Archaeological Hammers and Theories
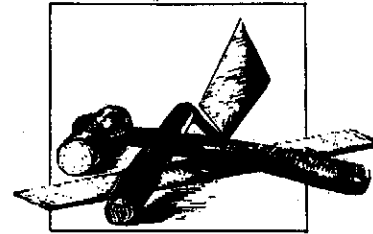
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The Poverty of Philosophy in Archaeology

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Since the late 1960s traditional archaeological theory and method have come under increasingly critical examination. Not surprisingly, these years have also seen a sharpening of interest in the philosophy of science. Recently, Schiffer (1981) has appealed for intensification along this front, calling for development of a more explicit "philosophy of archaeology." In what he views as an initial step in this direction, Schiffer identifies two issues within archaeology warranting philosophical treatment from archaeologists and philosophers of science alike. One of these concerns the borrowing of theoretical concepts from other disciplines (specifically ecology) to apply to human behavior; the other concerns the problem of confirmation in ethnoarchaeology. The present amount of controversy surrounding these issues suggests to Schiffer the need for a set of philosophically derived procedures to ensure more successful borrowing on the one hand, and the delivery of more universally acceptable knowledge-claims on the other.

Schiffer's specification of these particular philosophical issues suggests an epistemological outlook that is essentially empiricist in scope. The pur-

pose of this chapter is twofold: (1) to explore the consequences of an empiricist epistemology for both archaeology and society; and (2) to suggest an alternative set of philosophical issues that might serve to focus a philosophy of archaeology. The critique of empiricism and the alternative philosophical orientation outlined in this chapter depend upon a particular understanding of what theory is.

EPISTEMOLOGY, ARCHAEOLOGY, AND SOCIETY

Theory and Reality

At the basis of empiricist epistemology is the notion that "thought" and "reality" can be treated as independently existing realms of life. The empiricist presumes that the "truth" of reality is contained within the givens of experience in the guise of "facts." For the empiricist the goal of scientific inquiry is to "mirror" (Rorty 1979) this truth by representing assembled facts as accurately as possible in theory. Achievement of this goal in turn requires a certain amount of fundamental thinking among those seeking to participate in the process of theory building. Since humans are presumed to have privileged access to truth, the empiricist deems it necessary for everyone to agree on what counts as a conceptually relevant way of arriving at truth, so that alternative knowledge-claims can be evaluated. Adherence to this framework thus implicates a view of theory building as an ethically neutral enterprise that is uneffected by other political, economic, or cultural processes operating in society. Schiffer's call for a set of procedures to mediate theory building, as well as for some guidelines for confirming knowledge-claims, clearly reflects an allegiance to empiricist epistemology.

To the extent that one endorses this epistemological perspective, there is little fault to be found with Schiffer's arguments. The issues of philosophic import he identifies and the strategies he suggests for resolving them are consistent with his particular view of theory and the purpose of scientific inquiry. From the epistemological position taken in this chapter, however, a philosophy of archaeology that is grounded in empiricism has unfortunate consequences for both the movement of the discipline and for society. This alternative epistemological position is informed by a particular understanding of dialectical materialism (Resnick and Wolff 1982).

Like empiricism, dialectical materialism presupposes a certain relationship between thought and reality. Dialectical materialism differs, however, in viewing thought as but one constituent aspect of a *singular* social totality. Embedded in this social totality are all manner of other political, economic, and cultural processes in society, each of which is presumed to be in

cause–effect interplay with all the others. Thus, this epistemological position denies that the thinking process can ever be a pure or unfettered act of freedom. Rather, the birth, development, and death of any theory is seen to be conditioned by the myriad social processes comprising the social totality. In short, theory is viewed first and foremost as a form of *social* production—as a motive force shaped by society and in turn influencing society in particular directions (the "materialist" thesis). As characterized here, then, dialectical materialism refers only to a particular theory of knowledge; it is *not*, as some would have it, a "political strategy dedicated to the destruction of capitalism and the birth of communism" (Harris 1979:155).

Following from this particular conception of the relationship between thought and reality is the dialectical materialist assertion that *no* theoretical framework (regardless of its epistemological underpinnings) can deliver the "essence" or "truth" of reality. The empiricist claim that such truth can be known via programmatic adherence to a set of procedures for "mirroring" reality is thus rejected. Alternatively, from the standpoint of dialectical materialism the knowledge-claims delivered by *any* theory (including those informed by a dialectical materialist epistemology) can only be considered "true" insofar as their own validity criteria are concerned; that is, they are relative truths. But by rejecting the notion of absolute truth and the idea that theories can be evaluated and rank ordered using some standard measure of validity, the dialectical materialist does not mean to imply a relativist indifference toward alternative theoretical or epistemological frameworks. Rather, dialectical materialism specifies a form of critique that is distinctly nontraditional. Such a critique seeks to (1) expose the social conditions that allow competing theoretical frameworks to exist and (2) determine the consequences of competing theoretical approaches for those other aspects of the social totality with which they articulate. Since, from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, theories end only when their social conditions of existence end, pursuit of these tasks is seen to serve the purposes of radical social criticism.

The Methodological Beast

A full-blown critique of the empiricist epistemological position is well outside the scope of this chapter. Arguments concerning the drawing of the thought–reality dichotomy, the logic of empiricist proof, and the notion of value-free science are more ably presented elsewhere (Fay 1975; Harvey 1973; Resnick and Wolff 1982; Rorty 1979). The major intention here is only to point out some consequences of empiricist epistemology for both the direction of the discipline and society.

Perhaps the most apparent effect of the empiricist project in any discipline is the disproportionate amount of concern it generates for methodology. Indeed, a tendency for sets of analytical methods to become objects of analysis in their own right seems to be inherent in the empiricist framework (Mills 1959:51). Such a tendency is clearly evident within archaeology today. The unleashing of the "methodological beast" with the advent of the so-called "new" archaeology in the 1960s has created such an interest in mirroring (i.e., increasing the precision of those methods used to recreate reality) that problem definition has become a secondary concern in some areas (see Moore and Keene, Wobst, Keene, and Cross, this volume). Even those archaeologists who have furnished insights into the disciplinary trends of the past 20 years tend to view an appropriate question as one that can be answered with available data (e.g., Meltzer 1979). This is tantamount to saying that the questions archaeologists ask should be defined on the basis of how well they are currently able to mirror reality. It is precisely this kind of neglect for what it is we *want* to know that has perhaps contributed to the perpetuation of "normal" science (Kuhn 1970) in the recent history of the discipline, and the suppression of genuine theoretical revolution. But even normal science depends upon a background of consensus so that agreement can be reached on what qualifies as "truth." As Schiffer points out, such consensus has not yet emerged in archaeology. This situation attests to the inherent difficulty of arriving at standard criteria for adjudicating knowledge-claims even *within* the empiricist tradition, and thus to the need for some alternative (but distinctly nontraditional) evaluative framework.

The consequences of empiricist epistemology are as profound for society as they are for the discipline. Though the empiricist seeks a neutral framework to direct theory building and "govern the successful transfer of principles from one science to another" (Schiffer 1981:906), even the most "successful" of transfers in these terms is likely to have anything but neutral effects on society. Arguing from the standpoint of dialectical materialism, Harvey (1973, 1974) has demonstrated how theories marshalled by empiricists for application in the real world have predictable results for social policy making. Because such theories are necessarily grounded in the reality they seek to mirror, they usually tend to maintain the societal status quo when practically applied. As an example, Harvey (1974) shows how the empiricist tradition consistently produces theories that sanction Malthusian and neo-Malthusian conclusions concerning the relationship between population and resources. These theories are in turn shown to have particular political and theoretical consequences: they implicitly justify inaction where problems of economic repression are concerned, and effectively divert attention from other kinds of social processes (e.g., class relations) that condition the population–resources relationship. The potentially severe implications

of empiricist theories (a severity enhanced by the "universal truth" status accorded their propositions) thus suggests to Harvey the need for investigating their *social* conditions of existence. This need seems all the more compelling today given the variety of contradictory "facts" that exist concerning the population–resources relationship (e.g., Simon 1980).

In light of Harvey's argument, then, it becomes conceivable that the empiricist project operating in archaeology can have similar societal-wide effects. Because of the logic of empiricist epistemology, theories rising on empiricist foundations potentially serve only to recreate in the past the dominant cultural ideologies of the present. The continuing popularity within the discipline of population–resource stress models for explaining aspects of social evolution may be illustrative of this situation. When viewed in a social context, such theories serve to implicitly legitimize prevailing socioeconomic conditions, thereby reproducing the dominance of a certain subset of the social establishment. Schiffer (1981:903) does a service by calling attention to the weaknesses of such theories, no matter how they are conceptually packaged. However, it is arguable as to whether these theories can be "improved" by establishing a special set of methodological conventions to guide theory formation. As long as the thinking process is presumed to be ethically neutral, and concepts perceived as value-free, the empiricist project will likely continue to deliver nonrevolutionary theory and status quo archaeology.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered an alternative set of philosophical issues to contrast with that recently suggested by Schiffer, one deriving from a particular understanding of dialectical materialism. Though an archaeological research agenda to accompany this epistemological position has not been specified here, the purpose has been more to outline the kinds of philosophical issues that emerge given a view of theory that differs radically from that held by Schiffer. Rather than espousing a concern for those factors that allow the successful use of extradisciplinary concepts or the generation of truly lawlike knowledge-claims, the concern raised here is for (1) why certain concepts are more popularly consumed by archaeologists than others; (2) what political, economic, and cultural conditions support the continued consumption of such concepts; and (3) what the consequences of this theory building are for other aspects of the scientific process and for the direction of society. In a time of widespread social and economic instability, such questions are at least as compelling as those raised by Schiffer. Such questions, however, lie outside the scope of empiricist epistemology. Alter-

natively, an appreciation of the epistemological position advocated here encourages archaeologists to consider how theory building—as a social process—influences those other social processes with which it necessarily articulates.

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