

## Theory and Method in Archaeology

Anthropology 39000  
University of Chicago  
Spring 2022  
Friday 1:30-4:20 PM

Michael Dietler

[mdietler@uchicago.edu](mailto:mdietler@uchicago.edu)

Office Hours: Mondays 1-3 PM, via Zoom (send me an e-mail to set up a session)

This course offers a critical exploration of some major theoretical and methodological trends in the knowledge-producing endeavor that has come to be called “archaeology”, set within a socio-historical examination of its development. In an effort to encourage critical comparative reflection and avoid the sort of facile “presentist” historical narratives that often imbue discussions of theory with a kind of evolutionary teleology, the course readings about major theoretical and methodological issues and debates are intentionally not arranged in chronological periods.

History is, of course, crucial. An understanding of the socio-historical framework in which archaeology emerged as a scholarly practice, was formalized as a professional field of knowledge production within a complex set of institutions, and has changed over the last couple of centuries, is clearly essential to understanding the shifting nature, meaning, and goals of theoretical discourse. Consequently, the first week of the course will be devoted to examining these historical issues, and this will provide a referential structure for the subsequent exploration of theoretical debates. But the readings from weeks 2 through 9 are organized by themes rather than chronology. This is designed to run against the grain of narratives of progressive stages of radical transformation and novelty (the “New”, “Post-”, and “turns” syndrome) by encouraging critical thinking about the recurrence and persistence of certain questions, dispositions, and problems in theoretical arguments. It is meant to encourage students to discern what aspects of the complex palimpsest of theory constitute genuine novelties and improvements, while reflecting on “reinventions of the wheel”, “old wine in new bottles”, complex genealogies of ideas, and the reasons why some issues and questions disappear while others reemerge from the tomb clothed in new terminology, and some simply refuse to die. Terms like “the New Archaeology” and “Postprocessual Archaeology” are not analytical terms, but rather political slogans of polemical strategic essentialism. Hence, we should avoid using them as *terms* of analysis and instead view them as *objects* of analysis: that is, we must examine what functions the rhetoric of novelty performs and how it is deployed, while at the same time exploring the more complexly entangled landscape of ideas that it masks. Philosophical pretensions to the contrary, archaeological theory is not a rarified realm of the abstract clash of ideas. Like all other aspects of archaeology it is a practice that is situated in complex social fields structured by institutions, personal relations, and embodied intellectual dispositions. Hence, critical analysis of logic, rhetoric, and historical-sociology of the field are crucial for navigating the shifting winds of theoretical discourse.

The first session will be devoted partly to an introductory lecture and partly to general discussion of the articles listed on the syllabus. Class sessions for the following weeks will be divided into three 50-minute sessions with brief breaks in between. The class will be divided into three "theory squads", and each squad will be responsible for organizing discussion for one of the three periods, focusing on a selected subset of the readings. Obviously, all participants will be expected to read and discuss all the material for the week, but each squad will have responsibility for mobilizing discussion with critical questions and observations. Open discussion is key to a class of this type, as the exploration and evaluation of theoretical concepts is best undertaken in communal dialogue.

There will be no final paper. Rather, beginning in week 2, each student will be required to submit a "brief" on the readings for that week: that is, a one page (or two maximum), single-spaced comparative analysis of the major points that you have drawn from the articles. This does not have to be a polished piece of literature, and you will not be graded on style. The intent is that it should be beneficial in focusing and organizing your thoughts ahead of the discussion.

All required readings will be made available on the CANVAS site, although students who have not yet read it are encouraged to also read Bruce Trigger's (1996) *A History of Archaeological Thought* (second edition), Cambridge U.P., which provides the most detailed and thoughtful framework for examining theory in archaeology historically. Several other books summarize theoretical movements during the last couple of decades after Trigger's book ends, but none of these are on the same scholarly level. Readings marked with \*\*\* are (sometimes humorous/polemical) meta-commentaries about rhetoric and theoretical fashion that are not necessarily specific to the theme of the week (they are not necessarily meant for discussion, but for general background). The themes and articles are a selection from a vast array of possibilities. They should by no means be taken as representing the key statements or bodies of theory in the field. They have been chosen with an eye toward highlighting differing perspectives on a few selected recurring fundamental issues in archaeological thought, although many others have been excluded for lack of time (I have, for example, generally avoided important bodies of theory -- on colonialism, economics, the social history of archaeology and politics of the past, heritage, ethics, etc. -- that are covered in my other seminars). Readings were also selected with an eye to expanding horizons beyond the usual American and British myopia in theory talk. It is also important to point out that, because of pragmatic considerations, most of the readings selected are abstract programmatic statements and it is difficult to judge their value for archaeological practice without "road testing" them with empirical cases. That is where the flaws, inadequacies, and impracticalities generally appear promptly. But a comparative analysis of the kind proposed for this seminar at least allows the identification of intellectual genealogies, the presence of internal contradictions, fallacies of logic, rhetorical slight-of-hand, and semantic alchemy.

## Schedule of Topics and Readings:

### Introduction

**Week 1-** History of disciplinary, institutional, and social contexts of archaeology; History of theory and theoretical rhetoric in archaeology; Epistemology, social theory, and branding; Persistent epistemological, ontological, and dispositional tensions (rationalism vs romanticism; presentism vs historicism, realism vs positivism and instrumentalism; hedgehogs vs foxes, etc.)

Essential Questions and points of discussion:

-Is archaeology a discipline, a field, a technique, or something else? Is there some unity to archaeology? Does archaeological theory exist?

-What is theory? What are disciplines? How does theory vary by discipline? What is the difference between theory and method?

-A critique of "theoreticist theorizing" and "conspicuous conceptualization"; understanding rhetorical practices in scientific discourse (radicality effects, branding, straw-man polemics, cargo cult theorization, symbolic capital, "add Foucault and stir", etc.)

-Goals, methods, and evidence: What do archaeologists want, why do they want it, and how can they get it?

-Some important "-isms": Antiquarianism, Evolutionism, Historicism, Romanticism, Nationalism, Realism, Positivism, Functionalism...

-Institutional contexts and histories of archaeology (university disciplines, learned societies, museums, CRM)

### Reading:

Miller, Peter N. (2013). A tentative morphology of European antiquarianism, 1500-2000. In *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Alain Schnapp, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Peter N. Miller, and Tim Murray, pp. 67-87. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1975). The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason. *Social Science Information* 14(6):19-47.

Gingras, Yves (2007). "Please, don't let me be misunderstood": the role of argumentation in a sociology of academic misunderstandings. *Social Epistemology* 21(4):369-389.

Flannery, Kent V. (1982). The golden Marshalltown: a parable for the archeology of the 1980s. *American Anthropologist* 84(2):265-278.

Ucko, Peter J. (1995). Archaeological interpretation in a world context. In *Theory in Archaeology: A World Perspective*, edited by Peter J. Ucko, pp. 1-27. Routledge, London.

Johnson, Matthew (2006). On the nature of theoretical archaeology and archaeological theory. *Archaeological Dialogues* 13(2):117-132. [have a look at some of the replies as well, pp. 132-182]

Ribeiro, Artur (2016). Archaeology will be just fine. *Archaeological Dialogues* 23(2):146-151.

Criado-Boado, Felipe (2016). Tangled between paradigms in the neo-baroque era. *Archaeological Dialogues* 23(2):152-158.

## Major Issues and Debates

### Week 2--Scientific method, epistemology, objectivity, reflexivity: conflicting views and programmatic manifestos

\*\*\*Service, Elman R. (1969). Models for the methodology of mouthtalk. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 25(1):68-80.

Willey, Gordon and P. Phillips (1958). *Method and Theory in American Archaeology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. Pp. 1-57.

Binford, Lewis R. (1962). Archaeology as anthropology. *American Antiquity* 28(2): 217-225.

Binford, Lewis R. (1965). Archaeological systematics and the study of culture process. *American Antiquity* 31(2):203-210.

Clarke, David L. (1973). The loss of innocence. *Antiquity* 47: 6-18.

Fritz, John and Fred Plog (1970). The nature of archaeological explanation. *American Antiquity* 35(4): 405-412.

Schiffer, Michael B. (1988). The structure of archaeological theory. *American Antiquity* 53:461-485.

Hodder, Ian (1991). Interpretive archaeology and its role. *American Antiquity* 56(1):7-18.

Wylie, Alison (2000) Questions of evidence, legitimacy, and the (dis)unity of science. *American Antiquity* 65(2):227-237.

Wylie, Alison (2017). How archaeological evidence bites back: strategies for putting old data to work in new ways. *Science, Technology and Human Values* 42(2):203-225.

### **Week 3-Change: Evolutionist vs culture historical approaches**

\*\*\*Lucas, Gavin (2017). The paradigm concept in archaeology. *World Archaeology* 49(2):260-270.

Morgan, Lewis Henry (1877). *Ancient society: Or, Researches in the Line of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. Charles H. Kerr, Chicago. Part I (i.e. pp. 3-44)

Flannery, Kent V. (1972). The cultural evolution of civilizations. *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 3:399-426.

Marcus, Joyce (2008). Archaeological evidence for social evolution. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37:251-266.

Dunnell, Robert C. 1980 Evolutionary theory and archaeology. In *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol. 3, edited by M. B. Schiffer, pp. 35-99. Academic Press, Orlando.

Shennan, Stephen J. (2008). Evolution in archaeology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37:75-91.

Murray, Tim (2017). The origins of culture history in prehistoric archaeology: rethinking plausibility and disciplinary tradition. *World Archaeology* 49(2):187-197.

Smith, Grafton Elliot (1915). *The Migrations of Early Culture: A Study of the Significance of the Geographical Distribution of the Practice of Mummification as Evidence of the Migrations of Peoples and the Spread of Certain Customs and Beliefs*. Manchester University Press, Manchester. Pp. 1-20 and the "Summary", 132-135. [You can skim most of the first 14 pages, which are fairly repetitive, but have a closer look at pp. 15-20].

Kluckhohn, Clyde (1936). Some reflections on the method and theory of the *Kulturkreislehre*. *American Anthropologist* 38(2):157-196.

Childe, V. Gordon (1933). Races, peoples and cultures in prehistoric Europe. *History* 18(71):193-203.

Adams, William Y., Dennis P. Van Gerven, and Richard S. Levy (1978). The retreat from migrationism. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7:483-532.

Gramsch, Alexander (2015). Culture, change, identity — approaches to the interpretation of cultural change. *Anthropologie* 53:341–349.

#### **Week 4- Material culture theory I: Comparison, analogy, inference, and the development of ethnoarchaeology**

Fenton, William N. (1969). J.-F. Lafitau (1681-1746), precursor of scientific anthropology. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 25:173-187.

Lubbock, John (1889 [1870]). *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man: Mental and Social Condition of Savages*. Longmans, Green and Co., London. Pp. 1-37. [You can skim this, just to get a sense of why he viewed "savages" as a good analog for ancient European societies]

Gould, Richard J. and Patty J. Watson (1982). A dialogue on the meaning and use of analogy in ethnoarchaeological reasoning." *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 1: 355-381.

Wylie, Alison (1982). An analogy by any other name is just as analogical: A commentary on the Gould-Watson dialogue. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 1(4): 382-401.

Ravn, Mads (2011). Ethnographic analogy from the Pacific: just as analogical as any other analogy. *World Archaeology* 43(4):716-725.

David, Nicolas and Carol Kramer (2001). *Ethnoarchaeology in Action*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Chapter 2, "Theorizing ethnoarchaeology and analogy", pp. 33-62.

Roux, Valentine (2007). Ethnoarchaeology: a non historical science of reference necessary for interpreting the past. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 14(2):153-178.

Lyons, Diane, and Joanna Casey (2016). It's a material world: the critical and on-going value of ethnoarchaeology in understanding variation, change and materiality. *World Archaeology* 48(5):609-627.

Hicks, Dan (2010). The material-cultural turn: event and effect. In *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*, edited by Dan Hicks, and Mary Beaudry, pp. 25-98. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

## **Week 5-Material Culture theory II: Classification, typology, style; identity and boundaries; linguistic, textual, and semiological paths**

Spaulding, Albert C. (1953). Statistical techniques for the discovery of artifact types. *American Antiquity* 18(4): 305-313, and debate with James A. Ford, *American Antiquity* 19(4): 390-393 (1954).

Ford, James A. and Julian H. Steward (1954). On the concept of types. *American Anthropologist* 56: 42-54.

Dunnell, Robert C. (1978). Style and function. A fundamental dichotomy, *American antiquity* 43(2), 192–202.

Dietler, Michael, and Ingrid Herbich (1998). Habitus, techniques, style: an integrated approach to the social understanding of material culture and boundaries. In *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries*, edited by Miriam Stark, pp. 232-263. Washington DC: Smithsonian.

David, Nicolas and Carol Kramer (2001). *Ethnoarchaeology in Action*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Chapter 7, "Style and the making of boundaries: contrasting regional studies", pp. 168-224.

Hodder, Ian (1989). This is not an article about material culture as text. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 8:250-269.

Buchli, Victor A. (1995). Interpreting material culture: the trouble with text. In *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past*, edited by Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, Alexandra Alexandri, Victor A. Büchli, John Carman, Jonathan Last, and Gavin Lucas, pp. 198-212. Routledge, London.

Knappett, Carl (2012). Materiality. In *Archaeological Theory Today*, edited by Ian Hodder, pp. 188-207. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Ingold, Tim (2007). Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14(1):1-16.

## **Week 6-Scale, Structure, System, Agency**

\*\*\*Dietler, Michael (2022). Six provocations in search of a pretext. In *The Connected Iron Age: Interregional Networks in the Eastern Mediterranean, 900-600 BCE*, edited by James Osborne and Jonathan Hall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gibson, Clark C., Elinor Strom, and T. K. Ahn (2000). The concept of scale and the human dimensions of global change: a review. *Ecological Economics* 32(2):217–239.

Robb, John, and Timothy R. Pauketat (2013). From moments to millennia: theorizing scale and change in human history. In *Big Histories, Human Lives*, edited by John Robb and Timothy R. Pauketat, pp. 3-33. SAR Press, Santa Fe.

Foxhall, Lin (2016). Introduction: households and landscapes. *World Archaeology* 48(3):325–331.

Plog, Fred (1975). Systems Theory. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4:207-224.

Sahlins, Marshall (2004). *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. Chapter 2: "Culture and agency in history", pp. 125-193.

Robb, John (2010). Beyond agency. *World Archaeology* 42(4):493-520.

Lindstrøm, Torill C. (2015). Agency 'in itself'. A discussion of inanimate, animal and human agency. *Archaeological dialogues* 22(2), 207–38.

Sørensen, Tim Flohr (2016). Hammers and nails. A response to Lindstrøm and to Olsen and Witmore. *Archaeological Dialogues* 23(1):115-127.

Ribeiro, Artur (2016). Against object agency. A counterreaction to Sørensen's 'Hammers and nails'. *Archaeological Dialogues* 23(2):229-235.

Ingold, Tim (2014). Is there life amidst the ruins? *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1(2):29-33.

### **Week 7- Relational Frameworks: Economy, Ecology, Networks, "Connectivity"**

Clark, Graham (1954). The economic approach to prehistory. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 39: 215-238.

Skeates, Robin (2009). Trade and interaction. In *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeology*, edited by Chris Gosden, Barry W. Cunliffe, and Rosemary Joyce, pp. 555-578. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Jochim, Michael A. (1979). Breaking down the system: recent ecological approaches in archaeology. *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* 2:77-117.

Crumley, Carole L (2007). Historical ecology: integrated thinking at multiple temporal and spatial scales. In *The World System and the Earth System-Global Socioenvironmental Change and Sustainability since the Neolithic*, edited by A. Hornborg, and Carole L Crumley, pp. 15-28. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

- Crumley, Carole L. (1979). Three locational models: an epistemological assessment for anthropology and archaeology. In *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 2:141–173.
- Hall, Thomas D., P. Nick Kardulis, and Christopher Chase-Dunn (2011). World-systems analysis and archaeology: continuing the dialogue. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 19(3):233-279.
- Boissevain, Jeremy (1979). Network analysis: a reappraisal. *Current Anthropology* 20(2):392-394.
- Collar, Anna, Fiona Coward, Tom Brughmans, and Barbara J. Mills (2015). Networks in archaeology: phenomena, abstraction, representation. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 22(1):1-32.
- Brughmans, Tom (2013). Thinking through networks: a review of formal network methods in archaeology. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 20(4):623-662.
- Semerari, Giulia Saltini (2017). Towards an archaeology of disentanglement. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 24:542–578.

### **Week 8-Power and politics, structure and practice; inequality; violence**

- Wolf, Eric R. (1990). Facing power — old insights, new questions. *American Anthropologist* 92(3):586-596.
- Paynter, Robert (1989). The archaeology of equality and inequality. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18:369-399.
- Yoffee, Norman (1993). Too many chiefs? (or, safe texts for the '90s). In *Archaeological Theory - Who Sets the Agenda?*, edited by Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt, pp. 61-78. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- DeMarrais, Elizabeth, Luis Jaime Castillo, and Timothy Earle (1996). Ideology, materialization, and power strategies. *Current Anthropology* 37(1):15-31.
- Dietler, Michael (2001). Theorizing the feast: rituals of consumption, commensal politics, and power in African contexts. In *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, edited by Michael Dietler, and Brian Hayden, pp. 65-114. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C.

Thomas, Julian (2002). Taking power seriously. In *The Dynamics of Power*, edited by Maria O'Donovan, pp. 35-50. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL.

Smith, Adam T. (2011). Archaeologies of sovereignty. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40:415-432.

Simons, Anna (1999). War: back to the future. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28:73-108.

Armit, Ian, Chris Knüsel, John Robb, and Rick Schulting (2006). Warfare and violence in prehistoric Europe. *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 2(1):1-11.

**Week 9-The search for meaning, feeling, and experience, and the return of Romanticism, again** (interpretive and affective "turns": phenomenology, sensuality, sentimentality, memory, the body, etc.)

Bourdieu, Pierre (1973). The three forms of theoretical knowledge. *Social Science Information* 12(1):53-80.

Peterson, Rick (2003). William Stukeley: an eighteenth-century phenomenologist? *Antiquity* 77(2): 394–400.

Brück, Joanna (2005). Experiencing the past? The development of a phenomenological archaeology in British prehistory. *Archaeological dialogues* 12, 45–72.

Tarlow, Sarah (2000). Emotion in archaeology. *Current Anthropology* 41(5): 713-746.

Hamilakis, Yannis (2013). *Archaeology and the Senses : Human Experience, Memory, and Affect*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Pp. 1-15, 92-110, 191-103.

Boric, Dusan (2010). Introduction: memory, archaeology and the historical condition. In *Archaeology and Memory*, edited by Dusan Boric, pp. 1-34. Oxbow, Oxford.

Van Dyke, Ruth M. (2019). Archaeology and social memory. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48:207-225.

Mauss, Marcel (1973) [1935]. Techniques of the body. *Economy and Society* 2(1):70-88.

Joyce, Rosemary (2005). Archaeology of the body. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34:139-158.