

The End of Theoretical Archaeology? A Glance from the East

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Current post-processual discussions of archaeological theory are considered to be 'much ado about nothing'. Four major trends in post-processual theoretical literature are discussed and found to be inadequately formulated. Instead of theoretical ramblings, the author calls for a return to prehistory as a framework for interpretative practice.

In this article I present my impression of current theoretical archaeology. In the following pages my critique of theoretical archaeology will be not a criticism as such, but rather a holistic perception of it. At the same time, since Soviet archaeologists did not take part in theoretical discussions in the West, with the exception of some works of Leo Klejn, my impression will, perhaps, be interesting for Western readers. I will discuss Western theoretical archaeology, but my general assessments will concern Soviet theoretical archaeology as well. There is some difference between Western and Soviet theories of archaeology in themes and approaches. However, to my mind, the scientific level of theoretical archaeology in the West is the the same as that in the East (for more about current Soviet theoretical archaeology see Kolpakov & Vishnyatsky 1990).

To my mind, the state of current theoretical archaeology is far from acceptable. In current theoretical works in general I do not find truly new ideas and/or a new elaboration of old ones. Furthermore, it seems to me there is a disturbing gap between theory and the needs of archaeology in themes as well as in the quality of the theoretical works. In modern literature I see skilful but trivial reasoning which is hardly fruitful, or some

sort of ambiguous empty chatter which one may characterize as diletantism. Most modern works in the field of theoretical archaeology can be regarded as 'much ado about nothing' (cf. Binford 1989). So, to my mind, we have good reason to ask what is happening in the current theory of archaeology?

About four major trends are distinguishable in the literature on post-processual archaeological theory: epistemology of archaeology, sociology of archaeology, symbolic and contextual archaeology, critical or neo-Marxist archaeology. (The division of theoretical archaeology can be represented in another way but this has no bearing on my present aims).

EPISTEMOLOGY IN ARCHAEOLOGY

I have no doubts about the importance of epistemology for every discipline, including archaeology; and I am glad to see in the literature that many archaeologists have good knowledge of the theory of cognition and the methodology of scientific research. But I have not seen any specification for archaeology in this literature. All epistemological problems and their possible solutions are borrowed completely from the philosophy of science and history (Salmon 1982,

Hodder 1986, Shanks & Tilley 1987a, 1987b, 1989). But at this level themes such as objectivity of facts, criteria of science, criteria of truth, etc., must have been perfectly known to every archaeologist when he or she was a final year student. Without any new aspects, the place for these themes is in textbooks, not in theoretical discussions.

SOCIOLOGY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The sociology of archaeology as a discipline is now very popular in the West (Miller & Tilley 1984, Shanks & Tilley 1989, Trigger 1989). One cannot deny that society has a great influence on science, that unscientific phenomena and political problems determine to some extent scientific research and the interpretation of facts. Yes, this reflection is obligatory for modern science. But in this field I see some major weak points in archaeology.

First, there is no real argumentation for a real connection between special archaeological aspects and social attributes in concrete cases. For example, Thomas Patterson (1986) and Bruce Trigger (1989:312–313) believe that ‘at the most basic level the nomothetic orientation of the New Archaeology appealed to the tendencies’ which existed in the ‘increasingly powerful and nationalistically oriented middle class that has its base in the central and western parts of the United States’. There is no relevant evidence in their works to support this conclusion. It is very likely they are right. But how qualified is their opinion? Is it a fact or a data interpretation? For drawing such conclusions in the field of the sociology of science, there are some methods of investigation: interviews, a study of scientists’ letters and personal communications, a study of the peculiarities of personal education, etc. Where can one find these methods or any others in this archaeological literature?

Secondly, one can observe a delineation of direct ties between archaeological theories and politics, the interests and beliefs of social

groups, etc. This is a pure ‘Soviet’ approach and it leads to hell. Soviet scientists know this very well through hard, long-term experience. It was in Russia after the Revolution that Soviet leaders proclaimed that science must serve only the proletariat and Communism. A section of the scientific community supported this idea. In consequence, the humanistic sciences and disciplines in the Soviet Union were devastated. Their task was to prove everything as power ordered, not the truth. Those scientists who dared to disagree with the official ‘truth’ were suppressed by the authorities and their colleagues. Thus, we see that the agreement of scientists to be in the service of politicians and social groups leads to the destruction of science.

At the same time a comparison of Soviet and Western sciences provides us with a good example of how the delineation of the direct ties between scientific theories and society is essentially wrong. Despite enormous political, ideological, and organizational differences between Soviet and Western sciences, they have more similarity than diversity. This is obvious for the natural sciences and the similarity can also be observed in humanistic disciplines, if one disregards the difference in scientific language and meaningless ideological declarations. As for archaeology, the Soviet theory of stages of 1930–40:

in many respects anticipated the ‘new archaeology’ . . . It had the same pious attitude toward theory, the same passion for generalization and for abstracting the laws of the cultural process at the expense of interest in concrete historical events, the same concept for limited comparative typological studies, the same striving for functional definitions and the consideration of phenomena as a complex, the same militant denial of migrations and influences, the same indifference to ethnic boundaries, the same contrasting of itself with traditional archaeology (Klejn 1977:13).

In current Soviet archaeological publications, ‘one may find technological determinism, but also an ecological one, ref-

erences to the particular role of certain social or ideological factors, which had influence on the development of the productive forces and the relations of production, and so on' (Kolpakov & Vishnyatsky 1990:23). Such a situation would be impossible if the direct ties between scientific theories and society really existed.

When investigating the sociology of science one must uncover real connections between scientific ideas and particular aspects of society as well as their real mutual interdependence and the real origins of ideas, concepts and theories within science itself.

In this connection, thirdly, I think that we have to pose the principal question: when should we agree with the 'social order' or the demands of society and when should we have to reject them? If peoples and governments want to resolve some problem, it is our duty as scientists to do everything to satisfy their requirements. But if they thrust their opinion concerning the results of our investigations and concerning theories and methods of science upon us, we must firmly reject this. The task of science is to discover the truth, 'to evaluate the utility and accuracy of our own ideas so as to bring our ideas about the external world increasingly into concordance with the way the external world works' (Binford 1989:69). If anything besides scientific facts and theories influences the truth, then it is hardly the truth.

It is in the Soviet Union that the truth was proclaimed to have a class nature and the terrible results of this are well known. Of course, we are obliged and we can satisfy people's needs, but we must struggle against any 'party science', against any attempt to influence the truth of science in somebody else's interests.

My discourse is based on concepts of the truth as having some correspondence with objective reality. In other circumstances, my discourse is meaningless. For example, if each of us can have his or her peculiar truth, then science becomes an intelligent game

without risk of losing and I have no inclination for such games and do not understand what we may really discuss in this case. I have no doubt that all that has been said above is known to every archaeologist. I do not take any pleasure in having to reiterate such well-known things, but the current theoretical discussions have forced me to do so.

NEO-MARXIST ARCHAEOLOGY

As regards neo-Marxism and other near Marxist conceptions, I believe they have no meaningful scientific future, although they will remain rather popular in archaeology (Spriggs 1984, Trigger 1984) because Marxism is the best general sociological theory which enables one to connect the material and non-material aspects of human life. But 60 years of Marxism's inculcation into archaeology in the Soviet Union and abroad has revealed its weak cognitive ability. As experience shows, Marxism in archaeology leads to technological determinism, at best. The reason for this is obvious. The general Marxist idea of the correspondence between the relations of production and productive forces, which together form the basis of society, seems to archaeologists to be the most useful one because every other phenomenon — the superstructure of society — is conditioned, according to Marxism, by this basis. If this is true, then reconstructing the basis of society will give archaeologists a good opportunity to reconstruct every aspect of the human past. Of course, it is reputed by adherents of Marxism in archaeology that productive forces can be strictly rebuilt on the base of the archaeological record which contains tools and remains of productive behaviour.

There are, however, at least two points that crush Marxism in archaeology: (1) In reality, archaeologists can reconstruct in a relatively strict way only some aspects of ancient technology and not productive forces. (2) The assertion of the strong de-

termination of superstructure by the basis and of relations of production by productive forces, and so on, is simply wrong. There were not, and are not, any reasons for concluding that the basis of society determines its superstructure. So, for prehistoric reconstruction the most helpful Marxist idea has yet to be proved before use.

Now there are more popular soft variants of Marxism appropriated by philosophers and anthropologists during recent decades (in the Soviet Union and in the West) which accept the indirect connections between the superstructure and the basis or the ultimate determining role of the latter. This means that the basis alone does not determine the superstructure, other factors influence the superstructure too; that the superstructure itself influences the basis; that all aspects of human life have some independence from the economic basis of society, and so on. But in this case Marxism becomes impotent for prehistoric reconstructions because it does not allow one to infer anything from the basis to reconstruct some aspect of the past. It seems to me there is no need to put forward additional arguments here to prove that Marxism is fruitless in archaeology. (My rejection of Marxism does not mean the rejection of philosophical materialism in general.)

SYMBOLIC AND STRUCTURAL ARCHAEOLOGY

In symbolic and structural archaeology there seems to be more intelligence and less practicability than in the New Archaeology. There are plenty of Ian Hodder's and others' statements on cultural meanings and context, on the role of the individual, on archaeology and history, etc., but there are only a few statements on their realization in archaeology and in the interpretation of archaeological data (Hodder 1982a, 1982b, 1986, 1988). I agree with most of Binford's criticism of Hodder, but, in addition, I see in Hodder's works, as well as in post-processual

archaeology, the return in modern terms to some aspects of the 'traditional' archaeology in its best manifestations (traditional in Europe, not in America). 'We see Ian Hodder and the "coggies" re-discovering traditional archaeology as if it were new and innovative' (Binford 1989:23). Hodder himself (1982a:13) wrote that 'the contextual and cultural archaeology . . . and some traditional British prehistorians have a common direction . . .'. In contrast to Binford, I evaluate positively this return or this re-discovering.

MIDDLE-RANGE THEORY AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST

I have no doubts about Middle-Range Theory's importance for archaeological reconstructions, and I admire ethnoarchaeological studies being its basis. However, Middle-Range Theory is not a theory at all, rather it is a set of diverse empirical methods which enable us to infer concrete acts of behaviour from archaeological data (cf. Hodder 1986:116–117). It is what William Adams (1973) and Leo Klejn (1978) call 'the detective work of the archaeologist'. Without any doubt, there have been sound advances in this field in the past 20 years. In my opinion, this is perhaps the most significant consequence of the New Archaeology.

But 'detective work', as well as a reconstruction of ancient objects, is a lower level of archaeological interpretation or reconstruction. There is a higher level of archaeological interpretation — inferences about modes of production and social organization, kinship and family, ethnicity and migration, mentalities and beliefs, etc. We have a major interest in all of these in order to understand the past. When reading archaeologists' texts in this field I have to both cry and laugh. As a rule, archaeologists are rather naive about prehistory. They borrow almost everything from cultural and physical anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, ethnology, biology, and philosophy

without essential criticism. In most cases borrowed theories and ideas have to be proved before they can be used and they should be critically evaluated. Looking at the history of archaeological interpretation, we see that it was and is a mirror of the history of anthropological, historical, and philosophical theories. Was this interpretation really an interpretation of archaeological data or of some theories? Of course, there are no facts without theories. But in so-called prehistoric reconstruction or interpretation I see a lot of theories and few facts.

An archaeologist cannot interpret his or her data without sociological or historical theory. However, when borrowing some theories from other disciplines he or she must understand their grounds and proofs, their weak points and limits of application, etc. Can one be a professional in dozens of disciplines simultaneously? Whatever we may think on a theoretical level about this question, our scientific practice shows that one cannot. Unfortunately, to my mind, all theoretical archaeology has made few advances in the field of the theory and methods of prehistoric interpretation and reconstruction. Bearing in mind the failure of theoretical archaeology in this field and the lack of any real perspective in modern theoretical literature, I think that we are now observing some sort of natural 'end' of theoretical archaeology. The 'end' — because such a theoretical archaeology lends nothing to practice. From the point of view of archaeological practice, modern theoretical archaeology does not exist.

EXPLANATION OF THE "END"

So, in modern archaeological literature one can hardly find really new ideas and approaches. But, why? Are there no clever archaeologists? Or have all ideas been exhausted in general? Can affirmative answers to the first or the second questions really be true? I think that the reason for this

lack of new ideas and approaches is more profound.

The principal problem of archaeology was and is the building of theory and methods of culture-historical interpretation of archaeological data and reconstruction of the human past in terms of cultural anthropology, sociology or history ('Central to the arguments advanced by so-called new archaeologists in America was the issue of how to accurately give meaning to archaeological observations' (Binford 1989:12)). The solution of any other archaeological problem depends on a solution of this main problem. But all theoretical discussions in archaeology, and the realization of theories in practical work compel us, I believe, to come to one major conclusion. There is no, and can never be, a universal theory of culture-historical interpretation of archaeological data. There can only be some general principles and some methods without any hard and fast rules for their application. Every case of interpretation is unique in the sense of its methods and its flow of arguments.

This conclusion is based on two important and well-known empirical generalizations: (1) Much of the non-material aspects of human behaviour are reflected in material culture. This is the empirical basis for the opportunity of interpretation in general. (2) This reflection, as a rule, is not direct; archaeological records are not a mirror of the past (Klejn 1978). 'Because of the complexity of cultural systems the same factors might have different effects or different ones the same effect depending on individual circumstances' (Trigger 1989:306). 'There is no coincidence between the material and non-material aspects of culture' (Daniel 1962:134-135). Added to these, a part of material culture is lost in the course of the formation processes of the archaeological record. So, part of the actual connections between the material and non-material aspects of the past does not remain. Therefore, there is no straight highway back from material culture to the diversity of human behaviour (cf. Kolpakov 1990).

We have no reason to believe that a universal theory of culture–historical interpretation of archaeological data can exist. Of course, this is an inductive conclusion and the opportunity to believe that such a theory will be found some day remains forever. But about a hundred years of appeals to establish general correlations or laws of correspondence between material and non-material aspects of culture came to nothing in the field of theory and methods. Hence, the conclusion about the impossibility of a universal interpretative theory has some evidence, while the opposite one has not.

But what about ‘middle-range theories’ and ethnoarchaeological studies? Yes, they uncover a diversity of correlations between elements of the material world and different aspects of the non-material world. Nevertheless, have they uncovered a theory or theories of interpretation of archaeological data? No, they have not. Have they uncovered some rules or laws of application to concrete archaeological cases of those correlations between the material and non-material worlds which had been identified by ethnoarchaeology itself, or ethnography, or cultural anthropology, or history? No, they have not. Our attempts to identify generalized and strong correlations between material culture and the non-material aspects of social life have mostly failed and, it seems to me, will continue to fail. I think we have no option but to come to the conclusion that those regularities which exist in this field demand untrivial concrete solutions or interpretations for application in each case.

ARCHAEOLOGY VERSUS PREHISTORY

The conclusion of the previous discussion assumes that a culture–historical interpretation of archaeological data is possible in concrete cases without universal theories and methods of interpretation. So, on a theoretical level we cannot say anything about a theory of interpretation, apart from well-known state-

ments of common logic. However, we can say something about an organization of the process of interpretation of archaeological record.

Information about the human past can be extracted from the diversity of sources which are produced by many disciplines: archaeology, ethnology, anthropology, history, linguistics, folklore, sociology, economics, psychology, ethology, and biology. It is obvious that the optimal way to reconstruct the human past is to use data and inferences from all these disciplines. The majority of archaeologists believe an archaeologist himself or herself must and can do this. An archaeologist must work not only in archaeology, but also partly in all sciences and disciplines relevant to an understanding of the human past. He or she should be able to use inferences of all relevant sciences and disciplines for the interpretation of archaeological data. As Walter Taylor (1948:43–44) wrote:

Archeology per se is no more than a method and a set of specialized techniques for the gathering of cultural information. The archeologist, as archeologist, is really nothing but a technician . . . It is the gathering of the cultural materials that is the touchstone by which the archeologist, as archeologist, stands or falls. How he handles the information after its collection is impertinent to him as an archeologist, although it is very pertinent to him as an anthropologist, art historian, philologist, or whatever.

In other words, this ‘post-archaeological’ activity of an archaeologist can be viewed as the study of prehistory and the archaeologist becomes a prehistorian (cf. Rouse 1972: 237), though ‘it should be noted that archeology is not a synonym for prehistory’ (Trigger 1968:3). Thus, there is the opportunity to formulate this theme as ‘archaeology and prehistory’. There are other concepts and terms in this field. Some archaeologists prefer to avoid the term ‘prehistory’; some believe archaeology is prehistory and vice versa; others believe archaeology is a part of history or anthro-

pology, and so on. I will not discuss here the different concepts and terms existing in this field. The problem, which I do want to discuss here, is the process of the interaction of different sciences and disciplines in the reconstruction and understanding of the human past.

Almost all archaeologists agree that it is necessary to utilize all relevant sciences/disciplines to reconstruct and understand the human past; and almost all archaeologists believe that the archaeologist alone can and must do archaeology per se and prehistory. But, why? Why do they all emphasize that the archaeologist and the prehistorian must be combined in one individual? Why do they all suppose that the archaeologist and the prehistorian cannot be personified as two different specialists? I have never understood this.

Here I will not argue against the belief that an archaeologist can be a prehistorian and at the same time be able to synthesize data from all other relevant disciplines. It is more interesting to discuss prehistory as a special discipline as distinct from archaeology or cultural anthropology, and from archaeologists.

PREHISTORY AND THE PREHISTORIAN

The prehistorian is obliged to know on a professional level general sociological and historical theories and the theories and methods of the disciplines that are engaged in the reconstruction of the human past, and must be able to evaluate and criticize the data and results of these disciplines. A prehistorian must know the ways by which every discipline comes to its scientific results.

There is a common notion that prehistory follows after archaeology and other relevant disciplines which have worked up their materials and come to their specific inferences concerning the past. To my mind, this is wrong. The prehistorian does not start work after the archaeologist or cultural anthropologist. They must work together

from the very beginning of an investigation. The prehistorian must help the archaeologist to grasp a set of relevant problems in terms of prehistory in order to obtain relevant archaeological data, and the archaeologist, in turn, must help the prehistorian to use archaeological data in prehistoric reconstructions. Interaction between them provides an opportunity to correct, in the course of investigation, the acquisition and analysis of data and the interpretative process in terms of prehistory. The idea of the permanent cooperation of different specialists in the course of an investigation should be an imperative not only for prehistory and archaeology, but also for all specialists in the different disciplines that are a part of the study of the human past (Kolpakov 1988:110–112). Then, there will be a research team (cf. Schoenwetter 1981:373) under the leadership of a prehistorian. This research team will bring together representatives of various disciplines and sciences relevant to the set of problems under consideration.

Moreover, every discipline reconstructing its own specific aspect of the past uses data and inferences of adjacent disciplines for its own specific aims. For example, archaeology takes analogies from ethnography to clarify the functions of some artefacts; ethnography uses linguistic data to elucidate the ethnic origin of various tribes and nations; in the study of folklore ethnographic data are used to explain some texts, and so on. So, each of these disciplines can play the role of an auxiliary field for any other. And the task of the prehistorian is to help all of them to cooperate and coordinate their interests and actions within the research team.

PREHISTORIAN FOR WHAT?

Do we win anything by introducing a professional prehistorian into the investigation of the past? In the work of the prehistorian there seem to be no new methods and theories. The prehistorian synthesizes data/

inferences/theories from all relevant disciplines in a manner which is little different from that currently existing in archaeology or cultural anthropology. It is possible that new methods specific to the prehistorian will appear in the future, but it is difficult to say anything about them today.

I think that the employment of a research team under the leadership of a prehistorian optimizes the process of the investigation of the past. Participating in such a research team, every specialist will have an opportunity to work in his or her particular field and at the same time to obtain professional aid from every other discipline and an understanding of all relevant problems and the ultimate aims of the prehistoric investigation in general from the prehistorian, to correct his or her particular investigation from the very beginning in accordance with the needs of reconstruction of the specific fragment of the past, and so on.

In other words, a creation of a research team under the leadership of a prehistorian allows us at least: (1) to combine competence in particular fields of research in the human past with competence in prehistory on the whole and in general theories of human race and society; (2) to accelerate and improve interactions between different fields of prehistoric research; (3) to obtain the variants of inferences from each auxiliary discipline (Klejn 1978:67) — the prehistorian himself can elect the optimal combination of different variants of inferences of different fields by synthesizing them into a consistent whole; and, (4) I hope, to interpret archaeological and other data in concrete cases without universal theories and methods of interpretation and to achieve something more in this direction than is the case at present.

My propositions concerning archaeological theory are not, however, an archaeological theory at all. They are concerned with the organization of the research process, not with the theory itself. In this sense I may write about the end of theoretical archae-

ology (as a theory of culture–historical interpretation of archaeological records), too. In my opinion, only a professional prehistorian in cooperation with specialists in many other disciplines studying humans and society has a chance to synthesize all data in an optimal way and to reconstruct accessible aspects of the human past with the more convincing and exhaustive argumentation. I would like to hope that some day prehistoric reconstructions will stop being copies of sociological and cultural anthropological schemes, although I have little belief that this is possible.

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