

multiple interpretations of the past is certainly valuable, but giving up on methodological guidelines by which to exploit them for understanding and insight is harmful. It would be unfortunate indeed if such muddle were allowed to compromise the promise of his contextual approach which, I suspect, will be realised in direct relation to use of individualistic method.

In closing, I will add that Reading the Past is a difficult book to interpret. On numerous issues, one finds Dr. Hodder's viewpoints accompanied by qualifiers that amount to counterviews. It is not easy to know where he stands. Even his position on relativism, perhaps the most crucial in the entire book, is not clear:

An open relativism appears at first to be the only solution, whereby 'anything goes.' Certainly there are some attractive aspects of this solution, if it allows greater debate between different viewpoints and a fuller involvement of archaeology in contemporary social and political issues. Yet most archaeologists feel that this solution is too extreme. Most feel that some interpretations of the past are not as good as others, that not everything can be said with equal integrity. (p. 169)

I have shot the best of my arsenal at Dr. Hodder, and deliberately forged the ammunition to expose its sharpest edges. I strongly recommend reading on, where Dr. Hodder will fire in return.

Notes

1. Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology. Ian Hodder, Cambridge University Press, 1986, ISBN 0-521-33960-X, £6.95 (Paper); ISBN 0-521-32743-1, £20.50 (Hard).

READING BELL READING 'READING THE PAST'

Ian Hodder

I would like to start by considering some of the hard objective evidence that Jim Bell uses against me. At the end of his review article he quotes from p.169 of Reading the Past. Bell uses this evidence to show that my position on relativism is not clear and that on numerous issues I provide confusing sets of qualifiers and counterviews. Also, in the context of Bell's overall review, the quote, referring as it does to relativism, appears to substantiate his assertion that my position on relativism is perhaps the most crucial in the entire book.

My book is a real thing (in the same way that archaeological data are real). And yet in reading Bell's reading of my book I realise that he often did not see what I wrote or what I thought I wrote. The book is real but different readers give it different realities. For example, I think that it is unambiguously clear in the context of adjacent paragraphs in the book that the phrase in the first part of the quote, "an open relativism appears at first to be the only solution", is not my position. Indeed, in the context of the book as a whole, relativism is one '-ism' that I do not directly discuss at all! If the 'evidence' of the index is anything to go by, p.169 is the only place in the book where the word relativism is used. Far from being central to my account, relativism is entirely peripheral. On the other hand, I think it is unambiguously clear in the context of the book that I agree with the last sentence in the quote Bell provides: "Most feel that some interpretations of the past are not as good as others, that not everything can be said with equal integrity". Indeed, the sentence which follows this on p.169 of Reading the Past suggests that "the contemporary social basis of our reconstructions of the past does not necessitate a lack of validity for those reconstructions". At the top of the following page, I say that "in my view it is possible critically to evaluate past and present contexts in relation to each other, so as to achieve a better understanding of both".

These statements certainly do not read like relativism as defined by Bell. For him, relativism is the view that any interpretation is as plausible as any other, that there are no rational guidelines for assessing theories. It is seen as an irrational view of theory. He accepts that the second (and central) part of my book is not relativist, but goes on to claim that I am a relativist despite the above quotes, despite the fact that I only use the word once and despite the fact that when I do use the word it is clearly disapproved of. Why does Bell claim that I am relativist in the face of all the evidence? I think the answer is that when we read a book (or archaeological evidence) it is not a passive process of absorbing information. Rather, we read in a creative way, putting meaning on and into the data.

A further example clarifies the point. Bell divides my book into three sections. I certainly did not write the book in three sections and I never conceived of it in that way. There is no 'objective' evidence of three sections. Indeed I had the rather naive hope that the book had an overall unity, or that it would be seen as having a continuous flow, building up from beginning to end. If forced to divide it into sections I would have said that each chapter was a section or that the book had two overall sections -- a critical review of existing approaches and then my contextual and post-processual scheme. I think the reason for Bell's perception of three sections lies in his own interests and academic strategy. He clearly believes that it is possible to separate theory from data and to test/refute theory against data. Thus he separates my contextual method which appears to him to be hard, refutationist and scientific, from what he sees as my 'fall from grace' in the 'third' section where I examine the social basis of archaeological theory, method and data. Bell's own description of the 'data' in my book demonstrates the theory-laden nature of data.

New Archaeologists were distinctive in that they were not concerned with self-critical, reflexive analysis. They did not consider it necessary to examine the social basis of their ideas. This was not because they thought that their ideas did not have a contemporary social basis. Rather it was because they took the view that Bell retains that, wherever one's ideas came from, they can be tested objectively against the data. The link between their view and the study of process within New Archaeology is very strong and needs to be re-asserted in view of Bell's claims to the contrary. It is no accident that Binford scornfully used the term 'palaeopsychology' and that he and other processual archaeologists always refused to admit interpretive, emic approaches in archaeology. The study of behavioural, materialist approaches was intimately linked to the belief that science should progress through testing theory against hard data. It was only the behavioural and material world that allowed theories to be tested against the observable, measurable data. The New Archaeologists forged a logical and necessary link between positivism and the study of systemic processes. "The meaning which explanation has within a scientific frame of reference is simply the demonstration of a constant articulation of variables within a system and the measurement of the concomitant variability among the variables within the system. Processual change in one variable can thus be shown to relate in a predictable and quantifiable way to changes in other variables" (Binford 1972, p.21).

As a result, New Archaeologists were blind to their own social and political positions. Since Bell's philosophical position is in my view close to that of many New Archaeologists (although not the extreme law-and-order brigade), he also presents political views as if they were apolitical. For example, in a number of places he discusses structuralism and Marxism as if they are overly ideological, but he does not turn the same criticism on systems theory, positivism and refutationism. He talks of some views of the past as abuses or

miscarriages of science and rationality. Certainly there are many examples. But on what grounds can it be claimed that systems theory and philosophical positions are not political? For a Critical Theorist, systems theory is certainly an ideology. I have discussed it as an 'ideology of control' -- a means by which a liberal intellectual world can set itself up as providing a politically neutral method of social control (Hodder 1984). The claimed separation of fact from theory has exactly the same social and political consequences. It places the scientist outside, yet necessary for, society. Bell claims that in European prehistory the classical diffusionist theory was refuted by radiocarbon dating, thus leading to systems theory: old theory was refuted and new theory was introduced as part of the scientific process. In my view this is simply wrong. Certainly some aspects of the old diffusionist theories were shown (for many, but not all, archaeologists) to be invalid when confronted with radiocarbon. But in fact diffusion remains, and is a valid explanation for cultural similarities in prehistoric Europe. The diffusion may now go in other directions, and it may now have different names (peer polity interaction, or world systems model). But the concept of diffusion was not itself refuted at all. Rather, archaeologists began to be unhappy with the concept of diffusion. This change of attitude was much more closely associated with wider social and cultural changes than it was with any particular confrontation with the data. In the post-colonial era in Europe, indigenous development became increasingly emphasised and more highly regarded. Perhaps more important, the expansion of science and high technology, the development of computers and systems terminology could hardly have passed archaeology by. For cultural, social and funding purposes it was important to appear scientific. Systems theory was introduced and diffusionism declined. The science of radiocarbon was brought in to prove the point.

Refusal to explore the social and political dimensions of archaeological enquiry in New Archaeological and in Bell's accounts is clear. It is associated with a belief in the separation of fact from theory. I do not mind whether one calls this separation positivism, refutationism or whatever. In arguing over whether the New Archaeology was positivist or refutationist, it seems to me that there is a danger of following Bell into a philosophical debate over terms rather than discussing issues. What is important is that the separation between fact and theory was made (whatever one calls it). As a result archaeology refused to be self-reflective and it therefore remained an immature discipline. Also it became more and more concerned with method. The 'big questions' were less frequently asked as archaeologists became more and more concerned with rigorous method that would establish their scientific status. In my view the results of the New Archaeology have become increasingly negative. We are now in a period of mindless methodology. You only have to look at the pages of American Antiquity over recent years, or at the sessions of the Society for American Archaeology to see this. The dominant centre of the discipline is absorbed in site formation processes, middle range theory, methods for distinguishing foraging and collecting systems and so on.

The response to this situation should not be a retreat into total historical subjectivity. Bell reads my book from a position that rigidly separates subjective and objective approaches. It is from that position that his difficulties and the general impasse in archaeology derive. In Reading the Past I tried to argue that the data are both subjective and objective. It has always seemed to me that two contradictory views are equally true. On the one hand it clearly is the case that archaeological data constrain what we can say about the past. There is a hard reality there and we have to fit our theories and perceptions around it. On the other hand, it is equally clear that we cannot perceive or measure the past without giving meaning to it. These meanings are partly constructed in the social present.

I therefore argued that archaeology involves evaluating data in relation to two contexts -- the past and the present. The data are both objective and subjective but unlike the claims of New Archaeologists, I argued that these two components cannot be separated. The data can be carefully studied in relation to past and present contextual relationships. Bell is incorrect to think that I separate contextual archaeology (the second of his three sections) from a consideration of contemporary social contexts and from the 'power' of science (the third section). The definition of past contexts is itself a theoretical enterprise. My doing of contextual archaeology is closely linked to my political views about the nature of society.

We can see the total integration of the subjective and the objective in all aspects of daily life. We cannot think except through objective categories. We learn to understand the world through experience of it. The views that 'matter precedes thought' and that 'thought precedes matter' are equally viable. Can archaeologists not transcend the fixed dichotomy between objective and subjective, and the related dichotomies between positivism and relativism, materialism and idealism? The archaeological past is just another realm of experience by which we come to define ourselves in the present. If we simply impose the present on the past uncritically, as was done by New Archaeologists and traditional archaeologists, we can never learn about ourselves. All that information on library shelves quietly becomes useless. But if we interpret the past critically in relation to the present, then archaeological knowledge contributes directly to the present. It is by opening up a dialogue between the past and the present that we come to know ourselves better.

In this response to Bell's criticisms I have argued that he has read my text through tinted glasses. This is unavoidable and it is what archaeologists do in interpreting the past. In arguing with him about his review, our different social perceptions of the world are clarified and objectified. Such debate and controversy should be the stuff of archaeological enquiry, since it is through that debate that we come to have a fuller understanding of our and others' viewpoints. And it is through that understanding, as long as it is critically developed, that we can play a fuller part in society.

I do not want to argue that my interpretation of 'my own' book is right and that Bell is wrong. The book is divorced from me. Its meaning does not depend on the author but on the reading of it that is given. I do not wish for any authority in relation to the text. To control its meaning would be to control readings of it. That is not my concern. But neither am I slipping back into subjectivity and relativism. To read the book is to give an objective reality to one's thoughts, perceptions and assumptions. It is only through that objectivity that our subjectivities can be argued, fought over or transformed.

References

Binford, L.R. 1972. An archaeological perspective. Seminar Press, New York.

Hodder, I. 1984. Archaeology in 1984. Antiquity 58, 25-32.