

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FUTURES

In this latest contribution to our 'Archaeological Futures' series, Julian Thomas reflects on the current state of Western archaeological theory and how it is probably going to develop over the next few years. Archaeological theory has not ossified in the period since the processual/post-processual exchanges. The closer integration of archaeological thought with philosophical debate in the human sciences has gradually given rise to a theoretical landscape that would have been unrecognisable 30 years ago, wherein 'new materialisms' figure significantly.

The future of archaeological theory

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Introduction

What does the future hold for archaeological thought? One view is that we have arrived at a consensus that blends processual and post-processual thinking, that theory is becoming less abstract and more data-focused, or even that archaeological theorising has died out altogether (Bintliff 2011). From another perspective, archaeology is going through a new revolution, as fundamental as anything that occurred in the 1960s or 1980s (Olsen 2012: 14). A middle position does, however, also emerge. It suggests that although we may never again have the accelerated disciplinary development that resulted from our assimilation of the conceptual apparatus of the natural, and then the human, sciences, archaeology is now fully engaged in the philosophical debates of the humanities. Fortuitously, this has taken place during a period in which a variety of other subjects have developed a renewed interest in the tangible world: the so-called 'material turn'. Incrementally, theoretical debates have shifted and mutated to the point where the issues under discussion are now strikingly distinct from the preoccupations of 30 years ago. The perspectives that are currently emerging across the humanities are variously described as new materialisms, speculative realisms, object-oriented philosophies and process theories; despite sharing a number of common assumptions, these perspectives are also bitterly divided amongst themselves on a number of key issues (Coole & Frost 2010: 4). The way that these ideas are developing within archaeology itself is consequentially quite complicated. Thus, the intention of this contribution is to provide a guide for the perplexed, outlining some of the concepts that will probably animate debate over the next decade while identifying some potential difficulties and lacunae.

Although the 'new materialist' archaeologies (for want of a better term) essentially represent an extension of post-processual archaeology, they distinguish themselves by qualifying or rejecting many of the themes that had initially characterised that

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movement. Post-processual archaeology is generally associated with a critique of ecological functionalism. It rejected universal laws of culture in favour of a focus on culturally and historically contingent circumstances, within which factors ranging from ideology and power to gender and class were significant in the negotiation of social position. Artefacts were identified as material symbols, actively employed in social strategies, whose meaning was best apprehended by exploring their context. Finally, much of post-processual archaeology had a decidedly humanist tenor, emphasising the status of human beings as active, embodied social agents (Hodder 1982). It was as a result of archaeology's 'phenomenological moment' in the 1990s that some of these arguments were first challenged from within (Jones 2012: 8). Phenomenology is critical of a Cartesian vision of the world as a container of inert entities, in which humans as 'rational animals' generate understanding in the form of mental representations. It also approves a vision of material 'things' as relational entities whose significance derives from their physical substance as much as their symbolic meaning (Heidegger 1971, 1977). Yet the ultimate failure of phenomenology in archaeology has lain in the widespread misapprehension that it is concerned with no more than the way that human subjects access their environment. To the contrary, some phenomenologists would actually argue that human beings happen to be the component of an integrated world through which reality reveals itself. This is, however, something that they have no choice in, and it occurs in historically particular ways over which they have no control (Braver 2014: 139).

The new materialism's most significant inheritance from phenomenology is the critique of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism (Rae 2013: 3). That is, a rejection of the belief that human beings have an immutable nature that sets them apart from the rest of creation and that grants them a privileged position as the masters and interpreters of all other beings. In recent forms of archaeological thought, this has morphed into what we might call an 'ontological humility' (Wolfendale 2014: 165). Post-processual archaeologists were often at pains to emphasise the ethical dimensions of studying other human beings in the past and present, but it is now often considered a form of hubris to value people to the point of neglecting the moral demands of other kinds of entities, including material 'things'. One dimension of this shift has been an 'animal turn', which insists that other animate species should no longer be relegated to the status of symbols, totems and 'resources', but instead identified as active agents in their own right (Overton & Hamilakis 2013: 114). The impact of this 'post-human' perspective has been most keenly expressed in changing attitudes towards physical 'things'.

Things are not what they used to be

In recent years, a multifaceted argument has been mounted to the effect that material entities have been systematically underestimated and neglected by the human sciences (Olsen 2012: 20). Indeed, they are reduced to one of the following: inanimate matter to which things are 'done'; symbols invested with meaning by humans; expressions of human creativity; or mundane objects to be passed over without comment (Webmoor 2007: 567). The net effect of this is that although disciplines from archaeology to art history study 'things', they generally do so in order to get at something else: the people who made, perceived

and consumed them, the social or aesthetic values that they embody or the history that they reflect (Olsen 2012: 24). ‘Things’ are not interesting enough in themselves to merit investigation, while their inertia means that they must be explained in terms of an external force: society, culture, power. Moreover, when ‘things’ do become the focus of enquiry, they are often rendered as surrogate humans, so that pots are equated with people in cultural history, while artefacts are identified as having human-esque ‘biographies’ (Domanska 2006: 180).

For some decades, a distinct sub-discipline of material culture studies has been in existence, investigating the production, reception and consumption of contemporary artefacts, but this has predominantly operated using a framework of ‘objectification’ or ‘materialisation’ (Miller 1987). Under this dialectical rubric, people make objects that then act back on the formation of human subjects. More recent approaches within archaeology have begun to identify objects as independent actors. Thus, long-lasting artefact traditions and enduring objects lay down the conditions for human life, encouraging people to act in particular ways and effectively placing obligations on them (Gosden 2005: 208). Similarly, Ian Hodder has recently developed a sophisticated argument concerning the ways in which people and ‘things’ become progressively entangled with one another. People find themselves increasingly dependent on the ‘things’ that they make (from plastered walls and domesticated cereals to washing machines and cars), while those ‘things’ depend on humans for their upkeep, and on other ‘things’ for their stability (Hodder 2012: 88). The philosopher Graham Harman, however, complains that much of the recent ‘material turn’ is really only concerned with the relationships between people and ‘things’, and that, in Hodder’s case, the presumption seems to be that at some prelapsarian time, humans and objects were entirely separate (Harman 2014: 47). Hodder advocates a return to a state of hunter-gatherer simplicity, but Harman counters that people and ‘things’ have *always* been thoroughly bound up with each other.

Harman’s call to take real, substantial ‘things’ seriously already has its correlates in archaeology. Olsen (2012: 20) argues that we must consider how ‘things’ *are* amongst themselves, when shorn of any human involvement. For objects do not have to rely on people to animate them: they have the potential to do things independently. That is to say, matter can be considered as *vibrant*, imbued with powers of its own and continually in flux (Bennett 2010: 6). Left to its own devices, matter will flow, erode, degrade, decompose and reconfigure itself. The ‘making’ of artefacts is therefore less a matter of the imposition of a pre-determined design than a negotiation, in which the artisan follows and responds to the qualities of a material that is already in motion, so that form is emergent (Ingold 2012: 433).

The recognition that objects and animals are actively involved in the processes of our world, and that humans do not occupy a separate sphere of reality, has given rise to what is referred to as a ‘flat ontology’ (Bogost 2012: 17). In accordance with the theme of humility noted above, this is presented as a democratic framework in which all kinds of entities are placed on an equal footing and presumed to be capable of affecting other ‘things’. No single entity is imagined to be the sovereign source of change in the world. The first archaeological movement to advocate such a perspective was ‘symmetrical archaeology’, which argues that we should employ the same means to understand ourselves as those used to understand the

entities that we study (Witmore 2007: 546; Olsen *et al.* 2012: 12). Noting that modern Western thought tends to divide reality up into unequally balanced dichotomies, it advocates a levelling of the relationships between people and ‘things’, ideas and practices. It has been argued, however, that the effect of this balancing is simply to leave these dualisms in place, while reducing heterogeneous things and objects to sameness (Ingold 2012: 429).

Democratic modesty, and the recognition of objects as dynamic participants in our world, has led to a re-evaluation of the ethical status of material ‘things’, particularly in the domain of heritage studies. If objects can affect us, do they merely exist for our pleasure and edification, or do they have rights of their own (Sørensen 2013: 7)? And if objects are not ‘surrogate humans’ but operate in their own ways, should we not show greater respect for their independent role in our shared world (Olsen *et al.* 2012: 202)? There is, however, growing unease over the indiscriminate affordance of respect and sympathy to groups of non-humans. Does putting everything on the same level ultimately erode our capacity to prioritise the needs of disadvantaged humans (Gratton 2014: 119)? Do we really want to create a moral equivalence between migrants, disabled people, fruit flies and anglepoise lamps (Berry 2012)?

Ontology and alterity

The newfound preoccupation with material entities among the human sciences is structurally linked with a ‘turn’ to ontology, the philosophical investigation of the fundamental character of worldly entities. It is argued that since at least the seventeenth century, Western thought has been fixated with the problem of human knowledge. The question of how the mind can acquire secure information about the world was more crucial than what it is we might learn (Niemoczynski 2013: 20). The philosophical movement known as ‘speculative realism’ argues that we have consequentially been caught like rabbits in the headlights of epistemology for 300 years (Meillassoux 2008). We should instead have the confidence to assert that there is a real world out there, and be prepared to *speculate* about the character of that world. The ‘ontological turn’ has, however, taken radically different forms in different disciplines. For the speculative realists, it is concerned with the primordial nature of a reality that is utterly independent of human cognition and cultural values (Gratton 2014: 16). By contrast, in anthropology the talk is not of ontology but *ontologies* (Henare *et al.* 2007: 6). In the past, ethnographers have generally held that the peoples whom they study have different cultural perceptions of a single material world (whose definitive understanding is implicitly given by Western science). Breaking down any division between ideas and reality, it becomes possible to argue that different people are not just interpreting the world differently, but inhabiting different material worlds with multiple ontologies (Alberti 2013: 45). A particular community may, for example, maintain that stones and people are one and the same. This need not be evaluated in terms of cultural belief. Under particular circumstances, stones can have the same capacities as human beings and cause similar things to happen; in this sense, they are equivalent (Alberti *et al.* 2011: 904). In a similar way, different archaeological interpretations are not just sets of abstract ideas, as they actually arise from linking real ‘things’ together (artefacts, site reports, archives, measuring equipment, soil descriptions,

photographs). Once in existence, such interpretations are capable of creating effects of their own, becoming artefacts themselves to an extent (Fowler 2013a: 249).

The virtue of this approach is that it enables us to encounter unfamiliar worlds and to evaluate the adequacy of our conceptual apparatus (Jones & Alberti 2013: 26). When our ideas simply cannot make sense of a situation, we need to re-assess them. Yet those archaeologists who have been influenced by speculative realism have a very different view of alterity. They urge us to stop making up stories that subjugate ‘things’ to their relationships with people (Olsen 2012: 22). The real strangeness and unfamiliarity of objects lies in their non-humanness, their resistance to our intellectual schemes and the inaccessible depths that we can sense hidden beneath their surfaces.

Correlationism and realism

This imperative to think about ‘things’ in the absence of people is closely connected with the contemporary debate on *correlationism*, which begins with the conventional argument that the human mind orders and structures the raw data of experience, so that we never know the world as it really is in itself, only as mediated by our faculties (Braver 2007: 3). Any knowledge that we have is always, in part, a human construction, and it becomes impossible for us to think of people or the world in isolation, only ever the correlation between the two (Meillassoux 2008: 3). Meillassoux, however, objects that it *is* actually possible for us to get beyond the correlation of thought and being, and instead contemplate the ‘great outdoors’ beyond. His argument is that science is fully capable of addressing ‘ancestral events’ that took place long before the existence of humans: the big bang, the formation of the earth, the beginnings of life. Here we are not just thinking about the significance of evidence for the past that exists ‘for us’ in the present, we are thinking of a world utterly without human consciousness (Niemoczynski 2013: 19). The conviction that there are means of knowing ‘things’ as they really are is a further dimension of speculative realism, and it has contributed to a more general renaissance of realist philosophy.

The attraction of realism is that it allows for the possibility of entities that are entirely independent of ourselves (Gratton 2014: 29). Traditionally, this implies that the world is composed of free-standing objects, that humans passively accumulate knowledge of those ‘things’ in their minds, that truth involves a correspondence between objects and their mental representations, and that known ‘things’ are unaffected by our knowledge of them (Braver 2007: 14). Yet some of the ‘realisms’ that have emerged in archaeology are only realist to the extent that they maintain that the world is not a product of the human mind (Fowler 2013a: 235). Particularly influential has been the ‘agential realism’ of Karen Barad, who holds that our world is not composed of separate entities but of phenomena that are thoroughly entwined. These phenomena do not affect each other externally so much as ‘intra-act’ as elements of a greater whole. We understand this world from within, transforming it in the process (Barad 2011: 147). This approach is quite distinct from conventional forms of realism, and potentially conflicts with the view that objects are entirely autonomous.

Contemporary archaeological realisms also often eschew both the image of thought as mental representation and the correspondence theory of truth. They break down the distinction between ideas and objects, so that it makes little sense to seek a correlation

between the two or to identify archaeological interpretations as more or less successful approximations of reality (Fowler 2013b: 31). This suggestion hereby introduces the theme of interpretation, which is treated with some ambivalence in the contemporary literature. At least two recent publications advocate a form of archaeology that comes ‘after interpretation’, although what they each mean by this differs considerably. Jones and Alberti reject the figure of the interpreting archaeologist, aloof from both their evidence and contemporary society (2013: 16), and emphasise instead the imbrication of theories, techniques, people and apparatus described by Fowler (2013a: 235). But for Olsen, the over-interpretation of artefacts and the attempt to make them tell us about past societies should be rejected in favour of a more descriptive approach (Olsen 2012: 22). As a result, he argues that archaeology should attempt to reconstruct material memories rather than narrative history. This contrasts with other new materialisms that emphasise the specific historical circumstances in which ‘things’ and people interact (e.g. Bennett 2010: 24). While neither account rejects interpretation altogether, there is clearly a problem that it is often understood as a search for deep meanings and hidden truths. The alternative has always been to see interpretation as the way in which understanding is generated from being in the midst of events and experiences, finding one’s way through the world.

Networks and the social

Just as contemporary archaeologies sometimes claim to be post-interpretive, there is also talk of a turn ‘beyond the social’ (Webmoor 2007: 569). For thinkers influenced by network theories, society is not something that already exists, but something that people and ‘things’ conspire to bring into being (Latour 2005: 4). Increasingly, archaeologists are comfortable with the view that societies may be made up of diverse entities, rather than being composed exclusively of intersubjective relations: perhaps less a post-social archaeology than an extended notion of the social (Lucas 2012: 260). In the case of the Eurasian Neolithic, for instance, it may be helpful to consider people, animals and artefacts becoming bound together to create new kinds of communities (Thomas 2015: 1082). These perspectives are generally informed to some extent by the actor-network theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour and colleagues (Latour 2005). For Latour, nothing ever operates in isolation, but actants form networks that produce effects. Anything can be an actant—a person, a microscope, a cartoon character—so long as it can enter into alliances with other actants to bring about change (Harman 2014: 37). No actant is more ‘real’ than any other (a mythological deity may be as ‘effective’ as a stone monument), but they may be stronger or weaker, attracting more or fewer allies. Such an approach is relational, seeing reality created by the mediations and translations that take place between actants, but it none the less presents the latter as self-contained entities that can become uncoupled in order to create new networks (Harman 2009: 144).

In our discipline, the network approach has been impressively employed by the symmetrical ‘school’ in casting the business of investigating the past as an ‘ecology of practices’. As its followers note, the history of archaeology often focuses on a succession of ‘great men’ or sets of socio-political circumstances (Olsen *et al.* 2012: 37). What are left out are the battalions of plane tables, wheelbarrows, trowels, pencils, section drawings and

institutions that are tied to people in the co-creation of the past. Over time, archaeology in the field and the museum has become a more elaborate network, with a greater variety of tasks being assigned to a greater number of actants of various kinds (Olsen *et al.* 2012: 69). Despite this, the ANT approach is not without its critics. By breaking down the distinctions between objects and concepts, humans and non-humans, and by reducing the world to a grid of actants all busily mediating and translating, there is a tendency for all analyses to look much the same (Berry 2012).

One response to the problems of ANT is found in Harman's object-oriented philosophy; Harman rejects Latour's view that objects are always fully deployed in their relationships and retain no further potential in reserve, as this limits the possibility of change (Harman 2009: 17). It is partially for this reason that Harman champions the autonomy of individual, actual 'things', rather than reducing them to their relationships. This introduces an image of physical objects wherein they possess a hidden, non-relational core (Gratton 2014: 120). On this basis, Harman constructs an influential account of the relationships and interactions between material 'things'. We are all familiar with the way that when we use a tool such as a hammer, the object itself fades from our concern, and we focus on the act of hammering rather than the appearance, weight or feel of the tool. For Harman, all objects are, to a greater or lesser degree, like the hammer that has slipped from our notice: much of what they *are* is not just withdrawn but completely inaccessible to us (Harman 2010: 46). Furthermore, he maintains that restricting this kind of relationship to encounters between people and 'things' amounts to a form of human exceptionalism (Bogost 2012: 6). When two objects meet (a ball bouncing against a wall, for instance), some qualities are elicited from each, but much more of the 'subterranean reality' of both objects is withheld (Harman 2010: 58). The most controversial aspect of Harman's account is his claim that it is the sensual 'outsides' of objects that interact, and never their 'real' essences (Shaviro 2014: 55).

While Harman's views may prove influential in archaeology, it is worth noting Wolfendale's (2014: 165) criticism that Harman does not describe a world at all, just an array of partially accessible objects. Be that as it may, Harman's arguments highlight the critical distinction between two visions of reality: one in which 'things' emerge from their relationships, and one in which relations are created between objects that are essentially independent. Fowler and Harris have recently provided an elegant solution to this conundrum. Just as it is possible to identify an electron as either a particle or a wave, in the process bringing different realities into being, so we too can treat an archaeological entity (a chambered tomb, a stone axe) as either a mesh of expanding relations or as an enduring physical presence—but not as both at the same time (Fowler & Harris 2015: 128).

Assemblages and archaeologies of life

The apparent limitations of Latourian network theory have led a number of archaeologists to explore instead the concept of assemblage (DeLanda 2006: 12–16). An assemblage is a composition made up of disparate elements that cohere for a greater or lesser period, and to a greater or lesser extent, under specific historical conditions (Bennett 2010: 23). They are vibrant, unbounded and affective, unlike cybernetic systems. Assemblages have no essence or organising principle, and it is the assemblage as a whole that acts, with outcomes that are

emergent rather than attributable to any one element (Fowler 2013b: 23). The notion of assemblage deliberately blurs the conventional boundary between culture and nature, so that both ecologies and societies can, together and independently, be assemblages. Although their components may include ‘inanimate’ objects, assemblages are alive even though they are not bounded organisms (Lucas 2012: 188). Assemblages may be more or less ‘territorialised’, meaning that they may either become more stable and coherent, or prone to break apart to form new combinations. For our discipline, one of the attractions of the concept is that it is equally applicable to sets of artefacts existing in the present and to social or ecological entities operating in the past (Jones & Alberti 2013: 28).

Assemblage theory offers a novel approach to agency, which it presents as confederate, compositional and distributive (Bennett 2010: 33). Neither ‘things’ nor people act in isolation, and outcomes are emergent rather than attributable to any single entity. This view has been used by John Robb (2013) in his discussion of the spread of the European Neolithic, and by Jane Bennett in her classic account of the 2003 North American electrical blackout (2010: 25). Yet as Bennett recognises, this approach raises serious ethical difficulties. It is one thing to say that several millions of Americans were inconvenienced by a cascade of effects generated by an assemblage of electrons, managers, power lines, trees and wind. But we might have reservations about treating a historical event such as the Holocaust as an assemblage of disparate entities if it in any way reduced the scale of human responsibility, illuminating though it might be. Indeed, although we might wish to reject anthropocentrism, archaeologists will probably continue to concern themselves with humanity, if only as a historically emergent phenomenon (Barrett 2014: 68).

Embedding humanity in heterogeneous assemblages of vibrant materials and living organisms demands that we should focus on the process of *life*. In one view, it is essential that we should distinguish between living and non-living matter, recognising that only the former is capable of self-production (Barrett 2014: 72). The alternative, however, is that living assemblages are composed of both organic and inorganic matter (Protevi 2012: 248). For instance, soil is composed of both humus and a mineral component. Organisms are a specialised kind of entity, in which the process of life is enclosed. From this perspective, not only causality but animacy and vitality are best understood at the level of the assemblage rather than that of the individual organism. Nevertheless, the entities that make up assemblages are differentiated according to their capacities, such as intentionality and skill. Equally, we might wish to argue that thinking is not something that is enclosed in a single brain, but involves an ‘extended mind’ that encompasses the flows and fluxes of the physical world (Ingold 2012: 438). This would amount to a revised form of panpsychism, in which we think and experience *with* and *through* the world, rather than *about* it (Shaviri 2014: 63).

Conclusion

In continuing to develop, and in experimenting with, the ‘new materialisms’, archaeological thought has not achieved a new consensus so much as identified new areas of interest. It is to be expected that debates over history, realism, humanity, interpretation, alterity and

the ethical status of objects will intensify in the near future, but the results should prove illuminating.

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