4   Adventures In Processual Theory

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As archaeologists, we are meant to be intelligent, inquisitive, thoughtful, and above all open-minded. What I find appalling is more often than not, we as a profession often forget that last caveat, aligning ourselves with various theoretical approaches and ideals in much the same way the religious hold to their respective faiths. As likely surmised by that rather bold statement, I have developed a bit of a reputation among my peers as an anti-theorist. That is not to say I do not see the relevance or value of theory in archaeology, I simply question its application. Sadly, you will have to wait for my next article to witness me throw the literary gauntlet down in an all-out assault on theory. For now, however, you can begin your journey towards enlightenment through my current offering – 'Adventures in Processual Theory.' Ironically, I set out to submit this article last year but decided to wait and see if my views changed over the duration of my degree course. Interestingly, they have, but not for the better. . .

So without further ado:

When looking at the development of the so-called "New Archaeology", it is easy to become caught up in the ill-conceived theories and methods that came about during this time; however despite the dislike I hold for processualism, I (like many others) have to admit that it can still have its place within archaeological theory today. Widely claimed in American, Australian and British archaeological communities as the dominant theoretical position in practice, processualism has managed to separate itself from the historical connotations of the early twentieth century and claims to have associated itself with the natural, or hard, sciences (Smith 2004). However, in order to more accurately address the present, it is therefore important to review the past.

Archaeology was largely mired in the trappings of descriptive narrative without any forethought for the possibility of a clear and concise explanation of the purpose of neither artefacts nor the cultures in which they were originated. For good or ill, processualism was a key stage in the evolution of archaeology into the multidisciplinary social science we see today. Processualism was borne out of the desire to be more scientific and anthropological in the methodological approach to archaeology. This involved placing an emphasis on cultural evolution, systems thinking, adaptive culture, scientific approach and the concept of a culture process, as well as including an attempt to become more explicit about one's biases and lastly, an understanding of variability which involved the explicit use of theory, models and generalisation (Johnson 2006; Renfrew 2004). By isolating and examining the various systems functioning within a society, as well as between societies, processualists place emphasis on environmental, economic and subsistence models and their relation to the social aspects of a given society, in order to understand the impact of prevailing ideologies and beliefs on these systems and the various social units (Renfrew 2004). This need to distance archaeology from the culture history approach of its early foundations, and to move towards a more relevant and vigorous mode of theory, led to Clarke's famous treatise on the "loss of innocence" which characterised this paradigm shift as the price of expanding consciousness (Clarke 1973). The concept of the

expert scientific archaeology created mass public debate and conflict over the context of material culture; with the perception of heritage items transformed into archaeological data (Smith 2004). In fact, at its formative stage, processualists went so far as to accuse previous archaeologists of creating a form of 'counterfeit history' which failed to see the extent of the archaeological record available (Renfrew 2004).

Individual variability in the context of the culture-historical approach was one of the primary concerns of processualists. Hodder states the key features of this approach refer to a descriptive culture history, normative or shared beliefs, and prescriptive components to norms; i.e. the rules of behaviour (Hodder 1991). North American archaeology of the twentieth century helped to redefine this relationship between finds and the cultures from which they originated; this focus upon the classification of objects, their context and their respective impact upon the culture history relied on anthropological methods and interpretations (Greene 2002). As a result, Greene (2002) states, the position of settlements in relation to each other and to their agricultural and material resources became an important part of the New Archaeology in the 1960s. Processualism was largely responsible for inspiring advances in the systems used in the recovery of archaeological material, in addition to broadening the interpretation of said finds through a more precise methodology (Greene 2002). One positive development in processualism, according to Trigger (1997), was the creation of a systems theory in which archaeologists were allowed to apply a scientific method to their work (Trigger 1997). And while archaeologists were able to apply systems theories to their work, it was not possible to perform rigorous mathematical testing upon it, thus creating new ways of looking at models of cultural change and helping to illustrate that the application of scientific methodology to archaeology was possible (Trigger 1997). Perhaps the most significant contribution of processualism to archaeology is the attempt to include scientific method in the toolkit, and with this change that arrived at the universities and other areas of the discipline as a whole, the foundations for all the work of post-World War II was set follow (Johnson 2005).

However, processualism is inherently flawed, with its reliance on approaches that appear to lack any clearly defined form of explanation for archaeologists to use, with emphasis bearing on how that form of theory should be applied rather than how the archaeology occurs, thus leading to a far too generalised result which erodes the very credibility of these theorists. One of the key flaws of processualism was its failure to contribute an over-reaching understanding of not only the nature of the development of human culture, but also its behaviour, despite its apparent concern with the identification, as Smith (2004) states, of individual 'cultures' through the archaeological record. In 'borrowing' from the natural sciences during its development, as well as the failure to establish a link with social science models, the identification of subtle 'cultural' developments simply was not supported (Smith 2004). Gibbon summarises processualism as having largely failed to handle archaeological data as cultural material and realise an understanding of the cultural past (Gibbon 1989). More often than not, material culture was not a direct likeness of human behaviour; it was instead an adaption of that behaviour (Hodder 1991). A distinct aversion to admit that cultural change could have been brought about through human cognisance or desire is another major flaw of processualism (Trigger 1997). Trigger states major aspects of human behaviour, such as religious beliefs,

aesthetics, and scientific knowledge received very little attention (Trigger 1997). The unconvincing nature of generalisation forced the concept that material culture is an indirect representation of human society, which misrepresents the relationship between material and cultural society (Hodder 1991). Renfrew states that the aim of producing valid generalisations remains an important goal, although to frame these as universal 'laws of cultural process' is now seen as impractical (Renfrew 1994). The reliance on such universal laws and empirical methodology stood in stark contrast to the archaeological norms of the time. Gibbon states that the reader was left with the impression that, for example, an explanation sketch, while incomplete, was an adequate form of explanation (Gibbon 1989). As such, explanation, as used by processualists, was at best incomplete, and while the models may not be wrong, in the absence of an all-inclusive unified archaeological theory, it cannot be viewed empirically (Gibbon 1989).

This was largely due to Middle Range Theory, which linked arguments between the present and the past in order to interpret the past. An example of this is seen in the handling of data concerning the heritage of native North Americans against that of Euro-American society. Rife with sweeping generalities, any cultural or spiritual identity was all but eliminated from the native peoples, reducing them to nothing more than a ruler to measure from (Trigger 1997). This has only resulted in alienating the native peoples and led to a number of legal battles as they attempt to control their past and what is to become of it (Trigger 1997). A key failure of processualism therefore is its inability to broaden in scope and remove itself from the 1950s approaches of ecology and settlement-patterns (Trigger 1997). This ultimately prejudiced their methodology and, in their narrow-minded pursuit to explain how human behaviour and social culture was shaped by surrounding ecology, failed to recognise the all-encompassing aspects that underpin society and transform it into the cultural history that is left behind (Trigger 1997). The aim should be to incorporate, as Hodder suggests, both meaning and agency into archaeological theory, by using a number of means to interpret the past such as material culture symbolism, cultural meanings, intentions and purposes (Hodder 1991).

Despite its many failings, processualism was very much a product of its day: influenced by the society, culture and politics of the world the archaeologists found themselves in and without its theories and approaches, archaeology as we know it may very well have ceased to be. However, in moving from the past and into the present, just as the discipline moved into the latter twentieth century, a number of archaeologist became increasingly suspicious of not only the interpretations of finds, but also their methods, which were considered at best, nothing more than contrived and superficial 'stories' used to support the socio-political agenda (Greene 2002). Dubbing themselves postprocessualists, these archaeologists engaged philosophical and anthropological interpretive theory in an attempt to shift the focus from that of the generalised socio-environmental process to that of the individual human experience (Greene 2002). Postprocessualists argue that our interpretation is weighted by the influences we accumulate as a result of our respective socio-cultural and even environmental experiences and therefore the result is we cannot but help utilise some form of a biased theoretical perspective in archaeological investigations (Greene 2002). Furthermore, it has been suggested that while processualism did have a role in the development of archaeological thought, and the paradigm

shift away from the antiquarian role of data-collection and artefact acquisition, it was not key; it was a further step towards a better understanding of the past (Johnson 2006). Conversely, as postprocessualists point out, traditional archaeology was not as narrow-minded in its approach of its methodology as suggested, however the issues raised by processualism were relevant despite the fact its criticisms may have not been wholly accurate (Johnson 2006).

With the weight of the article's context in mind, is it healthy for processualism to hold a dominant position in archaeological theory today? The answer in lieu of the evidence must be a resounding "no". However, just as we have a number of implements that can be utilised in the field, so too do we have a series of approaches that we as archaeologists can apply to our methodology. This concept should be at the very heart of theory: theory is a toolset that relates to the total sum of the archaeological record. In other words, instead of aligning ourselves to a particular brand of theory as if it were our religion, we should instead view theory as an all-encompassing approach which suggests that you look beyond the standard line of thought, and take those elements from theory that work within the context of your own methodology, and use these as an integrated toolset to achieve your desired results.

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