

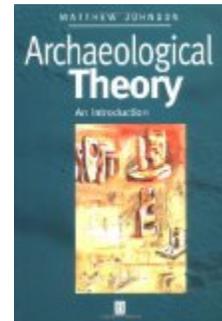
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Matthew Johnson. *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford, England and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. xv + 240 pp. \$54.95 (cloth) ISBN 0-631-20295-1; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-20296-7.

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Archaeological Theory: A History and Current Assessment

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Archaeological Theory: A History and Current Assessment

While excavation and the excitement of discovery, is to the general public the most glamorous aspect of archaeology, other aspects are fundamental to the discipline. These include exact site and artifact descriptions, scientific analyses, classification, dating, and interpretations are fundamental components of the task of the archaeologist. Although classifications are posited on derived or established taxonomies, and relative and absolute methods of chronological determination are well known in the literature, synchronic and diachronic historical assessments of the assembled evidence are at the core of archaeology as a scientific discipline. While transmuting the interpretations of material remains and contexts into historical judgments, the contemporary archaeologist is faced with a nearly bewildering array of theoretical constructs, paradigms, and explanatory models that explain the validity of the assessments. Data may “fit” the theory – or does the theory “fit” the data? This issue is at the heart of this new book written by a British archaeologist primarily for British students but it is of exceptional significance and utility to American scholars and students no matter what their particular theoretical stance, “school,” or position.

In *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, Matthew

Johnson undertakes what may by some to be a pedestrian task of discussing current archaeological theory. However, from the perspective of the professional archaeologist he undertakes the daunting responsibility of explicating in clear, non-technical language the current debate about archaeological theory as practiced during the past three decades. This historical approach is an essential step in synthesizing the diversity of perspectives and the primary theoreticians who postulate paradigms and consider such phenomena as the past and current meaning of the “New Archaeology,” processual and postprocessual archaeologies, as well as cognitive archaeology. Johnson’s unenviable but essential chore will please a majority of professional practitioners because he has created a balanced account of the debates within archaeology and social sciences in general. Nitpickers will point out that “their” particular theoretical orientation or paradigm has been neglected or deserves a more fulsome treatment than Johnson has accorded it.

Matthew H. Johnson, Professor in the Department of Archaeology at University of Durham, a specialist in the archaeology of England and Europe 1300-1800, is especially interested in the study of domestic architecture, changes in the landscape, and theory in the human sciences and, especially, archaeology. Before coming to Durham, he taught at Sheffield and Lampeter (Wales) and this volume is based, in part, on lecture notes from various courses given in those three universities. In addition he was a Research Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley in the spring of 1995, where he conceived

part of this volume. Johnson is also the author of *Housing Culture: Traditional Architecture in an English Landscape* (London: University College, London Press, 1993; Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), and *An Archaeology of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

In the Preface to *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* which Johnson titles “The Contradictions of Theory,” the author states that his book is designed as an “introductory essay on archaeological theory. It tries to explain something of what ‘theory’ is, its relationship to archaeological practice, how it has developed within archaeology over the last few decades, and how archaeological thought relates to theory in the human sciences and the intellectual world generally” (p. x). He also notes that the volume is “written to give the student an introduction to some of the strands of current thinking in archaeological theory. It is deliberately written as an introduction, in as clear and jargon-free a fashion as the author can manage” (p. xii). Johnson goes on to consider theory, theorists, political correctness, the “success” of theory, and cites the TAG conference (the British “Theoretical Archaeology Group”), “theoretical” symposia at the Society for American Archaeology annual meetings and the series *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*.

In his initial chapter “Common Sense is Not Enough” (pp. 1-11), Johnson points out that “archaeology can be very boring and physically uncomfortable. Every year we excavate thousands of sites, some with painstaking and mind-numbing patience, some in a great and undignified hurry. “Every year we churn out thousands of indeterminate, stultifyingly dull site reports, fretting over the accuracy of plans and diagrams, collating lists of grubby artifacts to go on microfiche that few will ever consult or use again. Why?” (p. 1). He claims that archaeology is very important because the past is dead and gone, but it is also very powerful, and then postulates “who are we?” (p. 2) before defining archaeological theory. Beginning in this chapter and continuing throughout the volume, Johnson uses a literary device of having undergraduate student “Roger Beefy” (the eternal empiricist) interject queries and serve as a contrapuntist (to borrow a term from music). Hence, we are exposed to questions and answers, a light hearted give and take, some cynicism, and a good deal of logical thinking correcting the student’s flawed notions, guiding the discourse, and instilling a desire to learn. It is an effective pedagogical technique and attempts to engage the reader/student as an active participant in the discussion of recent contemporary archaeological theory.

Johnson next offers four reasons and supporting evidence about the importance of theory: 1) We need to justify what we do. 2) We need to evaluate one interpretation of the past against another, to decide which is the stronger. 3) We must be explicit in what we do as archaeologists. And 4) we don’t “need” theory, we all use theory whether we like it or not. The emphasis, the author relates, is to “try to illuminate some of the major trends in archaeological theory, starting with the 1960s and moving on from there” (p. 11). Johnson adopts two strategies: 1) talking at length about the developments in associated disciplines and in intellectual thought as a whole, and 2) examine the development of theory historically by examining the origins of the New Archaeology and reactions to it.

With “Chapter 2: The ‘New Archaeology’”, we are exposed to the works of David Clarke (especially *Analytical Archaeology*, London: Methuen, 1968), Lewis Binford, Colin Renfrew, and Kent Flannery. The link of science and anthropology is noted and we are informed that the New Archaeology is a “movement or mood of dissatisfaction rather than as a specific set of beliefs” (p. 21). Major emphases were on placed upon cultural evolution, systems thinking, the use of scientific techniques developed in the postwar period (radiocarbon dating, paleoethnobotany, etc.), the stress on a scientific approach, and the idea of culture process. Likewise, he considers biases and objectivity, and the understanding of variability examined through sampling theory and techniques. Lastly, Johnson comments on distinctions between the North American and British institutional “set-up of archaeology,” e.g. archaeology as a part of departments of anthropology versus the British Departments of Archaeology as separate institutions often closely linked to Departments of History. He employs a case study of Western European megalithic tombs. Johnson writes, “if the New Archaeology was a revolution, it suffered the same fundamental problems as any revolution,” that is, in using concepts from science and anthropology, archaeologists were faced with working out in practice what those terms really meant (p. 32).

The subsequent chapter, “Archaeology as a Science” considers archaeology as a scientific discipline, assessing what we really mean when using the term “science.” He accomplishes this by examining the context of logical positivism (e.g. Watson, Redman, and LeBlanc’s *Explanation in Archaeology*, 1971, and *Archaeological Explanation: The Scientific Method in Archaeology* 1984) versus non-positivist approaches, considering five sets of beliefs, and concepts from the social sciences. Johnson

also assesses objections to science, the perspectives of Thomas Kuhn on successive paradigms and Paul (“Anything Goes”) Feyerabend’s rejection of single methods in favor of an unlimited diversity of methods. Lastly, Johnson evaluates “weak” and “strong” social constructivism.

With “Chapter 4: Testing, Middle-range Theory and Ethnoarchaeology” Johnson evaluates on the concept of “testing” beginning with an assessment of Lewis Binford’s arguments about middle-range theory (MRT) in linking the past and present. Inevitably, the examples used are the interpretation of Mousterian culture and Binford’s Nunamit research. Two uniformitarian MRT conditions are reviewed: 1) that MRT must be formally independent from general theory, and 2) based on the uniformitarian assumption that conditions in the past are like those in the present. As an example, Hillman’s (1984) ethnoarchaeological model of grain processing in Turkey is presented and followed by a case study on “bones at Olduvai,” prior to Johnson’s consideration of MRT problems: 1) the use and abuse of analogy, and 2) the issue of cultural continuity. The emergence of behavioral archaeology (e.g., Schiffer and his colleagues) is seen as related to MRT and taphonomy.

In examining the ways in which societies really “work,” Johnson next considers what we mean by “anthropology” in his “Chapter 5: Culture as a System”, differentiating mentalist from systems approaches. Six aspects of systems thinking are reviewed (adaptation to an external environment, observable, capable of being modeled, having interdependent subsystems, linked subsystems explained by function, and examination by correlation rather than simple causation). An example of post-Roman northwestern European economics (Hodges 1982) is instructive, and Johnson then moves into an assessment of the strengths and drawbacks of systems thinking. In the case of strengths, it avoids problems of “mentalism,” avoids monocausal explanations, and serves as a potential source of optimism for archaeology. The drawbacks of systems theory include a “fatal flaw of functionalism,” a dependence on functional linkages, inadequate explanations of change, objectionable political implications (e.g., an ideology of control), and that it is an external assessment in the attempt to understand society. Johnson also examines recent modifications of systems theory such as heterarchy (explicated by Crumley and Brumfiel) and world systems theory (associated with the work of Emmanuel Wallerstein), and the individual.

“Chapter 6: Looking at Thoughts” is a brief review of cognitive theory in science and archaeology, essen-

tialism, ethnocentrism, and idealism. The discussion of cognitive archaeology or cognitive processualism (exemplified by Renfrew, Zubrow, and Flannery and Marcus), leads to assessments of structuralism and Marxism. We are informed that in structuralism “culture is like language” and that culture is fundamentally expressive, a system of (hidden, cognitive) meanings, and that artifacts are the evidence of systems of belief in the broadest sense. Johnson also points out that Marxism originally was a materialist philosophy and that archaeologists influenced by Marxism perceive close linkages between archaeology and politics. Marxists, we are told, look for contradictions and inequalities in culture. In neo-Marxism the focus is ideology which, in turn, has led to a detailed examination of how ideology “works” and a stress on understanding the background of and precursors to ideology.

Marxist and structuralism helped to flavor the intellectual current of archaeological theory in the 1980s, elaborated by Johnson in “Chapter 7: Postprocessual and Interpretive Archaeologies.” Ian Hodder is the exemplar of this as seen in assessments of spatial analysis (Hodder and Orton 1976). Johnson cleverly characterizes and evaluates postprocessual thinking in eight statements: 1) the rejection of a positivist view of science and the theory/data split, 2) that interpretation is always hermeneutic, 3) the rejection of the opposition between material and ideal, 4) an emphasis on examining thoughts and values of the past (e.g., the historical idealism of Collingwood 1946), 5) the individual is seen as active (agencies are the active strategies of individuals), 6) that material culture is like a text (it can be manipulated and “read”), 7) context must be assessed, and 8) that interpreting the past is “always a political act” (the meanings produced are always in the political present and have political resonance). Johnson employs Tilley’s (1991) study of Swedish rock art and his own examination of Medieval British houses as case studies.

In “Chapter 8: Archaeology and Gender,” Johnson reminds the reader that his focus is the Anglo-American portrayal of theory and he combines theories and exemplars sometimes in an over-simplified manner. He also comments that there are contemporary theoretical movements that cut across the previous theoretical traditions and that these interests and movements may be complementary rather than competing or contradictory. Herein, he begins with an assessment of feminist archaeology or the archaeology of gender, with the works of Gero, Conkey, Wylie, Spector, and Gibb used to examine diverse topics including gender biases, the archaeologies

of gender, and the phallogocentric nature of knowledge. *What this Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* by Janet Spector (1993) is employed as a case study. Johnson concludes by observing that “both within the archaeology of gender and within the feminist movement as a whole, there is a great diversity of approaches and tensions between various viewpoints. Many of these tensions reflect archaeological theory as a whole; but other tensions point the way for new thinking in theory beyond some of the more sterile debates of recent years” (p. 131).

Johnson’s next diverges from his consideration of archaeological theory by introducing thematic essays. He initially examines how different theoretical approaches treat the question of evolution in “Chapter 9: Archaeology and Evolution.” Since the term evolution means different things to different theoretical positions, he assesses the different meanings by examining the history of archaeology and of evolution since the fifteenth century, progressing from Herbert Spencer’s cultural evolution to Charles Darwin’s biological evolution, Marx and Engels, and unilinear (Service, Fried, and White) versus multilinear (Steward) treatments. Critiques of cultural evolution by Shanks and Tilley precede Johnson’s reviews of sociobiology, Dunnell’s consideration of phenotype, and, briefly, cultural ecology. An evaluation of Paleolithic cave art (Mithen 1989) is the case study employed. Lastly, Johnson returns to a critique of Steward’s cultural ecology in which Shanks and Tilley figure prominently. Cultural ecology is seen as ideological and Johnson holds the opinion that the debate over evolution and ecology is grounded in “a lack of communication between the different schools of thought in the 1990s” (p. 147).

With “Chapter 10: Archaeology and History,” the author reminds the reader that in the United States archaeology is more closely allied with anthropology while in Europe archaeology’s sister discipline is history. Johnson begins with a review of traditional history (Ranke), empirical and inductive approaches, the Annales school (Le Roy Ladurie), social history (J. Hawkes) and historical archaeology – Classical and medieval. British historical archaeology is related to yet differentiated from North American historical archaeology (only Deagan’s St. Augustine, Florida research is cited). The chapter’s case study is the assessment of the military versus symbolic nature of Bodian Castle, Sussex (Coulson 1992).

In “Chapter 11: Archaeology in a Postmodern World” Johnson begins with a discussion of the metanarrative and the postmodern condition (following the French

philosopher Lyotard [1984]), enlightenment philosophy, teleology, and disciplinarity. The works and concepts of Derrida and Foucault are reviewed and Johnson states that “the postprocessual turn in archaeology parallels the postmodern turn in the human sciences rather than being derived from it” (p. 166). The breakdown of disciplinary divisions and seeking ideas and concepts from outside of archaeology and science are considered. The case study of the African Burial Ground in colonial New York City with its archaeological, ethical, political, racial, and “myth breaking” issues provides an excellent example of contemporary archaeology in a sensitive sociocultural setting. The final part of this chapter is a discussion of the issue and content of relativism. Johnson notes that Brumfiel, Wylie, and Trigger often cast their arguments as replies to postprocessual critiques, but he contends that there is nothing their arguments that contradicts postprocessual tenets and, therefore, implies that these are complementary. Lastly, he comments on the uncertain place of archaeology in the academic and intellectual world.

Johnson’s “Chapter 12: Conclusion: Conflict and Consensus” reiterates his attempt to cover the breadth of archaeological theory, be sympathetic to different theoretical positions, and leave the choice of theoretical orientation to the student reader. He reviews and cites specific passages from the works of Binford (1987), Renfrew (1996), Hodder and Bahn (1991), and Shanks and Tilley (1992) and attempts to evaluate where archaeological theory “is going.” Binford and Shanks and Tilley engage in a rhetoric of confrontation (take it or leave it), with Hodder and Renfrew engaging in a rhetoric of conciliation to their theoretical colleagues. Renfrew and Bahn, Johnson contends, occupy a middle ground, acknowledge the diversity of theoretical viewpoints, and appear as impartial commentators. At the turn of the millennium there is a great deal of low quality theory in archaeology and, at the same time, a great deal of exciting new work that employs a wide variety of approaches, and, as Johnson, notes in closing, he has attempted to persuade the reader that there is an excitement, importance, and relevance to archaeological theory. He also laments “the lack of serious critical thought that pervades much of the recent literature” (p. 187).

Johnson’s volume is unlike the traditional historical treatments of archaeology, for example Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff’s *The History of American Archaeology*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Freeman, 1994), which emphasizes archaeology by American archaeologists conducted in the United States, Mesoamerica and

the Andean Region. Likewise, the assessment differs from Thomas C. Patterson's *Toward a Social History of Archaeology in the United States* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995) which examines archaeology within the context of dynamic social and cultural content, and traces the relationships between the "neoliberal state," the New Archaeology, and multiculturalism.

What criticisms might be leveled at Johnson from the North American perspective? Although there are some over simplifications in Chapters 2-7, scholars trained in North America would probably like to have seen a more fulsome discussion of Julian Steward and multilinearity, and perhaps more commentary on Michael Schiffer and Kent Flannery. True, there are discussions about their contributions but these are rather abruptly dismissed. Nonetheless, these criticisms are minor. A particular weakness is that American historical archaeology is undervalued and underrated. I would contend that there is a growing closeness between scholars who are members of the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) and those in the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology (SPMA) at the methodological and interpretive level. For example, *Old and New Worlds: Historical/Post Medieval Archaeology Papers from the Societies' Joint Conferences at Williamsburg and London 1997 to Mark Thirty Years of Work and Achievement*, edited by Geoff Egan (for SPM) and Ronald L. Michael (for SHA), includes papers from the 30th anniversary SPMA-SHA conference held at Colonial Williamsburg and in London. *Old and New Worlds* (Oxford and Oakville, CT: Oxbow Books, 1999) contains 42 contributions grouped into five clusters: "Approaches to the Evidence" (5 chapters); "Communities

of the Old and New Worlds"; "Bridges and Divisions - Crossing the Seas and Military Operations"; "Manufactured Goods: Production, Movement, and Consumption"; and "Humans, Animals, Plants, and Landscapes." Given the papers in the "approaches" section, I believe that a more global, combined historical archaeological theory will emerge in the near future.

One frequent complaint among faculty is that current graduate students read only books and journal articles published during the past one or two decades. If that is indeed the case, Johnson's book should be among these works to be read and digested, and it may even stimulate students to return to the "older" literature. We must recall that the author notes that the book is written for students and that it is as clear and jargon-free as he can make it. Constructively, he has attempted to position himself between a purely "neutral" or objective position and a committed polemic in which he advances his own views (p. xii).

I have recently been informed that Johnson's *Archaeological Theory* is to be published soon in a Spanish-language edition by Editorial Ariel. It will be interesting to see reviews prepared by our Latin American colleagues. Lastly, readers may wish to consider Alan Barnard's *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) as a supplementary or correlative text. Barnard is a social anthropologist at University of Edinburgh and co-editor (with Jonathan Spencer) of *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (1996), and considers topics in sociocultural anthropological theory that parallel and complement Johnson's assessment of archaeological theory.

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