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COMMENTS ON KLEJN: "THEORETICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE MAKING"

It is very odd to try and comment on an article ten years old discussing the emergence and consolidation of an approach to archaeology that is now moribund and whose credibility has largely been destroyed. Any commentary made on the paper ten years ago would be entirely different from this. Had I read the paper in 1980 I would have regarded it as a very insightful, comprehensive and interesting piece of work and this is still my view in 1991 but my attitude in other respects has changed (as I suspect has Klejn's). The whole exercise is bound to be unfair because I have the benefit of hindsight and archaeological theory has changed dramatically since 1980. Rather than try and cover up this state of affairs I will try and positively use it to make some comments relevant to contemporary archaeology.

The poverty of theory

Klejn cites 113 articles or books in his paper. Looking through the list of titles I would classify less than 20 % of this literature as dealing with 'theoretical' issues. Why this difference between Klejn's views of that which constitutes theory and my own? Klejn does not tell us what is actually supposed to constitute a theoretical work but reading through the article it becomes quite clear that the words 'abstract' or 'generalizing' would provide close substitutes for him. Any work that does not simply describe, classify and catalogue sets of archaeological 'facts' or synthesize these facts within the culture-historical framework of traditional archaeology immediately become 'theoretical' for Klejn. This way of thinking about archaeological theory was, of course, commonplace in the 1970s and is reflected in his views. With the benefit of hindsight the

vast majority of the output of the 'new' archaeology can now be regarded as largely divest of theory, as non-theoretical as traditional archaeology: more of the same masquerading as something different.

Klejn has a special section of his article devoted to mathematics and computer studies. There is nothing particularly theoretical about using statistics, equations or computer programmes, the end result being merely a more formalized description of archaeological data in most cases. The change is simply from making qualitative to quantitative statements. Most of the ethnoarchaeological and 'behavioural' studies Klejn notes in the second section are works of pure methodology. His paper might then be retitled as a review of the application of fresh methods to archaeological data. Much of 'new' archaeology was little more than this which explains why, of course, it was so rapidly adhered to by many and why so many 'traditionalists' were supposedly converted. This 'new' archaeology became accepted because it did not present any radical challenge to the discipline as traditionally constituted. Shifting from an unsystematic empiricism to a formalized empiricism (positivism involving use of the hypothetico-deductive method etc.) wasn't exactly a very radical move. In hindsight it appears surprising that many regarded it as a threat in the 1960s and 1970s. That this was undoubtedly the case supports my point: the absence of much theoretical reflection both in 'traditional' and 'new' archaeology.

Theory involves conceptual labour, the creation of a strategic guide for practice involving the re-thinking and re-direction of that practice through philosophical argumentation and reflection. Theory itself is a form of practice acting reflexively on that which it seeks to understand through its transformation. Theory involves performing intellectual labour on concepts used to make sense of that which theory itself creates, its

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'objects' of knowledge (data). It is not using the rank-size statistic or drawing a Thiessen polygon, performing a multivariate statistical analysis, or interviewing informants about the spatial distribution of artefacts in a pueblo located somewhere in Arizona or quantifying the manner in which the Nunamiut distribute caribou meat. To discuss the concepts of totality, of subjectivity, of contradiction, of power, of discourse, of ideology, what it means to interpret, the consequences of modernity in relation to archaeological knowledges, the nature of material culture as a signifying system is to do theory. And there has been and is pitifully little of it, in archaeology. I would claim that a characteristic that does serve to unify and define archaeology, past and present, is the poverty of theory and a deeply entrenched distrust of intellectual argumentation.

The United Kingdom is supposedly a heartland of archaeological theory. To my knowledge there is only one academic post in the country devoted to teaching theory. Every post advertised and every appointment made demands that the candidate be a period specialist or have some technical skill such as the ability to identify pollen grains or faunal remains. I am generally labelled as a theoretician but my appointment and a large amount of my time is devoted to teaching the prehistory of Europe and anthropology. Teaching theory, officially at least, is merely a tolerated sideline. Until this deeply traditional institutionalized *empiricist* obsession with period slots and classes of archaeological data ends the poverty of theory in archaeology will reproduce itself and the discipline will continue to be an intellectual and conceptual desert in comparison with others. An eminent professor of archaeology, whom Klejn has labelled as a 'theoretician', once told me that until I excavated a major site or produced an area or period monograph I would never be considered a true archaeologist. It, therefore, would be a good career move to do these venerable things. He was right and these remarks were intended for my own good. I intend to do neither.

Theory does not and should not involve ignoring archaeological materials and working in a purely conceptual ether. Its only importance is as a means of thinking through those materials in a fresh manner. Theoretical work is thus a materialist practice from the very beginning to the very end. It is a labour in just the same sense as excavating a site and just as time consuming. In archaeology as a whole there is still very much the prevailing notion that theory is a kind of optional extra, something that may or may not be

'added on' to the site report or the period survey or teaching in institutions. I am not advocating the reverse but would rather like to see the entirety of archaeology become a theoretical practice wrapping empirical evidence and procedures around with conceptual structures dialectically related to them. We would then have no theoretical archaeology and no archaeology that was not theoretical.

The writing of theory

Klejn's approach to the 'new' archaeology could be described as what Roland Barthes referred to as a 'neither-nor criticism'. One is decent, balanced, tolerant, doesn't take sides. The new archaeology is admired but not without a 'just' measure of criticism (e.g. the emphasis on homeostasis: "the dialectical concept of internal contradictions as the source of development remained alien to the New Archaeologists" (p. 6). Spatial archaeology is 'very useful' but doesn't take account of evolution. The *Transformations* volume edited by Renfrew and Cooke contains "very interesting and promising studies" but only provides formal answers. It appears as if almost any work that is not traditional archaeology must be supported. I never really obtained any coherent idea of Klejn's own position. He mentions that Higgs adheres to a rigid economic determinism supposedly simplifying Marxist concepts, and this is about as close as the article comes to a critical statement but what does Klejn himself advocate? As a reviewer he seems to try to maintain a carefully guarded neutrality on most matters. The paper is thus essentially descriptive rather than analytical and incisive. In trying to reference and discuss so much material a truly critical approach becomes largely substituted for a will to document and catalogue and list. Klejn's mode of discourse is thus itself a reflection of traditional archaeology. The traditionalist describes artefacts, Klejn describes books. In the desire to be as comprehensive as possible neither has much time or space for sustained critical argumentation.

Interestingly Klejn mentions Marxism making the astonishing claim that it "sometimes openly, sometimes implicitly, constitutes one of the fundamentals of theoretical archaeology" (p. 11). At the end of his paper Klejn warns us of the dangers of simplification. Nothing could be more simplified or clearly wrong than the suggestion that new archaeology had anything to do with Marxism except on the level of the banal. If it is

sufficient to state that 'the economy is determinant' to be a Marxist then clearly the new archaeology was Marxist. But to reduce the complexities of Marxist thought to that level is entirely vacuous and itself symptomatic of the poverty of theoretical debate in archaeology. Similarly it could be claimed, and equally spuriously, that all archaeologists (either traditional or new) are Marxists because they study materials (i.e. they are materialists and Marxists are materialists). It is highly ironic that during the student uprisings of the late 1960s the 'response' of archaeology was to produce and utilize a deeply conservative theory (the systems approach), which was little more than an ideology of universal harmonies. It is even more ironic that one of the chief proponents, Colin Renfrew, has just been made a Conservative peer in the House of Lords. The irony lies in the belief that the 'new' archaeology was in any sense radical. Klejn mentions two strands of Marxism, a culture-historical approach and as a philosophy (p. 11). But what of Marxism as a critique of alienation, domination, exploitation and repression-Marxism as a politics? This is missing. There are no politics in Klejn's discussion and because there are no politics he lacks a vital way of

assessing the relationship between facts and values and thus achieving a critical insight in the review.

To end I would like to quote Klejn:

"'New Archaeology' [has become] much more moderate than before and for this very reason (and in that form) is quite acceptable to the wide circles of traditionally-minded archaeologists" (p. 6).

There are signs that this may be about to occur in so-called 'post-processual archaeologies'. To make themselves acceptable to other archaeologists theory will be watered down, a radical politics abandoned, careerism and conformism will hold sway. This needs to be guarded against. New theory must always be irreverent to the past. The way to honour Klejn is to seriously criticise his work not to write platitudes about his insight or whether in mentioning cognitive approaches towards the end of his paper he accurately predicted a direction *some* future archaeology would take. I would like to invite him to undertake a review of theoretical archaeology post 1980. Then a real debate could take place rather than indulging in a kind of shadow boxing with the past.