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Systematic theorising in archaeology today is widely regarded as a thing of the past. The two principal reasons why theory has become so diluted are those theoretical positions addressed also by Lucas and Witmore: (1) the black-boxing tactics of scientific archaeology where the inner workings of its apparatuses are thought to be so simple or particularistic that their outputs or the societal effects thereof need not be problematised, and (2) the ontologisation of archaeology's epistemology and the related idea that any indigenous ontology is a better epistemology. Both are good examples of theorising to the point of systematically and uncritically excluding any theoretical system in conflict.

Against this backdrop, I read the article by Lucas and Witmore as a call for a return to the systematic thinking of the basic questions concerning the definition and pragmatics of theory in archaeology: what is it that we talk about when we use the word theory, and why do our theoretical commitments matter?

Theoretical archaeology has been around for as long as the discipline has existed, but archaeologists did not always use the word theory (e.g. Müller 1897, 689–702). To add to the confusion, the history of explicitly theoretical archaeology is that of theoretical atomisation characterised by a shift from epistemological matters pertaining to scientific explanation in the new archaeology, to an emphasis on the social concerns in the interpretive archaeologies, and, more recently, to the extension of theory to also pertain to the speculative realm of objects.

I want to use this opportunity to talk about archaeological theory as a system of thinking. I try to do so in a way that is historically sensitive but also cautious of the definitions of “systematic” and “thinking”. In doing so I am also, at least implicitly, addressing the fault lines of contemporary archaeological theorising and the opportunities we might have for thinking across the disparate realms of ontology and epistemology.

In archaeology, systematic thinking means engaging in (at least) four types of theory. I use the term component to stress their systematic entanglement:

*1. The empirical component.* With empirical I refer to the type of low-level inferences and generalisations or the straight-forward creation of ideas from the sensuous observation of a given body of archaeological material without much theoretical intervention or critical reflection. What the empirical component then suggests is not a naive empiricism but an empirical sensitivity; that some sort evolutionary or cosmological closeness – however translative – is to be expected between impression and object. In my reading, the empirical component is the same as Lucas and Witmore's fidelity: theories characterised by unfinishedness and slowness as well as the patience to resist the urge to rush up the ladder of inference and explanation.

2. *The principled component.* When empirically founded ideas grow too big too fast they become detached from what they were supposed to represent (I use the term also in the sense of representative or spokesperson). For instance, the adoption of the hypothetico-deductive method in the Anglo-American form of new archaeology is an example of how poorly mathematised logical schemas can convey the modesty of archaeological inference. On the other hand, Arne B. Johansen (1969) has shown how the scarcity of archaeological material sometimes necessitates the use of high-level conceptual frames and how the identification of data is a matter of concern to begin with. In other words, in epistemological terms, successful principled theorising facilitates and mobilises the empirical component. This, I think, is also part of what Lucas and Witmore are after with their treatment of the syntagm-paradigm interplay.

3. *The speculative component.* If the empirical and principled component form the epistemological core of our theoretical system, they are intimately affected by ontological commitments, and vice versa. As noted by Lucas and Witmore, the boundedness of epistemology and ontology was nicely outlined by Clarke (1973, 14) who declared that “fundamental speculation at this level is exceedingly important if only because the more fundamental the metaphysical controlling model, the less we are normally inclined to rethink it”. In contemporary archaeological theory the rift between new positivism and new materialism (e.g. Olsen & Witmore 2021) is partly result of the adopted model of causation. As somewhat of an extended answer to Hodder’s (1997, 694) challenge to “introduce interpretation at the primary level”, the new materialist’s hold that interpretation begins at the inter-object level, and that objects interpret their surroundings aesthetically, while the positivist would rather contend that objects interact according to mechanistic laws of causation. The aesthetic theory of causation therefore suggests that theory pervades everything; relational objects exist in a translative state of anticipation and uncertainty (Marila 2020, 37–42). I wonder how this contrasts with the view held by Lucas and Witmore that things do not lack anything?

4. *The critical component.* Whereas the epistemological (1 and 2) and ontological (3) components operate in the realm of fidelity (how well a theory follows the evidence), with the critical component we are entering the realm of social relevance (I understand the social as an extended concept that includes all kinds of actors, not just our fellow scholars or audiences). Part of the relevance of critical thinking is to provide meta-methodological tools for the assessment of the validity of epistemological and ontological operations (the fidelity of empirical inferences or the intelligibility of ontological models), but the critical component is chiefly targeted at the anticipation of the creative effects of those operations.

The assessment of social relevance is where Lucas and Witmore put most weight when they reflect on the need for theoretical commitment in archaeology, highlighting that the practical relevance of a theoretical position is realised when power-imbalances are exposed; that the concerns of those with power are easily identified as more important

than those of the marginalised, that political or social power dictates what materials or methods are considered important or reliable, but also that the connected ontological models limit what is thought possible to begin with.

It is along these lines that I want to conclude by reflecting on the theoretical system and on the role of thinking in it. In this context, I refer to thinking as a rational operation that is nevertheless deeply embedded in the empirical, a sort of speculative empiricism (Debaise 2017) or speculative pragmatism (Rosenthal 1986). The job of systematic rational thought in archaeological theory is the creation of concepts and ideas that prepare us for novel observations rather than their systematic doubting – and here I express my deep indebtedness to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead – the speculative creation of concepts is a “lure for feeling” (Whitehead 1978, 184). While the opposition between empirical observation and rational reflection tends to suggest a complementarity between them, it should also be kept in mind that new theories can act just like new empirical observations in shaping existing conceptual models. This is to say that a theoretical system does not necessarily assume a hierarchy between the empirical and the rational.

To me, a systematic commitment to theory in all of the aforementioned four fields, not just on the ontological or the epistemological front, is the prerequisite for a civilised archaeology characterised by the appreciation and anticipation of the deeply plural and inexhaustible nature of existence and experience. Here I take civilising to mean commitment to a process of systematic rationalisation by which one becomes aware of the concepts and theoretical systems that they have adopted uncritically. I agree wholeheartedly with Lucas and Witmore who take theory to be the cultivation rather than presumption of relevance, or as Whitehead (1956, 8) puts it: “We must be systematic; but we must keep our systems open. In other words, we should be sensitive to their limitations. There is always a vague ‘beyond’, waiting for penetration in respect to its detail.”

I believe this to be a motto most of us can share, regardless of our favourite theoretical system or academic position.

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