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**Peter F. Biehl,  
Alexander Gramsch, Arkadiusz Marciniak (Hrsg.)**

# **Archäologien Europas/ Archaeologies of Europe**

**Geschichte, Methoden und Theorien/  
History, Methods and Theories**

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JOHN CHAPMAN

## Theoretical archaeology in Britain in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – An overview

### Introduction

The long-term historian of social power, Michael Mann, once famously distinguished two kinds of historian: parachutists and truffle-hunters (Mann, TAG conference, Bradford, December 1986). It will become clear to the reader very rapidly which kind of archaeologist I shall have to be to deliver the editors' request: a summary of trends in British theoretical archaeology over the last decade. In this summary of a precis of an overview, I sketch a personal view of what I take to be the key developments in post-processual archaeologies (henceforth PPAs). Like Matthew Johnson (1999), I take it as axiomatic that, while a middle theoretical ground could be created, the mere juxtaposition of words without deconstruction of their epistemological loads will remain unproductive for the development of a coherent research framework. As Johnson says in his story from a West Texas bar: "there ain't nothin' in the middle of the road 'cept white lines and dead armadillos." To which Johnson adds: "And the odd theoretical archaeologist" (1999). So therefore, for reasons of space/time, I shall omit references to the very real achievements of traditional, processual and cognitive-processual archaeologists over the last decade and focus on what makes British theoretical archaeology so distinctive.

Hodder (1999) laments the fact that: "Archaeological theory could provide a central coherence and definition of the objects and objectives of study. In fact, theoretical debate has become factional and divisive and exclusionary." I hope to show that archaeological theory can contribute something to current and future developments despite this trend. In the main part of the paper, I examine three areas in which PPA approaches have made major contributions to the field: the person, the object and the place.

Habermas (1984; 1987) distinguishes two kinds of rationality: (1) instrumental rationality: the acquisition of knowledge to manipulate the environment: leads to an objective, dead and distanced past; (2) communicative rationality: based upon the social experience of consensus-building, leading to a shared understanding; leads to a subjective, lived and connected past. I take it that the second communicative rationality is what this book is all about and that is certainly why I agreed to contribute this summary.

### Criticisms of postprocessual archaeologies in the late 1980s

To set the scene for this overview of the 1990s, I begin with a summary of the critiques commonly made against postprocessual archaeologies. I then compare these criticisms with a shorthand definition of the main common elements in PPAs made by Johnson in 1999 and see to what extent the criticisms have been met or have simply faded away. I then examine the wildly undisciplined nature of the archaeological “discipline” before looking at people, things and places.

Three criticisms were widely leveled against PPAs in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chippendale 1987; Flannery / Marcus 1993; Fletcher 1989; Gilman 1987; Paddayya 1990; Trigger 1989; 1991). At the same time, these criticisms serve to bring out the main characteristics of PPAs at this time.

1. PPAs are relativist. The most extreme relativism identifies a disempowering “crisis in historicity” (no objective knowledge of the past is possible).
2. PPAs are idealist and romanticist. The verbal meanings of ideology, politics and social organisation cannot suffice as PRIMARY explanations for cultural change. This leads to a version of “semantic determinism”, applied to that domain of past human experience where we have the LEAST empirical knowledge.
3. There has been little / no work on the methodological implications of the integration of the materialist/positivist side with the symbolic/interpretative side in PPAs (example: there is no method for reading the symbols in the archaeological text). Thus, when there is no background information available (as in the Neolithic), reconstructions of cosmology, religion, ideology and iconography can border on science fiction.

### PPAs’ responses in the 1990s

In his textbook *Archaeological Theory: an introduction*, Johnson (1999, 102-108) discusses eight points which, for him, characterize the distinctiveness of PPAs at the threshold of the millennium:

1. rejection of positivist science and the data/theory split.
2. interpretation is always hermeneutic.
3. rejection of opposition between material and ideal.
4. the importance of thoughts and values in the past.
5. the individual is active.
6. material culture is like a text.
7. the importance of context.
8. interpreting the past is always a political act.

Insofar as Johnson’s summary is accurate, it is clear that the PPAs of the 1990s have maintained an overall identity of approach, based upon certain core elements of the

program. How have the PPAs responded to the three main criticisms of relativism, idealism and lack of method? Briefly, the pluralism of PPAs, parallel to the polyvocality of ethnographers such as Clifford and Marcus (1986), is not the same as relativism; all accounts of the past must meet the resistances of the evidence. PPAs continue to deny the relevance or utility of an idealist / materialist split, citing examples from an even wider range of evidence, from persons, to places and landscapes and objects, that materiality is inextricably linked to ideas of history, contemporary networks of meaning and cosmology (see below). Finally, methodological developments in interpretive archaeology (Hodder / Shanks / Alexandri / Buchli / Carman / Last / Lucas 1995), in the fundamental importance of metaphors in interpretation (Tilley 1999) and in fresh approaches to the process of excavation (Hodder 1999) demonstrate that the theory-method gap is not unbridgeable. PPAs have manifestly approached material culture more closely in the 1990s than before, with detailed case studies exploring the ways in which objects and places are reflexively related to people.

Johnson (1999, 175) goes on to claim “peace has broken out in the realm of epistemology”, with general agreement on three propositions:

9. we are unavoidably influenced by our social and political circumstances
10. raw data do NOT exist in any unproblematic or unbiased way
11. data ARE important, forming a network of strong resistance to our interpretations

While these elements are widespread amongst PPAs, what many PPAs continue to emphasize is the immense diversity of the field – one hint at which is contained in the use of the plural for ‘PP archaeologies’! This leads to the question of how the relative stability of core issues in PPAs over the last decade equates to the diversity of views of individual researchers in the field.

### How undisciplined is theoretical archaeology in the year 2000?

I should like to go further than David Clarke’s famous (1973) statement that “archaeology is an undisciplined empirical discipline” to suggest that archaeology has never achieved the stability and coherence of a single paradigm. The claims of the new archaeologists to have made a Kuhnian breakthrough ignored the fact that a high proportion of practicing archaeologists worked on a different, much more traditional agenda (and still do!). The same is true of PPAs, which have generated huge resistance from many shades of archaeological opinion. It is my contention that we are still at a pre-paradigmatic stage in archaeology and this shows absolutely no sign of changing!

This diversity of theoretical approach has been recognized by many archaeologists, some clearly horrified by this, others welcoming the opportunities it brings. While Schiffer (1988) lamented the fragmentation of archaeological theory into “a thousand archaeologies”, Tilley (1996) recognized that a lack of discipline provides possibilities for innovation and fresh debate. Part of the significance of pluralism concerns its attack on the grand narrative, the absence of a “transcendental grid” – a single set of



standards and reference points to which all models, hypotheses and claims can be referred (Wylie 1992). Preucel and Hodder (1999) comment that, *contra* Sherratt (1995), there is no coherent or plausible integrative Grand Theory that is not partisan or linked to a specific perspective. Kolpakov (1996) expresses a certain Russian fatalism that “There is no universal theory of culture–historical interpretation of data and *never can be*” (my emphasis).

It was the merit of Roland Fletcher (1989) to define more clearly the condition of modern archaeological theory. Fletcher realized that “currently, divisions dominate the discourse in an “extraordinary bricolage of concepts and practice” and that “archaeology has too many cross-cutting conceptual axes to possess a middle position with a defined identity.” Fletcher compared archaeological theory to chaos, “where there are islands of stability and areas of chaos but, within each island, there are further irregular chaotic and ordered parcels at smaller and smaller scales”. He saw the absence of a paradigm as an advantage: “No clearly defined paradigmatic position exists to obstruct (the) development ... of (archaeology’s) own theoretical perspective for explaining the nature of human community life.” However, Fletcher realized that, since there are very diverse approaches to the goal of explaining the past necessarily in terms of social theory, there is no obvious basis for a new paradigm here.

The collapse of authoritative voices bringing grand narratives about the past from a privileged, white male Anglo-Saxon Protestant position (hence “WASP”) is not just about being politically correct – it recognizes the diversity of different people’s experiences of the past and the rights they have to tell their stories. If this makes the presentation of archaeology harder but more democratic, then this is a price worth paying. The result is, as Hodder (1999) states: “Archaeology is very undisciplined. Any apparent unity comes from contingent negotiation between a great variety of interests; any resulting coherence is provisional, contested and temporary; the aims, goals and boundaries are in a continual state of flux.”

### New contributions in the PPAs of the 1990s

It is tendentious in the extreme to select three themes which, for me, make the PPAs of the 1990s cohere in a specific way but I shall do so, at the same time acknowledging the anti-PP spirit of this enterprise!

What does Fletcher (1989) mean when he identifies PPAs’ greatest contribution: to extend social theory in archaeology across its full potential spectrum? Clearly not simply the recognition that the social cannot be disentangled from the economic, the technological or the ritual, as it was in the systems models of the New Archaeologists. Not only the insight that PPAs represent a shift from the study of behavior to the study of culture and behavior, with full recognition of the importance of symbolic systems for human choice and decision-making (Carr / Limp 1987). Not even the notion that there are symbolic and social dimensions to all aspects of surviving archaeological material culture, including landscapes. There are perhaps two general aspects of this extension, which, as Watson and Fotiadis (1990) realizes, pushes archaeological inference to its

limits, concomitantly expanding those limits beyond the boundaries of processual archaeologies.

The first is the greatly increased emphasis on structure-agency relationships and social constructivism (see Dobres / Robb 2000). This is the principal route to the recognition of the importance of individual social action and a powerful method for breaking down apparently homogeneous schemes of cultural norms and values. As Johnson (1989) observed: "While to the social agent, (an existing structure) appears to be a coherent set of values, it is one to be drawn upon selectively, manipulated and even inverted." The archaeology of agency underlies much innovative theoretical work on the body, the individual and the social person, underpinning the social constructivist approach which is so important to 1990s PPAs. This approach emphasizes the recursive relationship between persons 'becoming' themselves through bodily and social developments and those pre-existing structures which provide the material and the material conditions for such growth. Both these approaches highlight the small-scale and the local, taking a particular characteristic of the gender archaeologies of the 1980s and 1990s and bringing it into the PPAs mainstream.

The second development concerns the radical re-conceptualization of things, places and landscapes in and of themselves (Johnson 1998; van Dommelen 1999). The heightened sense of interconnectedness can be seen in Tilley's (1996) view that "Material culture is as fundamental to the constitution of the social world as language ... Material culture is embedded in the everyday structures of social life." It is interesting to note parenthetically that, in his recent studies of material culture, Schiffer (1999) reaches the same conclusion! This is a shift away from the notion that things were representations of something else, identified through analysis of attributes which distances the artifact from its own grounding in a social ontology. Shanks (1993) has criticized those approaches to style that place pottery in a social context, thereby marking the artifact as epi-phenomenal, a "by-product" of social practice or behavior. In the same vein, Barrett (1999) maintains that monuments did not represent certain social conditions, rather it was through their construction that those conditions were gradually transformed. Thus, objects or monuments are brought into a closer relationship with the people who made and used them (Chapman 2000). As Tilley (1999) states, "the processes of making things and making people are part of the same seamless order of things." A similar approach, termed the "inherent" approach to landscape, has been developed by Johnson (1998), in which "landscape is not separately perceived but embedded within ways of living and being." This approach emphasizes the immanence of meanings in landscape and is opposed to the 'explicit' approach, whereby the cultural landscape fashioned out of a pre-existing natural landscape (Sauer 1925) or the notion that landscape cannot be understood without reference to a world view which integrates place and space in the production of meaning (Snead / Preucel 1999). The importance of lived, meaningful experience is another aspect of the gender archaeologies of the 1980s and 1990s which has influenced wider approaches in a variety of PPAs.

In the three sections that follow, I shall examine in turn aspects of these new approaches to the person, the thing and the place in its landscape.

### Persons and bodies

The polyvocality of PPAs underpins two different implications: first, it means that people in the present should not have to rely upon (even politically correct) white male middle-class archaeologists to speak for them (see Preucel / Hodder 1999). Secondly, it implies the need to identify a suite of different voices for different people in the past – women as well as men, children and old people as well as middle-aged adults, ordinary villagers as well as high-status elites, etc. If, as Tilley (1994) suggests, “a phenomenon of place is the process of interpreting the significance of place through the body”, different persons will have experienced the ‘same’ place in different ways, which it would be important to capture. An example concerns the contrast which Bradley (1998) draws between two kinds of circular monument. Stone circles differ from henges, in that the former is permeable, allowing the people inside to relate the characteristics and position of the stone circle to other constructions in the surrounding landscape, while henges cut those inside the banks off from the external world. Thus, quite different views of the world are open to the different people allowed to enter these two monument types. Work on small-scale narratives have led to important new methods to provide the people of the past with their own voices (e. g., Spector 1991).

This ‘post-colonial’ insight leads in many different directions: obviously to a gender archaeology (Gero / Conkey 1991; 1996) and the potential for a feminist archaeology (Gilchrist 1991) but also an archaeology of childhood (Sofaer Derevenski 1997; 1997 a), a ‘queer’ archaeology (Bapty / Yates 1990; Solli 1999), an archaeology of ethnicity (Jones 1997; Díaz-Andreu 1998) and, more generally, an archaeology of identity (Thomas 1996; Díaz-Andreu / Champion 1996). I do not, however, wish to explore these different and important archaeologies of persons here but, instead, look more generally at the assumptions which make these archaeologies possible.

The key point underpinning this diversity of approaches to the person and the body is the significance now given to the way in which people’s experience of the world in which they lived, shaped their social action (Shanks 1992). This approach is excellently illustrated by Mark Edmonds’ (1999) book *Ancestral geographies of the Neolithic*, in which the people in the book are always working within their understandings, within the knowledge passed down to them from generation to generation. As Bender (1999) comments in a conversation with Edmonds at the end of the book, “the book is about a lived landscape that is filled with the voices and the wisdom of those that have gone before. ... Whether clearing ground, opening a pit to extract flint, burying the dead or coming together at an enclosure – the same ritualized and varied understanding of the world permeates each and every action. This abolishes the divide between ritual and everyday landscapes. ... As people go about their daily concerns, they not only reproduce the social order but also negotiate and subtly, often unknowingly, change it.”

Hodder (1999) diagnoses this new direction as a new opposition between knowledge about self versus intellectual knowledge about the past. He sees this as an important development – the past as self-discovery, where archaeology provides a set of experiences about the past which can be made available to a wide range of people, often through heritage sites. This approach is close to the ethnographer’s thick description of

a contemporary community, in which people working through different raw materials come into constant contact with their pasts through traditions.

In his latest book, Tilley (1999) also comes closer to closely contextualized bodies when he discusses the use of bodies as metaphors to refer to other material culture. For Tilley, anthropomorphism is a primary metaphorical process in small-scale societies. Terms for the body act as an enormous reference system making use of dress, bodily decoration, movement and gesture. In this way, the principles of social differentiation may be read through bodily hexis. The human body is metaphorically intertwined with the social body, in fact constructed through this integration; thus, “the body is acknowledged to be a *constructed* product of a ritual discourse: a socio-politics of becoming.” The body’s power as metaphor is also widely applied to houses, animals and other forms of material culture (Tilley 1999).

Thus, the lived experiences of different people in their local and wider landscapes are seen to be inter-dependent upon the structuring principles of the society for the social construction of persons. The wider the range of social differentiation in any society, the greater the potential for the identification of multiple voices expressing the differing experiences of those lives in the past.

### Material culture

The supposed dichotomy between the material and the ideal is broken down completely in new approaches to material culture in the 1990s, approached which owe much to Kopytoff’s (1986) work on the biographies of artifacts – the notion that things carry with them their own histories of making, trading and exchanging and, eventually, death and burial. This facility of objects to “presence” different place/times (Ray 1987) comes from their essential materiality and transportability – two essential qualities of things which have been much played upon in recent PPAs.

Kopytoff (1986) also emphasized that the way societies construct persons is a metaphorical model of the way they make things. Tilley (1999) has developed this point further, insisting that the logic of production is often expressed metaphorically through the logic of procreation / reproduction. Hence, production becomes a performance through which persons and objects create and define each other. In small-scale societies, technology is inseparable from ideas of spiritual / ancestral involvement in the production process (see Rowlands / Warnier 1993; Chapman 1996).

PPAs have also taken up the insights of Strathern (1988) into exchange processes, in which the whole cultural order is re-capitulated in an act of exchange. The Melanesian mode of creating, maintaining and extending social relations, known as enchainment through inalienable objects, has been incorporated into the cultural dynamics of the Neolithic, but based upon the social practice of object fragmentation (fragment enchainment: Chapman 2000). In this way, as Tilley (1999) expresses it, “the artifact is the multiple site for the inscription and negotiation of social relations, power and social dynamics.” Likewise, value in things and people is mutually constituted, with the reputation of each inter-dependent upon the other (for an ethnographic example, Munn 1986; for an example from Balkan prehistory, see Chapman 1996).

Hence, material culture has returned to center stage after its relegation to a form of representation of other “variables” in processual research. This development was implicated in Fletcher’s (1989) argument that the nub of social theory in source disciplines is the relationship between verbal meaning and action, not the relationship with material culture; therefore, archaeology is decoupled from the primary task of social theory building because the connections between social and material phenomena are not clearly defined. In this sense, it is not surprising that PPAs (and Schiffer) have sought to emphasize the key role played by material culture in the constitution of past life ways.

### Landscape and place

Some of the most important changes in the 1990s concerned PPAs’ approaches to the archaeology of landscape. As Ashmore and Knapp (1999) recognize: “What was once theorized as passive backdrop or a forcible determinant of culture is now seen as an active and far more complex entity in relation to human lives.” Many studies quote Hirsch’s (1995) view that landscape is “a process yielding a foregrounded, everyday social life from a background range of potential social existence.” Central to this concept is the notion of dwelling or inhabiting the land – a keystone of the “inherent” approach to landscape (see above). Barrett (1999) characterizes inhabitation as “to evoke or revitalize the ever-present ancestral and spiritual order embedded in that landscape”; inhabitation empowers, so that actions gain legitimacy with reference to other places/times.

This approach recognizes the important pre-existing structures inhabiting a landscape, just as much as the *habitus* in a village house. Thus, for Barrett (1999), “the world as already existed (is) always imbued with meanings and therefore used as a background of reference against which contemporary acts played out, often through seeking to make explicit the meanings that were soaked into the landscape” or to help focus them more directly on contemporary concerns. These meanings refer to both natural and cultural features, since each has the potential to reveal the truths of a mythical past (Barrett 1999). It is hard, therefore, to underestimate the importance of the day-to-day experience of living in a world steeped in symbolic significance (Bradley 1998).

A good example of the inter-dependency between the form of monuments and structures and the landscape in which those monuments inhabit is the work of Richard Bradley (1998). Here, Bradley draws our attention to a constant emphasis on the circle in the archaeology of later prehistoric Britain – a shared perception of the world, a prehistoric cosmology. For Bradley, an important political dimension in the study of prehistoric monuments is the way in which space is organized in the same way, interpreted and re-interpreted over very long periods of time. In the same way that Bradley posits that the general perception of space is shaped as much by mythology as by topography, so changes in the design of a monument are related not to different ways in which the monument was constructed so much as to more profound modifications in the same basic perceptions of the world (e. g., the shift from inside to outside contexts



for megalithic art). Thus, circular monuments (e. g. henges) epitomized a circular perception of space; encapsulated the qualities of the surrounding area; and summarized in monumental form any existing understandings of that locality (see Richards 1996). For Bradley and Richards, structures were a microcosm of the landscapes in which they were made.

This brings us to the significance of places in a landscape. Compare these two statements about place by a philosopher and two social anthropologists: E. Casey (1996): “phenomenologically, space and time come together in place.” Feld and Basso (1996): “place – that most powerful fusion of space, self and time.”

The continuing inhabitation of a place brings an accumulated sense of history – of the peoples who settled there, the things which they used and deposited there and the ways in which the place was related to the rest of its landscape. For this reason, the notion of place-value is important in PPA studies of landscape (Chapman 1998). It becomes clear that archaeological sites are not just spaces for the performance of specific tasks or activities but an essential way of creating the world in which people lived in the past (Chapman 1988). Tilley (1999) sums up the question as follows: “Place is thus an elemental existential fact and the social construction of a sense of place is a universal experiential medium.”

Thus, place and landscape have not simply been colonized by symbolic and social factors as in some of the less cerebral ‘interpretations’ of “ritual landscapes”. The creation of immanent relations between places and landscape is central to the self-perception of a group and their perception by outsiders. To the extent that the place is the locus for small-scale, local experiencing of the world, place is vital to interpretations of PPAs.

## Endwords

In a recent, intelligent analysis of why processualists and postprocessualists are such rare figures in French archaeology, Coudart (1999) links the individualism of PAs and PPAs to four factors: the individualism of the Thatcher / Reagan years; the refusal of universalism; the triumph of particularism; and fluctuations in the framework of the collective identity and society itself – i. e. what she terms the “crisis of modernity”. Coudart then proceeds to characterize PPA as “a kind of non-project”, arising out of the deadlock one finds whenever one focuses on contingencies and individual facts” which “ultimately led PPA down the path of an almost complete, sterile, but politically correct, relativism”. Coudart maintains that, in France, “the battle between the processualists and the postprocessualists has been seen as a respectable kind of exoticism” ... “both are part of the same cul-de-sac”.

This is a vigorous attack, which, however, does not take into account any of the detailed approaches to people, things and places which I would characterize as the core achievements of PPAs in the 1990s. I hope that I have demonstrated in this chapter that there is more to PPAs than “a kind of non-project”, “a cul-de-sac” and “a sterile relativism”. The very diversity which Coudart fails to recognize is, for me, the greatest

strength of PPAs – stimulating colleagues to look afresh at well-known material and develop new interpretations.

Let the final word be one of reconciliation between field archaeologists and theoreticians! Richard Bradley (1998) began his book *The significance of monuments* with the claim that: “The practice of archaeology is not as objective as fieldworkers would like to believe; nor is it as subjective as theorists often suppose.” I shall conclude on this note, refuting the notion that, at the start of the new millennium, we have witnessed the end of the history of archaeological thought – what I like to call “Trigger mortis”.

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