GLOBAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY
Contextual Voices
and Contemporary Thoughts
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Global Archaeological Theory

Introduction

Pedro Paulo A. Funari, Andrés Zarankin, and Emily Stovel

In 1982, Ian Hodder published “Symbols in Action”, crystallising a series of ideas that opened the possibility of rethinking archaeology. At a later point, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1987a and b) published two seminal volumes aimed at reconstructing archaeology as a socially informed and engaged discipline. A similar revitalization of archaeology also took place in the early sixties when Lewis Binford proposed a foundation for scientific archaeology. Processualism diverges from the previous unitary paradigm of New Archaeology in its encouragement of many different approaches, methods and perspectives, and in its explicit political commitment. While ‘New Archaeology’ considered archaeology a hard science with one explicit and correct way of practicing it, subsequent postprocessualism, including contextual or interpretative archaeology, has led to a plurality of approaches.

The contextual perspective argues that archaeological practice is directly linked to a subjective scholar. The archaeologist connects the past and the present and considers artifacts, archaeological practice and text as discourse. Material culture is considered active in the construction of subjects and subjectivities, in opposition to the processual emphasis on material culture as adaptation to the natural environment and as a passive product of social activity.
These two issues—artifact as active text and academic subjectivity—although linked in postprocessualism, do not actually come together unless we argue that all aspects of archaeological investigation are considered historical, contextualized entities; including the researcher, the objects they examine, and the interpretative frameworks they employ.

In fact, postprocessualist scholars seem to consider all aspects of archaeological investigation historical, contextualized entities: including the researcher, the objects they examine and the interpretative frameworks they employ. All are as actively and equally engaged in the construction of culture and social structure as they are in its representation. What is so interesting about this subjective approach is that it incorporates a plurality of readings, thereby implying that different interpretations are always possible (Shanks and Hodder, 1995), and allowing us to modify and change our ideas under the light of new information and/or interpretive frameworks. In this way, interpretations form a continuous flow of transformation and change and thus archaeologists do not uncover a real past but rather construct a historical past (Jenkins, 1995) or a narrative of the past (Funari, 1995).

Twenty years have passed since the publication of “Symbols of Action” and although traditional approaches in archaeology are still widely used, we find that free spaces are created allowing us to get away from the requirement of searching for a ‘true past’. New fields and topics which were considered inadequate or even unthinkable at the beginning of the 1980s are now common, such as gender issues, ethnicity, class, landscapes, consumption, and architectural archaeology, among others (Andrade Lima, 1999; Buchli and Lucas, 2001; Delle et al., 2000; Díaz-Andreu and Champion, 1996; Gero and Conkey, 1991; Gilchrist, 1999; Grahame, 1995; Funari, 1993, 1994; Johnson, 1993; Jones, 1997; Leone and Potter, 1999; McGuire and Paynter 1991; Miller, 1987; Miller et al., 1989; Parker Pearson and Richards, 1994; Zarankin, 1999). Of course, some of these have always been studied in archaeology, but now have a new element: a conscious and explicit political interest on the part of the scholar and the subject. Renfrew and Bahn (1993) have even suggested that “nowadays, archaeology is a tolerant church that embraces lot of ‘different archaeologies’.” The metaphor of a church betrays a Western homogenizing concept that tolerates diversity to a point, but in essence archaeology is increasingly seen as a part of social praxis; diversity, then, becomes an inescapable part of the discipline.

Since the creation of the World Archaeological Congress in 1986, archaeology has acquired both global and ethical dimensions. The attendance of archaeologists from all over the world at the 1st Meeting of Archaeological Theory in South America, sponsored by WAC, and which took place in 1998 in Vitoria (Brazil), reflected a conscious attempt to decentralise the discipline, from an imperialist point of view to an empowering one. This is the basis of the present volume too, having grown through contributions by authors living outside the so-called Western imperialist core. From our standpoint, archaeological theory is a global...
endeavour with a global perspective (Ucko, 1995) and incorporating, above all, a critical political stance. A view from the periphery—be that a geographical (from the most austral country in the world, Argentina) or social periphery (from scholars of the poorer nations)—is fundamental to such a critical stance, since critical experiences and conditions engender critical thought.

Thinking and discussing theory is a much more common practice for the archaeologist than it ever was. South America, in particular, has received and consumed an enormous number of theories developed in Western countries. In recent years, however, there is an increasing realization that theoretical and methodological debates are at the heart of the discipline everywhere such that Latin America is no exception. This book seeks to contribute further to the discussion of archaeological praxis, starting with the gathering of several papers read at the meetings in Vitoria,¹ but including other works as well.² Despite the variety of approaches represented here, all of the papers focus on fundamental theoretical issues found in the discipline and thus both engage and represent the very rich plurality of postprocessualism discussed above. We consider archaeology a useful tool for deconstructing homogenous pasts created by master narratives because it explores and empowers all those histories excluded from official normative discourses. The following contributions consider topics such as gender, the meaning of material culture, the archaeology of aesthetics and images, and radical archaeological thought, among others.

Archaeological Theory in Action

The chapters of this book are characterized by a number of themes which are explored in relation to diverse theoretical, methodological, and historical contexts. Five themes are thus explored, followed by a commentary from Matthew Johnson. Issues in archaeological theory are discussed in Section I by four contributors, two of whom are South American. Julian Thomas begins our discussion by exploring the “inherently social character of material culture” and the political focus of archaeological practice, thus setting the groundwork for many of the subsequent papers. He asserts that archaeologists are responsible for cracking open sealed (modern) understandings of the past through understanding past relationships which is itself only accessible by recognizing the active role of objects in the past. And usefully, he asserts that we can and will be rigorous in our model building because although our interpretations are “subject to our subjectivities”, they are also flexible in the face of new phenomena and thus “reality is always symbolically mediated, but this does not make it any less real” (Thomas, this volume).

Exploring another take, Karlsson asks us “Why is there material culture instead of nothing?”. In answer to this complex question, the author employs Heidegger and distinguishes material culture as a physical representation from the major process in which the material manifestation
is only the final result. In essence, he considers both present and past people shared ‘Being’ such that we come together on the nature and perception of material culture because of that shared existence. Here too we find Guarinello’s discussion of the challenges to symbolic archaeology, demonstrating that (almost) new models need revision and reflection, and attempting to provide general characteristics of an ‘active symbolic material culture’. Moreover, he critiques the provision of meaning for material culture without written substantiation because, as before, this process allows for the archaeologist to assume their interpretations are in some way similar to prehistoric meanings. To ward against this, we must contextualise our symbolic work with detailed consideration of the (pre)histic conditions that surrounded the symbolic system under study. Finally, Alberione provides an interesting consideration, both in substance and in style, of the recurrent tension between written and material texts/documents in Historic Archaeology and the role of the archaeologist/author in reading and constructing sites. All authors explore the interplay between the two active and invested participants in an archaeological investigation: scholars and material culture. We conclude, along with Thomas, that this similar activity and political engagement should be explicit and requires a non-Western component.

Section II, ‘Archaeological Theory and Methods in Action’, offers case studies of and new views on innovative models in contemporary archaeology. Orser, for example, begins from the utility of network theory to the construction of a global historical archaeology to propose that archaeologists must focus on the connections and connectors between people and groups in the past. For a truly complex understanding, we must examine large and small scale connections, including global patterns of social articulation. He provides a good schematic picture of what network analysis can offer archaeology and a brief example of new questions arising from its application in the archaeology of Palmares, Brazil. Funari, on the other hand, compares the urban settlement planning of the Spanish and the Portuguese in the New World. This little explored juxtaposition provides interesting insight into the comparative method and two different symbolic material modes in the colonial past that still mark urban environments today. Alberti explores the putative difference between gender and sex with reference to cross-cultural evidence that bodies, sex, and gender are constructed differently by different communities at different times, and that we cannot postulate the existence of a natural body against which social categories are imposed. Here we see that bodies, not just objects, are integral to the construction and representation of world-views. Politis seeks to inject the impact and objects of children to the study of the past by providing key correlates for children’s material production and consumption through analogies collected in modern hunter-gatherer communities. Such ethnographic data show that children were significant producers of material culture, especially in residential camps. Finally, Stovel explores the possibility of studying identity construction in the past, and the antagonistic foundations of this new model,
through the case of interaction between inhabitants of the Tiwanaku polity and San Pedro de Atacama in northern Chile between 200 and 1000 AD.

The third Section, ‘Space and Power in Material Culture’, focuses specifically on the relationship between space and power within the active role of material culture in diverse cultures and periods. Lazzari begins by making a critical revision of the use of space in models of exchange in archaeology, proposing the need for a reformulation based in social theory, specifically in the sense that we must consider the possibility of resistance and the construction of status through trade and long-distance interaction. She demonstrates the utility of this reformulation with a case study from the Formative Period (600 BC–AD 1000) in Northwestern Argentina where ‘distance’ is not seen as an abyss that prehistoric actors needed to ‘overcome’ in their exchange networks. Rather, different distributions of various material forms suggest that these groups were producing and consuming goods within “a variety of interaction relationships and networks” (Lazzari, this volume) that also served the negotiation of conflict and power.

Acuto and Zarankin consider the manipulation of space in particular as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of power relations. The former develops the specific spatial mechanisms of domination used by the Inca Empire, including the physical and cultural recalibration of place and hierarchy in the landscape of conquered peoples. He cites the imperial installation of a totally new spatial organization that not only reproduces the power structures of the Inca, but situates them as the ancestral and spiritual foundation of each conquered community. The latter author demonstrates how transformations in the design of public elementary schools in 19th and 20th Century Buenos Aires shared the same principles of restricted access while reflecting an important shift—from a Disciplinary Society to a Control Society—in the understanding of control and socialization which entailed changing perceptions of the role of schools and of the citizens they ‘produced’. Senatore, on the other hand, considers the underlying Enlightenment principles evident in the planning and implementation of the Spanish colonization of Patagonia during the 18th Century. There, in the southernmost colony Florida Blanca, we see the manifestation of desires to construct and replicate the ideas of a ‘modern’ society. In all of these cases we are yet again confronted with the simultaneous reflection and construction of ‘the social’ (lo social) that is found in both the production and consumption of material culture (including texts and otherwise), and of archaeological reports.

Section IV, ‘Images as a Material Discourse’, deals with the potential of iconographic analysis in archaeological research. Three contributors demonstrate the unique difficulties of this key component of archaeological research. Prous returns to the perennial concern with the validity of modern meanings inferred from prehistoric imagery and how different archaeological schools have produced different interpretations of past imagery. He quite rightly reiterates that meaning is culturally determined, but insists that the time and space that separates
us from past peoples should not deter our symbolic analyses. Modern archaeologists can see the symbolic interpretations they produce as heuristic tools useful for approximating past meanings and for understanding ourselves better. In other words, he claims (Prous, this volume) that, “our view of rock art manifestations is more sensitive to their ‘artistic’ aspect than prehistoric peoples were”. This is because we express our linkage with a consumerist society in which art is a “per se product.” In other words, that our interpretations are culturally determined does not prevent us from understanding the past, nor does it prevent us from understanding the present which is, in the end, the ultimate goal of archaeology. In turn, Chevitarese provides a detailed and fascinating examination of the decline in various motifs characteristic of rural scenes found on Classical Grecian Attic vases during the 5th and 6th Centuries BC. Several formal, design, and thematic changes in the iconography of these vases help us understand long-term, deep-seated tensions between images and conceptualisation of urban versus rural environments, and may have been a product of a significant reorientation in Greek society at the time toward more urban interests. In the end, urban values and themes of city life are argued to reflect a growing Athenian imperialism.

As is patently clear, this volume is interested in the relationship between archaeology and politics. Díaz-Andreu (1999) has already commented that political aspects of scholarly knowledge have increasingly entered the core of the discipline. As such, the final section, ‘The Construction of the Archaeological Discourse’, encompasses a series of papers concerned with this very issue. McGuire and Navarrete consider the differences between the radical archaeologies of North and South America, stating bluntly that Latin American Social Archaeology demonstrates a more critical and ‘revolutionary’ character than its simply ‘rebellious’ Anglo-American counterpart, Marxist Archaeology. In fact, Social Archaeology engenders and reflects more political praxis than its more reflective and diffuse northern partner despite a similar dedication to social reform and critical knowledge building because of the intellectual and political history of Latin America, and the current patterns of funding and political activism in each professional sector.

Both Ferreira and Piñón, in turn, see archaeology as a tool of the hegemonic classes during two moments in the formation of the Brazilian nation insofar as it supported oppressive identity regimes that reified race and class differences. In other words, the subjective nature of archaeological investigation, if unquestioned, can reflect and enact modern power imbalances that archaeologists would wish to counteract. Such is the case explored by Noelli, where the excessive dominance of one theoretical and methodological framework in Brazil from the 1960s and 1970s until the present lead to difficulties in articulating archaeological and ethnographic data, certainly in the case of the Jê. Noelli provides a detailed reconsideration of the issue thereby demonstrating the real dangers of relying on one investigative perspective alone. In addition, he opens new avenues for research and confirms the
value of proposing multiple interpretive models. It is this intimate historical and political examination of Brazilian archaeology that makes Noelli’s contribution so thought-provoking and complementary to a similar analysis provided for Argentina by Podgorny and colleagues. This last paper not only considers the specific adoption of New Archaeological premises in Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s, but it also attempts a rigorous historiography of the discipline, thus avoiding the more common personalized discussions. As a result, the authors provide an intimate picture of the development of two archaeological modes—the cultural historic school and American culturalism—that were actually more integrated that previously thought. Of even more interest is their consideration of the diffusion of academic texts and journals which has rarely been considered in the intellectual histories of Latin America, despite its obvious importance. In fact, they argue that more texts were available to scholars than usually is presumed. Finally, Matthew Johnson provides a commentary on all contributions.

The preceding discussion demonstrates how intertwined much current theoretical work is in archaeology. It also shows that varied and apparently contradictory perspectives share similar underlying interests in political action and scholarly engagement. Theoretical debates are increasingly relevant to archaeologists, and issues of methods, theory, personal and professional goals, data collection and analysis are all integral to this endeavour. The views of contributors coincide and contradict, but this is the nature of a pluralistic science. While total consensus is unlikely, this diversity ensures we are flexible and open to change and that we are conscious of the necessity of this very quality for the promotion of politically engaged research and action.

Most papers in this volume explore ‘processes’—of representation, knowledge construction, of material production and exchange—such that it seems odd to label them ‘postprocessual’. In fact, it would appear that postprocessual analyses require even more dedication be applied to archaeological research such that each subjective element, be that object or person, be it in the present or the past, is fully exposed in terms of its social and political ramifications. It is within the detailed process of constructing, producing, representing, and changing that these interests are detected. This volume does not undertake to explore these political underpinnings to excise them and thus attempt a more objective, uncompromised perspective. Instead, it proposes we identify the common political commitment (bad and good) found in the prehistoric and historic production of objects, self and knowledge, such that we can commit ourselves in the present, and thereby recognize and develop our underlying political engagement.

Here action means not just enacting theory in methods and analysis, but also acting as politically aware and engaged scholars that incorporate diverse critical approaches to improve understanding of the past yet also to improve our contribution through knowledge and deeds to the struggle for the improvement of social conditions in the core and the periphery.
Acknowledgements

We owe thanks to the scholars who contributed chapters to the volume, and to the following colleagues who forwarded papers (sometimes unpublished), exchanged ideas, and helped us in so many different ways: Margarita Díaz-Andreu, Mark Graham, Matthew Johnson, Michael Shanks, Christopher Tilley, Peter Ucko, Amalia Sanguinetti de Bórmedia. The ideas expressed here are of course our own, for which we alone are therefore responsible. We must also recognize the important institutional support received from the The World Archaeological Congress, Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq), the São Paulo State Research Foundation (FAPESP, granted to Dr. Funari), the Campinas State University, and the Department of Prehistoric and Archaeological Research of the Argentinian National Science Fundation (DIPA-CONICET).

Notes

1Such as those by: Alberti, Karlsson, Lazzari, McGuire and Navarrete, Noelli, Orser, Podgorny et al. Politis, Prous. The same chapters were published in Portuguese and/or Spanish in Funari et al. (1999).

2That is, Acuto, Alberione, Chevitairese, Ferreira, Funari, Guarinello, Piñón, Sequeira, Senatore, Stovel, Zarankin.

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INTRODUCTION


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Materiality and the Social

Julian Thomas

In this contribution I intend to consider some problems concerning material things and social relations, which arguably derive from the intellectual structure of our own discipline. Archaeologists, obviously, study the material traces that human beings leave behind them, and on that basis they attempt to understand past societies. Necessarily, this means that we are placed in the position of having to reflect on the relationship between the social and the material, because this directly affects the kinds of statement which we can legitimately make about the past.

It can be argued that our discipline is burdened with a way of thinking which is characteristic of modernity, and which we might characterize as ‘Cartesianism’. I will suggest that this actually impedes our understanding of the material culture of the pre-modern past. But at the same time I am aware of the irony that archaeology is itself a product of the modern era. It was the parallel development of commodified, linear work-time and of the nation-state, that fuelled an interest in the origins of particular peoples and nations (e.g., Trigger, 1989). However, I do not wish to argue that there was a particular point at which the western world ‘became modern’. Rather, I suggest that modernity represents a particular relationship between people and their world which gained coherence over a long period of time (Foucault, 1984).

As Bruno Latour (1993) argues, one of the characteristic elements in modern thinking has been a separation or segmentation of the rich and complex elements which make up the world into distinct and bounded categories. And the understanding is that the things which surround us naturally divide up into classes, which are discovered by science, rather than created in discourse. As the range of discursive categories
multiplied, so new analytic fields were generated, and archaeology was one of these. With its practice of uncovering the hidden past, and stripping away layers of detritus in order to disclose older and more profound realities, archaeology provides the perfect paradigm for modern thought. Structural linguistics, in its search for the deep generators of language, or Freudian psychoanalysis, identifying the sedimented strata of the personality, have both relied on the metaphor of archaeology in setting up a separation between surface and depth. It seems that as a means of gaining knowledge of the past, archaeology has a model of depth and surface, or of ancient truth needing to be recovered from contemporary ruin, written into its constitution.

I want to argue that the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment did not so much discover the order of nature as construct it, and that by implication modern thought has been involved in a general process of alienation. This is not simply an alienation of workers from their products, but of human beings from the world of material things. In this respect, recent ethnographic work has been very instructive in demonstrating the ways in which non-western modes of thought emphasize the relational character of existence (e.g., Strathern, 1988). As soon as we are able to divide the world up into bounded categories of things, many of the relationships in which people find themselves are severed, or at least obscured. So people can come to appear as self-sufficient and internally motivated units, and 'their environment' can be reduced to a series of boxes in a flow-chart. Presented as separate entities, things or units can be valorized against each other (Jordanova, 1989). One entity can be held to be more solid than another, or to underlie another, or to give rise to another, or to be more fundamental than another. This is the principle which gives us the logic of economic base and cultural superstructure, unconscious and conscious self, essence and substance, authenticity and superficiality. It is very interesting that in this way of thinking we can equally well argue that biology provides the basis for social life, or that deep generative structures provide the basis for human thought. So both materialism and structuralism can be accommodated within these patterns of modern thought: in either case one entity is being set up as primordial in relation to another. One thing is presented as a given foundation, and another is assumed to be derived from it. This way of thinking has been described as a metaphysics of substance or presence, since it presents particular objects as being so fundamental that they evade analysis.

From my point of view, the most significant aspects of this way of thinking are the distinctions between culture and nature, and mind and body, which are conventionally associated with René Descartes (Cottingham, 1992). For Descartes, mind and body are different kinds of substance, so that the human being is a 'rational animal', a biological entity onto which some ephemeral extra element has been grafted (Heidegger, 1993). In a similar way, nature is understood as the given worldly material which is transformed and enlightened by culture. Culture then represents the cognitive aspects of human progress, which
can subdue or dominate nature, the substantial. Our problem is that archaeology is implicated in this process by which we turn the world into objects observed by subjects, but that this process actually renders our subject matter incomprehensible. Archaeologists study *material culture*: something which is, within the Cartesian scheme of things, a contradiction in terms (Thomas, 1996). Consequently, I would argue that archaeology has consistently attempted to reduce material culture to an essence, which then has to be located either in the realm of ideas or that of physical presences.

For example, the archaeology of Britain and America in the first half of this century was dominated by forms of culture-history which presented artifacts as the material manifestations of internalized norms and values (e.g., Childe, 1936, 1942). Members of a given culture group shared the same ways of making and decorating pottery because they shared the same mental templates. But because these things were locked away in the sphere of the mind, and because the minds of dead people are now lost to us, the meanings of ancient artifacts are effectively beyond consideration.

I think that we can start to see the extent of these problems if we think for a moment about the way in which Karl Marx discussed materiality. Marx, of course, was one of the great theorists of alienation, but I think that we can argue that his focus on *production* remained deeply modernist in character. Marx recognized that under capitalism objects are severed from their producers through the operation of wage labor, so that they can circulate freely as alienated commodities. However, he maintained the distinction between culture and nature, so that raw materials are seen as having been *taken out of* an essentially passive nature, and transformed into artifacts through the application of human labor. As Marx (1970: 177) puts it, “man . . . opposes himself to Nature . . . in order to appropriate Nature’s production in a form adapted to his own wants.”

So Nature constitutes a storehouse of resources, whose utility is realized through the application of human labor. The relationship is an oppositional one, in that the ‘work’ of nature in producing resources is categorically different from the human action which frees those resources for use.

From an archaeological point of view, the disadvantage of this perspective is that it presents material culture as no more than a product or reflection of society. According to this argument, society logically precedes any material substance which is taken up and transformed into an artifact. As a result, social relations come to be perceived as metaphysical and inter-subjective. If we accept this, archaeological evidence becomes no more than a pale reflection of relationships which are now entirely vanished. And the most that we can hope to do as archaeologists to is find the pattern of those relationships somehow preserved in their material outcomes. However, it is clear that many non-western communities do not acknowledge any distinction between culture and nature, and I think that this should prompt us to think more closely about both social relationships and materiality.
Now, many recent forms of social thought have replaced a concern for social morphology ('the social unit is composed of...such-and-such') or social structure ('the social unit is underlain by...such-and-such') with a framework based on social practice. In these perspectives, the social becomes something which people do. One way of expressing this is to say that social life involves the *working* of relationships. This, hopefully, conveys a sense of people's *engagement* in social conduct. The notions of social morphology and social structure both tend to promote the perception of society as something which is *thing-like*—a bounded entity, if you like (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). A shift toward social practice therefore has significant implications. Firstly, the social ceases to have any grounding essence, and it is seen instead as reproducing itself through continual performance. Secondly, it is evident that diverse social practices such as agriculture, exchange, ritual and craft production will rarely involve exactly the same groups of people, and need not all be bounded within the same social group. Different activities may have distinct yet overlapping constituencies. These may cut across lines of gender, ethnic affiliation, age and class. Indeed, each of these group identities may be seen as, to some extent, the outcome of social practice, rather than purely a pre-existing framework within which social life is conducted. Shirley Strum and Bruno Latour (1987) put this very nicely, by suggesting that we are never 'in' a society so much as struggling to define one. So the effect of this insight is to remove 'society' from its pre-eminent position as an *object* of analysis, replacing it with 'the social', which is an unbounded field or space. As a result, this concern with practice brings about a shift from a focus on entities to one on relationships.

Now, one of the better-known examples of an approach to social life which stresses relationships over entities is Michel Foucault's work on power (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1980). Foucault argues against what he calls the 'juridical' conception of power, which sees it as something which can be held and dispensed by a ruler, principally as a means of restricting the actions of others. Power, he says, is not a thing or a commodity, and it cannot be held, stored or monopolized. It is a relational network in which people find themselves immersed. It also is not separate from other kinds of relationships—power is immanent in all forms of relationality. Moreover, power is not a contract that people enter into from outside. People do not create power relationships: power relationships produce people. By that I mean that we come to recognize ourselves as human subjects because the language that we use to talk about ourselves, the ways of acting and communicating, and the cultural stereotypes that make us intelligible to others are all imposed on us: they are all effects of power. In this sense, power restricts us, but it also facilitates our actions. All of the things which our culture imposes on us—from means of statement to forms of identity—become the resources through which we realize our own goals and objectives.

If we accept that the social is a field of relationships rather than a bounded entity, I think it becomes easier to recognize the inherently
social character of material culture. The social is a hybrid, which mixes up human and non-human elements (Latour, 1993). Human activities are rarely conceived and executed by a single person, or brought to fruition within a single mind. More often, we use ideas and materials which have been affected by the actions of others, negotiate with others to define the form that the project will take, and channel our intentions through material things in bringing about our design. So, for instance, writing an academic paper involves engaging with books and papers written by others (which exist in a material form), discussing ideas with colleagues, and writing on a computer—with much of the content emerging in the act of writing itself. The process involves the negotiation of a series of alliances and associations, both with people and with objects. So you could say that you have a productive alliance with the computer, which is maintained until the printer ribbon breaks, or whatever. I would suggest that all of these connections are social in character, and that "socialness" extends to all of the relational involvements in which human beings are implicated.

Material culture is therefore not simply a product of society, it is integral to society. It follows that materials which remain from the past are more than evidence for a vanished entity: they are a part of that entity which is still here with us in the present. As such, of course, they are re-contextualized. Back in the 1960s and 70s, when many archaeologists were trying to claim a scientific status for the discipline, it was maintained that the 'archaeological record' was a kind of laboratory of human behaviour. In other words, archaeological evidence was something inert, which was bracketed off from both the past and the present. I am suggesting quite the opposite: these materials are part of now vanished social formations, and they have a cultural significance in the present. A very clear example of this would be Stonehenge in southern Britain, which both embodies aspects of past social practices, and has a variety of different modern meanings (Bender, 1998). Stonehenge is implicated in various notions of 'Englishness', and it is claimed and presented in various different ways by English Heritage, the National Trust, the Order of Druids, new age travelers, earth mysteries enthusiasts, and so on. To a greater or lesser extent, I would suggest that this is true of all material culture: it is implicated in a set of social relationships, and yet those relationships keep shifting as the historical process unfolds itself. So the task of the archaeologist becomes a twofold one: to attempt to identify through critique the modern understandings within which the evidence is now embedded, and to 're-animate' it through interpretation. Interpretation is an attempt to re-work past relationships, by putting agency back into the material fragments of the past. Necessarily, what one ends up with is a reading of the past which is of and for the present, but I think its also one which is grounded and constrained by the material evidence.

So far, so good. I am arguing in effect that archaeological practice, by engaging with material things, provides a kind of allegory for past social life. However, I should like to complicate matters somewhat by thinking a bit further about the character of materiality.
Philosophically, materiality has often been connected with irreducibility: that which exists materially simply is (Butler, 1993). This, after all, is the foundation of empiricism. However, it may be a mistake to imagine that simply because we can see and touch a thing we can grasp it in its entirety. That much would imply an unmediated transfer of objective information into the brain. This might be a description of the way in which a very sophisticated machine might function, but I do not think that it is how human beings operate in their world. When we apprehend the world, we do so through language, symbols, and concepts. If we were to want to argue that ‘the real world exists independently of language’, for instance, we still have to do so through the medium of language. However, this does not condemn us to insisting either that there is a real material world which can be transparently apprehended by consciousness, or that there is only language and signification. It is important to tread a fine line between these two extreme positions. Language does not bring the world into being, or create a fantasy existence which hides reality from us. Instead, language is the means by which the material world is revealed to us. We can recognize things because we have the concepts at our disposal to apprehend them. Where our concepts are inadequate to grasp what we encounter, we create new ones. So reality is always symbolically mediated, but this does not make it any less real.

What this means in practice is that when we have an experience of some phenomenon, we experience it ‘as’ something or other. We hear birdcall, we taste honey, we feel a walking-stick, we smell the pine trees, and so on. The experience and its interpretation are coextensive. It is only when something is incomprehensible, through its unfamiliarity, that we focus on it analytically and try to define what it might be. Even then, it tends to be our available stock of language which gives us the resources through which we rationalize our new experience. Robert Mugerauer gives a very good example of this process when he describes the earliest European travelers and colonists entering the American west. Unable to describe the alien land-forms which they encountered in the vocabulary of Old World landscapes, they resorted to an architectural lexicon of ‘vaults’, ‘spires’ and ‘crenellations’ (Mugerauer 1985).

This suggests that materialization is not just given; it is a process, in which the physical world is gradually disclosed to us (Hull, 1997). Of course, we are never aware of all of the objects that surround us at once; our concern is directed toward things with which we are involving ourselves at a given time. This is principally a matter of the tasks and projects in which we are involved. So cleaning the floor directs my interest to the broom that I use, even though my absorption in the task might mean that this involvement is implicit and unconsidered (Heidegger, 1962). Thus two senses of ‘mattering’ are interconnected: we are aware of things matter-ing (being material) because they ‘matter to us’, they are significant. So signification does not merely describe or reflect materiality, it provides the conditions under which materiality can be recognized and make sense. This begins to break down any idealist notion
that language and symbols operate in a rarefied cognitive realm, separate from material reality. Signification, or discourse, is something which happens in the real world, and which articulates relationships between real things.

Of course, it follows from what I have been arguing already that signifying practices are implicated in relations of power and knowledge. Our differential positioning as people, and our differential access to knowledge provide us with distinct ways of giving voice, and varied chances of being recognized as an authoritative speaker. Similarly, inscriptions and material symbols are more or less likely of being recognized depending upon the conditions under which they are encountered. So it follows that materialization is an effect of power. Judith Butler (1993) has documented the way in which human bodies have to perform in approved ways, citationally repeating a regulatory norm, in order to secure cultural intelligibility as a 'man' or 'woman'. The alternative is to lie outside what can be readily comprehended, in abjection. But even artifacts will be understood in different ways by people who come to them with different understandings which emerge from different social experiences. Occupying different positions in the network of power, people will interpret their material surroundings in different ways. In understanding my give rise to hegemonic struggles over the definition of reality. However, it would be a mistake to argue in these circumstances that one group has a true appreciation of the situation, while another is laboring under false consciousness.

So, to try to come to some sort of conclusion, I have suggested that modern thought, which separates the mental and the material, or society and nature, into distinct spheres makes the enterprise of interpreting material things appear both too easy and too difficult. The empiricists believed that the status of objects was self-evident. I am suggesting a much more complex situation, which makes the study of artifacts at once more challenging and potentially more rewarding. Human social life is inherently relational: everything we do, and everything we are is realized through relationship. The material world is not extrinsic to those relationships, and artifacts are implicated in the ways that we create meaning and carry out our everyday lives. For an archaeologist, this means that the task of attempting to understand the past becomes more like anthropology. We attempt to engage with the material evidence, just as the ethnographer enters into a conversation with his or her informants. But at the same time, I am suggesting that the apprehension of the material world is a social phenomenon. How things are materialized depends upon the language, the concepts, the experiences, and the power relations which converge on a particular experience. So just as we cannot look back at the ancient past and imagine that those people understood their own bodies in the same way as we do in the present, we equally cannot imagine that the significance of material culture is fixed and changeless. This underlines the point that the conversation between past and present that is involved in interpretation is one which can never be fully completed. The more we know about a past material world, the more we are likely to find that we fall short of a total understanding.
References

Archaeology and the Meanings of Material Culture

Norberto Luiz Guarinello

Whether considered as a more anthropological or more historical discipline, archaeology is a science of objects, which one nowadays more commonly calls ‘material culture’. No matter how we define culture, though, it involves communication and meaning and the archaeologist’s task may be defined as that of extracting, or rather of proposing meanings to objects produced by human cultures. That task is surrounded by great difficulties, quite different from those presented by written texts or oral tradition. It is now almost common sense that objects communicate, or are rather means for communication, either between contemporaries (their producers and users) or through time, as monuments from the past that we try to transform into documents. Since the 60’s Semiotics and Anthropology have been trying to decipher the world of things by imagining it is structured like a language, with its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. In archaeology, the most daring experiment in this sense was perhaps that of David Clarke (1968, 1972), but it had no followers and the parallel between language and material things seems in fact to lead to a dead end. More recently, the emphasis in archaeological theory has shifted from language, understood as a signic system, to symbolic systems, with all the complexities associated with the interpretation of symbolic meanings. Considering material culture as a symbolic system opens an extraordinarily fertile field of investigation, but poses new
problems and difficulties. It the last of these I wish to explore further here.

The growing interest in symbols is a recent phenomenon. The so-called New Archaeology, still largely predominant in the USA and the Americas, is a case in point. In the 60's and 70's, new archaeologists were more interested in establishing what they thought were the scientific foundations of the discipline. They employed a once fashionable method—the so-called hypothetico—deductive method—and developed a view of the evolution of human societies which centered on ecological or adaptive factors. Even if they did not totally disregard ideology or symbolism, they tended to treat them as a sub-system of society, dependant on technology or adaptive forces. Their interpretation of past societies was based on models of a universal character: on any given level in the evolutionary scale, societies in the same adaptive situation would display the same correlations or regularities between technology, social organization and social symbols or ideology. Symbols were not forgotten, but surely they were not the main concern (cf. Binford, 1983).

Since the late 80's, however, things have changed rather swiftly. Archaeology has entered postmodernity and the focus of innovative theory has moved to England, particularly to Cambridge, where Ian Hodder assembled a group of young, thought-provoking archaeologists whose work has been most influential. The 'postprocessual school' has some interesting characteristics (see Shanks and Hodder, 1995) that warrant further consideration:

1. Their theoretical basis is sought from outside archaeology, mainly from continental philosophers like Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu and even Nietzsche (Bapty and Yates, 1990; Tilley, 1990).
2. Discourse is their main theoretical category. Everything is considered discourse or text, be it material culture or the works of contemporary archaeologists.
3. Science is regarded with suspicion, as an instrument of power which imposes a western attitude on the rest of the world, or the scientists' own views onto the general public.
4. They tend to disregard technological or adaptive factors as being less important than symbolic ones, that is to say, than the meanings of material culture.

So the meaningful character of material culture has come to the forefront of archaeology. Objects are no longer considered simple and passive reflections of technology or social organization. Material culture is considered to be an active, structuring dimension of human societies and its meanings, as a fundamental dimension of human life. At times, it seems to appear as the determining one. However, in order to interpret the meanings of material culture, they totally reject the comparative, cross-cultural and evolutionary presuppositions of the old New Archaeology.

To postprocessual archaeology, every human culture has its own symbolic structure that can only be understood in its own terms, that
is to say, in the very specific context that produced it. The only way of interpreting the meaning of material culture would be to recreate the specific contexts in which the objects were meaningful, thus to make a contextual analysis of them. Material culture is considered to be structured much like a text, or rather to be a text, with all the difficulties a text poses to the reader, with all the infinite readings a text offers to the readers (Hodder, 1990).

This conception of material culture has some interesting points. On one hand, it seems very pessimistic in its emphasis on the opacity of material culture, on the difficulties it encounters in comparing different contexts, on the multiple possible readings it admits and proposes. On the other hand, it is also too optimistic in its boldness in exploring the symbolic dimension of material culture and the robustness of the readings they propose. Their assumption is that the local context would certainly supply, to the attentive archaeologist, all the keys to the interpretation of the objects they find.

Nonetheless, their actual interpretations of the meanings of ancient objects do not always seem convincing. Moreover, they do not ever keep to the reading methods they propose. In fact, from their theoretical papers one would expect very thick descriptions of archaeological contexts which would be the key to the revealing of the symbolic meanings of the objects found therein. In practice, we find little of this. Ian Hodder, for instance, has recently turned his attention to the early Neolithic of Southeastern Europe and the Middle East (Hodder, 1992). This period represents to him the domestication of man in Europe. His central idea is that in order to domesticate plants and animals, these societies had first to domesticate themselves and that they achieved this by material and symbolic means. So, the female statuettes abundantly found in early Neolithic sites are regarded as instrumental to and a statement of this process of domestication. He appropriately rejects the old interpretation of them as symbols of the Mother Goddess. But his own interpretation is not without its methodological faults. How does he extract meaning from the female statuettes? Well, it is a complex operation. His point of departure is the assumption that these societies were organized by the opposition between house and wilderness (in his words *domus* x *agrios*). To settle in houses, societies had to be afraid of the wilderness. So, terrible symbols of the wild were put inside their houses. The statuettes of women are also found within the houses, as opposed to the terrible images of the wilderness: “the metaphor of the women was a central part of the idea of *domus*” (Hodder, 1992: 246) so they are proof that women were associated with the house, with home, cooking and agriculture. Hodder oscillates between seeing this association as a sign of women's power in that society or rather, of their submission (Hodder, 1992: 257). He really proposes both in successive papers, only to reject them both and to conclude that his own interpretations were based on a sexist, male's outlook (Hodder, 1992: 258). More importantly, when he does propose an interpretation he employs universal categories and not contexts! Sheer archaeological context seemed to be unable to reveal the meaning of the statuettes. And in fact, his interpretation is based on
a binary opposition (home-wild) very like those of Levi-Strauss (culture-
nature) or even those employed by Leroi-Gourhan in his interpretation
of Paleolithic rock art (Leroi-Gourhan, 1985). It is true that he argues that
this categories are particular to this area and period, but they are not
in any way contextual or particular, but very abstract ones (as Hodder
himself admits, 1992: 251).

By these critical remarks I do not intend to deny the relevance
and importance of postmodern archaeology and the significance of the
questions they put to all archaeologists and social scientists. But be-
fore trying to interpret the symbolic meaning of material culture or even
proposing it as the main task for archaeology, we should pay more at-
tention to what symbols are and, above all, to what limits the archae-
ological documents themselves impose on their study. After all, what
do we mean by affirming that material culture is symbolic? That is a
difficult question. The very definition of symbol is debatable. One can
find many definitions of it in the literature of the Social Sciences, among
anthropologists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, semioticians and even
archaeologists. Some people equate sign and symbol with the linguistic
sign, so that symbols seem to have an arbitrary but very precise and
circumscribed meaning; that is, they refer to precise, identifiable things.
The majority however, use symbols in relation to specific kinds of sign,
which are not completely arbitrary, but are produced by metaphors,
analogies, metonymies, etc. Symbols in this view express things that
may not be precise or rather, they allude to things which cannot be
expressed by words. They communicate in specific ways, quite un-
like the linguistic sign. Such are religious symbols, or those of psy-
choanalysis, either Freudian or Jungian. (Augé, 1982; Dévereux, 1979;
Maquet, 1982).

This second meaning of symbols seems more useful for interpret-
ing material culture; symbol as an allusion, a reference to things not
expressed and not necessarily expressible by words, as signs with a
surplus of meaning. These symbols may be very private and particular,
but they are always a statement of social meanings, of shared beliefs,
common identities or even social conflicts. We are surrounded by these
social symbols, they give us unity and a sense of a common life. In
terms of material culture, symbols are objects especially invested with
emotion, objects that serve to communicate. But is all communication
symbolic? Do all cultural objects function as symbols? I do not believe
so. As I see it, there are many levels of meaning in the objects. Any
object is part of a human transaction, be it in its production, distribution
or consumption, and so all objects are means of communication. But
some of their meanings are unintentional, others are consciously em-
ployed to communicate, others yet are explicitly produced to communi-
cate. If we forget for a moment that objects may be differently invested
in their meanings (from unnoticeable to highly effective), we can reduce
the meanings of objects to different spheres.

The most concrete one is functional. Objects indicate their use by
their material, form, and decoration. The meaning of a cooking pot
is to cook. Form seems determined by function as an almost signic
relationship. That is the way Moles (1972) analyses table services and the arbitrary meaning of each piece within a set. One may suppose a code behind the objects which is structured like a language by the sheer play of opposition in their forms. Of course this is mostly true of service sets; that is, groups of objects associated with a specific activity and with specific functions within it. That is not true of all material culture. Archaeological interpretation at this level of meaning poses specific problems given the high degree of arbitrariness in the form/function relationship found in all human societies. In effect, different cultures employ different objects to execute similar functions, like forks and chopsticks, or similar objects to do quite different things. So frequently we cannot predict the functional meaning of an object from a foreign culture just through its form.

On a more general level, objects are a fundamental part of social communication, joining people together or pulling them apart. They are everywhere; they constitute the world we live in. They are the products of humans yet are themselves socially productive. Objects approximate and differentiate groups of people in the process of their production, either by the sheer division of labor between sexes or age groups or through different forms of class exploitation; they create and reinforce relationships through their distribution and exchange within and between societies and they materialize and express social positions through their consumption. Objects even unintentionally express and are the materialization of social identities and differences. We can propose to identify a group, a tribe, a series of tribes by their pottery, haircut, dressings, funeral practices, houses and so on. At the individual level, we can sometimes identify a potter by his style, even if this particularization was unintentional.

Modes of consumption also intentionally express identities and differences and the spans of identities and differences admitted in a given society or between societies. Objects classify human beings, include or exclude, substantiate and express identity and differences in gender, age, occupation, religious beliefs, football teams, birthplace, wealth or lifestyles. Objects offer a range, more or less open to individual choice, of possibilities to communicate social identities and differences, to large sectors of society as well as to the individual consumer of modern societies. The distribution of objects reflects and materializes in this way the structure of a society. The important point is that their meaning depends on a code which is not in themselves, but is produced elsewhere, in the social relationships which constitute a society. Objects are thus not structured like a text, as the postprocessualist would say (i.e., Hodder, 1990). They have no internal code, no unifying meaning or authorship, no frozen meaning to be differently read. Different societies will have different structures of objects, some more egalitarian, some highly differentiated in forms, functions, qualities and quantities. The interpretation of the meaning of material culture depends on the interpretation of the society producing and using it.

At a more abstract and profound level, objects can loose precise reference values and signify or communicate a structured code outside
their meaning. Arrangements of objects may produce very complex sets of meanings by way of allusion, metaphor, analogy, in a very imprecise, impressionistic manner. This is an everyday experience. When we enter someone's house, the objects inside it and the house itself enable us to classify their owner in a general way, as rich or poor, middle-class, blue or white collar, and to have a feeling of the tastes of the occupants. But this perception is not a precise one, it is always open to different interpretations. The objects themselves and their arrangement produce an ambiguous discourse, an almost polyphonic one. As many authors have already pointed out, from different perspectives, we organize our world and express ourselves through the use and arrangement of certain objects, but the structures we find in the objects are more symbolic than signic (Baudrillard, 1968; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979).

At last, there are specific objects which are produced precisely for their shared symbolic content, like artistic (aesthetic) and religious objects, or recently created national symbols. These are the most difficult for the archaeologist to decipher. Their meanings are not strictly structured nor fixed but metaphorical, paradigmatically structured, meaningful only to specific partners in often ritualized use. These intentional symbols have always had a surplus of meaning; they synthesize beliefs and emotions; they are highly affective and can represent quite different things to different people even in the course of a single event or within the same ritual in which they are employed. Their meanings can be socialized in very different degrees, from very particular symbols, impressed in specific objects to which individuals attribute unshared meanings, understandable only to themselves, to those which can encompass the collective emotions of a whole group of people.

Material culture is thus a complex matter. In a sense, it means much more than its meanings. It is a fundamental part of human existence and of social relations: it is a means to action over the world and over people, it enables and forbids people to take part in social practices, it signals and symbolizes, it expresses, it indicates, it classifies. It, or parts of it, may have different meanings, from very private to social ones, more exclusive or more widely shared; meanings that may be contrastive or even contradictory within a given society; meanings, it must be said, are never given, they are interpreted, imposed or negotiated. Objects are thus a matter of power relations, as has been repeatedly stressed by archaeologists over the last few years. The control over objects, be it in their production, distribution, or consumption, is a way of controlling the social practices of everyday life and defining the production of meaning within a given society. It is part of the permanent self-structuring process of any society.

The process of interpreting material culture may seem easier to those who believe in the universal character of symbols, who treat symbols as the statement of the human mind and psyche in general, like psychoanalysts and structuralists. Some very interesting interpretations have been made using these assumptions, concerning for instance myths or religious symbols. I find them, however, highly speculative and they do not appeal to my taste.
Be that as it may, the interpretation of material signs and symbols does remain a major concern for archaeologists. I think we should be more cautious about our interpretations. Today it seems old-fashioned to remember the famous ladder of inference proposed by Hawkes in 1954, but it remains valuable. For Hawkes, archaeology would find it increasingly difficult to understand the meanings of objects as it progressed from technological questions through economic, social and finally ideological ones. I think he was essentially right.

As has been seen, my examples have been drawn from prehistory. That is because prehistorians are confronted with greater difficulties than classical archaeologists in interpreting their materials. After all, classical archaeologists do have written texts. I do not entirely agree with Moses Finley (1989), to whom prehistory was an almost impossibility, and medieval and contemporary Archaeologies perfectly useless. But I do agree with him that Classical archaeology occupies a special position within the various existing archaeologies. Classical Archaeology has access to a plethora of written sources, together with well known, published, classified, dated archaeological material of excellent quality, together with a long tradition of reflection and analysis behind it that puts it in a very special position within archaeology.

However, while written sources are excellent guides in the study of material culture, they pose their own problems to archaeological interpretation. In fact, objects and texts, even if produced by the same society in the same period, are different dimensions of reality and their relationship is never immediate (Andren, 1998). Material culture is neither a reflection of literature/written culture, nor its illustration. As we saw, it has its own levels of meaning. This is true of objects in general and particularly of iconography, which I take here as an example.

Iconography, or the imaging of objects, may be decorative or symbolically invested, narrative or paratactic, figurative or abstract. The important point is that it has its own rules. Mythological scenes, for instance, are not mere translations of written myths, they are the statement of myths by way of images. Think of Etruscan iconography and the problems it poses to interpretation: are the images on Etruscan objects from the VII BC merely decorative, or a banalization of Greek myths and art, or a precise reference to Greek myths, or to their own mythical narratives (Camporeale, 1965)? Well, we do not have, after all, the Etruscan texts. But the same uncertainty is present in the interpretation of Athenian iconography from the V and IV centuries BC. Think of the women in Dionysian pottery scenes: are they maenads or nymphs? (Carpenter, 1986, 1997).

In fact, what written sources offer us are just possible interpretations, by contemporary men, of the meanings of some of the objects or images they used to employ and see. They can show us some of the possible or more diffused interpretations, but not the real and only ones. Think only of the apotropaic meaning of the phallus, which Latin literature presents either according to its attractiveness or on its awful ugliness. Sometimes, iconography seems even to contradict written