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

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

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PHILIP L. KOHL

Advances in archaeology: Comments on
“Archaeologies of Europe.
History, Methods and Theories”

The publication of the papers delivered at the “Archäologien Ost – Archäologien West” conference in Poznań, Poland, in spring 2000 is a major contribution to our understanding of the development of archaeological thought and practice throughout Europe. The papers clearly reveal that archaeologists are increasingly and critically aware of how the history of their discipline must be properly contextualized in terms of the social, economic, and political conditions under which it developed and continues to develop. It is a singular honor for me – an outsider from the ‘North American variant of the Anglo-American archaeological tradition’ – to comment on these papers, though I am not certain how typical or representative I am of the regional tradition in which I was reared. Consequently, these remarks really just represent my perspective, something of a lone maverick in North American archaeology. While there is much to praise in the history of Anglo-American archaeology, particularly, though not exclusively, its theoretical innovations, there is also a disturbing tendency that is alluded to in several of the papers – defensively or not; viz., its provincial, largely self-imposed isolation or what might be termed an almost imperial arrogance based to a great extent on linguistic ignorance. The papers presented here should go a long way in correcting mistaken and dated prejudices about continental European archaeology and its presumed exclusive interest in the compilation of archaeological data. Finally, it is also true that these papers have been so well circulated and intelligently commented upon by other participants that my remarks may be largely redundant. For this reason, I will be brief.

The histories of the development of archaeology in specific countries presented here strikingly illustrate how archaeological work is dependent upon the political conditions under which it is produced. This relationship is necessary, inevitable, and, at least in hindsight, not surprising. On the other hand, it is also clear that the relationship between archaeology and politics is not always, nor even typically direct; they are not synonymous activities, and the relationship between them must be examined on a case-by-case basis. Thus, as reported here, the experiences of Spanish, Serbian, and Slovenian archaeology can be contrasted with those of Italian and Romanian archaeology and of German archaeology during the time of the Nazis. In the latter cases, political interference in the practice of archaeology is more blatant and connected with the aims of the state to construct national identities or to pursue aggressive aims of expansion or policies of ethnic extermination. In the former cases, many factors intervene to modify or nuance the relationship between archaeological practice and state

policy. Both S. Babić for Serbia and P. Novaković for Slovenia mention the very limited number of archaeologists working within their countries and the secondary role (“marginal social position”) archaeology played in the construction of Serbian and Slovenian national identity. These same factors also influenced the development of Spanish archaeology where one can also trace continuities in archaeological practice despite the civil war and violent political upheaval that Spain suffered during the past century. Moreover, according to I. Martínez Navarrete: “... the institutions essential for the reproduction of academic power live on through changing historical developments with their scientific activity put to different purposes. Similarly, intellectual traditions and the corporate and affective relations of archaeologists determine their choice and maintenance of a particular theory more than scientific advances” (Navarrete in this volume, p. 361).

If the number of archaeologists was extremely limited, as was true in many countries throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, then their social positions, which generally associated them with the elite or upper class, or even their personal relations may have affected the development of the discipline more than their political beliefs.

Several papers comment on similarities and differences between the abuse of archaeology in Nazi Germany with that which occurred in the Soviet Union during Stalinist times. Many also observe that by late Soviet times, allegiance to Marxist ideology was more nominal than real. Lip service was paid to the Marxist-Leninist classics at the beginning or end of what was typically a highly descriptive archaeological report. This assessment is undoubtedly true, as is the general claim, asserted by L. Koryakova and others, that there was considerable convergence in the actual practices, including theoretical developments, of archaeologists in the East bloc with those in the West. As F. Bertemes notes, the assumed division between East and West European archaeology, that supposedly characterized the discipline during the Cold War, may have been more superficial than real and there was an underlying or more basic Central European archaeological tradition that united scholars on either side of the Iron Curtain.

On the other hand, I personally do not find it surprising or paradoxical that some of the most dangerous manifestations of nationalist archaeology have occurred within areas formerly controlled or dominated by the Soviet Union, such as the Balkans and the Caucasus. There are many ways to explain the emergence of these nationalist-inspired archaeologies. One factor largely internal to the discipline, which is not really focused on in any of these papers, is the emphasis given to tracing ethnic origins, the essentially illusory pursuit of ethnogenesis, that guided and still guides many archaeological research projects throughout the former Eastern bloc. I wish the papers of L. Koryakova and Yu. Rassamakin had treated these disturbing manifestations in greater detail in their otherwise rich accounts of current developments in Russian and Ukrainian archaeology.

It is refreshing to observe that most papers distinguish different forms of Marxist archaeology – from officially controlled versions rarely believed in to more flexible approaches genuinely linked to critiques of contemporary society. These comments cannot expatiate on what is worthwhile or limited in Marxist archaeology, but it is worth noting that Marxism is a materialist theory and in this respect more congruent with the nature of archaeological evidence than many of the fashionable approaches

being advocated by theoretically inclined archaeologists today. V. G. Childe was attracted to Marxism for both political and empirical reasons: archaeological data could be reasonably interpreted in light of Marxist theory.

The papers demonstrate the importance of critically reflecting on the development of archaeology within specific regional or national traditions and, above all, of explicitly acknowledging the mistakes and wrong paths that were taken. It is also essential to break down misleading stereotypes or superficial generalizations meant to characterize all the archaeology produced within a given tradition. H. Parzinger's and F. Bertemes' objections to depictions of German archaeology as atheoretical, if not anti-theoretical, data gathering are well taken and amply documented. On the other hand, one cannot just dismiss personal experiences, such as those that U. Sommer recounts, as fanciful aberrations. Typically, there is a kernel of truth hidden within most stereotypes, and I suspect P. Barford comes closer to the mark when he observes: "... the [processual] movement gained its most obvious successes in ... the Old Continent where young academics were able to use meritorial arguments to release themselves from the censoriousness of professorial authority in a gerontocratic system and 'attack the establishment.' This is probably the main reason why the new [processual] paradigm failed to develop to any great degree in those central European academic centers largely under the influence of the so-called "German School" of archaeology with its endemic authoritarianism rather than any post-Kossina mistrust of theory" (Barford in this volume, p. 86).

Similarly, Barford postulates a structural, rather than theoretical or conceptual, reason for the rise of postprocessual archaeology in Great Britain: "... one of the factors which led to its [postprocessual] rise was the structure of the academic community in Great Britain and in particular the comparative intellectual freedom of the younger generation of British scholars compared to many of their continental counterparts" (Barford in this volume, p. 88).

I. Martínez Navarrete's account likewise stresses the importance of such structural features within Spanish universities that impeded the development of archaeology there, and I am confident that such structural factors can be documented in other regional or national traditions. The ever-changing search for new theoretical trends or means of explaining the archaeological record that is such a characteristic feature of contemporary American archaeology is also partially explained by how young archaeologists advance their careers within the American educational system and publishing industry. In this context, old approaches just do not sell.

The traditional is not necessarily bad or incorrect, and the new good or desirable. I personally have serious reservations about some – though not all – approaches that are collectively referred to as postprocessual. From my perspective, the principal reason why some postprocessual approaches have not been widely accepted in France and other continental European countries is that it is generally recognized that they are inappropriate or not particularly useful for understanding the archaeological record. For this reason, I wonder whether the structural explanation that B. Olsen postulates for the tepid reception to postprocessual archaeology in Denmark is sufficient: "The disparity in ... response to postprocessual thinking ... is ... caused by the infra-structural differences in university education and access to academic positions" (Olsen in this volume, p. 220). It may simply be that Danish archaeologists just refuse to jump on

certain postprocessual bandwagons for what they reasonably consider to be their deficiencies. Although my knowledge of Danish archaeology and its practitioners is very limited, I also wonder if the close association of some dominant and highly-visible Danish archaeologists with processual archaeology might also explain the apparent lack of receptivity to these approaches.

It is important to recognize that theoretical archaeology is not exclusively an Anglo-American concern, and J. Chapman is certainly correct in observing that even in Great Britain most practicing archaeologists still pursue a "traditional agenda" and that the discipline itself as a whole remains in a "pre-paradigmatic stage" of being. Many others comment on the dominance of culture-historical archaeology within their own traditions of research. The question inevitably arises then whether or not this will always be true and, indeed, whether or not it is something desirable. What I mean is that if most archaeologists view what they do as principally concerned with reconstructing the past through the analysis of material culture remains, this work necessarily can be characterized to some extent as culture-historical archaeology. It is not a dated approach, but an integral and essential aspect of the discipline itself. The image of culture-historical archaeology needs some necessary refurbishing and sprucing up; the term should not just be identified with some hopelessly recondite and irrelevant form of butterfly collecting. History and evolution are not opposed, but complementary concepts, and historians of whatever persuasion always must order their materials through some criteria of selection and relevancy. Archaeologists necessarily will always confront this same task. Such recognition does not mean that all that one does is to order one's materials spatially and temporally. Historians certainly do more than that, and theory – correctly and appropriately chosen – is necessarily employed by historians and archaeologists alike.

One very relevant example of a theoretical advance with immediate archaeological implications is the recognition of the socially constructed character of collective identities such as ethnicity and nationalism. J.-P. Demoule's paper refers to historians, such as E. Hobsbawm and B. Anderson, who stress the invented or constructed character of these identities. If they are correct and if such identities become real or exist only through self-categorization and the recognition of others, then such identities are essentially unrecognizable archaeologically, making an archaeology of ethnicity or of ethnic identification, as proposed by many famous and infamous figures in the history of the discipline, impossible.

Following Demoule, I would also argue that the recognition of this impossibility makes it necessary for archaeologists to confront manifestly incorrect, mythical interpretations of the past, even seemingly innocuous ones promoted by advocates of the European Union: "Diese kritische Haltung ist zweifellos der beste Dienst, den man dem heutigen Europa geben kann" (Demoule in this volume, p. 141). This service may be largely negative, but it is nonetheless most important. As Demoule further argues, collective identities, such as nationality or culture, are never homogeneous nor linguistically uniform, but always mixed. This observation too has immediate consequences for our understanding and use of essential concepts, such as the archaeological culture. Prehistoric realities were as complex in these respects as contemporary ones, and our reconstructions of the past and our use of essential ordering concepts must be flexible and reflect such complexity.

Such recognition should be challenging, not disheartening. Archaeological optimism should be grounded in scientific progress and the realization that empirical, technical, and theoretical advances have allowed us to reconstruct the remote past more satisfactorily today than ever before. It is understandable why many archaeologists from different regional traditions of research were reluctant to accept the reality of radiocarbon dating. Nevertheless, as H. Parzinger argues, "Das, was richtig ist, setzt sich früher oder später durch" (Parzinger in this volume, p. 46). Such advances occur at the empirical level, as well as at the technical and theoretical levels. The continuous accumulation of archaeological evidence ultimately constrains the ways in which the prehistoric past can be plausibly interpreted. There is still often room for alternative, equally plausible interpretations of the archaeological record, but some ultimately can be dismissed as incorrect, and through such perpetual paring down our understanding of what actually happened in prehistory grows.

Finally, advances in archaeology are promoted through holding international conferences, such as the one that yielded these papers, and through promoting and conducting international collaborative research projects. This theme too is apparent in nearly every paper collected here. There is no need to review why such collaborative projects have grown in the recent past and undoubtedly will continue to do so. The ultimate result will be to bridge the divides separating the archaeologies of different traditions whether they be those of the former eastern and western blocs or those manifest on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. Despite backsliding in certain areas, the promise of reconstructing a truly world prehistory looms brighter today than ever before. The editors of this volume deserve great praise for advancing this cause.