Processual and Postprocessual Archaeologies

Multiple Ways of Knowing the Past

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5. Radical Theory and the Processual Critique

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The processual/postprocessual debate in archaeology is wide-ranging, touching on philosophical matters of fundamental concern to all anthropologists. At issue are ways of conceptualizing social forms and ways of producing and justifying knowledge-claims about those social forms. This chapter intervenes in the processual/postprocessual debate in a particular—and perhaps unwelcome—way. I argue that we do not need to find common ground beneath those approaches as much as to move the debate to a new philosophical terrain that neither side presently occupies. In this regard, I want to make two points: first, that movement to this new terrain is being impeded by an essentialism of theory that informs both positions and, second, that this alternative, nonessentialist terrain has thus far been best explored by radical (i.e., Marxian) theory.

The chapter has a three-part strategy. I first substantiate my critical claim by calling attention to aspects of the debate that reveal an essentialist logic—an essentialist epistemology. Then I briefly discuss a key regulative ideal of radical theory—the concept of overdetermination—and how it prescribes an alternative set of philosophical concerns. The discussion allows a closing response to charges that radical theory is dangerously relativist and without merit for directing paradigm growth in archaeology (Binford 1986:465; Earle and Preucel 1987; Schiffer 1988).

Critiquing the Debate

By essentialism of theory, I mean a position in epistemological practice that evaluates ideas against a universal standard presumed to exist above and beyond their differences (Resnick and Wolff 1987:6). Throughout history, the "observable facts of reality," on the one hand, and, on the other, some presumed "underlying logic" of reality have competed as such standards

under the banners of empiricism and rationalism. In practice, however, people regularly move between those standards—or invoke them both simultaneously—in supporting particular claims to knowledge (Hindess and Hirst 1977; Layder 1981; Suchting 1983).

The processual/postprocessual debate displays the same kind of waffling on standards, though rationalist arguments have increasingly gained prominence with the deepening recognition that data—including "actualistic" data—only gain meaning in light of theory; that is, they are paradigm-bound (Hodder 1985:12; Watson 1986:447; Wylie 1989a). Thus, ideas are currently evaluated and ranked on their ability to grasp some presumed rational, underlying logic of reality. They are evaluated as more and less "useful," "productive," "fruitful," and "adequate." The problem here, though, is that those terms themselves are fully paradigm-relative and hence a priori inappropriate as pan-theoretic criteria for evaluating knowledge-claims (Resnick and Wolff 1987). That point is not generally appreciated within the debate, resulting in a certain amount of unconstructive posturing and presenting serious obstacles to the exploration of epistemological alternatives.

Some examples will help substantiate my charge. Binford routinely invokes the greater superiority of the processual paradigm in defending his particular conception of the cultural subject. Binford denies outright that variables other than ecosystemic ones have any autonomous causal efficacy in shaping social forms. For Binford, societies are thermodynamic systems—period—and any approach that fails to grasp the fact is either inappropriate or simply wrong (1986:469). As Wylie (1989a) has pointed out, however, Binford makes the claim without showing on empirical grounds that his conception of the cultural subject is true and others false. Instead, he resorts to a rationalist assertion that his systems paradigm is self-evidently correct—that is, uniquely "fruitful" and "productive" for grasping reality—and others self-evidently false. Binford's rationalism is further evidenced by the intimation that his conception of science—contra that of the postprocessualists—is singularly proper and correct (e.g., Binford 1986:459–460), a claim that Schiffer also makes where he accuses radicals of misunderstanding (among other things) the scientific process (Schiffer 1988:467). In my mind there are some deeply religious ideas at work here, yet this does not prevent Binford from condemning contextualists and Marxists as the new wave of "archaeological theologians" (1987:404).

Binford's characterization does contain some truth, however, to the extent that postprocessualists are also given to theory justification on distinctly rationalist grounds. Hodder, for example, routinely serves notice on the "inadequacy" of processual and other noncontextual archaeologies—the Marxian approach again among them—for their failure to take stock of "knowledgeable human actors" (Hodder 1985:3; 1986:70) and the "content of historical meaning" (1986:75). In Hodder's view, human subjectivity is the underlying essence that must be grasped in order to achieve a full and "adequate" understanding of reality. In a move not unlike Binford's, Hodder claims that the focus on agents and meaning content allows us to get at the "real complexity" of archaeological data (1986:150), thereby making

contextualism conceivably "more scientific" than processualism (1987b:517). Such arguments from both sides highlight the debate as, to some degree, one of contesting rationalisms.

Evaluations of the debate by third parties—for example, Earle and Preucel and their *Current Anthropology* (CA) commentators—offer a final way to substantiate my charge. What I take from the CA discussion—and several of the chapters in this volume—is the impression that the debate can be resolved by combining elements of both approaches in some synthetic alternative, that is, by adopting a strategy of eclecticism (e.g., Earle and Preucel 1987:510–513). Such a strategy aims at producing theories that are more "comprehensive" or "realistic" than extant alternatives. One has to worry about such solutions, however, to the extent that they reaffirm the existence of a singular underlying logic of reality, which it is theory's task to appropriate and which existing theories are only partly successful in capturing. In other words, they preserve as standards for building and evaluating theories criteria that I have already identified as deeply paradigm-relative.

In short, my argument is that a pervasive rationalism informs both the contributions to, and the suggested resolutions of, the processual/post-processual debate. This rationalism is impeding constructive discussion of theoretical differences, the values which shape them, and why particular ideas—about agency, structure, power, rationality, and so on—are struggling at this point in history. I believe we need to prepare some new philosophical ground if we want to deepen intradisciplinary understanding of philosophical differences and eliminate arguments over the hegemony of the best idea.

Radical Theory

In my opinion, that ground has thus far been best explored by radical theory. There has, however, been precious little detailed discussion of radical philosophy in archaeology. An important exception is Shanks and Tilley (1987), who have recently elaborated a "dialectical" framework of inquiry. Although Shanks and Tilley do not fully escape the clutches of traditional philosophy—reflected by their retention of a "surface appearance-underlying essence" metaphor and their qualified defense of "realist" epistemological principles—it is nonetheless clear that they have prepared some important new ground warranting serious consideration.

Perhaps the most important component of Shanks and Tilley's framework is one they do not fully develop—the notion of "overdetermination." On my reading, Shanks and Tilley use that concept to support the idea that social orders are simultaneously symbolic orders—that there is no separating the abstract and the concrete (Shanks and Tilley 1987:121). I think the implications of overdetermination are much more far-reaching. In addition to being a governing concept in theories of society, overdetermination is radical theory's distinctive conceptual entry point into epistemology—into what theory is (Resnick and Wolff 1987:2). It holds that theories are complexly

shaped by a host of cognitive, personal, professional, and social relations. Those relations influence their choice of analytical entry point, their ways of defining and linking concepts, their selection of relevant data, their particular truth criteria, their attitude toward other theories, their justification for the entire process and, importantly, their particular internal contradictions.

Radical theory's recognition of different, overdetermined sciences means that there can be no final, underlying essence of social process or universal standard for evaluating ideas. Rather, it holds that there is a plurality of sciences that struggle with each other and with their own internal contradictions, in turn producing change in thought and change in society. Radical theory thus describes the nature of scientific activity and scientific change in a way that avoids all essentialism. It rejects as spurious appeals to the greater "adequacy" of one or another way of making sense of reality, inasmuch as it recognizes that different theories perceive "the real" differently. In so doing, radical theory eliminates the rationalism that is the lifeblood of the processual/postprocessual debate.

Radical theory's rejection of universal standards does not imply a relativist indifference to paradigms or an "anything goes" attitude, however (see Bell this volume). Overdetermination creates contradictions within theories that can, as Brumfiel (1987:513) has suggested, be discredited within their own frames of reference. There is room for critique of theory on cognitive grounds (Wylie 1989a). But criticism also turns on specifying differences between theories as regards their particular social causes and consequences. Radical theory asks how and to what ends theories are productive, fruitful, or useful (see also Potter 1987:520–521), with particular reference to the social reality that produces them, whatever we variously perceive that reality to be. This form of critique eliminates the discontinuity between science and society that ultimately is reinforced by processualism, despite its claims about science being an embedded cultural activity.

To the extent that radical theory prescribes activist specification of difference, it represents a significant departure from the relativist philosophies of Kuhn, Rorty, Feyerabend, and others. Those philosophers express a very limited interest in the causes and consequences of theories. They are largely unconcerned with why different theories exist, how they influence social life, and why they change in particular ways at particular times in history. For Kuhn (1970), the evaluation of alternative theories—that is, their sorting into "normal" and "abnormal" piles—is a matter of choice by an agreeing group, his "scientific community." The concept of "scientific community" is a very problematic one for radical theory, not unlike the concept of "working class," and Olsen's chapter discusses some of the reasons why. Rorty (1979) backs off from a critical engagement with theories even further, trusting that free and open "conversation" between proliferating theories will keep disciplines moving in healthy directions. Finally, Feyerabend's (1975) "anarchic" theory of knowledge perhaps epitomizes the neglect of theoretical causes and consequences, for reasons discussed by Bell in his chapter.

In contrast to these relativist philosophies—and to the positions taken in

several of the conference papers on epistemology—radical theory neither celebrates nor laments the diversity of theories that exists (compare also Shanks and Tilley 1987:245). Diversity is expected, given the overdetermination of thought. Radical theory seeks only to specify the social constitution of that diversity and its consequences (Resnick and Wolff 1987:57). While radical theory respects difference, it definitely takes an attitude toward sciences that rest on different assumptions about social reality and what is knowable about that reality. In that regard, radical theory clearly wants to advance the social position of some sciences versus others—it wants to send Rorty's "conversation" in particular directions. It just cannot accept that this partisanship requires a denial of the scientific status or "realism" of alternative frameworks.

Radical Theory and Paradigm Growth

I think enough has been said that undermines the claim that radical theory is antifoundational and relativist in the conventional sense of those terms. As for its viability as a "productive" framework for ordering paradigm growth, implicit in my discussion is the belief that radical theory is no more or less viable than any other paradigm, to the extent that it engages concepts and methods in making sense of the empirical world. Hodder's (1987b) rejection of the processualist charge that postprocessual work is antitheory and antimethod (Earle and Preucel 1987; see also the chapters by Hill and Cordell and Yannie) is thus well-taken. In practice, radicals do not work in a manner any different from that which Watson (1986) describes as characteristic of all archaeologists. It is a manner that involves continuous, back-and-forth movement or "dialogue" between ideas and the infinite data of experience. Theories accomplish the movement between ideas and experience by working through methodological "middle ranges" of their own devising. Experience thus matters to the extent that it offers what Shanks and Tilley (1987:104) refer to as a "network of resistances" to theory. I take that to mean that experience overdetermines theory along with everything else. It guarantees that the past will "get a say"—that mistakes will be made and contradictions created. Just as radical theory changes through critical confrontation with other theories, so too does it change through self-conscious interaction with the real world. Thus, contra the claims of Schiffer (1988:469), radical theory is not "hermetically sealed."

If any common ground supports processual and postprocessual approaches, I think Watson has isolated it in her chapter on contemporary archaeological practice. I am all the more convinced of it in light of recent processualist definitions of science that see it as involving "the orderly production of general knowledge," "self-conscious attention to theoretical biases," and "the critical evaluation of ideas in the face of data" (Earle and Preucel 1987; see also the chapters by Earle, Hill, and Bell). Those are statements with which radical theory has no quarrel.

Nonetheless, in the larger scheme of things this realization of common

practice is ultimately limited. One should not make too much of that which is unavoidably common or even explicitly agreed upon. To the extent that the logic behind radical theory's selection of particular problems, concepts, and data is nonessentialist—that is, driven by particular social interests rather than an overriding desire to be "comprehensive" or "realistic" in some absolute sense—I am not sure that the few scattered insights deemed worthwhile by processualists so readily lend themselves to harmonious synthesis with nonradical ideas. Radical theory does not produce and defend discourses about power, class, or subjectivity simply on the conviction that such things make a difference in social life or because they can be archaeologically known or "tested." Rather, it produces and justifies such discourses in light of an explicit social project for moving thought and society in particular directions. Such justifications are in short supply even within radical theory; thus, Schiffer (1988:469) has a point where he claims that radicals have not been particularly self-conscious about the interests their own theories serve. However, to the extent that processualism explicitly denies the relevance and legitimacy of a political role for archaeology (e.g., Earle and Preucel 1987:525), one must worry about any "accommodation" reached between processualism and the assorted radical concepts it might be inclined to wrench from their original discursive contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter questions the fertility of any substantive philosophical ground held in common by existing forms of processual and postprocessual thought. Occupancy of such ground reproduces epistemological essentialism and dulls the cutting edges of paradigms having particular theoretical interests and particular social conditions of existence. I think we need an alternative philosophical terrain to help us better understand such differences and conditions. I have tried to specify one such terrain here in the hope of soliciting greater understanding, if not agreement or even tolerance.