

# THEORY and PRACTICE in ARCHAEOLOGY



Ian Hodder



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# THEORY AND PRACTICE IN ARCHAEOLOGY

This book aims to show through a series of examples that an interpretive archaeology dealing with past meanings can be applied in practice to archaeological data, and that it can also contribute effectively to social practice in the world of today.

Seven of the nineteen contributions included have been specifically written for this volume to act as an overview of the way archaeology has developed over the last ten years. Yet Ian Hodder goes beyond this: he aims to break down the separation of theory and practice and to reconcile the division between the intellectual and the 'dirt' archaeologist. Faced with public controversy over the ownership and interpretation of the past, archaeology needs a clear image of itself, be able to gain funding, win public confidence and manage the heritage professionally and sensitively. Hodder asserts that archaeologists cannot afford to ignore general theory in favour of practice any more than they can afford an ivory-tower approach. Theoretical debate is important to any discipline, particularly in archaeology, if it is not to become complacent, self-interested and uncritical

*Theory and Practice in Archaeology* captures and extends the lively debate of the 1980s over symbolic and structural approaches to archaeology. It will be essential reading for students of archaeology and for those involved in, and responsible for, heritage management.

**Ian Hodder** is a Reader in Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, a Fellow of Darwin College and a Director of the Cambridge Archaeological Unit.

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*Ian Hodder*



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## SERIES PREFACE

The Material Cultures series crosses the traditional subject boundaries of archaeology, history and anthropology to consider human society in terms of its production, consumption and social structures. This approach breaks down the narrow compartmentalization which has until now obscured understanding of past and present societies and offers a more broadly-based (and coherent) set of explanations.

The series has developed from frustration with the conceptual limits imposed by a structure of separate disciplines. These divisions make little sense when so much of the most valuable work in many areas—in archaeology, consumption studies, architecture, muscology, human geography, anthropology and communication science—grows from common roots and a shared intellectual framework.

The thrust of the series is to develop concepts necessary for understanding cultural and social form; but the editors' approach reverses the primacy often given to linguistic over material structures. This is deliberate after all, although structuralism borrowed from linguistics it took its most original shape through Lévi-Strauss's studies of kinship, myth and ritual. More recently a parallel process has taken place in architecture, which has been a crucial focus in the development of theories of post-modernism. This suggests that there are many advantages in attempting to construct approaches to the material world which consciously proclaim the distinctive nature of *objects* as against *language*.

This approach, central to all the books in the series, should be of particular benefit to those studies (like archaeology) which have artifacts as their main focus. But materiality provides new perceptions of cultural context over a much wider range of subject matter. It demands a conscious process of linking together the techniques and strategies of other disciplines. For example, a recognition of the issues of gender will infuse an historically based study with a deeper set of meanings; set the same work within an anthropological framework as well, and its value (and insights) are enhanced.

This broad sense of context allows us to publish work on the cultural politics of the body, on power systems of representation, on food and gender, and the experience of possession or alienation. All of them are rooted within a materialistic interpretation of culture.

The series will maintain a productive dialogue with developments in Marxist, as well as structuralist, post-structuralist and phenomenological thought, through focusing on the *specificity* of the material world and its particular forms and contents. Yet we recognize that it is the very materiality of that world which often presents a challenge to theory and promotes a critical approach to analysis.

Many of the disciplines which have a particular concern with material culture, such as muscology and consumption studies, have tended to feel that their own developments in theory and analysis have been neglected over previous decades. They have become, relatively speaking, backwaters of the social science. This series is launched at a time when there are signs that this is about to be radically changed.

There are new advances in cultural theory which are not merely fetishistic and do not posit the object as distinct from social and cultural context. Advances in post-structuralism which have challenged the notion of the subject mean that we are now free to conceive of a new approach to material culture, which does not privilege or reify either objects or persons.

In planning and co-ordinating the series we wish to demonstrate above all the current intellectual excitement and potential for working within this field. Creating meaning from the material fragments of the past and the present now provides an arena for addressing some of the fundamental theoretical and philosophical issues of our time.

Daniel Miller, Michael Rowlands  
and Christopher Tilley

## PREFACE

In presenting a collection of some of my previously published papers there is perhaps an understandable desire to 'correct' all those commentators who argued that I whimsically shifted from one theory to another. Those who argued that my writings were confused and contradictory and that I just followed the latest trend, I now have the opportunity to show that they did not understand how all the pieces fit into a whole, an *oeuvre*. I can attempt to show how my work had a developmental coherence, if not predicted at the beginning, certainly guided by some big questions and dominant interests.

There is an impulse to 'put right' those 'mis'-readings of my writings. I can try to put the critics 'right' and show them what I had 'really' intended to say, explain what I 'really' meant. It is all too easy to argue that my critics, commentators, reviewers have not even read my work. Others sometimes seem wilfully to misunderstand what I have to say. It is tempting to take the chance now to argue that they read what they want into my writing, set me up as a straw man, and criticise me for what I have not written. Usually I have no opportunity to respond (see, however, Hodder 1986\*). So at last, within the confines of these collected papers I could take the opportunity to 'set the record straight'.

I especially want to correct the impression that my work has only been about theory and has little relevance to what archaeologists actually do. People argue that I favour 'thinkers' over 'stinkers'. People say that the critique of processual archaeology was well established but that I have nothing to put in its place that 'lab' or 'dirt' archaeologists can use. They say that post-processual archaeology has led to an intellectualisation of debate so that few people want to be involved. Now I have the chance to show that the new theories can be linked to practice.

The problems raised by these impulses to 'put the record straight' will need fuller discussion from Chapter 10 onwards. For the moment, I wish to begin with the whole issue of theoretical debate and its relationship to archaeological practices.

\* Hodder, I. (1986) 'Digging for symbols in science and history: a reply', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 52, 352–6.

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I would like to thank Sarah Tarlow for the preparation of the index.

## THEORY, PRACTICE AND PRAXIS

This book deals with recent developments in archaeological theory which have come to be classified within the small world of archaeology as 'post-processual', but which in the wider world would be termed neo-Marxist, hermeneutic, critical and post-structuralist. The heavily theoretical nature of the post-processual debate is clear from even the briefest encounter with the literature (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1987a; 1987b; Bapty and Yates 1990; Hodder 1991). Yet I have titled the book *Theory and Practice in Archaeology*. The emphasis on practice partly derives from a desire to show a wider relevance for post-processual ideas. If these new ideas are to have more than a superficial impact, they need to be related to the practice of archaeology. But I have also set myself a wider brief. Regardless of the overall impact of post-processual ideas, there is a need to break down the separation of theory and practice in archaeology.

In many countries with a large archaeological community, there is some form of division between, on the one hand, the intellectual, the interpreter, the academic, the theoretician and, on the other hand, dirt or white-coated archaeologists dealing with practical issues. Many people would feel that they fall somewhere between and temper these two extremes. But it is often the case that those most involved as practitioners are suspicious of and uninterested in abstract theory. It is probably true to say that most archaeologists are not specifically concerned with theoretical discussion, except perhaps when it creates the spectacle of a public oppositional debate. Archaeologists tend to be pragmatic and data-oriented, fascinated by specific technical and historical problems. In North America, for example, you only have to compare the Society for American Archaeology meetings (with their emphasis on middle-range theory, site formation processes, hunter-gatherer strategies and regional studies) with the meetings of the American Anthropological Association (where the emphasis is on power, gender, text, rhetoric etc.) to see the neurosis most archaeologists still feel towards saying anything which might have topical and general theoretical interest.

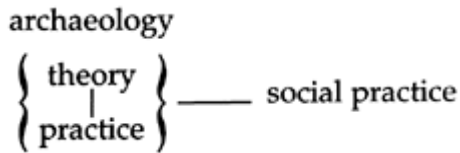
The lack of interest in general theory partly stems from the positivism which most archaeologists assume, however weakly. It has long been assumed that the source of theories and their internal coherence is of less concern than one's ability to test them against the archaeological data. The New Archaeology of the 1960s and early 1970s did lead initially to a refreshing concern with theory development as intuitive approaches were replaced by a 'loss of innocence' (Clarke 1973) and by a self-conscious concern with separating theory from data and providing rigorous methods for evaluating hypotheses. Through time, however, this approach has increasingly put all its eggs in the basket of neutral methods. Within positivist approaches in archaeology there is, on the whole, more emphasis on testability than there is on whether the theories being used are interesting, or valuable. So theoretical discussion in its own right is relatively

unimportant, because we are supposed to be able to let method sort out the good and the bad theories.

Perhaps because of this positivism, perhaps because of the enormous difficulty of making sense of fragmentary data from long-gone societies, perhaps because of the difficulty of saying anything with any degree of certainty about the distant past, most archaeologists prefer to become absorbed in data and method. There are also institutional divisions between universities and heritage management which perhaps encourage the separation of theory and practice. This latter factor is especially severe in contexts of rapid site destruction. The past is being destroyed and we are wasting time if we gaze into our theoretical navels. We have to 'get our act together' rather than be involved in internal theoretical wrangles. What is needed is a discipline with a clear and certain image of itself, able to do the job of acting quickly and professionally to save the heritage, a discipline able to gain funding and win public confidence in conflicts over rights to the past.

A common view was expressed by Schiffer in a public debate at the Society for American Archaeology meeting at Atlanta, Georgia in 1989. 'High-level goals, I think, mostly generate conflict and ennui, whereas middle- and low-level goals generate productive research.' It is easy to sympathise with this 'let's get on with it' view (for a less absolute version see Flannery 1982). Theoretical discussion involves defining terms, stating positions, setting up categorical boundaries. It involves creating a coherent whole which is defined by its opposition to other wholes (for example, culture as text and as meaningfully constituted as opposed to culture as tool and as man's extrasomatic means of adaptation). General theories are heavily influenced by a priori judgements and taken-for-granted. They are about ourselves. Even when describing the great thinkers and philosophers, it is possible to argue that they are expressing a certain way of looking at the world which is prefigured (White 1973).

But it is precisely this prefigured nature of theory which should entice us to look at theory more carefully rather than putting our blinkers on and getting our noses into middle- and low-level goals. The purer theory always asserts the interests of particular groups more obviously. This has been shown with great effect by Said (1978) in his analysis of the disciplines which have constructed the 'orient', which have reproduced over the long term certain stereotypical views of the orient, and which have thereby asserted the dominance of the 'Occident'. In relation to Said's analysis it is interesting to note Rowlands' (1987) discussion about the study of European prehistory as a celebration of the peculiar dominance of the European occident against the stagnant and despotic orient. In more general terms, Fabian (1983) has shown how the anthropological creation of 'the other' as in another time asserts the dominance, dynamism and separation of the west. As a specific example of this tendency of theory to set up relations of domination, Trigger (1980) has shown how different phases of North American archaeologists have written the American Indian as unprogressive and lacking in dynamism.



*Figure 1* The relationships between theory, practice and social practice (praxis)

One reason for a fuller consideration of practice is the need to evaluate the practical implication of our theories. Here I am talking about practice in the sense of social practice. Praxis is the Greek and German word for practice and in a long tradition of scholarship which includes Marx it has come to refer to social practice (Hoffman 1975). According to this view, theory and thinking are social and cannot be separated from the practices of social life. Theory and social practice are fused and the oppositions between fact and value, object and subject are demolished. The theory of praxis argues that theory is transformative and is potentially revolutionary. It asserts that we do not passively observe, contemplate the world, but that we create it. Science cannot, therefore, be separated from society.

Even by writing abstract theory in a proverbial ivory tower, apparently cut off from the world, the archaeologist is using and furthering a system of academic prestige, authority and privilege which has impacts on the conduct of education. Such theoretical labour, often supported by elitist institutions such as Cambridge University and its colleges, is part of a wider attempt to establish the independence and domination of intellectual endeavour. Recently the complacency of theoretical practices in archaeology has been under attack from several quarters. For example, an awareness of gender issues has led to a rethinking not only of implicit androcentric assumptions in our theories but also to more general critiques of our understanding of power, domination and signification (Gero and Conkey 1991). A whole series of volumes following on from the 1986 World Archaeological Congress, itself a highly charged and politicised event (see Chapter 8), have expressed the claims made by minority groups against the theories about the past espoused by dominant traditions (e.g. Layton 1989a; 1989b; Shennan 1989; Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990 etc).

Intellectuals, including those on the 'left', have long spoken from the standpoint of the universal, as controllers of truth and justice. Foucault (1980, 126) argues that across the disciplines, the role of the intellectual has now changed from the universal to the specific. A new connection between theory and social practice has been established. As the example of archaeology shows well, 'intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the "universal", the "exemplary", the "just-and-true-for-all", but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them.... This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles. And they have met here with problems which are specific, non-universal' (ibid.). As archaeologists are embroiled in reburial issues, land claims, feminism, heritage management and the planning process, as they stand up in court as 'expert witnesses' in the management of cultural resources, they fit better the picture of

the specific intellectual than the universal scholar of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As well as considering archaeological praxis, it is necessary to bring to the fore archaeological practice in a more conventional sense. By practice here I mean the application of theory in specific contexts. There is a potential link between praxis and practice which can be exploited in order to limit the closure, self-sufficiency and self-interest of abstract theoretical schemes. Almost by definition, theory describes abstractions and generalities which go beyond the specific instances with which it may be concerned. Even theories which purport to explain only particular events involve translating those events into terms which we can understand and which therefore have some generality. In more general theory, concerned with defining rules and principles, the specific instances are examples which illustrate the general point. In neither the particular nor the general types of theory is the theory reducible to the practices being explained. Even in the case of an exhaustive catalogue there are theoretical underpinnings which go beyond the cataloguing practice. There is, therefore, a gap between theory and data. I realise that this notion of a separation of theory and practice might be seen as a hangover from positivism and from the separation of science from value judgement. This is a problem to which I will return (Chapter 12). But for the moment I wish to assert that in relating theory to data there is always a tension, a need for adjustment and interpretation of the general in relation to the particular. While the human ability to twist and turn until theory and data are made to fit is remarkable, there is at least the potential that in accommodating theory to unexpected data we will be confronted by problems that force reconsideration of general theory. This may be a pious hope when the theories are strongly grounded in ideologies as I demonstrate in Chapter 8, but in other cases I will argue that we do adjust our taken-for-granted (Chapters 15 and 16). Relating theories to practice potentially opens them up to reflection and to the evaluation of archaeological praxis (Chapter 16). For example, it might be argued that the hard archaeological and geological evidence for the 'antiquity of man' contributed to a shaking of beliefs in Biblical accounts of origins. Equally, the discovery of indigenous traditions of cultural development in South Africa and North America ultimately provided a basis for the critiques of white supremacy and legitimacy.

But it is not enough to focus on practice alone. I have so far been providing grist for the mill of those like Schiffer and Flannery who say we should 'get on with' practice. But if theory is inadequate on its own, so is practice. Schiffer (1976; 1987) does of course use theories but would claim that middle- and low-level theories can to some extent be separated from abstract general theoretical argument. Otherwise his statement quoted earlier (p. 2) would make no sense. In fact, however, all middle- and low-level theory must involve higher level generalities in order for us to understand them, know their relevance and place them within a disciplinary framework. For example, in Schiffer's account of site formation processes, his *a priori* assumptions (high-level theory) lead him largely to ignore the issue of whether discard is meaningfully constituted. We cannot hide in empiricism, description, field archaeology, applied science and middle-range questions, hoping to avoid general theoretical issues. Our practices always necessarily employ generalities in order to make sense of what we find and do. What we measure and how we measure it are theoretical. The assumption that artifacts are the result of human



action is theory. The concepts of a site, a pot, an axe are theoretical and dependent on the historical development of disciplinary knowledge. After all, we used to think axes were thunderbolts. Archaeology, perhaps more than any other discipline, is forced to use theory to construct statements on the basis of highly fragmented and partial evidence.

So if archaeologists just want to 'get on with it' and ignore general theory, they are simply being uncritical and doing bad science. But the need for theory as well as practice takes me back to praxis. In fact many of the social implications of archaeological assumptions have come about through theoretical critique—for example, of the 'man the hunter' hypothesis (Gero and Conkey 1991) or 'optimal foragers'. However much archaeological data and contemporary social practices confront archaeological theories and taken-for-granted, there is still a need for theoretical reflection of the implications raised. Theory allows the possibility of critique.

But theory is also needed for archaeology if as a discipline it is to make an impact in current society and in competition with other disciplines. It is through theory, which systematises and forms a body of knowledge according to specified principles, that the discipline takes its form. The discipline so defined adjudicates the appropriate data and methods. It is through apprenticeship in the theoretically formed body of knowledge that professionals are defined. Such a disciplinary discourse, formed through theoretical praxis, has to be the subject of critique in order to expose its exercise of power as repressive. But power is also enabling and productive (Foucault 1980). If archaeology as a discipline is to act effectively in relation to a quickly diminishing heritage, and if it is to achieve a wider public participation in the past, it must claim a certain coherence (Chapter 12). While it might be argued that such coherence can be given by common methods and techniques, the decision about which methods are allowable (such as systematic sampling or open as opposed to 'box' excavation or the collection of botanical remains) can only be based on theoretical considerations.

The difficulty is that any such coherence, while it may have the advantage of empowering the discipline as a whole to play an effective role in society, threatens to stifle diversity, critique and change. Such coherence and self-confidence may disempower alternative and subordinate voices. This is a central problem which I will explore later in this book. For the moment, I have argued that archaeologists use theory whether they like it or not. The 1980s, at least in some parts of Europe and America, have seen an enormous expansion of theoretical debate. Such theoretical debate is a necessary part of a self-conscious discipline. But it has to be related both to practice and to praxis if it is not to become self-interested, complacent, inward-looking and uncritical.

Perhaps a simpler way of making the same point would be to say that both theory and practice (including praxis) are necessary to each other. On its own, either can become blind to its follies, dangerous in its implications. It is in the movement across the gap between theory and practice, between the general and the particular, that change is safeguarded.

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