ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY

AN INTRODUCTION

SECOND EDITION

MATTHEW JOHNSON

WILEY-BLACKWELL

Table of contents

List of Illustrations

Figure 13.3 Archaeological theory in 2008: the struggle between different elements of thought and activity, in the mind of every archaeologist

Alan Sorrell, ‘Falling Tower’, date uncertain. Sorrell (1904–74) was a neo-Romantic artist known both for his ‘reconstruction’ drawings of archaeological sites and depictions of past cultural life, and for his ‘imaginative’ work, which was characteristically inspired by the monuments and images of the past.

For Jo,

who learnt to love theory

Archaeological Theory

An Introduction

2nd Edition

Matthew Johnson

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This second edition first published 2010

Edition history: Blackwell Publishing Ltd (1e,1999)

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnson, Matthew, 1962–

Archaeological theory : an introduction / Matthew Johnson. – 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-0014-4 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4051-0015-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Archaeology–Philosophy. I. Title.

CC72.J65 2010

930.1–dc22

2009039202

List of Figures

Preface: ‘You’re a terrorist? Thank God. I understood Meg to say you were a *theorist*.’ From Culler (1997: 16)

11.2	Bodiam Castle: plan of landscape context
12.1	A coffin from the African Burial Ground, New York. The heart shape is made of tacks; it has been interpreted as a west African symbol
13.1	Archaeological theory in 1988
13.2	Archaeological theory in 1998
13.3	Archaeological theory in 2008: the struggle between different elements of thought and activity, in the mind of every archaeologist

Acknowledgements

The author and publishers gratefully acknowledge the following for permission to reproduce copyright material:

Acknowledgements

Preface cartoon © Anthony Hadon-Guest; figure 2.2 from Childe, V. G., *The Danube in Prehistory* (Oxford University Press, 1929); figure 2.4 copyright © 2010 by Transaction Publishers. Reprinted by permission of the publisher; figure 2.5 from Clarke, D., *Analytical Archaeology* (second revised edition) (Routledge, London, 1976); figure 2.6 from Daniel, G. E., 'The dual nature of the megalithic colonisation of prehistoric Europe', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 7, 1941, courtesy of The Prehistoric Society, Salisbury; figure 2.7 from *Before Civilisation: A Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe* by A. C. Renfrew, published by Century. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.; figure 3.1 © The Kobal Collection; figure 4.3 from Hillman, G., 'Interpretation of archaeological plant remains', reprinted from Lone, F. A., Khan, M. and Buth, G. M., *Palaeoethnobotany – Plants and Ancient Man in Kashmir* (A A Balkema, Rotterdam, 1993); figure 5.1 from Clarke, D., *Analytical Archaeology* (second revised edition) (Routledge, London, 1976); figure 7.1 from Hodder, I. and Orton, C., *Spatial Analysis in Archaeology* (Cambridge University Press, 1976); figure 7.3 from Tilley, C., *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (Routledge, London, 1991, © Dr Christopher Tilley); figure 8.1 from Unstead, R. J., *Looking at History 1: From Cavemen to Vikings* (Black, London, 1953); figure 8.2 © Klammers and the University of Minnesota Collections; figure 8.3 © Minnesota Historical Society; figure 9.1 http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St_George_and_the

_Dragon-altar_wing-NG-Praha.jpg; figure 9.2 © The British Museum, London; figure 9.3 © The British Museum, London; figure 9.4 from Clarke, D., *Analytical Archaeology* (Routledge, London, 1976); figure 10.1 Private collection/The Bridgeman Art Library Nationalaity; figure 10.2 © Crown copyright, RCHME; figure 10.3 © Royal Geographical Society, London/The Bridgeman Art Library; figure 11.2 © Crown copyright NMR.

The publishers apologize for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful to be notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in the next edition or reprint of this book.

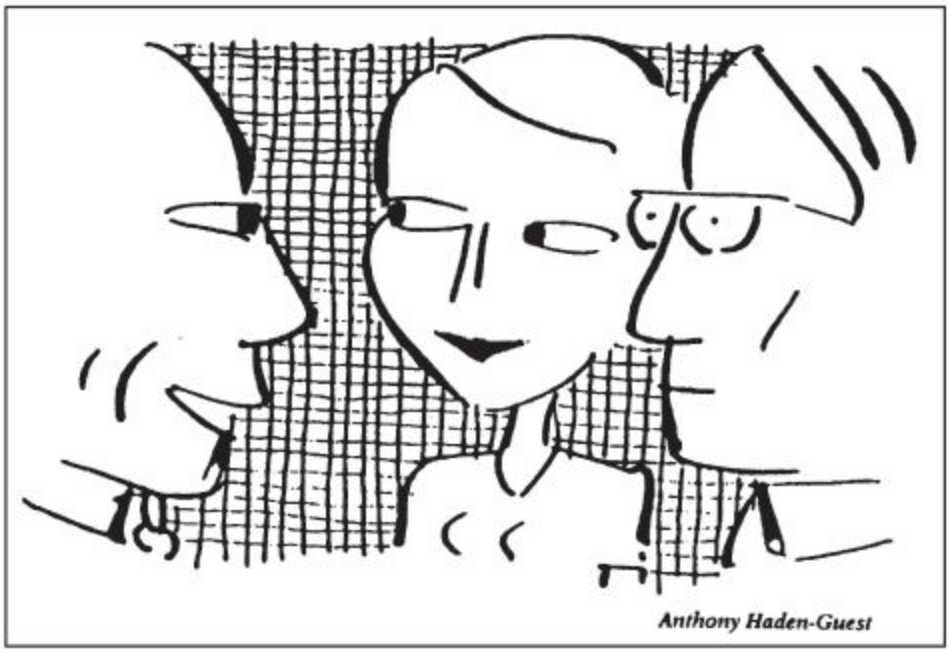
Preface: The Contradictions of Theory

This book is an introductory essay on archaeological theory. It tries to explain something of what ‘theory’ is, its relationship to archaeological practice, how it has developed within archaeology over the last few decades, and how archaeological thought relates to theory in the human sciences and the intellectual world generally.

To many, ‘theory’ is a dirty word both within and outside archaeology. Prince Charles earned almost universal approbation when he condemned ‘trendy theorists’ in education; nobody however, including the Prince himself, seemed to be very clear precisely who he meant. When visiting an archaeological site a few years ago a suggestion of mine met with laughter and the response ‘that’s a typical suggestion of a theorist’. I don’t recall anyone telling me exactly why my suggestion was so absurd, and when I visited the site the following year the strategy had been adopted. For the meat-and-potatoes Anglo-Saxon world in particular, theory is an object of profound suspicion. It is a popular saying that for the English, to be called an intellectual is to be suspected of wanting to steal someone’s wife (sexism in the original). Theory, ‘political correctness’ and being ‘foreign’ stand together in the dock as traits to be regarded with hostility in the Englishspeaking world–and beyond; there is even a word for hostility to theory in German–*Theorifeindlichkeit*. I shall look at some of the reasons why this is so in chapter 1.

At the same time, however, theory is increasingly popular, and seen as increasingly important, both within and outside archaeology. Valentine Cunningham commented in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* that theorists in academia are ‘a surging band, cocky, confident in academic

credentials, job security and intellectual prestige', inspiring the columnist Laurie Taylor to write a memorable account of a bunch of theorists intellectually roughing up a more empirical colleague at a seminar before departing to the local bar. His account was fictitious but contained much truth.



'You're a terrorist? Thank God. I understood Meg to say you were a *theorist*.' From Culler (1997: 16)

There are various indices of the 'success' of an explicitly defined archaeological theory; one might cite the frequency of 'theoretical' symposia at major conferences such as the Society for American Archaeology or the European Association of Archaeology, or the incidence of 'theory' articles in the major journals. One particularly telling index is the rise and rise of the British Theoretical Archaeology Group conference (TAG). This was formed as a small talking-shop for British archaeological theorists in the late 1970s, but since then has become the largest annual archaeological conference in Britain with substantial

participation from North America and Europe. There are now similar organizations in North America, Scandinavia (NordicTAG) and Germany (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Theorie*).

It is true that a lot of papers delivered at TAG scarcely merit the term ‘theoretical’, and even more true that many only come for the infamous TAG party in any case. It must also be conceded that the degree of impact of TAGs and ‘theory’s’ influence on the ‘real world’ of archaeological practice, and the cultural and legislative framework of archaeology, is debatable. The theorist often feels like Cassandra, constantly giving what he or she sees as profound predictions and insight and constantly being ignored by the decision makers.

This book is written to give the student an introduction to a few of the strands of current thinking in archaeological theory. It is deliberately written as an introduction, in as clear and jargon-free a fashion as the author can manage (though as we shall see, criteria of clarity and of what constitutes jargon are riddled with problems).

It is intended as a ‘route map’ for the student. That is, it seeks to point out prominent landmarks on the terrain of theory, comment on relationships between different bodies of thought, and to clarify the intellectual underpinnings of certain views. As such, it is anything but an encyclopaedia; it is hardly one-tenth of a comprehensive guide to the field, if such a guide could be written. The text should be read with reference to the Further Reading and Glossary sections, and over-generalization, oversimplification and caricatures of viewpoints are necessary evils.

Above all, I remind all readers of the fourth word in the title of this book. I have tried to write an *Introduction*. The book, and its different chapters, are meant to be a starting-point for the student on a range of issues, which she or he can then explore in greater depth through the Further

Reading sections. Many of the comments and criticisms made of the first edition of this book focused on an alleged over-or under-emphasis of a particular theoretical viewpoint, or lack of coverage. Many of these criticisms were valid, and I have tried to deal with them in this second edition; but many evaluated the text as a position statement with which they happened to agree or disagree, rather than on its pedagogical intention, that is as an introductory route-map to the issues. Additionally, students need to be reminded that this book should be the start, not the end, of their reading and thinking, a point I will return to in the Conclusion. A route-map is not an encyclopaedia.

To pursue the route map analogy, the route followed here is one of several that could be taken through the terrain of archaeological theory. I could have devoted a chapter each to different thematic areas: Landscape, The Household, Trade and Exchange, Cultures and Style, Agency, and so on. In each case, a variety of approaches to that theme could be given to show how different theories contradict or complement each other and produce different sorts of explanation of the archaeological record. Alternatively, a tour could be taken through different ‘isms’: positivism, functionalism, Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, feminism. These would be reasonable paths, and ones moreover that have been taken by other authors.

This book, however, tries above all to bring out the relationship between archaeological thought and wider strands of theory in intellectual and cultural life as a whole. It seeks to show how specific theoretical positions taken by individual archaeologists ‘make sense’ within a wider context, cultural, social and political as well as academic. This book also seeks to bring out the relationship between archaeological theory and archaeological practice more clearly than has been done in the past. The structure adopted here, of a historical approach focusing initially on

the New Archaeology and reactions to it before moving on to current debates, fitted this purpose best.

I have written above that this book is a guide for ‘the student’; I mean the student in the broadest sense. Many practising archaeologists employed outside the academic world have told me that they are interested in current theoretical debates, and see such debates as of potential relevance to their work. Nevertheless many feel alienated by what they see as the unnecessary obscurity and pretentiousness that is central to the theoretical scene. I don’t subscribe to such an analysis, but I have to acknowledge that it is widespread. Right or wrong, I hope that they may find that what follows is of some help.

In trying to survey many different theoretical strands, I have been torn between trying to write a ‘neutral’, ‘objective’ survey of different currents of thought on the one hand, and a committed polemic advancing my own views on the other. The end product lies, perhaps a little unhappily, somewhere between these extremes. On the one hand, the construction of a completely objective survey simply isn’t intellectually possible; the most biased and partial views on any academic subject consistently come from those who overtly proclaim that their own position is neutral, detached and valuefree. In addition, it would be disingenuous to claim that the book is written from a disinterested viewpoint–that it is a guide pure and simple. Obviously an interest in theory goes hand-in-hand with a passionate belief in its importance, and an attachment to certain more or less controversial views within the field.

On the other hand, if we want to understand why theory is where it is today, any account of a wide diversity of intellectual positions must endeavour to be reasonably sympathetic to all parties. A survey can never be neutral, but it can make some attempt to be *fair*. As R.G.

Collingwood pointed out in relation to the history of philosophy, most theoretical positions arise out of the perceived importance of certain contexts or issues; that is, philosophical beliefs are in part responses to particular sets of problems, and have to be understood as such rather than given an intellectual mugging. One's intellectual opponents are never all morons or charlatans to the last man and woman and one's bedfellows are rarely all exciting, first-rate scholars. Before we get carried away with such piety it must be remembered that this does not mean that certain positions are not therefore immune from criticism. An intellectual relativism in which 'all viewpoints are equally valid' or in which 'every theory is possible' is not a rigorous or tenable position. We can see historically that some theoretical positions have been abandoned as dead ends, for example the extreme logical positivism of the 1970s.

I have also been torn between writing a historical account of the development of theory, and of giving a 'snapshot' of theory in the present. On the one hand, it might be held that my re-telling of the origins of the New Archaeology of the 1960s, and more arguably the processual/postprocessual 'wars' of the 1980s and 1990s, is now out of date. On the other hand, I feel that in order for the student to understand where theory is today, it is necessary to look at its development over the last few decades, and indeed to look at the deeper intellectual roots of many views and positions in the more remote past, for example in the thinking of figures like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. Much of traditional cultural evolutionary theory, and much of the early postprocessual critique, may appear to be passé to some; but I do not think that the modern student can understand current thinking without reference back to this literature. Archaeology would be a strange field of study if it asserted that it could understand the way

the discipline thinks in the present, without reference back to the way it thought in the past.

For this second edition of the book, I have made a number of changes. I give a more extended account of these and reflection on them in the Further Reading section, but two stand out. First, there has been an explosion in archaeological discussion of Darwinian evolution, and I have therefore divided the chapter on ‘Evolution’ into two. Second, the first edition concentrated on theory in the Anglo-American world, in part reflecting my own background and limitations. This concentration was rightly criticized by many non-Anglo scholars. I have tried in this second edition to write a more inclusive text, giving more attention to Indigenous and postcolonial perspectives as well as drawing more attention to theoretical contributions from across the world. I have nevertheless retained the original structure of the book, and have run the risk of ‘fitting in’ material around this organizing structure; but the alternatives, for example of having a separate chapter on non-Anglo theory, or of a country-by-country survey, seemed to me to be greater evils and to do greater violence to the very subtle texture of theoretical debate.

The adoption of an informal tone and omission of detailed referencing from the text is deliberate. It is to help, I hope, the clarity of its arguments and the ease with which it can be read. Many ‘academic’ writers have often been taught to forsake the use of the ‘I’ word, to attempt to render our writing neutral and distant, to avoid a conversational or informal tone, all in the name of scientific or scholarly detachment. This may or may not be a valid project. The aim here however is educational rather than scholarly in the narrow sense.

One of my central points, particularly in the first chapter, is that all practising archaeologists use theory whether they

like it or not. To make this point clear and to furnish examples I have often quoted passages from avowedly ‘atheoretical’ writers and commented upon them, to draw out the theories and assumptions that lie implicit within those passages. In most cases the passages come from the first suitable book to hand. I want to stress that critiques of these examples are not personal attacks on the writers concerned. Here, the need to use practical examples to make a theoretical point clear clashes with the desire to avoid a perception of unfair, personalized criticism.

The text is based in part on lecture notes for various undergraduate courses I have taught at Sheffield, Lampeter, Durham and Southampton. The students at all four institutions are thanked for their constructive and helpful responses. Some students may recognize themselves in the dialogues in some of the chapters, and I ask their forgiveness for this. The first edition of the book was partly conceived while I was a Research Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley in the spring of 1995. I would like to thank Meg Conkey, Christine Hastorf, Marcia Ann Dobres, Margot Winer and many others too numerous to mention for their hospitality during that time and for making my stay so enjoyable and profitable. I also thank Durham University for giving me study leave for that term. A number of reviewers, some anonymous, made a string of invaluable comments without which the book would have been much more opinionated and parochial and much less comprehensible. These include especially Randy McGuire, Jim Hill, Chris Tilley and Elizabeth Brumfiel. Robert Preucel and Ian Hodder reviewed the final draft extensively. Tim Earle, Clive Gamble and Cynthia Robin kindly corrected my misconceptions for the second edition. Dominic McNamara drew my attention to the Foucault quotation in chapter 6. Within the Department of Archaeology at Durham, Helena Hamerow, Colin

Haselgrove, Anthony Harding, Simon James, Sam Lucy and Martin Millett read and made invaluable comments on the first draft. Brian Boyd, Zoe Crossland, Jim Brown and John McNabb helped with illustrations. William R. Iseminger kindly supplied figure 9.5 and Francis Wenban-Smith kindly supplied figure 10.4. Collaboration with staff of the History, Classics and Archaeology Subject Centre, particularly Annie Grant, Tom Dowson and Anthony Sinclair, influenced my thinking on the pedagogical framing and impact of the second edition. Conversations on the philosophy of science with my late father C. David Johnson clarified many points.

I moved to Southampton in 2004; I thank an outstanding group of colleagues and students there for their advice and support over the last five years. I prepared revisions for the second edition while a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania in the autumn of 2008. I thank Bob Preucel and Richard Hodges for making that visit possible, and the students of Bob's theory class for their input and hospitality. I also thank Clare Smith, Heather Burke and Matt Spriggs for organizing a stimulating visit to Australia in 2003/4, and Prof Joseph Maran, Ulrich Thaler and the staff and students of Heidelberg University for four wonderful months discussing theory and practice in spring 2005.

More broadly, can I thank everyone who has taken the time to speak or write to me over the last ten years to express their appreciation for this book. Students, teachers and practicing archaeologists have given me some very kind compliments, for which I am flattered and grateful, from the Berkeley feminist who said that I wrote like a woman to the Flinders student who sent me a picture of her Matthew Johnson Theory Action Doll.

Conversations with Chris Taylor, Paul Everson, Casper Johnson and David Stocker informed the discussion of

Bodiam in chapter 10, though errors and misconceptions in this discussion remain my responsibility. John Davey, Tessa Harvey, Jane Huber, Rosalie Robertson and Julia Kirk at Blackwell were always patient, encouraging and ready with practical help when needed. My wife Becky made comments on successive drafts; proofread the final manuscript; and most importantly, provided emotional and intellectual support without which this book would never have been written. In return, I hope this book explains to her why archaeologists are such a peculiar bunch of human beings, though I know she has her own theories in this respect. My thanks to everybody.