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From social to cognitive archaeology

An interview with Colin Renfrew

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Following on from major theorists such as V. Gordon Childe and Grahame Clarke, Colin Renfrew was among the earliest to use the term ‘social archaeology’, in his inaugural lecture as professor at the University of Southampton, entitled *Social Archaeology* (1973a). In 1984 he published *Approaches to Social Archaeology* (1984), which remains a basic and important work on the topic.¹ For over 30 years he has been one of the leading figures in archaeological theory and remains one of the most influential scholars of his time. He has effectively bridged one of the classic divides between art and science, writing on diverse areas such as radiocarbon dating, trade, ritual, art, megalithic architecture, language and genetics and the politics of the antiquities trade. His research has focused on British and European prehistory, the Aegean and Indo-European archaeology, and he has also made occasional forays into the archaeologies of Polynesia and the American Southwest. Lynn Meskell met with Professor Lord Renfrew to conduct this interview at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge, in July 2000.²

LMM: In 1973 you gave a lecture at Southampton University entitled simply ‘Social Archaeology’, and I was wondering at that time what social archaeology meant to you. Could you review the substance of that lecture?

CR: That was the middle of the radiocarbon revolution, a time when European prehistory, and indeed the prehistory of other areas also,



was still fundamentally diffusionist. The underlying explanation for just about everything had been in terms of how it got there, out of those great centres in the Near East. A real problem was therefore to understand: what was the new story line? The story line was no longer all this diffusion business, so the question became what have we got in front of our noses, and how do we talk about it?

Obviously in north-west Europe one had, and to some extent still has, a great focus of attention on the so-called megalithic monuments, which are a strange phenomenon. They of course go back very early, 4,000 BC and before, so people were still very inclined to take a diffusionist view, but an opposite one, and immediately wanted to say that the pyramids came from Brittany! So I had to say, 'well not quite, that's not quite the story.' The issue became, and indeed remains (if we're going to see these developments as separate from those major advances in the Near East, from the Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations): how did this happen? How did Stonehenge happen? How did the early complex societies in the Aegean come about?

So, the question had to be set in social terms: these were innovating societies that were producing change, creating a different world: how could one conceive of that? That was the initial motivation. At the time, when speaking of social archaeology one was speaking mainly of the archaeology of societies. We still speak of societies when we're talking about social archaeology today: we are interested also in ethnic groups, and in ethnicity. But I think in addition that today, if you talk about social archaeology, you're thinking more about the theme of archaeology and identity. You're thinking about the individual in society and how the individual becomes socialized, or what it means to be a person in a particular prehistoric community, or indeed in a contemporary community. I think it's fair to say that the archaeology of identity is perhaps more up-front now in social archaeology.

The notion of different types of societies still seems to have a certain utility however. As you know, Tim Earle likes to see the world in those terms and I think he remains one of the most active in thinking about societies and how they work. Certainly I would make the criticism of many of the so-called 'postprocessual' archaeologists, that they show a tendency to take themselves off on their own into the landscape, and say 'Here I am looking through my window frame, how does the landscape look?' or 'Here I am, I'm a woman, what does it feel like to be a woman in this body of mine?'. This process of emphasizing individual experience may be very phenomenological, but it can also be very isolationist, solipsistic even. There still remains the question of how do communities come

together, and how does change arise in communities? It's alright to go to Stonehenge, and say 'I'm experiencing this great monument through my senses: look, I can do my dance right in the middle of Stonehenge'. But that does not necessarily give you much insight into the society which built it.

LMM: No, but certainly you would think, given the postprocessual focus on hermeneutics, this kind of research becomes very personal . . .

CR: Yes, it becomes personal. I don't think I've ever read a passage in any interpretive archaeological work that goes far enough beyond the personal towards a hermeneutics of community. There is so often an emphasis upon the hermeneutics of the individual: 'here I am and how great that is, and this is what it feels like, and now I'll tell you about it'. The approach can be refreshing in itself, but some social aspects are lost. Some of the great questions about the emergence of complexity are being ignored.

LMM: Of course, people respond to that strongly western, individualistic view of things. I would argue that you can study the individual in the past, but that version of the individual may be very different, very contextual and very networked, with community and kin. I think if people had read more into that, or perhaps introduced that, they would have had a different sense of how social relations operated in the past and other modes of being, rather than carrying your window around and having this one-to-one relationship with the landscape.

I thought it was interesting, when you said there was a movement away from looking at the social archaeology of the aggregate group, and now we have come around to looking at identity. Although complex societies, a term that is still very prevalent in the United States, are of interest, I'm wondering what are the obvious reasons for that turn, or that more particularistic focus? Is it simply the sorts of theory that we engage with, or a reflection of how society has changed over the past three decades?

CR: I think it's partly reactionary, since much of the emphasis in social archaeology was previously concentrated upon social organization. There has been more recently a sort of Gramscian antagonism to organizations, and an anti-scientism which tends to see laboratory people in white coats seeking to rule the world – that caricatures this movement a little, but I'm not really exaggerating the tenor of Shanks and Tilley's *Black and Red* books.³ To some extent I think the baby is being thrown out with the bath water. The emphasis on the individual we've just been speaking about is indeed very valid, but I think if we do want to understand social change, if we do want



to understand how the world has changed, it is necessary to understand more complicated issues, such as how urban societies came about. It is necessary to understand the development of power, not simply to rail against hegemony and power. Some contemporary archaeology, particularly postprocessual archaeology, tends to turn its attention away from the exercise of power, which clearly was a very intimidating feature of some early state societies, like the early Mesoamerican states. They were bloodchilling, some of them, and some people would rather turn away from that. There is a romantic ruralist tendency among some of the postprocessuals: a tendency to favour earthworks in green meadows. They may be correct in saying that 'complexity' has become rather a stereotyped term to apply to human societies, but some more complex analysis is needed than a simple interpretive view such as might be offered by a participant-observer.

LMM: I think that is a very recent progression, but I'm reminded of the absolute fascination with power that many postprocessual archaeologists had in the late eighties. There have been numerous critiques of Miller, and Tilley, and the two books you mentioned by Shanks and Tilley.

CR: Well they have turned away from the 'dark satanic mills' of Blake's *Jerusalem* in order to 'walk upon England's mountains green'!

LMM: There was the theoretical turn towards phenomenology of landscape.

CR: Yes, that's right.

LMM: But I think it has been an understated change, because there has been that seamless flow from fascination with Foucauldian archaeologies which really are about power or the institution, and the implementation of power over large groups.

CR: A lot of the impetus in interpretive archaeology has come from the neo-Wessex school of British archaeology. The all-absorbing, definitive moment for the neo-Wessex school is the transition from the Neolithic societies of southern England, which had some centralizing features, to the individualizing societies of the Early Bronze age. That is the big moment. But the idea of urbanism in this context is not mentioned. And by the time you get to the Roman period, these people have wandered off somewhere else: they don't say much about Silchester or the more complex social transformations and hierarchical power structures of Roman times.

LMM: You were very early in flagging the problems inherent in studying

prehistoric institutions, what I would consider social relations. This has come up again and again for Europeans, particularly British prehistorians, and here specifically I'm thinking about that generation of archaeologists who focused on some form of social archaeology. I'm wondering what you see as the main tension for people working in prehistory, who want to study social relations more broadly.

- CR: Well, in a very pragmatic way, if we're going to study prehistory fruitfully, we have to find a subject area (that is, a space and time) where we think there is something that we can say, something we can add to. There clearly are such areas. We have a great pre-occupation in Britain with the field monuments, because they are abundant and fascinating. Glyn Daniel was one of those who, a couple of generations ago, emphasized their romance in a really effective way: to some extent, what keeps people going is still the extraordinary romance of these monuments. But we have to remember that they are something special to north-western Europe. Not every part of the world is privileged to have these romantic, great, 'rude stone monuments' as Fergusson called them, these great constructions of rough boulders. I think one has to go out and look at other societies where the evidence is different. Obviously, with hunter-gatherer societies you're not often speaking about great constructed stone monuments, and with urban societies, again, the great bulk of material you come up against is of a different kind. The individual-focused approach of recent interpretive archaeology does have much to offer, but it needs to be applied also to stratified, state societies in a way that does not ignore the larger picture of what used to be called social structure.
- LMM: That's very provocative, what you said about the influence of romance in British prehistory, and the nostalgia in pastoral landscapes. As a foreigner, that's what I imagine people come to Britain to see, this incredible green land. I think that the national character has been influential, and that's why perhaps people are exploring phenomenological approaches.
- CR: It's a very simple thing! If you're going to be a prehistorian in Britain, you're going to marvel at the field monuments. You're going suddenly to discover Avebury for yourself and Stonehenge. But, not all of prehistory is laid out as conveniently as that. I assume that in the American south one can engage with the same issues with the Mississippian mounds, just as initially the Maya researchers marvelled at those great cities. So you do, to start with, stub your toe against the most obvious surviving remains. Also,



some of the most recent advances are in the field of mediaeval archaeology, hitherto much neglected: we certainly have no shortage of castles and country houses to work with.

LMM: Let's return to the opening of your book *Approaches to Social Archaeology* (1984).

CR: The initial shift came 10 years earlier, as I just described, away from the diffusionist approach. Another emphasis was upon interaction through the study of trade and exchange. I included in that book a paper called 'Trade as Action at a Distance,' and of course you can regard all social interactions as action at a distance. I don't think I developed this theme very fully, but obviously the whole idea of networks and of different kinds of network follows very naturally.

LMM: The other part of that question was: in the 20 years subsequent to the publication of *Approaches to Social Archaeology*, what do you feel are the fundamental changes for a socially informed archaeology, and I mean that in the broader sense, both in the social archaeology you were talking about at the time of writing, and now all the repercussions of doing archaeology. What do you think are the fundamental changes? Is it simply moving from a focus on aggregates to the specifics of cultures?

CR: I've certainly become very impressed by the difference between doing archaeology to find out what happened in the past, on the one hand, and the task of presenting the findings of archaeology to a contemporary audience on the other. The more I look at museums, the more I realize how complicated it is to set up a museum display in which you are presenting the past. Where such presentation is concerned I completely accept most of the things that postprocessual archaeologists say about the practice of archaeology. If you're trying to convey what happened in the past, through a version, which inevitably is some kind of authorized version, then the interesting question is who is authorizing it. In museums you do indeed see a whole interplay of forces, and this situation has been very well considered in the past 20 years in the postprocessual field. My own interest indeed follows one particular avenue, and that is what actually happens to objects when you put them on display.

I've recently come to know quite well the artist Mark Dion, who is particularly concerned with display, and who then moves on from display to the activity of research. He puts under the focus of his scrutiny as an artist the practice of the researcher. One of his favourite themes has been the work of the naturalist in the 19th century. He did an archaeological project for the Tate Gallery in

London that I was really very intrigued by (Renfrew, 2000a). I have over the years become more and more impressed by what I see as a very powerful analogy between the practice of the archaeologist and the practice of the gallery-goer who is looking at contemporary art. Contemporary art can often seem enigmatic to the viewer, and it invites an engagement, an interaction between the viewer and the material. As a viewer you start off without having an idea of what the artist is seeking to convey, or what the art might mean, or what you might infer from it, just as the archaeologist (especially the prehistoric archaeologist) starts off with elements of material culture and has the responsibility of making sense of that material. In both cases it is the viewer (or the archaeologist) who is making sense of the material. I think there's a lot of interest in that approach, and it allows one to have a much more fresh interaction with both groups of material.

LMM: Would you say then that this has taken off in the last 20 years, this idea about the ramifications of archaeology, and that a social archaeology has meant much more commentary than actual practice?

CR: Well, that's not what I mean or meant by social archaeology but I'm beginning to feel that's what social archaeology may be taken to mean by many today, namely the role of archaeology in contemporary society.

I'm sure that is an interesting field, and I can see that there are many archaeologists who find it really very attractive. But I think if you really want to do politics, why not go and do the politics? Why sit around being an archaeologist? My motivation for doing archaeology is to find out about the past, and I do indeed feel that understanding the past has a bearing on the present. We all know how the past can be used and manipulated, and no doubt we all live in a community where the past is so used to some extent.

So far as politics are concerned, the issue of how the past is manipulated to influence the present, while of some interest, is not for me as interesting as the broad sweep of politics itself: how politics is manipulated to influence the present. The interest goes beyond that tiny segment of the modern world where heritage weaves its way into politics. There's more to politics than that. And, more importantly, there's more to the past than that. If we want to understand who we are as human beings we have to situate ourselves in the world in the broadest sense and that is something which archaeology allows us to do. That's much more interesting to me than asking 'what shall we put on our postage stamps?'



LMM: Sure. But, it's interesting that a large part of your own work, about the antiquities trade and looting, is something that is very socially engaged. I guess there is a difference between being socially engaged with its concomitant responsibilities, and analysing and critiquing the deployment of images.

CR: Well, I wouldn't deny that getting angry about looting and the illicit trade in antiquities, and trying to do something about it, is, to some extent, the politics of archaeology in the present (Renfrew, 2000b). That's one area where I've felt it worthwhile to get involved, partly because I'm just angered by the hypocrisy of the dealers, and the collectors, and the monumental hypocrisy of the major museums that continue to buy unprovenanced antiquities. It's all the more scandalous because it's perpetrated by professionals who ought to know better.

LMM: That's a very difficult area for archaeology to reconcile, and a whole other body of literature and practice applies. But I want to move away from those questions for a moment now, and ask you about cognitive-processual archaeology. What is the major contribution of that development? How do you see its development as a negotiation between processual archaeology and postprocessual archaeology? In fact, do you see these as relevant or even helpful terminologies at this point?

CR: It's clear that any perspective of the past that seeks to be comprehensive, and anything that is speaking to what is special in human societies and in human actions, has to deal with cognitive aspects: the things people respond to, their understanding, their ideas and their projects, and so on. Any archaeology has to deal with that. In the early days, the New Archaeology was very concerned, even pre-occupied, with ecological adjustments and adaptations and dealt less with symbolic aspects of material culture. That's why I named that the Functional-Processual phase, because everything was very much set in that framework. Recall, however, that Binford himself in his early pronouncements ruled everything in, rather than excluding aspects of culture and society: he stressed the sociotechnic and the ideotechnic as much as the technomic. All those things were on the agenda, but somehow the cognitive didn't seem to rank very high in practice. And then the early 'postprocessualists' began to point out the lack of discussion about the symbolic field, and I completely agree with them there, although their approach has always seemed to me to be somewhat lacking in methodology.

The aspiration of a well-founded cognitive archaeology is indeed to have a coherent methodology and hence a systematic way of

talking about these things. The principal difference is, perhaps, that, while the cognitive-processual archaeologist seeks to study how cognitive systems work, the postprocessual or interpretive archaeologists are seeking entire interpretations, and very often they still mean by that 'now I see it all' experiences. That's what interpretive archaeology sometimes means: it aspires to putting yourself inside the other guy's shoes.

Cognitive archaeology sets out to have a slightly less ambitious approach. It is concerned with the question 'how do things work?' including: how do concepts work, how do mental constructs work, how do symbols work, what difference do they make and how are we to study these things? Probably my best example remains the Indus Valley weights.⁴ A sceptic in the early days of the New Archaeology (M.A. Smith) insisted that we couldn't talk about social organization, or about belief systems, since the archaeological record didn't contain that type of information. Well, the Indus Valley weights allow you in a very explicit way to demonstrate that there was indeed a weighing system, in modern terms. That implies that they had constructs. And when you ask what did they use the weights for, it seems clear that they were not weighing their cubes merely against other cubes. Clearly they were weighing stuff, and that introduces the notion of commodity.

Recently I've become interested in a slightly different approach, which is the whole issue of the process of the human engagement with the material world. I think it's possible to see the human story as different kinds of increasing engagement with the material world, in a number of ways. Of course we engage with the material world not only through actions but through constructs. Weighing, or measuring in general, offers a very good example, a very important component of a society's engagement with the material world, since the whole notion of commodity represents such a crucial advance. For the notion of commodity also carries with it the notion of economy, that if you have a commodity you will think of it in relation to another commodity: and how much each is worth in terms of the other. So you have issues relating to value that come in, and along with them the whole notion of 'economy'. So I'm very much inspired by that line of thought at the moment. That is the sort of direction that a cognitive approach can stimulate. You're actually investigating something, you are not simply offering an interpretation.

LMM: It is, I think, quite telling that you feel the interpretive approach hasn't had a methodological construct to apply. So you would see the attempts at semiotic analysis, or using archaeology as text, using frameworks developed by Ricoeur, as insubstantial?



- CR: Semiotic analysis might be useful, but just proclaiming archaeology as text doesn't seem to be analysis. Were there analysis, I would be more enthused. I think the whole image of archaeology as text is largely a misleading one, because I think text is normally meaningfully constructed. Yet it's a mistake to think that the archaeological record is meaningfully constructed. I don't doubt that material culture is used meaningfully, so you have a context which was meaningful, and I'm entirely in harmony with that. But when you say archaeology is a text, it at once conjures up the notion that what you are finding is a text, and that is what these misguided people are doing: they're looking at these fragments, these disjointed fragments, these *dissecta membra*, which is what the archaeological record is, and saying 'oh this is the text, I'd better read it'. And they're getting confused. That's not a method!
- LMM: Again we go back to the dichotomy between prehistory and other cultures where something like a semiotic analysis is more applicable with wall paintings, just for an obvious example, where you actually have visual puns, verbal puns, you can decode certain layers . . .
- CR: That's a different issue though. If we're talking about iconography, then I think that's fine, let us use that approach. I don't for a moment deny that if you have a series of wall paintings, and say 'let us take these as the text, as a visual text', there the metaphor is entirely acceptable. These wall paintings were meaningfully constructed, and let us take steps to employ different avenues to approach the meaning, but that's not archaeology as text. If you're regarding wall paintings as text, that's fine. That's not what archaeology, in general, can hope to do.
- LMM: Given the recent work on language and identity, and in some sense a search for origins, a search for beginnings of something shared, how do you see the recent re-discovery of ethnicity in European archaeology?
- CR: Yes, it's become very fashionable today. There were some very similar ideas in my book *Archaeology and Language* (1987), for instance, writing about what is meant by the Celts. It is a very similar observation. I'm very much in sympathy with Siân Jones' book, which asserts very effectively that ethnicity is a construct and ethnicity is something which people choose. Perhaps she doesn't emphasize as much as I would how the constituent ingredients come down from the past, and obviously language is very important in this process. Recently, people have come to realize that it is quite hard to find an archaeological correlate for ethnicity, which is

therefore quite hard to recognize archaeologically. One really should not equate archaeological cultures with ethnic groups, that's all a complete misunderstanding. The archaeological culture is a construct of ours, and one which may not have had any meaning at the time in question. Stephen Shennan is continuing to do interesting work developing these insights.

The concept of ethnicity can only get you so far, particularly because, as Jack Goody showed many years ago, there are some communities that have a significant degree of ethnicity, and others that don't. I think it's one of the great reproaches to be made of anthropology and archaeology, that somehow after the Second World War erupted we forgot about those ghastly consequences of loose talk about ethnicity (and race) instead of going in and clearing up the problem as people are doing effectively today, showing that ethnicity is always a construct operating at the present time. All that dreadful business in the former Yugoslavia probably wouldn't have happened if anthropologists, immediately after the war, had shown ethnicity to be what it is.

LMM: You were mentioning that one of the possibilities of your work on language is a closer understanding of the development of regional cultures, and that we might get to a point where we actually have a cognitive archaeology of early prehistoric contexts.

CR: There is much more to be learned about 'area effects', about the way similar concepts and conventions are sometimes shared over a whole region. It may be that language plays a bigger role here than the archaeologist has realized. Certainly if we really were able to understand when particular language families had their initial spread, that is to say the spread of the proto-languages, there might well be interesting things to learn from that. I do find it a very fascinating issue. There is no doubt that linguistic diversity is one of the main features of human diversity. The mechanisms by which linguistic diversity takes shape are going to be of great interest when we come to understand better interactions among humans (as we were saying earlier, action at a distance), which result in the formation of languages and language families.

The book that we've just published, *America Past, America Present* (Renfrew, 2000c), is devoted to the Americas. There one sees a fabulously rich pattern of language families, a huge variety of languages, and really quite strong genetic patterning emerging. Yet how they fit together isn't in the least clear at the moment. It's rather disappointing that after decades of controversy, we haven't the faintest idea to within 10,000 years when humans first occupied the Americas. It's time archaeology advanced further there.



LMM: Lets move over from science to art. You've had a long-standing interest in art and aesthetics, and you've written both for audiences in archaeology and in the fine arts. How do you see the relationship between archaeology, the antiquities trade and the art market as they currently stand, and what do you think our colleagues can realistically do in the future? While we're on the topic of how you stand on issues of representation and interpretation, where do you draw your conceptual influences from? I'm thinking here also about questions of meaning, agency and even gender?

CR: Well, I'm very caught up with that whole issue at the moment. I'm preparing a series of lectures (the Rhind lectures) for Edinburgh, and I want to talk about how the archaeologist may look at contemporary art and also employ perspectives of artists looking at the past. I think the contemporary sculptor Richard Long offers some wonderful insights into the activity of making monuments and the remembrance of things. Long's work gives one a path of access into the consideration of monuments in the landscape. To take another example, contemporary artists have explored the body in new ways. Antony Gormley has almost reinvented the body, side-stepping the whole 2,000 year tradition of sculpture in marble and bronze, simply by taking casts of his own body and using these in very interesting ways. So the whole approach in a way is redefined. We are led to think again, through his work, of what it is to be embodied, living as a human individual in space, with mass and with our five senses. I think there's a whole series of insights here for the archaeologist.

Another issue, as we discussed earlier, is that of commodification. We live in a world of commodities, and David Mach, one of the artists I'll be talking about, has focused much of his work upon that issue. Eduardo Paolozzi has emphasized through his work that we live in an environment of artefacts which we ourselves have made. Contemporary artists are very good at sensing and showing these things. To go to Tate Modern⁵ and see the room by the contemporary British sculptor Tony Cragg is a revelation: we are reminded how we live in a world of artefacts. These are very immediate experiences, obtainable very directly from contemporary art without the need for too much philosophical discussion. It's very illuminating!

LMM: And how do you see the interplay between that idea of representation and then interpretation? How do we make the linkages between the immediate effect and that way of revisioning the world? How can we use that productively in archaeology? It's hard to say that is a methodology.

CR: Quite so: it isn't a methodology in itself, it is inspiration only, and it is inevitably subjective. But if you glimpse new things, sometimes you can work out methodologies for making them explicit. That after all is how science works, and always has. Scientists have nearly always benefited from intuitive inspiration just as mathematicians very often see the solution before they see the proof. Of course then I'm not really talking about finding proofs, but we do come to see artefacts in new ways.

Sometimes we have to remind ourselves that a new material was once something wonderful and novel. Just imagine the impact of bronze, when there had been no bronze in the world before. I can still remember the impact of plastics, which changed some aspects of the world, but of course in a less fundamental way. Bronze was one of the first materials of value, and, to go back to what I was saying earlier about engagement and the materialization process, the notion that there are now valuable commodities in the world was a total revelation, which changed the world!

To take a different case, if one is talking about the fragility of the individual in the modern world (along a number of dimensions) Tracey Emin's work⁶ in the Turner Prize show, 'My Bed', offers a splendid case in point. Her installation and the videos that went with it were very affecting, focusing your attention on human fragility and how hard it is to survive as a human being in various circumstances. Of course that particular work can be interpreted in gender terms, and very validly so, and in more general terms to reflect problems of human vulnerability and of how humans establish what they are in the world. Much of the effect was achieved through the use of artefacts: the unmade bed. And so, I think, to go into Tracey Emin's installation, essentially an unmade bed with debris, was a very archaeological experience. I mean, just go to any well-excavated ancient house, basically it's an unmade bed with debris.

LMM: More than a metaphor in that sense.

CR: Much more than a metaphor, yes.

LMM: I think most people would say that's very interpretive, and that what you're suggesting is very radical. That's not just about reading a book and trying to interpolate that into some sort of archaeological narrative, but here you have far more contact, sustained contact with people actually working in those fields, and it has ranged from what we would say is hard science, to something quite avant-garde.

CR: When you become interested in contemporary art, the possibility is



always there to take matters further and come to know the artists, and to become a little involved. At Jesus College over the years we have had a series of sculpture exhibitions which have given the opportunity of knowing some of the artists personally. That has certainly offered new insights into their work.

LMM: I'm interested in how you see our relationship to another field, social anthropology. Some time ago you pointed out 'it is up to us to formulate the questions, and to define this field of inquiry'. You suggested that the project of archaeology has diverged from social anthropology, and that social anthropology was not interested in material culture, but rather in ethnography, and this is where we went our separate ways. But from where we are now, there has been so much scepticism about the ethnographic project, and what is *de rigueur* at the moment is material culture studies. What do you see as the interesting terrain shared between social anthropology and archaeology, and what possible futures might we have on an inter-disciplinary front?

CR: Well that's one good thing about archaeology: it does work from material culture, and it has to. Although social anthropologists have tended to wander away from that, there have always been some, like Arjun Appadurai, who have maintained a connection with material culture. His ideas about the life histories of objects have fed back in a useful way into archaeology, and I'm sure anthropology has an enormous amount to contribute through thinking about material culture. But then archaeologists including Danny Miller, as you say, have contributed a lot to that. I think one of the best points that Ian Hodder ever made was to emphasize the active role of material culture, which indeed is the very point that I'm emphasizing in talking of the engagement with the material world. The instrument of engagement is material culture, and it has a strong cognitive dimension. Material culture is used knowingly in furtherance of concepts and constructs.

LMM: In 1999, we were in a session called 'Archaeological Method and Theory 2000', which brought together archaeologists interested in social theory, feminist theory, issues of representation and neo-Darwinian theory. You had some very strong comments to make at the start of that presentation. Could you recap the main points you were trying to make, and could you also discuss whether you feel that this particular application of theory contributes to social archaeology at all?

CR: I am unimpressed by the current neo-Darwinian approach among archaeologists. I made just a few brief comments at the beginning

of the paper to that effect, which were thought to be very scandalous by some of the neo-Darwinians gathered there. Of course nobody can doubt for a moment the power of Darwin's evolutionary approach. Humans have their place right in the middle there, along with everybody else. What guidance that gives in the field of material culture is not however very clear.

We can discuss why that should be, but one reason the Darwinian approach works so well is that it deals with systems where the mechanism of the communication of information through DNA is increasingly well understood. The great miracle is that Darwin was able to be so clear without understanding the mechanism, but we do have that opportunity today. Yet I still have to be persuaded that all this is anything more than a metaphor when applied to human culture. You can go to an enormous amount of effort to translate very straightforward insights about social evolution into neo-Darwinian language, and when you've done so, all you've done is translate. Does that really get us much farther forward? I haven't really found many instances yet where I've received deeper insights into the underlying processes of culture change from reading this material.

LMM: Your reactions to this type of theory, that relies upon scientific models and insights of science, are significant, since your new work on genetics and language also relies on some fairly substantive science. How do you see these fields differing and what is the place of science within archaeology today?

CR: I think archaeology is about trying to make sense of, and to understand more about, the human past. In some ways I think my approach is a very empirical one: we need all the help we can get. For instance, in the radiocarbon revolution it became clear that if one could have an independent dating method, this was going to be an enormous benefit. Yet the adoption of the new chronology meant overthrowing the whole framework that had been accepted before. So it was more than just a useful tool. It actually did produce a revolution in the sense that what was previously believed was no longer believed. It wasn't only revised, it was no longer believed.

I think that will happen to some extent with the study of the pre-history of languages, certainly in the Indo-European case, where I am persuaded that what was the classical model for Indo-European language simply doesn't make sense. Then there are other areas, for instance, genetics. It is clear that we're getting to know about the history of the peopling of the world, that is the dispersal of *Homo sapiens* in the Upper Palaeolithic period, mainly through molecular genetics. Molecular genetics is going to walk side-by-side



with Upper Palaeolithic archaeology to give us a new demographic history of the world, from a hundred thousand years ago down to very recent times (Renfrew and Boyle, 2000). And that's very exciting in a number of ways. It's exciting because I think from that we're going to understand the spread of languages.

LMM: You're really talking about revolutions in our understanding of very fundamental concepts in the past. You're suggesting that, with genetic information, we have an avenue through which we might be able to construct a fine-grained history of a period that we can't tap into through conventional means.

CR: I think that is so, yes. I wouldn't claim that it's the be-all and end-all: we are speaking of the relatively restricted field of population history. I'm actually more interested in what we were talking about earlier, about the engagement between humans and the material world. One of the key processes that fascinates me is the notion of value and prestige in material objects. There you've got one of the motivating forces: how is it that material culture, sacred objects or precious objects, are such a powerful motivation, just as money is? Money is just a form of material culture abstracted once or twice. Electronic money is still just some more material culture in a sense, but it started off as a pound or a gold sovereign in your pocket. These are really, to me, the most crucial questions in terms of what makes humans tick

LMM: In advocating a cognitive approach, you prefer the term 'cognitive archaeology' rather than cognitive-processual archaeology?

CR: Either will do. The interest lies in the cognitive part. The reference to 'processual' reminds us of the link to the aspirations of the early New Archaeology, and of the need to find more coherent methodologies than have so far been offered by post-processual archaeologies.

LMM: This is historiographic, but in advocating cognitive archaeology, in going down that road, you're talking a lot about material culture. But you have also advocated moving on, and doing something other than material culture. People have suggested that there is a danger of falling into a biological determinism with a cognitive approach.

CR: I can't see the force of that at all. First of all, one of the benefits of the cognitive approach is that it does indeed allow you to ask questions about changes in cognition that would have taken place up to *Australopithecus*, and from *Australopithecus* through to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. One of the terrible limitations of the interpretive approach is this: that in practising it you are assuming

that we're all in this together in the sense that we are all equivalent versions of *Homo sapiens*. How otherwise can we stand in the other guy's shoes? It is hard enough to be intuitive about our human equivalents – how are you going to play that game when you are intuiting other species? When you are considering the process of the emergence of *Homo sapiens* you are talking about a time when we weren't all in this together. We hadn't made it yet. On this issue I don't think the interpretive approach can even get to first base.

Cognitive archaeology does take into its scope the cognitive archaeology of *Homo erectus*, or the cognitive archaeology of *Australopithecus*, as well as that of our own species.

LMM: The other part of the question is really, how do you separate the cognitive from the social?

CR: Well, I used the systems approach a long time ago, and the separation between subsystems was always a little artificial. You don't have to separate. For instance, what I was saying about value was an absolutely central statement, referring to a central area within the field of cognitive archaeology, but at the same time it clearly is a social statement also. The same is true of language. Of course language is a social phenomenon. You can't have a language unless there are people speaking it. Real languages are spoken by lots of people, who can quite reasonably be referred to as a language community. So language is social, and language is a cognitive phenomenon. Anything important in the cognitive field is going to be social, and it's also the case that most important things in the social field are going to be cognitive. So no, there is no distinction, but with the cognitive we are talking about constructs and thoughts and the brain . . .

LMM: But you're not advocating the 'hard wiring' end of things . . .

CR: No, but I'd like to be much further into the hard wiring. But that's another field! If neurophysiology advances fast enough then I'll be very interested in knowing more about neurophysiology, and I do see that as a key field. I also think, with molecular genetics, they are just beginning to isolate the specific genes. In the cognitive sphere, that suggests genes for language impairment, particular kinds of . . .

LMM: Predispositions?

CR: The notion of a gene for dyslexia is such a good idea, and it may be as easy as that. When we know more about that, we're going to know a great deal more about human cognition, and obviously human cognitive capacities are to a large extent genetically determined in



humans. So there is the whole field of genetics that is going to intersect with cognitive archaeology. And you're right, when you speak of the wiring, of the links between the genetics, between the DNA and what actually happens. We shall have to learn one day about the neurophysiology of the brain, then come to understand better the pattern of social behaviour. All those aspects will one day form part of cognitive archaeology.

LMM: But you wouldn't say that these characteristics aren't socially, culturally or contextually grounded for a group? It doesn't strike me from our conversation that you would be advocating some sort of blanket treatment, or a deterministic way of reducing people to that.

CR: People are individuals: there is much diversity and we must develop ways of taking into account the differences among individuals and among groups. But at the same time there are common elements of the human condition. There must be a basic hard wiring. There is an undoubted DNA component in what it is to be human, which far outweighs the genetic diversity between individuals and between groups. It is from that genetic component that arise the neurophysiological aspects that distinguish humans from other species. That may seem terribly determinist but I'm afraid it is broadly the case! Actually this touches on what I think is most interesting, what I'm actually trying to think more about at the moment: if all those hunter-gatherers of 35,000 years ago were born with very much this same DNA composition and the same hard wiring that we possess, why didn't they behave like us? And that is the interesting story, that is a story which I think is not altogether clarified when the leading biological anthropologists, and indeed archaeologists like Lewis Binford or Paul Mellars, talk about the 'Human Revolution'.

Now what do they mean by the Human Revolution? The Human Revolution is the appearance on earth of *Homo sapiens*, so the Human Revolution in that sense was accomplished 40,000 years ago if you talk about Europe. Some years ago I wrote an article (Renfrew, 1996), 'The Sapien Behaviour Paradox', which (when given as a Hitchcock lecture) scandalized the archaeology community in Berkeley. I pointed out that the Human Revolution was accomplished by 40,000 years ago. And then what happens? Not a lot. Nothing particularly radical seemed to happen in Europe for 30,000 years. The pace of human existence, so far as Europe is concerned, changes about 10,000 years ago. Indeed that is true globally: with the Holocene the pace quickens.

I don't think it's unfair to say that the human artistic record

until the Holocene, if you exclude Franco-Cantabrian art, is not overwhelmingly exciting. And so, the interesting thing is that it's not in the hard wiring, it's not in the genetics, the interesting phenomena all come within the lifespan of *Homo sapiens*. And we have no effective causative explanations for this. We do not properly understand how these changes came about, and where, and when. We've been doing archaeology for 150 years now, 1859 was supposed to be the big year – *The Origin of Species*, the antiquity of humankind (the three-age system had been known for years) – archaeology 'came of age' in 1859, and we still don't have any good answers to those questions.

LMM: The questions you consider significant here seem at variance with the very specific applications of cognitive archaeology mentioned earlier. It strikes me that when you give examples of cognitive archaeology they are very local and contextual.

CR: A cognitive approach has to be willing to deal with both the general and the specific. When we are considering the emergence of *Homo sapiens* from the earlier hominid forms, a certain level of generality cannot be avoided. But many of the important questions will nonetheless be cognitive ones, in the sense that we are discussing human or hominid capacities to plan and to execute tasks, to organize activities, to cope with social relations. Ideally one would hope to be dealing with specific instances, with individual sites where there is material evidence to allow inferences about intelligent behaviour. But to the extent that we are discussing the emergence of a species, a certain level of generality may be permitted.

When the big events occur, that I was discussing earlier – the development of farming and settled life, the organization of life around farmland, the development of personal property, the inception of new kinds of social relations, the emergence of new technologies such as ceramics and metallurgy, and the beginning of monumentality – each of these things occurs within a specific context and can only be understood within that context. So I agree that detailed cognitive studies will be local and contextual.

But that's what is amazing about the human experience, that the trajectories of development are just so different from continent to continent, and from place to place. Each requires analysis and explanation in its own right. But then at the same time there are the similarities in development from continent to continent, not all of them explicable in terms of contact.



LMM: So, what is the future of cognitive archaeology? How can a cognitive archaeology go farther, and where will it go from here?

CR: I think the approach is bound to influence everybody's subsequent work. When we talk about the active role of material culture, it's not the stuff, the material that is active ultimately. The material culture resonates in the minds of humans, and that is where the activity lies. Of course it resonates in the minds of humans in different societies in different ways, so that there are different concepts. I was saying earlier that what is really interesting is the way material culture takes on value. That might at first sound like some sort of universal formulation. But in fact it isn't, because high value in the Near East must have been different as an experience from high value in Mesoamerica. The context and the reality are specific to the case, but our analysis may seek to be more general and to deal with more than one case at once. In just the same way, what happens when people domesticate rice isn't the same thing as when people domesticate maize, so the notion of 'domestication' is a generalization which makes bland and uniform something that was not bland and uniform at all. Probably all that is mildly obvious. But people are quick to object that one is dehumanizing if one seems to decontextualize through the making of generalizations. But one of the purposes of archaeology is to understand the Other: past times at different places. We cannot hope to do this without using our own language, and in doing this something of the original context is inevitably lost. We do need words like 'value', 'commodity' and 'measure' when seeking to understand the social dynamics of other societies.

It is the aim of cognitive archaeology to get under the surface of things, to gather some understanding of the concepts and categories which, in different societies, underlie the workings of material culture. It cannot aim at complete interpretation and is sceptical of the intuitive leaps which sometimes seem to characterize hermeneutic approaches. But the challenges are there, and they will not go away.

LMM: We also need to have the language to be able to talk across specializations.

CR: You have to be able to generalize. That's what is sad about some of the interpretive archaeology that earlier on said 'oh, you must not generalize,' and then they write books of considerable abstraction, which are generalization from beginning to end!

LMM: So you think cognitive archaeology can go beyond . . .

CR: It's the archaeology of the future.

LMM: It's the archaeology of the future . . . well, maybe we should end on that.

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Notes

- 1 A complete bibliography of books and articles by Colin Renfrew can be found on the internet at: <http://www-mcdonald.arch.cam.ac.uk/index.htm>
- 2 This interview was transcribed and assembled by Matthew M. Palus in Fall 2000.
- 3 Shanks and Tilley, 1987a, 1987b.



- 4 This discussion refers to artefacts described by Colin Renfrew (1982) from Mohenjo-daro, consisting of small worked cubes of coloured stone that have been interpreted as standardized weights.
- 5 The new national modern art gallery in London.
- 6 Tracey Emin's controversial work, entitled 'My Bed', was featured in the 1999 Turner Prize show at the Tate. In July 2000 the work sold for around £150,000, to a private collector. For more information search for the keywords 'Turner Prize' at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/low/english/uk>

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