Essential Tensions
in Archaeological
Method and Theory

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Archaeology and the Problems of Men

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Eighty-five years ago the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey urged his contemporaries to turn their attention from the problems of philosophy—those concerned with how we know—to the problems of men—those concerned with how we should live (Dewey 1917). This is good advice for the new millennium.

The problems of knowing are well attended to in current archaeology. Today there even appears to be a widely shared commitment to epistemological realism, the idea that a real world exists which constrains what we can say about it. This consensus includes the postprocessualists who, after an initial fling with relativism, have moved back into the epistemological mainstream with what Hodder (1991c) describes as "qualified objectivism" and Thomas (1996a) describes as "perspectivism." VanPool and VanPool (1999) have recently established that, on philosophical issues, there is more that unites than divides these camps. Thus, I take for granted that in a sense we are all realists now—we all use the "master's tools" (Lorde 1984, cited in Wylie 1995:269–271) of systematic empirical inquiry to deal with experience.

But, this is not to say that we've reached the end of epistemology in archaeology. I believe that the shared commitment to realism is ultimately trivial. There is still room for disagreement on how, and to what purposes, we should use the master's tools. In this regard pragmatism offers an important challenge to the current realist hegemony. Realism applies itself toward knowing, toward "getting things right." Pragmatism applies itself toward living or, in Rorty's (1989) words, toward "making things new." In so doing pragmatism subscribes more fully to the kind of sensibility that equips us for using our craft (sensu Shanks and McGuire 1996) to address the problems of men; that is, human needs.

In the first part of this paper I briefly discuss some key concepts that inform a pragmatist sensibility. In the second, I provide some examples of how a pragmatist archaeology can serve human needs. The most compelling of these is the need to enlarge the community with which archaeology articulates and to which it can contribute; the need to expand the scope of "us." Pragmatism addresses this challenge by directing us to produce knowledges of the past that foreground subaltern groups and concerns, and by offering some alternative criteria for mediating conflicts between groups having different interests in, and understandings of, the past.

A PRAGMATIST SENSIBILITY

There are many understandings of pragmatism. There are also many debates about what the fathers of pragmatism (Charles Pierce, William James, John Dewey) meant, and about the accuracy of various contemporary interpretations (e.g., those of Richard Bernstein and, especially, Richard Rorty).

This diversity and tension is pragmatism's strength. Understood as a "conversation" instead of a thing (Bernstein 1988), pragmatism offers fertile ground for exploring how time-honored—and I think still useful—concepts of truth, experience, and testing can be reformulated in a way sensitive to meeting human need.

The first core pragmatist concept is an antifoundational or fallibilistic notion of truth—the idea that there are no fixed, stable grounds on which knowledge claims can be established. For the pragmatist truth is what is good to believe; truth is belief justified by social need, rather than by the way things are in nature (Posner 1990). Or, put differently, truth is a matter of intersubjective consensus among human beings, not of accurate reflection of something nonhuman (Rorty 1998). One of antifoundationalism's most important implications, for the purposes of this paper, is its warrant for "experimentation" with theory and method in order to arrive at true beliefs. In this sense, pragmatism moves us in directions other than those stipulated by the earliest processualist commentators on archaeology's social relevance. Ford (1973), for example, saw the "indiscriminant publication of unverified hunches" in the discipline as an obstacle to archaeology's ability to serve humanity. Alternatively, I think that liberal production and publication of such hunches—the more the merrier—is critical for moving archaeology toward the sorts of "usable truths" that can serve human need.

The second core concept is the idea that these experimental truths must be evaluated against a broader notion of experience. 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, Marxist 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 reburial or repatriation controversies; i.e., 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; it is genuinely reflexive (Kloppenberg 1996). 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 much more qualitative and humanistic—what Rorty (1989) has termed "fuzzy" rationality.

A final concept is pragmatism's notion of "testing," specifically as it relates to the evaluation of truth-claims borne of different cultural traditions. Especially germane to archaeology are those truth-claims that divide scientific and traditional knowledges of the past. In contrast to the mainstream scientific view where competing ideas are tested against each other in the light of the empirical record, pragmatism stipulates that we "test" the ideas of other cultures 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. It prescribes a "measured relativism" (Appleby et al. 1994) that balances a commitment to evaluation with the parallel belief that cultural pluralism is our best recipe for civil cohesion (Menand 1997:xxviii). Rorty (1989:13) lays the groundwork for such a procedure when he suggests that "the distinction between different cultures differs only in degree from the distinction between theories held by members of a single culture." This strikes me as a useful assumption if the goal is to achieve some sort of commensurability between competing cultural beliefs without essentializing the differences (as tends to happen in postprocessualism) or, worse, essentializing *sameness* (as we are currently seeing, for example, in processualist justifications

for scientific study of Kennewick Man—see Preston [1997]—on the grounds that if you go back far enough in time—presumably to humankind's African origins—we all have a common ancestor; i.e., "we're all the same").

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 PRACTICE
Archaeology is currently faced with the challenge of better integrating the various constituencies that have a stake in its operations, and better engaging a public that is often utterly indifferent to whether it operates or not. How, then, can a pragmatist archaeology concretely serve the enlargement of community?

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, civilization) traditionally addressed by our discipline's most important popularizers (e.g., Lewis Binford, Brian Fagan). Of interest are questions about 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. As Wylie (1995) points out, 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 is making good progress in this area. Many alternative or "counternarrative" understandings of the past are now developing, including those produced by the gender archaeologies, the various subaltern archaeologies that address such things as

slave life, and the anti-colonialist archaeologies that focus on indigenous peoples and their histories (Schmidt and Patterson 1995). Our own efforts to develop a "working class" archaeology can be added to this list (e.g., Duke and Saitta 1998; Ludlow Collective 2001; McGuire and Walker 1999). We are currently using the master's tools to produce a "critical" history of the lives of early twentieth-century coal miners in southern Colorado that can stand with the more "official" (sensu Bodnar 1992) histories of the West. Official history—especially in the American West—is patriotic, progressive, and triumphal, emphasizing social unity and the continuity of the social order. Critical histories deal with context, transformation, and rupture, addressing both the historical process *and* different narratives about that process (Trouillot 1995). Our archaeological work in the Colorado coalfield includes a program of excavation at the Ludlow Tent Colony, a National Historic Register site where, on April 20, 1914, striking coal miners, women, and children were killed by a strikebreaking force of Colorado militiamen and coal company guards. In this work we are having to engage people—including organized labor, our primary clients—who have never had much use for archaeology, realist or otherwise, and who embrace "vernacular" (again, see Bodnar 1992) histories of coalfield events. Vernacular histories are local, "kitchen table" histories, derived from the first-hand, everyday experience of those people who were directly involved with history's events. Negotiating between these different peoples and histories has not been easy. The gulf between academic and working-class cultures is palpable in our research area (Duke and Saitta 1998). As one miner put it to me at a 1997 union local meeting, where I went seeking permission to excavate at Ludlow (with just a bit of hostility in his voice), "I can tell you everything you need to know about Ludlow in three words—they got fucked."

In our case, a key to narrowing this gulf has been to appreciate that Ludlow and other coalfield sites are part of a living history and

13

long commemorative tradition, and considered sacred ground by the descendants of miners who lived and died on them. This appreciation has earned us a place on the speaker's platform at the annual Ludlow Memorial Service, where we update the local community (including direct descendants of the Ludlow miners as well as a wider interested public) about our work. In conjunction with the fieldwork we also offer Summer Teacher Institutes dedicated to building a labor history curriculum for Colorado middle and high schools. The Institutes compare, contrast, and explore the synergies between official, vernacular, and critical histories of southern coal field events. A pragmatist sensibility is thus helping us satisfy the different interests that come together in the Colorado coalfields, and promises to help raise archaeology's stock as a socially relevant discipline.

Much less progress is being made in coping with the bigger conflicts in archaeological interpretation, such as surround NAGPRA compliance. 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. Happily, in this scheme native oral traditions are assigned an evidentiary status equal to the other kinds of evidence (see Anyon et al. 1997; Echo-Hawk 2000; cf. Mason 2000). 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 conse-

quences 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. At some recent NAGPRA consultations in Durango several Pueblo tribal representatives implicitly endorsed pragmatist evaluative criteria where they argued, in so many words, that history is less important than survival and the maintenance of harmonious relationships among the tribes (Duke 1999). Survival is understood broadly as political, economic, *and* cultural. Naranjo (1996:249) takes a similar 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're willing to rethink the usual scientific criteria, i.e., 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 (1999) 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, 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). Rorty (1989:94) notes that "novels and ethnographies" are especially well suited to building this kind of solidarity. It seems to me that archaeological narratives attuned to human cultural variability across space and time can be just as useful.

Despite its critique of criterial rationality and preference for thick description over nomothetics, the pragmatist alternative need not be antiscience. Indeed, in the pragmatist view, and all things being equal, science is an excellent model of human community and solidarity (Rorty 1989:15). But, 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) dominated other ways of knowing. In his *Federalist No. 10* James Madison noted the threat to community presented by "majority factions" (Madison et al. 1987). For Madison, the best corrective to the majoritarian threat was enlarging the scope of community; i.e., 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. For those archaeologists and native peoples alike who cringe at *any* call for compromise in the service of reconciliation and stronger community, perhaps 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."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper for archaeology to turn from realism to pragmatism as a governing sensibility. 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 ob-

jectivity of laws and theories. Pragmatism subsumes Enlightenment criterial rationality and nomothetics to more humanistic, albeit fuzzier, regulative ideals. In so doing, it converges with some key subaltern priorities and concerns about the wider social context and consequences of knowledge claims. At the same time it departs from *both* the analytical and continental philosophical traditions that so many have found wanting as underpinnings for, respectively, processual and postprocessual archaeology.

Even though pragmatism is only just emerging as a framework for archaeological inquiry, different understandings of its project are already afoot. Reid and Whittlesey (1999) have recently discussed pragmatism's utility as a philosophical toolkit for Southwestern archaeology. These authors approvingly view pragmatism's antifoundationalism not as a stand against philosophical truth but rather as a stand against academic authority. They take the pragmatist concern for experience to be exemplified in archaeology by pursuits such as ethnoarchaeology and experimental archaeology. Finally, they cast pragmatist method as turning on the unbiased collection of *all* available data, and pragmatist theory as requiring equal parts common sense, intuition, and appeals to "human nature." Although seen by the authors as preferable to processualism, this version of pragmatism bears little resemblance to mine. Rather than leading beyond processualism, Reid and Whittlesey's pragmatism seems to recall an unreflective, disengaged empiricism where knowing rather than living rules the day. It will be very interesting to see where the conversation about pragmatism's regulative ideals, and relevance for archaeology, goes from here.