

produced from particular social standpoints; (2) support, because of standpoint sensitivity, theoretical inquiries into gender, race, class, and other structuring relationships in human life; (3) recognize that, even though empirical reality constrains what we can say about the past, there is still lots of room for interpretation; and (4) incorporate, because of theory's inevitable underdetermination by data, broader criteria of evaluation beyond an interpretation's correspondence with archaeological facts and its logical coherence. The influence of the "postmodern" turn in intellectual life is evident here, but so are influences emanating from many other "post-positivist" philosophies of science.

These philosophical commitments come together in what has been promoted as a *social archaeology* (e.g., contributors to Meskell & Preucel 2004). Social archaeology is focused on how different people inscribe meaning in space and time and, through these processes of inscription, construct themselves. It looks to engage multiple interests in the past, especially those of historically disenfranchised groups. These include all those indigenous and descendant populations marginalized by expanding capitalism and who have been famously described as "people without history" (Wolf 1982). Social archaeology is thus a more inclusive, democratic practice that appreciates "the multiple entailments of our being-in-the-world" (Meskell & Preucel 2004: 3). This is not simply politics by other means; rather, it is good science. Our ability to grasp and learn from the otherness of the past can be enhanced by an engagement with traditional knowledges. In Bernstein's (1988) words, "it is only by the serious encounter with what is other, different, and alien that we can hope to determine what is idiosyncratic, limited, and partial." While serious engagement with stakeholders located outside the academic realm offers particular frustrations and challenges in reconstructing the past, it nonetheless makes us aware of silences that we have been creating and opens up new research directions. Such engagement is right at home in an archaeology that not only seeks to explain but also emancipate, that is, to foster critical thought about the contemporary

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## Pragmatism in Archaeological Theory

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### Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the dual nature of archaeology has been widely recognized and accepted by scholars working within the field. On the one hand, archaeology is a rigorous search for truth about the ancient past. On the other, it is a political dialogue with the present. This accepted fact has been accompanied by a sea change in philosophy and theory. A number of important critiques by scholars located worldwide have moved archaeology away from empiricist and positivist epistemologies to various "realist" alternatives. These alternatives (1) appreciate that knowledge is constructed and

human condition in hopes of impelling positive social change (Saitta 2008).

## Definition

Pragmatist philosophical principles are especially compatible with, and indeed crucial for advancing, a critical social archaeology. Preucel and Mrozowski (2010: 28) define pragmatism as the “distinctive American philosophy that holds that the meaning of ideas or action can be determined by considering what idea or action it routinely generates, that is to say, its practical consequences.” They note that pragmatism has never been, and is not today, a unified approach. There are many debates about what the founders of pragmatism (Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey) meant and about the accuracy of various contemporary interpretations (e.g., those of Richard Bernstein and, especially, Richard Rorty). Preucel and Mrozowski briefly review some of the ways that pragmatism has been employed by archaeologists. This entry focuses on the influences of Dewey and Rorty.

John Dewey captures the essence of the approach with his notion that pragmatism turns from the “problems of philosophy” to the “problems of men” (Dewey 1917). That is, it applies itself less toward knowing or “getting things right” (in terms of capturing some final transcendental truth) than toward living or “making things new” (Rorty 1989). For pragmatists, making things new requires that we improve our ability to respond to the views, interests, and concerns of ever larger groups of diverse human beings – to expand the scope of who counts as “one of us” (Rorty 1989).

Thus, pragmatism seamlessly dovetails with the kind of sensibility that equips practitioners for using the *craft* of archaeology (sensu Shanks & McGuire 1996: a “unified practice of hand, heart, mind” and “emotion, need, desire”) to address human needs. Pragmatism does so without abandoning time-honored and still useful concepts of truth, experience, and testing. Instead, it reformulates these concepts in a way more sensitive to meeting human need. In so

doing it responds more directly – and perhaps more coherently and honestly – to the widespread consensus that archaeological work occurs in a political context, and that we must therefore be aware of how the results of our inquiries are used within that context. A brief summary of core pragmatist philosophical commitments follows.

The first core commitment is to an antifoundational notion of truth – the idea that there are no fixed, stable grounds on which knowledge claims can be established. Truth is not an accurate reflection of something nonhuman; rather, it is a matter of intersubjective consensus among human beings, one mediated by currently available theories, methods, and data. This notion produces a warrant for aggressively experimenting with theory and method in order to arrive at historical truth. Experimentation is crucial for improving and expanding the conversation between and among interested parties of scientists and citizens. It is the vitality of this conversation that moves archaeology and its constituencies toward the sorts of “usable truths” that can serve human need. So understood, pragmatism moves us in directions other than those stipulated by the earliest commentators on archaeology’s social relevance. The “New Archaeology” that burst upon the scene in the 1960s sought to establish such relevance when it explicitly cast archaeology as a science and argued “it is anthropology or nothing.” However, advocates like Ford (1973) still saw the “indiscriminant publication of unverified hunches” as an obstacle to archaeology’s ability to serve humanity. Today, liberal production and publication of such hunches is seen as critical for advancing archaeology’s explanatory and emancipatory project.

The second core commitment is to the idea that truth claims must be evaluated against a broader notion of experience. Specifically, they must be evaluated in terms of their concrete consequences for life today – for how we want to live as a pluralistic community. Instead of simply asking whether a claim about the past is empirically sufficient in light of available data, pragmatism asks *what difference the claim makes*

to how we want to live. What are the implications of theoretical claims from evolutionary archaeology, interpretive archaeology, post-colonial archaeology, or indeed any other current framework for understanding society and history for how we think about, and how we might intervene in, human social life? To what extent does a truth claim expeditiously meet the human needs at stake in, say, reburial or repatriation controversies; that is, to what extent does it facilitate putting human souls to rest and human minds at ease? "Experience," in this view, is relational, interactive, and creative. It acknowledges our status as social and historical beings and thus is self-consciously reflexive. Defining experience in this way means that we must subsume the usual realist "criterial" rationality for judging truth claims (i.e., criteria emphasizing logical coherence and correspondence between theory and data) under something that is still broadly criterial but much more qualitative and humanistic – what Rorty (1989) has termed "fuzzy" rationality.

A third commitment is to a particular notion of "testing," specifically as it relates to the evaluation of truth claims produced by different standpoints, perspectives, and cultural traditions. As noted, especially germane to archaeology these days are those truth claims that divide scientific and various descendant community knowledges of the past, including indigenous, immigrant, working class, and other "folk" knowledges. Many have argued that within archaeology, there is no clear epistemology for uniting descendant community and mainstream scientific understandings of the past. Several scholars have advocated a rethinking of epistemology now that previously disenfranchised groups have places at the table. In contrast to the mainstream scientific view where competing ideas are tested against each other in light of the empirical record, pragmatism stipulates that we test the ideas of other cultures and descendant communities by "weaving" them together with ones we already have (Rorty 1989). Testing is a matter of interweaving and continually reweaving webs of belief so as to increasingly expand and deepen community and, perhaps, create new fields of

action. Pragmatism prescribes a "measured relativism" that balances a commitment to evaluation with the parallel belief that cultural pluralism is our best recipe for civil cohesion. Latour (1999: 4) captures the same basic idea with his notion of a "sturdy relativism" in which science allows us to be sure of many things but also seeks to make better connections with the wider social collective. For Latour, this relativism is not one that capitulates to "anything goes" or, in his words, to the "frantic disorderly mob."

The specter of *objectivity* haunts these core philosophical commitments. What does objectivity mean in this context? And do we abandon all hope of attaining it by embracing a pragmatist orientation? The notion of objectivity endorsed by pragmatists, as alluded to above, is one that can be described as *dialectical*. Dialectical objectivity takes a particular stance toward the subjectivity of the knower. Whereas other kinds of objectivity seek either to exclude subjectivity (absolute objectivity) or contain it (disciplinary objectivity), dialectical objectivity adopts a positive attitude toward subjectivity. Subjectivity is seen as indispensable to the constituting of objects, as in fact *necessary* for objectivity. As Heidegger (1927) notes, objects first become known to us through action in the world. Knowing is thus acting, and human acting is always acting in company (Fabian 1994). These arguments close the loop to a concept of "objective truth" as a matter of intersubjective consensus – or solidarity – among human beings, rather than as a matter of accurate reflection of something nonhuman.

This pragmatist notion of objectivity differs a bit from realist notions that are still widely invoked in contemporary archaeology. Realist objectivity stipulates that there is an independent reality, that alternative accounts map it differently, and that, while hope and bias complicate the picture, systematic exploration of similarity and difference can establish credible knowledge claims and produce more complete understandings of the past. Binford (1982) famously characterized this kind of objectivity as "operational objectivity." This qualified notion of objectivity has been endorsed by

archaeologists working across the paradigmatic spectrum. Thus, processual archaeologists have called for a “mitigated objectivity,” contextualists a “guarded” or “modified” objectivity, and feminists an “embodied objectivity.”

The rub is that such notions of objectivity, no matter how well qualified, still might not be best for regulating a more democratic, inclusive, and critical social archaeology. Pragmatism’s commitment to “testing” the beliefs of other cultures by interweaving and continually reweaving them with beliefs that we already have best supports an integrative approach to settling differences between indigenous and scientific knowledges. The navigational guide in these encounters is something fully human – wider, deeper, stronger, and better community – rather than some socially independent object that we seek to accurately represent in theory.

### Key Issues/Current Debates

How can a pragmatist archaeology concretely serve this enlargement of community, especially when many public constituencies are still utterly indifferent to whether archaeology exists or not? How can we find some measure of integration in the new, post-colonial world?

One obvious way is through the production of knowledge that takes stock of neglected peoples and histories and that focuses on questions other than the kinds of “origins questions” – about the evolution of humanity, agriculture, and civilization – that have traditionally anchored archaeology’s more popular writing. Of interest are questions about the “lived experience” of everyday life – its conditions, variations, rhythms, and disjunctions – with answers developed in such a way that they are accessible to those living peoples having a stake in the interpretations. This ambition is only realizable if those whose lives are affected are directly involved in the research enterprise as partners and collaborators, instead of just subjects or informants. Archaeology has been making good progress in reaching out to these groups. New understandings of the past are being developed

by the “subaltern” archaeologies of women and racialized others, and by anti- and post-colonial archaeologies focused on indigenous peoples and their histories.

Efforts to develop a “working class” archaeology in the United States are cut from similar cloth (e.g., Saitta 2007; Shackel 2009). Archaeologies of labor are gaining increasing visibility in the States and catching up with those that have been developed elsewhere. A critical history of early twentieth-century coal miners in southern Colorado (Saitta 2007) is one that has been offered as an antidote to *official* histories of the American West. Official histories – especially in the West – are nationalist, progressive, and triumphal, emphasizing social unity and continuity of the existing social order and its institutions (Bodnar 1992). They gloss over periods of transformation and rupture or spin those ruptures (e.g., the American Civil War) as always having produced a better society, “a more perfect union.” Alternatively, critical histories deal with context, transformation, and rupture, addressing both the historical process and different narratives about that process. Both kinds of history often conflict with *vernacular* (Bodnar 1992) histories of the past. Vernacular histories are local histories derived from the first-hand, everyday experience of those people who were directly involved with history’s events. They are “passed around the kitchen table,” conveying “what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like” (Bodnar 1992: 14). Vernacular histories threaten the sacred and timeless nature of official history, just as critical history threatens vernacular history.

Archaeological work in the American West has produced useful, mutually beneficial dialogue with people steeped in vernacular history, such as trade unionists. The vast majority of these people have never had much use for archaeology, realist, or otherwise. Others in the same unionist company, however, are keenly aware that history is complicated and can be written in a lot of ways, all of them deeply political. The gulf between academic and working class cultures, no matter where it is found around the world, is still palpable. We may or may not need



a working class archaeology, but it certainly seems that we need a different way of *justifying* it. A key to narrowing the cultural gulf is to appreciate that sites of industrial and class struggle are part of a living history and long commemorative tradition and often considered sacred ground by descendant communities.

Progress is also being made in coping with the other, arguably more difficult conflicts in archaeological interpretation, such as surround compliance with the United States' Native American Graves Protection and Recovery Act (NAGPRA). These conflicts, especially, beg for pragmatic interventions more attuned to "living" than "knowing." By law, NAGPRA compliance is governed by a realist, criterial rationality. The success of a claim for cultural affiliation depends on whether it is supported by most of the available biological, linguistic, archaeological, and documentary evidence. In this scheme native oral traditions are assigned an evidentiary status equal to other kinds of scientific evidence. However, NAGPRA's "preponderance of evidence" criterion remains deeply problematic, both because of the elastic nature of evidence in archaeology (resulting from the particular quality of archaeological data combined with the fact that such data only become "evidence" in light of theory) and because of the often deep contentiousness of tribal oral traditions.

Given this situation, a realist, criterial rationality may not be the most appropriate or productive. Instead, we might follow the lead of those pragmatist philosophers and Native Americans who suggest that a more important and relevant criterion is the consequences of knowledge claims for everyday life: for how we want to live, and for the building of a genuinely pluralist community characterized by mutual understanding and respect. In the American Southwest, for example, Pueblo Indian tribal representatives implicitly endorse pragmatist evaluative criteria where they argue, in so many words, that history is less important than survival and the maintenance of harmonious relationships among the tribes. Survival is understood broadly as political, economic, *and* cultural. Naranjo (1996: 249)

takes such a stand where she asserts that, in her view, the Pueblo Indian's primary concern is with "the larger issues of breathing and dying," rather than with the specific details of knowing that focus scientific world views. This concern for the present as well as the past – for living as well as knowing – represents a significant convergence between pragmatist and tribal epistemologies that is worth exploiting for its unifying potential. But this unity can only be established if we are willing to rethink the usual scientific criteria – that is, empirical and logical sufficiency – for judging and integrating knowledge claims.

Other convergences are apparent in the realm of methodology. Speaking at a conference dedicated to the topic of "Indigenous People and Archaeology," Lomaomvaya and Ferguson (2003) note that:

In Hopi culture, what stands the test of time is substantive information about the past. Collection and analysis of data requires theory, but for Hopi it is the Hopi past itself that is most important, not what we think this past means for the world beyond Hopi.

This primary interest in archaeological "thick description" of a particular past converges with the pragmatist belief that human solidarity is best achieved not by those disciplines – theology, science, and philosophy – charged with "penetrating behind the many private appearances to the one general common reality" but rather by those which sensitize humans to the experience of diverse "others" through exploration of the private and idiosyncratic. Rorty (1989: 94) notes that "novels and ethnographies" are especially well suited to building this kind of solidarity. Archaeological narratives attuned to human cultural variability across space and time, and developed via more reflexive and hermeneutic methodologies, can be just as useful.

Despite its critique of criterial rationality and preference for "thick description" over nomothetics, the pragmatist alternative need not be anti-science. This is a perennial criticism of scholars involved in building a critical archaeology. In the pragmatist view, and all things being

equal, science is an excellent model of human community and solidarity (Rorty 1989: 15). But, unfortunately, all things are rarely equal. Where compromises are required, it is science that must lead the way, since it has for too long (and as a consequence of unequal power relationships in society) dominated and silenced other ways of knowing. In his *Federalist Paper No. 10*, the American founder James Madison noted the threat to community presented by “majority factions.” For Madison, the best corrective to the majoritarian threat was enlarging the scope of community, that is, the number of interests represented at the table of democracy. To the extent that mainstream, realist science is a majority faction in American archaeology, it poses the greatest threat to the project of reconciling competing knowledges and expanding community. Archaeologists and subaltern “others” alike tend to cringe at any call for compromise in the service of reconciliation and stronger community. But Rorty (1998: 52) provides some comfort when he reminds us that, in democratic societies, “you often get things done by compromising principles in order to form alliances with groups about whom you have grave doubts.”

### Future Directions

Pragmatism emphasizes ways of living instead of rules for knowing, the “weaving together” of knowledges instead of their “validation against” experience, and the social utility of narratives instead of the absolute truth of laws and theories. These governing ideals neither forsake reality nor undermine the possibilities for learning, nor capitulate to relativism in the way that term is usually understood. Pragmatism subsumes Enlightenment criterial rationality and nomothetics to more humanistic – but no less explicit and compelling – regulative ideals. In so doing, it converges with the epistemologies of subaltern groups – native peoples and working classes – for whom the social causes and consequences of scientific knowledge claims can be of great

concern. This in turn promises a more collaborative and democratic, and less authoritarian, archaeology.

At the same time, pragmatism usefully breaks with both the analytical (empiricist, positivist) and continental (post-positivist) philosophical traditions that so many around the world have found wanting as underpinnings for contemporary archaeological practice. The desirable outcome of pragmatism’s advocacy of these particular notions of truth, experience, and testing is stronger community – richer and better human activity – rather than some singular, final truth about the past or some imagined “more comprehensive” or “more complete” account of history. The loyalty in pragmatism is to other human beings struggling to cope rather than to the realist hope of getting things right; the desire is for *solidarity* rather than *objectivity*.

Pragmatist philosophy is thus fully compatible with the theoretical interests of an archaeology of collective action. It also meets those criteria enunciated by scholars seeking a more *ethical* practice (e.g., contributors to Lynott & Wylie 2000). These include the need to be self-conscious of one’s subjectivity, accountable for one’s presuppositions and claims, and responsive to the various constituencies having an interest in the past. Pragmatism’s ethical imperatives dovetail especially nicely with archaeologies of civic engagement and those that employ “service learning” as a pedagogical tool (e.g., Nassaney 2004) whereby we, as contributors to public knowledge, use our knowledge to serve the public good – whatever we take “public good” to mean.

Whether these ethical principles are best theorized as universal (good for all times and places) or situational (a matter of comparing time and space-bound practices with each other) is subject to debate. Rorty’s (2001) position that community-building is best served by situationalism or, in his terms, “ethnocentrism” is particularly useful: that there is more to be gained by replacing the Enlightenment rationalist commitment to universal moral obligations with the rather more modest idea that we – as

Westerners, intellectuals, archaeologists, or whatever – merely have some instructive and possibly persuasive stories to tell that might help to build trust across the boundaries that divide us from others. On this view, moral and ethical progress is viewed as an expansion in the number of people among whom unforced agreement can be established through free and open encounters (Rorty 1991).

Pragmatism's emphasis on narrative and conversation is perhaps its greatest gift to a discipline like archaeology. Indeed, these commitments fit well with those who see archaeology today – given the diversity of theories, methods, and voices that have come to characterize it – as less a well-defined, bounded discipline than a fluid set of negotiated interactions, as less a "thing" than a "process." This "community of discourses" (Hodder 2001), while threatening what some might see as an unproductive dispersion of scientific energy, is mostly to the good if it stimulates imagination and experimentation, sustains intellectual vitality, and produces better understandings of the past as well as better and stronger community.

## Cross-References

- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), USA
- Post-Processual Archaeology
- Social Archaeology

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