6 Theory 101

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The New Archaeology

I am not what many would classify as a typical archaeologist. In fact many of my thoughts and ideas fall well outside the typical norms of the profession and sometimes to such extremes to cause a friend and colleague to dub me an *Archaeological Anarchist*; a name, I am afraid, that has stayed with me. Past readers of *The Post Hole* will recall that in Issue 16 I threw the proverbial gauntlet down on all things theory. Well I am not sorry to say that the current editors, in their divine wisdom, have taken up my challenge and tasked me with providing an argument on a selection of theories over the coming issues. Furthermore, you the reader will get the opportunity to not only challenge me, but perhaps influence which theories I cover in issues to come. As a result, I will be exploring key elements of Archaeological Theory, with a view to offer the reader a basic understanding of the featured theory as my own thoughts on the subject. So as with all things it is said that it is best to start at the beginning, so that is where we shall begin this journey: at the very foundations of what was eventually labelled 'The New Archaeology'.

The earliest roots of Archaeology are found deeply embedded within layers of Antiquarianism, which as Matthew Johnson states, in his book *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, is a process of simply assembling and collating old objects for their own sake, rather than as evidence of the past (Johnson 2005, 13). With that in mind, it is quite easy to understand how Archaeology was entrenched within a process of descriptive analysis which lacked a definitive exploration and explanation of artefacts and their respective material culture. Prior to what Renfrew refers to as 'The Great Awakening' in the early 1960's, Archaeology's 'Long Sleep' left the field in a torpor of some eighty years which entrenched the profession in such a state of stagnation that it saw very little change, particularly in theory, despite the growing methodological innovations brought to the field by the likes of Gordon Childe and Walt Taylor (Renfrew 1982, 7).

Much of the work carried out by Archaeologists at this time largely fulfilled a custodial or curatorial role, with artefacts simply collected within an accepted structure and catalogued against a surface history which may well have overlooked key elements such as the material culture in which it existed. To further submerge this period into a veritable Archaeological 'dark age', while our knowledge of these artefacts improved over time, there was no real change in our actual understanding of them. Soon however, whether as a result of a desire to be considered a credible discipline or perhaps finding inspiration in the explosion of new ideas in the fields of philosophy and science, Archaeology began its long ascent from the infancy of a descriptive antiquarianistic approach to that of an analytical scientific method.

This paradigm shift away from a normative view of the origins of culture to that of a process was best characterized by David Clarke in his article 'Archaeology and the Loss of Innocence' as the price of expanding consciousness (Clarke 1973). While the theory of the era was neither well defined nor described, explanation was still an intrinsic approach to archaeology (Trigger

2006). However from this rose a desire to look beyond the simple classification of data and create new theories and generalisations that could provide an explanation for the history of human culture (Trigger 2006). Renfrew states, the aims of explanation may be described, without initial reference to any methodology, as to make intelligible (Renfrew 1982). However in plain English, when Archaeologists set out to put an artefact into context, they are attempting to understand the deeper meaning or origins behind the item they are studying.

The drawback of the early approaches to archaeology appears to be the general lack of a clearly defined form of explanation for archaeologists to use; far too frequently, the emphasis lies on how that form should be applied rather than how it is (Renfrew 1982). Without some form of standard in place, the deductions and generalisations produced through these scientistic (the belief that scientific thought is inherently superior to other modes of thinking; Johnson 2006) methods and approaches can become far too generalised and as such erode at the credibility of theorists (Renfrew 1982). In this sense, a conflict is borne out of explanation which will ultimately result in a return to descriptions (Hodder 2003). By introducing analogies to archaeological method, in order to fully explore the inherent similarities and differences observed, their context may be more clearly understood and explained (Hodder 2003). This concept enabled the development of the hermeneutic method, which states that we must understand any detail such as an object or a word in terms of the whole, and the whole in terms of the detail (Hodder citing Gadamer 2003). These ideas and theories formed the foundations for cognitive archaeology and the discipline of critical self-consciousness (Clarke 1973).

This new level of disciplinary consciousness sought to transcend the assumed trajectory and circumstance of the system through a greater interpretation of the internal structure and the underlying peripheral environment (Clarke 1973). Ultimately, this evolved into the multidisciplinary approaches we have today which comprises of such schools of thought as functionalism, processualism, post-processualism, etc. All these methods were influenced by the society, culture and politics of their day and while they each have their own flaws, they all sought to give an explanation to the history of artefact and their respective cultures. From scientific method to cognitive thinking, without these theories, archaeology may have descended back into antiquarianism or even been lost to the very histories the profession so fervently tries to understand and explore. Although they may rarely agree with one another on everything (and in some cases anything), these theories all have their place for answering the question: why?

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