

Common Sense is Not Enough

Archaeology can be very boring, distressing, and physically uncomfortable. Every year we excavate thousands of sites, some with painstaking and mind-numbing patience, some in a great and undignified hurry. Every year we get chilled to the marrow or bitten half to death by mosquitoes while visiting some unprepossessing, grassy mound in the middle of nowhere. Miles from a decent restaurant or even a warm bath, we try to look interested while the rain comes down in sheets and some great professor whose best work was 20 years ago witters on in a monotone about what was found in Trench 4B. Every year we churn out thousands of interminable, stultifyingly dull site reports, fretting over the accuracy of plans and diagrams, collating lists of grubby artifacts to publish that few will ever consult or use again.

Why?

We could spend the money on hospitals. Alternatively, we could quietly pocket the cash and write a much more entertaining, fictitious version of what the past was like while we sat on a sun-kissed terrace somewhere in southern California. If we were feeling ideologically sound, we could raise an International Brigade for a liberation struggle somewhere. Each of these alternatives has its attractions, but we don't do any of these things. We go on as we have done before.

One reason we don't do these things is because *archaeology is very important*. The past is dead and gone, but it is also very powerful. It is so powerful that an entire nation (Zimbabwe) can name itself after an archaeological site. It is so powerful that archaeological sites are surrounded by police and are the subject of attempted occupations by New Age travelers. It is so powerful that even individual groups of artifacts like the Parthenon frieze are the

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subject of major international disputes. It can even be so powerful that religious groups engage in deliberate and public iconoclasm – destruction of archaeological sites and artifacts.

The question “why do we do archaeology?” is therefore bound up with the question “why is archaeology – the study of the past through its material remains – so important to us?” And this again leads on to the question of “us,” of our identity – *who are we?* And these are all theoretical questions.

Definitions of Theory

“Theory” is a very difficult word to define. Indeed, I shall return to this topic in the final chapter, since different theoretical views define “theory” in different ways. Different definitions cannot therefore be fully explored without prior explanation of those views.

For the time being, I propose to define theory as follows: theory is *the order we put facts in*. I will go on to discuss the extent to which “facts” exist independently of theory, how we might define “facts” and what qualifies as a “fact.” We can also note that most archaeologists would include within the purview of theory *why we do archaeology* and the social and cultural context of archaeology. They would also refer to *issues of interpretation*. Most archaeologists would agree that the way we interpret the past has “theoretical” aspects in the broad sense. For example, we could cite general theories such as cultural and biological evolution, issues of how archaeologists could or should go about testing ideas, debates over how archaeologists should think about stylistic or decorative change in artifacts.

There is disagreement over whether many concepts can be considered “theoretical” or whether they are merely neutral techniques or methods outside the purview of theory. Stratigraphy, excavation and recording techniques, and the use of statistical methods are, for example, clearly all instances of putting facts in a certain order. However, they might be considered “theoretical” by some but “just practical” or “simply techniques” by others. Theory and method are often confused by archaeologists. In this more restricted sense of theory, if theory covers the “why” questions, method or methodology covers the “how” questions. So theory covers *why* we selected this site to dig, method *how* we dig it. However, theory and method are obviously closely related, and many archaeologists including myself regard such a straightforward division as too simple.

To give an example of the relationship between theory and method, we might consider different methods of investigating social inequality in the archaeological record. Thus the method archaeologists might use would be to compare graves “richly” endowed with lots of grave goods with poorer, unadorned graves. It is evident in this exercise that certain ideas or theories

about the nature of social inequality are being assumed (that social status will be reflected in treatment of the body at death, that material goods are unequally distributed through society and that this has a direct relationship to social inequality, and so on). These ideas are themselves theoretical in nature.

Perhaps theory and method are one and the same thing and cannot be separated; perhaps they have to be separated if archaeology is to be a rigorous discipline that is capable of testing its theories against its data. This is a debate we shall return to in Chapter 4.

I'm sorry to butt in, but all this discussion of theory and method clearly demonstrates just how sterile and boring theory really is. You're already lost in definitions and semantics, you haven't mentioned a single fact about the past, and I'm beginning to wish I hadn't bothered to start reading this and had turned my attention to that new book about the Hopewell culture instead. Theory is irrelevant to the practice of archaeology; we can just use our common sense.

Ah, Roger, the eternal empiricist. (Roger Beefy is an undergraduate student at Northern University, England, though students like Roger can be found in any archaeological institution. Roger fell in love with archaeology when he was a child, scrambling up and down the ruins of local castles, churches, burial mounds, and other sites. Roger spent a year after school before coming to Northern University digging and working in museums. Roger loves handling archaeological material, and is happiest when drawing a section or talking about seriation techniques over a beer. Now, in his second year at Northern University, Roger has found himself in the middle of a compulsory “theory course.” Full of twaddle about middle-range theory, hermeneutics, and postcoloniality, it seems to have nothing to do with the subject he loves.)

So, you want to know why theory is “relevant” to archaeological practice. Perhaps you will bear with me while I discuss four possible reasons.

1 Archaeologists need to justify what we do

The audience for archaeological work (other archaeologists, people in other disciplines, the “general public” or “community” however defined) needs to have a clear idea from archaeologists of why our research is important, why it is worth paying for, why archaeologists are worth listening to. There are a hundred possible answers to this *challenge of justification*, for example:

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- The past is intrinsically important, and we need to find out about it for its own sake.
- We need to know where we came from to know where we're going next. Knowledge of the past leads to better judgments about the future.
- Only archaeology has the time depth of many thousands of years needed to generate comparative observations about long-term culture processes.
- Archaeology is one medium of cultural revolution that will emancipate ordinary people from repressive ideologies and validate social justice agendas.

The chances are that you disagree with at least one of these statements, and agree with at least one other. That doesn't change the fact that *each statement is a theoretical proposition* that needs justifying, arguing through, and debating before it can be accepted or rejected. None of the statements given above is obvious, self-evident, or commonsensical when examined closely. Indeed, very little in the world is obvious or self-evident when examined closely, though our political leaders would have us think otherwise.

2 Archaeologists need to evaluate one interpretation of the past against another, to decide which is the stronger

Archaeology relies in part for its intellectual credibility on being able to distinguish “good” from “bad” interpretations of the past. Were the people who lived on this site hunter-gatherers, or were they aliens from the planet Zog? Which is the stronger interpretation?

It's impossible to decide what is a strong archaeological interpretation on the basis of “common sense” alone. Common sense might suggest, for example, that we accept the explanation that covers the greatest number of facts. There may be thousands of sherds of pottery dating from the first millennium BCE on a site, all factual in their own way, but one other fact – a tree-ring date of 750 CE, for example – may suggest that they might be all “residual” or left over from an earlier period. In practice, every day of our working lives as archaeologists, *we decide on which order to put our facts in*, what degree of importance to place on different pieces of evidence. When we do this, we use theoretical criteria to decide which facts are important and which are not worth bothering with.

A good example of the inadequacy of common sense in deciding what is a strong or weak archaeological explanation is that of ley lines. Ley lines were “discovered” by Alfred Watkins in the 1920s, when he noticed that many ancient archaeological sites in Britain could be linked up by straight lines. The idea that ancient sites lay on straight lines could be “proved” easily by taking a map upon which such ancient monuments were marked and drawing such lines through them. Watkins suggested these lines represented prehistoric trackways. Nonsense, said the professional archaeological community.

It was common sense that prehistoric peoples living thousands of years before literacy or formal geometry were far too primitive to lay out such geometrically sophisticated lines. Watkins had intended his book as a genuine contribution to archaeology, but his research, sincerely carried out, was laughed out of court and consigned to the ranks of lunatic “fringe archaeology.” Other writers took his thesis up in succeeding decades but extended it by suggesting that the lines were of sacred significance or mystical power.

Now it is quite clear today that prehistoric peoples would have been quite capable of laying out such lines. The original, commonsensical criteria used by some archaeologists for rejecting Watkins’s thesis were completely invalid.

Ley lines do not exist. This was shown by Tom Williamson and Liz Bellamy in *Ley Lines in Question*, which analyzed such lines statistically and showed that the density of archaeological sites in the British landscape is so great that a line drawn through virtually anywhere will “clip” a number of sites. It took Williamson and Bellamy a book’s worth of effort and statistical sophistication to prove this, however.

The moral of the debate over ley lines is that what is considered to constitute a strong or a weak explanation is not simply a matter of “common sense.” I would argue that if we really want to understand what drove and continues to drive the ley line debate, we have to look, in part, at class divides in British archaeology. In his time, Watkins was derided as a vulgar amateur, while today the tradition of ley line searchers continues strongly in “alternative” or New Age circles. New Age travelers and others in their turn view upper middle-class professional archaeologists with suspicion. Others might dispute this social interpretation and suggest alternative reasons for the intellectual development of the issue. I might reply: we would then be having a theoretical debate.

3 We must be explicit in what we do as archaeologists

In other words, we must be as open as possible about our reasons, approaches, and biases, rather than trying to conceal them or pretend that they do not exist. This is a basic rule of academic discourse, though it is not always followed. Lewis Binford, a character we shall meet properly in the next chapter, made the point that all scientists of all disciplines need to be aware of the assumptions they are making if they wish to be productive.

It goes without saying that we can never be completely explicit about our biases and preconceptions. This should not stop us trying.

4 We don’t “need” theory, we all use theory whether we like it or not

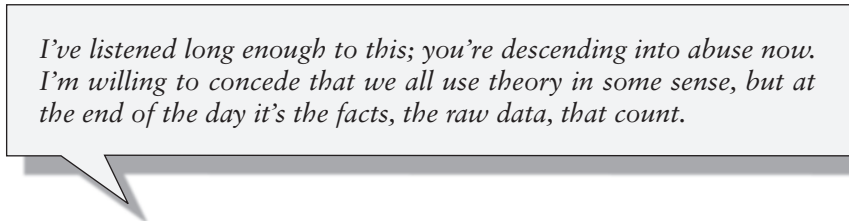
Put another way, *we are all theorists*. This is the most important point of all. The most lowly troweler, the most bored washer of ceramics, the

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most alienated finds assistant or lab technician, are all theoreticians in the sense that they all use theories, concepts, ideas, assumptions in their work. (The theory may have been imposed on them by the project director or funding body, but it is theory nevertheless.) Put another way, the driest, most descriptive text or site report is already theoretical. Somebody wielding a WHS or Marshalltown trowel relies on theories of soil color change and stratigraphy in their work; editorial judgments about the relative weighting and order given to pottery and artifact reports in a site monograph depend on a judgment on what is “significant” about that particular site which in turn rests on theoretical criteria.

Any archaeologist who therefore tells you that their work is “atheoretical,” that they are “not interested in theory,” or that they are doing “real archaeology” as opposed to those “trendy theorists” is not telling the whole truth. They are as much theorists as anyone else, though they might choose to mask their theoretical preconceptions by labeling them “common sense” or derived from the “real world.” In doing so, I would argue that they are bypassing their responsibility to make clear the intellectual basis of their work, trying to hide the theoretical assumptions and approaches that they are in fact using from critical scrutiny. They are indulging in an intellectual sleight of hand.

I would go further: pretending to be atheoretical is an attempt to impose a kind of *machismo* on to archaeological practice. As we shall see in Chapter 9, archaeological practice is bound up with gendered notions of what is or is not valuable. There is, at least in the English-speaking world, always something vaguely effeminate (and therefore, it is implied, somehow secondary) about talking, reasoning, discussing, trying to think clearly and explicitly. It is difficult to see Vin Diesel at a philosophy discussion group. “Real men” don’t do isms and ologies; they just dig – preferably with a really large, heavy pickaxe.



I've listened long enough to this; you're descending into abuse now. I'm willing to concede that we all use theory in some sense, but at the end of the day it's the facts, the raw data, that count.

I'm not going to argue now about whether “raw data” really exist independently of theory – that will come later. Let's suppose for now that raw data really do exist. Where does that get us? There is an infinity of archaeological facts.

They are piled in their millions in museum and laboratory storerooms, in physical and online archives, and in tables of data. Here are some pretty undeniable “facts”:

The pot I am holding is 600 years old.
 Cuzco is an Inca site in Peru.
 Lepenski Vir is a Mesolithic site in Serbia.
 Colono Ware pottery has been found in Virginia.
 A skeleton was excavated at Maiden Castle, Dorset, England, with an iron projectile lodged in its spine.
 Great Basin projectile points come in different sizes.
 The Bronze Age preceded the Iron Age.
 Tikal was a major ceremonial center for the Ancient Maya.
 There are usually lots of clay pipe fragments on post-1500 sites.
 The Dordogne area of France is full of cave art.
 The Great Wall of China is studded with towers.
 In Chaco Canyon the ancient pueblos are built of stone.

Do the sentences above add up to a meaningful account of the past, a coherent archaeological narrative? No. Simply dredging up facts and waiting for them to cohere into an orderly account of the past is like putting a number of monkeys in front of typewriters and waiting for them to come up with the complete works of Shakespeare.

What makes us archaeologists as opposed to mindless collectors of old junk is *the set of rules we use to translate those facts into meaningful accounts of the past*, accounts that “make sense” to us as archaeologists and (it is hoped) to those who read or engage with our work. And those rules, whether they are implicit or explicit, are theoretical in nature. Facts are important, but without theory they remain utterly silent.

Let’s take the example of a distinguished Professor of Archaeology who claims to be writing in an atheoretical, factual manner using “common sense,” and see what he is really doing. I have selected this text more or less at random:

It is worth stressing that Romano-British culture was based on a money economy. In south-eastern Britain coins were indeed in use before the conquest, but the Romans were responsible for spreading their circulation throughout the island. The extent to which currency permeated the whole commercial life of the country, down to the smallest transactions, may be gauged from the occurrence of coins on the humblest Romano-British sites and in the remotest part of the province. (Alcock 1976, p. 174)

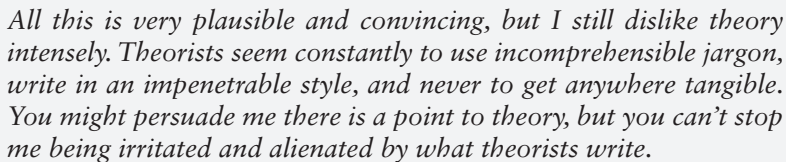
One theoretical assumption being made here is that ideas like “transaction” and “commercial life,” which only gain their modern meaning in the later

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eighteenth century and only arguably so even then, can easily be applied to Roman Britain without further explication. It follows that the writer must expect the reader to use his or her modern experience of transactions and commercial life – market oriented, largely unconnected with social relations, mediated by a common means of monetary exchange – to understand the meaning of the sentence. This and other assumptions may or may not be true, but they are theoretical in nature.

A second is a “middle-range” assumption: that is, it connects particular facts on the one hand to general theories on the other (see Chapter 4). Alcock assumes that the relative numbers of coins on different site types (note the use of an implicit site hierarchy that equates with a social hierarchy, assumed rather than demonstrated: “the humblest sites”) will accurately reflect the level of what Alcock has termed “commercial activity.” Of course, we have already acknowledged that commercial activity is a much more theoretically complex beast. Again, this is a theoretical proposition.

Alcock’s account may or may not be “true,” a “fair picture,” or “valid”; that is a matter for debate among those specializing in this period. It is certainly deeply theoretical. In many ways, it reflects the theoretical ideas and assumptions of the early medieval archaeology of its time, broadly those of “culture history” discussed in Chapter 2. I could go on analyzing the passage for several more pages, but the point has been made that even the most apparently straightforward, transparent, “clear” prose conceals theoretical depths.



All this is very plausible and convincing, but I still dislike theory intensely. Theorists seem constantly to use incomprehensible jargon, write in an impenetrable style, and never to get anywhere tangible. You might persuade me there is a point to theory, but you can't stop me being irritated and alienated by what theorists write.

No, I can't. I get irritated by a lot of theoretical writing, just as I get irritated by all sorts of archaeological writing. But you've raised a lot of points here that are worth taking in turn.

First, why the “jargon?” Long words with specialized meanings are not confined to archaeological theory. Every area within archaeology has its own specialist terms of reference; in this sense jargon is in the eye of the beholder. My familiar terms as a theorist or as a specialist in vernacular architecture may seem jargon to the environmental specialist, and those of the environmental specialist may equally seem jargon to me.

There is a deeper problem with the accusation of jargon, however. There seems to be an assumption behind such an accusation that we can always express what we want to say in “clear, simple, and easy” language. If only archaeology were so straightforward! If it were, we might have concluded the archaeological project with a perfect understanding of the past hundreds of years ago. Archaeology is, if nothing else, about new ideas about the past. We express ideas in words, and it may be appropriate to use new words to lead the reader to think in new ways.

Human societies were and are very complex things. As part of the natural world, they share its complexity, and also have a social and cultural complexity all of their own. We don’t complain when the chemist or biologist uses technical language incomprehensible to the layperson, so why should we when the archaeologist does so?

The point I am making here is that archaeologists expect the finer techniques of archaeological practice to be difficult to comprehend and master; that is the nature of our discipline. We are prepared to put effort into grasping the language and practice of stratigraphy, Harris matrices, seriation, scientific dating techniques, even the half-intuitive practical skill of differentiating between layers by the feel of the soil under the trowel. But the “theory” side of what we do – using the tiny scraps of information thus gained to tell us about the human past in all its richness and complexity – must be at least equally difficult as these “practical” tasks. In fact, it must be one of the most intellectually demanding tasks we as a species have ever set ourselves.

I think you’re missing the point. The suspicion is that jargon is being used to mystify, to create a language of exclusion where the outsider is made to feel small.

There is some justice in this charge. Certain forms of academic rhetoric are used, intentionally or unintentionally, to set up in-groups and out-groups. I do not defend such a practice; the issue of who gets included, and who gets excluded, in academic language and practice is an important one which will surface several times in later chapters. But again, one hears the vague murmur of pots calling kettles black; all sectional interests within and outside archaeology do this. Read any article in *Vernacular Architecture* on the classification of scarf-joints with squinted and pegged abutments, or a medieval historian on enfeoffments and subinfeudation.

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Finally, “writing clearly” assumes that one is *writing about something else*. In other words, that there is a real, external world out there with certain essential, concrete features, features that language can describe in a more or less clear and neutral manner. Now whether one is describing the decoration on pots or suggesting what it might have been like to live in the Bronze Age, this is a highly debatable assumption. Certainly, in most traditions of Western thought, the past doesn’t exist anywhere outside our own heads. I have never touched, kicked, or felt the past.

Theory is difficult. If one accepts that all archaeologists are theorists, then logically it is no more or less difficult than any other branch of archaeology. But archaeology itself is difficult. We have set ourselves an incredibly daunting task. We want to understand human societies that have been dead and gone for thousands of years, whose customs, values, and attitudes were almost certainly utterly different from our own. We have to do this without talking to the people themselves. What is more, we want to understand how and why they changed in the way they did. And the only materials we have to achieve this immense task are a few paltry scraps of rubbish they left behind on the way, most of which have long since decayed into dust. Such a task is not a simple one; the wish that, for all its practical discomforts and difficulties, it be an intellectually easy one is quite understandable, but very naïve.

Theory is also difficult for reasons that have less to do with jargon as such and more to do with academic practice. Practitioners in theory will often say one thing and do quite another. A theoretical article will proclaim that it is tackling a problem from a new, exciting perspective and just churn out the same old approach thinly disguised. Another article will accuse a rival of a string of theoretical iniquities and then do exactly the same things itself using different language. One of the most important things theory does, or should do, is to distinguish between the claims that an academic paper is making and whether those claims are actually met in practice. Making such distinctions is hard intellectual labor.

Which leads to my final point: theory is difficult, in the last analysis, because it requires one to think for oneself. When a student writes a term paper or essay on southwestern Native American pottery, he or she can churn out a series of “facts” gleaned from the standard textbooks. Such a list of facts, or more accurately a repetition of the textbooks’ narratives, may not get a particularly good grade in the absence of any critical analysis or independent thinking whatsoever, but the student will get by. Such an approach comes unstuck, however, in writing a theory essay. It’s more difficult to regurgitate things copied out of books and not really deeply understood when one is dealing with abstract ideas, particularly when one writer disagrees so clearly and fundamentally with another. Though any crop of undergraduate essays will demonstrate that it is not impossible.

The literary theorist Jonathan Culler (1997, pp. 11–17) points out that:

theory makes you desire mastery: you hope that theoretical reading will give you the concepts to organize and understand the phenomena that concern you. But theory makes mastery impossible, not only because there is always more to know, but, more specifically and more painfully, because theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and the assumptions on which they are based.

Theory, then, involves pain. It involves the deliberate placing of oneself in a vulnerable position, where the need to think for oneself makes one's conclusions always provisional and always open to attack from others.

Thinking for oneself, however, is something every student of archaeology (or any other critical discipline for that matter) is (or should be) in the business of doing. Ultimately, critical evaluation with reference to evidence is the keystone of a liberal education. We live in an age of contradictions: for some, education is increasingly seen as a commodity, in which knowledge can, it is implied, be bought and sold in the marketplace, while for others, the engagement of ideas with evidence is seen as optional rather than necessary. In these times, the idea of an education as learning the skills of thinking critically and of evaluating the evidence for and against a particular view is more and more under attack. Perhaps it is this cultural context that has led to some of the sharpness of the ritualized denunciations of theory.

Understanding Theory

Well, I still feel pretty dubious about theory, but I'm prepared to go along with you for a bit. Where do we go from here?

The rest of this book will try to illuminate some of the major trends in archaeological theory, starting with the 1960s and moving on from there. To try to make this book as clear as possible, I am going to adopt two strategies.

First, from time to time I shall talk at length about developments in associated disciplines and in intellectual thought as a whole. As a result, long passages and even sub-sections of chapters may seem utterly irrelevant to the practicing archaeologist. The reason I do this is because archaeology has had a habit of picking up ideas second-hand from other disciplines.

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Ideas have been changed, even confused and distorted, in the process. As a result, it is necessary to go back “to source” to explain them clearly and to understand precisely how they have been used and abused by archaeologists. So please bear with the text, plod through the “irrelevant” material, and I will then try to explain its relevance to archaeological thought.

Second, I shall look at the development of theory historically, looking first at the origins of the New Archaeology, then at reactions to it. I suggest that by understanding the historical context of a set of ideas such as “New Archaeology” or “postprocessual archaeology,” one may more easily sympathize with its aims and grasp some of its underlying principles and concerns. Please, do not skip this part of the book as “out of date” or “passé”; an understanding of this context is necessary in order to put many of the features of contemporary archaeology in their historical surroundings rather than place them in a vacuum. If you want to understand where your professor is “coming from,” the ideas and attitudes that underlie views of archaeology that are accepted and commonplace today, these earlier intellectual movements and theories are absolutely foundational.

The next chapter will discuss the New Archaeology; the following three will look at the questions of “science” and “anthropology” that it raised. The New Archaeology is now over 40 years old, but the intellectual questions raised by New Archaeologists remain, I will suggest, absolutely central to contemporary archaeological theory and practice.