultural studies – and indeed also in history and archaeology. The basis for what may be labelled “postmodern social theory” took recognizable shape in the so-called post-structural movement of the 1960s in France, whereas scholars such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and others opposed the modernist positivistic way of science. Their writings comprise a varied mix of important critique, theoretical and methodical development, but also playful provocative rhetoric, experimental and sometimes an incredibly multifaceted style of writing. There is a complex relation between what has been categorized as post-structural theory and what may pass as postmodernism. The two are not the same but share many similar traits (e.g. Toth 2010:37ff; Huyssen 1987:205ff; cf. Olsen 2006:85f; 2010:40).

In order to discuss the impact and to evaluate the consequences of the proposed postmodern turn in archaeology it is necessary to make a number of generalizations and restrict the scope of the text. In the field of archaeology there is quite substantial regional variability on this matter – both between different countries and between different collectives

(e.g. university archaeologists, field antiquarians, museum curators etc.). The focus of this text is mainly on north European developments, although some points certainly may have a more general validity. Many of the concepts and terminology mentioned here are also complex and multifaceted, and it has been necessary to make a certain amount of generalizations in order to keep a coherent argument. The primary aim is to discuss some of the roles of postmodernist epistemology in archaeology – not to write a complete account of the development. In order to achieve this in a short article I have chosen to focus on five central themes that are generally associated with postmodern epistemology and discuss how they have been received and incorporated in archaeological theory: (a) truth and knowledge, (b) generalizations and particularities, (c) individual and discourse, (d) heterogeneity and multitude, and (e) style and rhetoric.

TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

How to define truth and examine its subjective, relative, objective, or absolute aspects is a fundamentally philosophical question which lies outside the realms of a short archaeological article. Nonetheless, a central point in postmodern epistemology concerns the questioning of absolute truths, universal laws and the validity of scientific objectivity. The main point, however, is not necessarily to refute truths altogether, but to point out that there are no viable means for us in which it can be specified (Eagleton 2003:103). In postmodern epistemology, truths and knowledge are something that is *produced* within a dominant discourse. A general argument by post-structuralists and critical theorists is that knowledge is historically situated and tends to follow the logics of a particular “régime of truth” (Foucault 1980:133). That the earth only was 6,000 years old was a fact for many educated individuals as late as the 19th century. It was not simply a matter of belief in the supreme authority of the Bible, but according to the means and understandings of the time, that particular age of the earth was actually “verified” through geology and palaeontology (Cutler 2003; Thomas 2004:44f). If different periods in history have regarded their truths as solid and empirical, why should it be any different today?

Indeed, objects and features have been interpreted differently in different times. Megaliths have been seen as dwellings of giants and Stone Age axes were considered to be “faerie’s weapons” or “thunder-stones” caused by lightning etc. (Trigger 1989a). That interpretations can vary over time has since long been recognized by social scientists and his-

torians (e.g. Collingwood 1946), but the relativist argument was reinforced by (post)structural linguistics, which suggested that a text never has fixed content or straightforward symbolization (Urban & Schortman 2012:92). The meaning of a text is argued to lie in its appropriation, which implies that there can hardly be any “true” or definite reading of a text and that any original meaning is out of reach (Barthes 1977). This suggests that interpretations of the past are not only context-dependent and historically situated, but also that there are no means to ever find out “how it really was”.

The notion that our interpretations are situated historically in the past and the present was a cornerstone in the post-processual critique of the processual faith in positivist science (Hodder 1987:106, 152; Shanks & Tilley 1987:25). However, there is, of course, a great difference between recognizing that there may be alternate readings of the past, and subscribing to a hyper-relativist view of an infinite number of equally valid interpretations (cf. Knapp 1996). Roy Bhaskar (1979) has formulated the problem as a duality of *epistemological relativism*, which recognizes that knowledge is situated in a particular time and culture, and *judgemental relativism*, which in addition also claim that each form of knowledge is equally valid (cf. Brown 1994:27f). Within contemporary archaeology most seem content to acknowledge that our interpretations of the past are affected by the present but not necessarily determined by it (e.g. Hodder 1991:30; the Lampeter archaeology workshop 1997). There are, however, also those who argue that archaeology is all about contemporary discourse and that the pasts and the presents are hopelessly mixed and entangled (e.g. González-Ruibal 2008:262). The crucial question is to what extent the past is the present and to what degree we can confidently speak about the past. Michael Shanks may seem to subscribe to an epistemological relativism when he writes: “History is constantly rewritten as the present changes” and that: “We cannot transcend the located nature of historical understanding” (1992:28, 45; but see 1998:21ff) – a notion that he shares with many other leading post-processual archaeologists (e.g. Hodder 1987:152f; Thomas 2001:10). This however, does not necessarily make post-processual archaeology postmodern. To acknowledge relationalism is not the same as to be relativist (see Hodder 1997:193; Pollard 2005). The idea of the archaeological data being historically situated seems to be more about being self-aware and reflexive when interpreting the past rather than suggesting that “anything goes”. In fact, it is actually difficult to find proponents of judgemental relativism in archaeology. There are tendencies within some strands of “contemporary archaeologies” where the main significance of archaeological practice is no longer necessarily about interpreting the

past but “in the very process of engaging with the material remains of the past in the present” (Holtorf 2005:544). Such an agnostic position to the past does not, however, necessarily imply a hyperrelativist standpoint, but rather a just way of avoiding the problem by instead focusing on archaeology as a contemporary practice and experience.

GENERALIZATION AND PARTICULARITIES

The postmodern perspective on knowledge as relative has also had implications for the way science is presented and organized. For the literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard the prime aspect defining the postmodern condition is the collapse of faith in totalizing and synthesizing texts, the so-called “grand narratives” or “meta-narratives” (1984). The traditional synthesizing form of the modernist treatise is an explicit result of the positive perspective on knowledge as accumulative and continuously progressing forward towards more precise and accurate accounts. The idea that the past can be understood on the basis of one basic principle towards a pre-defined objective, is, of course, too simplistic. The obvious problem with such a perspective is that it tends to be reductionist; data are often forced to fit the logical structure in order to present a coherent whole (cf. Tilley 1990:143f). Further objections concern the linear structure of the narrative, which also tends to be teleological. The postmodern alternative to the totalizing historical narratives is instead to emphasize plurality and multiplicity in the production of knowledge. The grand narratives need to be *deconstructed*, that is, broken down into their core elements, each part of which needs to be scrutinized and evaluated before something new can be assembled (Nicholson & Seidman 1996:9ff). Instead of creating new meta-narratives, history can be presented as open-ended montage or simply as a multitude of micro-narratives that may or may not contradict each other. The postmodern “incredulity towards grand narratives” thus conveys an implicit shift from a generalizing perspective to the particular and the marginal.

Attitudes to the question of scale and generalization in archaeology are probably best described as ambivalent (cf. Gosden & Kirsano 2006). Hodder has suggested that archaeology should indeed focus on diversity rather than general history. Particular events, he stresses, can constitute “narrative windows” that will function as keys to understanding the “larger flows”. Such small-scale histories may not always be commensurable but are still preferable in order to avoid generalized grand narratives (Hodder 1999:137, 147, 176; but see also Hodder 2003:88, 91).

Others have elaborated on the way of presenting the past in the form of “singularized histories”, in which each locale and chain of events is interpreted as individual fragments instead of as parts of a general narrative (e.g. Magnússon 2003). Also in more recent actor-network (ANT) inspired archaeology, which aims at “redistributing” the global and general into local practice, the general *is* the particular (Latour 2005:177). This particular aspect of ANT has, however, only to a lesser extent been applied in archaeology, but judging from Latour’s own work, the redistribution of the general to the particular (and material) is a methodological move rather than a celebration of specificity. Although the particular and the individual indeed are more emphasized in post-processual and neo-materialist archaeologies than in previous schools of thought, the scope of archaeological texts is, however, by large still dictated by the general structures and developments of a certain period or culture (cf. Sherratt 1995; Thomas 2004:53; Johnson 2006a:123). The particular seems mainly addressed to provide our narratives of the past with a sense of intimacy and detail (cf. Hodder 2003:91), or as a methodological point of departure in order to make general issues more palpable and less metaphysical (e.g. Fahlander 2008:136ff; 2012a).

THE INDIVIDUAL, THE MATERIAL, AND DISCOURSE

An issue closely related to the general–particular dichotomy is the classical question of how the individual experience of agency relates to various structural constraints (e.g. Mouzelis 2008). In postmodern epistemology societies are generally viewed as heterogeneous, constituted by a multitude of individual voices (Harvey 1989:9; Eagleton 1996:103). This emphasis on plurality and diversity may seem to contradict the post-structural emphasis on discourse and structure: it is difficult to argue for the importance of structures and discourse one on the one hand, while emphasizing heterogeneity and polymorphous relations on the other. The postmodern emphasis on the particular and specific is, however, not simply about taking an opposite stance to the modernist totalizing perspective. Foucault, for instance, is very clear about not emphasizing any specific level between the event and the structure, but stressed that “there are actually a whole order of levels of different types of events differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce effects” (1980:114). In his own particular “archaeology”, Foucault investigates how the régimes of truth are articulated in the discourse on interstitial and transgressing categories such as the mad or criminals.

The focus is generally on the small-scale, on the event and particular statements, but the agents involved seldom fully recognize the structural background of their actions. The individual ways of *experiencing* the world may thus be heterogeneous and multivocal, but taken together the multitude is nonetheless much confined within the logics of a particular discourse (1980:133). There is hence a great difference between arguing for social heterogeneity and subscribing to the modern idea of the individual as an autonomous agent. In some postmodernist (and indeed archaeological) thought these two perspectives are nonetheless sometimes confused (Hodder 1987:79f; 2003:84; Thomas 2004:121ff; cf. Eagleton 1996:88f; Brown 2005:88f).

In archaeology, the post-structural emphasis on discourse before individual agency and experience has had limited impact. Perhaps the emphasis on discourse was too close to the processual dehumanized perspective that post-processualism opposed? Instead, Hodder and other influential post-processual archaeologists advocate a mixture of Collingwood's hermeneutics and the "softer" post-structuralism of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, who both in varying respects suggested a "third way" between structural constraint and individual agency (Fahlander 2003:18f). On this issue, many strands of post-processual archaeologies reveal a certain incoherency when they argue for social heterogeneity and multivocality (individual experiences) while simultaneously advocating hermeneutics as a means to understand social collectives on a collective cultural level (Fahlander 2003; cf. Wallace 2011:92f). This traditional way of understanding agency has also recently been challenged in some strands of neo-materialist, relational, symmetrical, posthuman, and perspectivist archaeologies (again, many labels indicate ambivalence?). Following the basic ideas of ANT, it is argued the material world needs to be added to the mixture. From a relational network perspective, people are not social in themselves, but agency is rather dislocated, articulated, delegated, mediated and translated between humans and materialities (Latour 2005:7, 159). The question of the ontology of the (in)dividual is thus displaced and the emphasis is instead on the relations in which humans and materialities are entangled (e.g. Thomas 2004:147f; Henare *et al.* 2007; Knapp & van Dommelen 2008; Ingold 2012). To view humans and non-humans as relationally constituted is an interesting perspective, but it does not really disentangle the general problem of how to deal with asymmetries of agency in power relations (between humans, non-humans, and ideology). Symptomatically, the relational perspective in archaeology has so far mainly been applied on a very general, ontological, or cultural level (e.g. Jones 2005; Brück 2006).

THUS SPOKE THE SUBALTERN: HETEROGENEITY AND MULTITUDES

The ambivalence concerning the individual experience contra the general scope of the narrative has always been a part of the post-processual movement. In the later texts, the focus shifts from the polyphony of past social diversity (cultural relativism) towards present-day interpretative pluralism. In contemporary archaeology, the concept of *multivocality* generally refers to the diverging meanings between different groups of people today and the question of who “owns” the past (Habu, Farcetti & Matsunaga 2008). The discussion is thus taken one step away – from the epistemological issue of divergent interpretations of the past – to the moral and ethical evaluation of preferential right of interpretation. Some archaeologists advocate a responsibility to engage a variety of academic and non-academic understandings and to accept that there are both complementary and contradictory interpretations which we cannot just dismiss as “unscientific” (e.g. Karlsson 2008). This moral dimension of multivocality is typically inspired by the post-structural notions of the relation between power and knowledge and the historicity of knowledge.

The difficulties of indigenous groups to make their interpretations or experiences of the past heard and recognized are well known and debated in archaeology (Trigger 1989b). Traditionally the validity of a statement is dependent on who utters it; a professor is traditionally regarded as more sound than your layman neighbour. This “authoritarian attitude” of traditional academia has been questioned by some archaeologists who argue for a more pluralist and “democratic” dialogue (Shanks & Tilley 1992:261; Harrison & Schofield 2010:12). The main idea seems to be to decentre scientific authority in favour of pluralism. To promote equal and plural discussion about the past is, however, a slippery slope to walk; on the one hand it may seem both fair and righteous to embrace a wider scope of voices, especially concerning the past of former colonies, but on the other hand the same archaeologists are less happy to promote, for instance, revisionist interpretations of Auschwitz and the Holocaust (cf. Harvey 1989:357). Moreover, there are fundamental problems when a dominant party encourages “the other” to respond and express their perspective. It can never be a matter of an equal relationship. The professional western archaeologist can hardly neglect years of training in argumentation and reasoning, no more than s/he can disregard his/her social and cultural capital in terms of social confidence etc. Yannis Hamilakis stresses that we need to be aware that “a multivocality that fails to address the structures of power and au-

thority is at the very least a chimera, and at worst an appeasement of the manufacturing of consent” (1999:75). The post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1988) formulated this problem in the question: “Can the subaltern speak?” The point here is not whether the subordinated classes can voice an opinion, but whether their voices are recognized as intended in the dominant discourse. Spivak despairs about whether communication on equal grounds is ever possible, while many archaeologists seem more optimistic (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1992:60; Hodder 2003:28; Harrison & Schofield 2010:12). Maybe sometimes a better way to hear the voice of the subaltern is to speak less?

It is also interesting to note that, despite the efforts of many concerned archaeologists, the multitude of different voices actually seems rather limited in range. We simply do not find the suggested great variability – either among or between academics, nor among or between non-academics – that the postmodern dogma suggests (cf. Tilley 1990; Burström 1998:32). There are, of course, controversies concerning the interpretation of certain objects or features, but the general view of the pasts often circulate around a number of given popular themes. Unlimited heterogeneity and multivocality seem thus to be more a matter of ethical and political concerns than a social reality. The idea of placing ethics before epistemology may indeed be considered a typical postmodern trait, but again, in relation to the broad spectrum of contemporary archaeology, multivocality seems so far to be an issue that mainly concern archaeologists within heritage management or among Western archaeologists working in former colonies.

STYLE AND RHETORIC: AMBIGUITY AS EPITOME?

In any discussion of postmodernism it is hard to avoid the sometimes dreadfully ambiguous and complex literary style that is associated with postmodern writings. The traditional dry treatise in formal, neutral language was developed as a form in order to distinguish it from fiction and mere speculation. But as poststructuralist theory has pointed out, there are no neutral texts; they are all subject to multiple readings and the traditional logocentric style of argument tends to encourage a teleological structure. This critique spawned a great variety of stylistic experiments coloured with mischievous irony and a mixture between serious arguments and the play with words and double meanings. Especially Derrida (1986) experimented with non-linearity and parallel texts that in no way made his arguments clearer to the reader. It can be argued that

an equivocal and ambiguous style is a consistent means to avoid a false sense of closure and the teleology of the classical treatise, but unfortunately it sometimes makes some texts more or less unintelligible. This is certainly one reason that Alan Sokal succeeded in duping the editors of the journal *Social Text* to publish his fake postmodern elaboration on quantum physics (1998). In some quarters, it is the complex and ambiguous style that stirs up the sometimes fierce war between the new and old schools (Eagleton 2003:76).

There are indeed several examples of archaeological texts that excel in ambiguity and complex writing, which are hardly justified. Yet it can never be the aim always to write in a clear and straightforward manner; some issues *are* very complex and cannot easily be simplified without becoming too mundane (or even misleading). Perhaps we also need to be reminded that Lewis Binford's and David Clarke's early texts, inspired by the rhetoric of the natural sciences, were quite difficult to understand and comprehend too? Obscure writing is thus far from novel in archaeology. Nonetheless, a few archaeologists have explored alternative forms of writing. For instance, writing poetic and subjective narrative texts in order to evade the implicit objectivism and neutrality of the traditional scientific treatise (e.g. Edmonds 1999). Others have attempted to evade the linearity and teleological aspects of written text by using electronic hypertext as a medium (e.g. Holtorf 2000). Other means of communicating and evoking the past in the present are continuously elaborated by the means of illustrations, photographs, film, augmented reality, etc. (e.g. Hamilakis *et al.* 2009; Shanks & Webmoor 2010; Gheorghiu 2012). However, despite such attempts to broaden and deepen the ways of presenting/experiencing the past, the great majority of research produced by contemporary archaeology nonetheless follow a traditional academic form, scope, and style (perhaps encouraged by the increasing importance of the peer-review system in academic journals).

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN (POST)MODERN?

Judging from how archaeology has dealt with these five themes, it is quite clear that we have not remained unaffected by postmodern epistemology. However, it is still difficult to find more than a handful of texts that fill all the criteria. The once highly controversial arguments about the fluidity of meaning, the active properties of material culture and the attack on universal categories and essentialism – all this seems more or less to be “normal science” to which only a few would

object (cf. Sjöstrand 2008). However, as Slavoj Žižek (1989:21) has argued, it is often the things we take most for granted, the things we never question, that are the fundamentals of the *real* ideology. Eagleton and Harvey, among others, suggest that postmodernist issues of diversity, pluralism and heterogeneity follow the logic of a globalized capitalist economy to which we all are subjugated (Lyotard 1984:38; Eagleton 1996:133; Harvey 2006; but see also Jameson 2005:165). For instance, postmodern identity politics that encourage multiculturalism and heterogeneity over traditional nation states certainly benefit globalized free market capitalism. It can also be viewed as a strategy of the dominant discourse (Western capitalism) to maintain power by encouraging fragmentation and heterogeneity among its rivals. The dissolution of ethnic identity makes it difficult for marginalized groups to voice their claims to be recognized as an oppressed collective (cf. Spivak 1998; Whyllie 2007:103; Hamilakis & Duke 2007). If women, for example, of different social classes, or from different parts of the world, do not have enough in common to represent a social category, it is difficult to point out the general lack of equality between the sexes (Young 1994:713f). Such a political perspective on postmodernist epistemology does not necessarily imply a global capitalist conspiracy, but serve as an example how scientific discourse is generally intertwined with politics and economics.

However, it is important to note that the proposed relation between ideology and research does not imply that issues such as heterogeneity and multivocality are recent theoretical inventions with little or no relevance to studies of pre-modern societies. It is interesting to note that most of the themes associated with postmodernism have in various respects been addressed previously in the course of modern science. Social heterogeneity, for instance, was already noted in small-scale societies by several anthropologists in the early 20th century. A historical relativism similar to that of Collingwood is found in Rankean historicism of the 19th century (Berding 2005). Moreover, matters of social heterogeneity and hybridity in small-scale societies were frequently discussed in the first half of the 20th century; anthropologists such as Robert Lowie, Ralph Linton, Georges Balandier, Marcel Mauss, and later Edmund Leach, developed an understanding of the changing life cycle of the individual, intra-cultural social heterogeneity, as well as the fact that societies are normally in a continuous process of change/hybridity (Mercier 1966:155ff; cf. Anderson 1998:80). This background has led some to stress that it is rather the postmodern pluralist view of the social that is the norm in the past and that the modernist homogenizing perspective represents the anomaly (Fletcher 2004:309).

TURN IN, TURN ON, TURN BACK?

Even though postmodern epistemology may not have been as novel and revolutionary as suggested, is it safe to say that it challenged the very essence of archaeology. Wherever one may stand in the debate, it is difficult either to neglect the postmodern critique or to remain untroubled in keeping modernist ideals of an objective science. However, instead of simply positioning a modern against a postmodern mode of archaeology, the main differences are perhaps better formulated in degrees of constructionism – from moderate to radical (Schwandt 1994). Another way of describing the developments is in terms of “turns” within the humanities and social sciences (i.e. the linguistic turn and the practice turn etc.). At the beginning of the new millennium it is argued that we face yet another “turn”. This time the discussion is less polarized perhaps because radically different epistemologies are encouraged by the new-found interest in the material. The recent “neo-materialist” or “ontological” turn seems to be attractive for both essentialists, such as neo-Darwinians, and more constructionist-influenced posthuman and relational archaeologies (cf. Solli 2011:47; Hodder 2012b:16). On a superficial level, viewing the development in terms of “turns” can thus be interpreted as a trend from polarization towards convergence (cf. Hodder 2012a:9). However, it is not difficult to see the quite substantial differences between thinking *about* things and thinking *with* things. The neo-materialist field has diverged into several strands, which are mutually quite different depending on whether they focus on becomings, relationships (in meshworks or networks), perspectivism, material agency, and object-oriented ontologies etc. Considering the theoretical underpinnings of these strands – the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1988), Bruno Latour (2005), Karen Barad (2007) and Graham Harman (2011) – it is quite clear that the rumour of the “death of theory” proposed by e.g. Eagleton (2003) and others is exaggerated.

The question that really begs for an answer is whether the current interest in the material is merely a palpable front for a radicalized postmodern epistemology. In the varieties of neo-materialist-inspired frameworks, the concepts that have been discussed here are either bypassed or made redundant. From a general neo-materialist perspective, for instance, meaning is not considered relative as much as relational and entangled in fluid networks (or meshworks) of relations between humans and materialities (e.g. Jones 2006; Ingold 2007:8off; Anderson & Harrison 2010; Fahlander 2012b). These relationships are not necessarily context-bound, but transgress cultural, regional, temporal boundaries. Instead of studying social phenomena on different levels (micro–

macro, local–global), is it argued that the local is rather related, connected, attached to and associated with various “superstructures” (Latour 2005:177). The question of individual agency versus structural constraints has also been modified by putting greater emphasis on the role of the material world, and the question of agency has been redeployed to be more about the ways in which and the degrees in which certain materialities “have it” or do not. A further aspect of the ontological turn is the reinvention of animism – or perspectivism as Viveiros de Castro terms it (2004, cf. Alberti & Bray 2009). Perspectivism further poses the question of material agency and opens up for radically alternative ontologies where materialities cannot always be distinct from the world of the living. Although different neo-materialist perspectives accentuate the material component and move away from signification, symbolism, and representation, they are by no means less immune to relativism. If objects and things indeed are constituted by their relations, those relations change when we dig them up, adding ourselves and our histories to them (e.g. Maurstad 2012). This is not the same thing as plurality of meaning, but meaning is nonetheless fluid in a similar way (cf. Pollard 2005:47f). The radicalized constructivism in non-representational and relational theories may thus be viewed as an ultimate consequence of postmodern thinking.

ARE WE THERE YET?

In retrospect, it is somewhat peculiar to read the hostile critique of some archaeologists who saw the postmodern turn as the end of archaeology as a science. A major result of the postmodern critique in archaeology seems rather to be a further expansion of the scope of the discipline and its roles in society (cf. Thomas 1995:338; 2004). If there is anything that is fitting to describe contemporary archaeology it is rather pluralism, specialization, and diversity (Webmoor 2007:568). Johnson (2006b:443) has noted that archaeologists nowadays tend less often to position themselves as either modern–postmodern or processual–postprocessual. Instead they are more likely to subscribe to certain sets of concepts, such as agency, symmetrical archaeology, intersectionality, neo-materialism, postcolonialism, feminism, etc., which all have their own sets of epistemological standpoints. Many archaeologists also turned to other issues than interpretations of the past (e.g. philosophy and social theory, the history of archaeological thought, heritage management, museum pedagogy, and contemporary archaeology). One reason for the shift of focus to the discipline itself is perhaps that it offers a way to side-step the

epistemological problems raised by the postmodern and post-structural critique. Although this interest has resulted in important discussions and new insights it is, of course, somewhat problematic to have a discipline that strives to be something else (e.g. philosophy, cultural studies, history, history of science, ethnography, etc.). Whether this state of affairs is “good” or “bad” for archaeology is up for debate. Diversity is a two-edged sword; on the one hand it may seem constructive and liberating, but on the other, it may lead to fragmentation, problems of communication and lack of disciplinary coherence (cf. Jones 2004:327).

In theoretical and ontological terms it may be true to some extent that the postmodern linguistic constructivism collapsed at the beginning of the new millennium (Eagleton 2003; 2007; Hekman 2010). However, considering the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the new materialist ontologies, archaeology is by no means less theoretical or less fluid than before – rather the contrary. From a very general point of view the theoretical discussion of the last millennium was characterized by aspirations to resolve the problems posed by postmodern critique. In this sense the contemporary debate can be said to differ since those questions are rather displaced than emphasized. There is an implicit notion in the writings on the neo-materialist turn that we have “moved on” and are past the basic questions of the 20th century. For instance, in recent neo-materialist archaeologies – especially the Latourian ones – this is made by a series of moves that seek to “redistribute” and “re-assemble” the social as entanglements of relations in rhizomatic, ever-expanding networks. The relational basis for ANT may, however, face problems when operationalized in actual case studies. If artefacts, landscapes and humans are in a constant process of “becoming” and “on the move”, is it difficult to say anything substantial about them. The proposition to approach the social from a more “symmetrical” perspective may indeed be inspiring, but suffers the risk of ending up as mere ethnographic (or praxiographic) descriptions (Latour 2005:136f, 156f, 184; Mol 2002:32). Furthermore, is it not evident how asymmetrical power relations can be articulated from a relational network perspective (cf. Harman 2009:208). A past constituted by networks of relations may thus suffer the risk of being toothless and mundane. Taking these considerations into account, not only the “death of theory” is exaggerated, but also that of the demise of postmodernism. Although postmodernism as a concept and term may have gone out of fashion, its ramifications are still alive and kicking as a silent non-spoken counterpart to the neo-materialist strands of thought. Whether this shift in focus is mainly an effect of contemporary events, a generational shift between different theoretical per-

spectives on the past and the present, or really constitutes an ontological shift, is for the future to tell.

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