Chapter Fifteen: A visit to Down House: some interpretive comments on evolutionary archaeology

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Until the last few years, interpretive and Darwinian, selectionist, or evolutionary archaeologies have not had a troubled or adversarial relationship; rather, they have had very little relationship at all. Their visions of archaeology appear to be poles apart; the style and tone of the writings of either school are, it would seem at first appearance, like chalk and cheese. If the last twenty years have seen a growing diversity and fragmentation of archaeological theory, then one artefact of that fragmentation has been a lack of dialogue between different fragments. Scholars engage in 'redlining' of large areas of archaeological theory (Kristiansen 2004). Where the 1980s saw furious arguments at conferences, the first decade of the 21st century is more likely to see polished papers in parallel sessions delivered to the already converted.

Until invited to write this chapter, I had had little contact with the current literature on Darwinian or evolutionary archaeology. Selection of areas of expertise is always necessary, particularly given the necessarily open-ended and interdisciplinary nature of theory ("…to admit the importance of theory is to make an open-ended commitment, to leave yourself in a position where there are always things you don't know", Culler 1997: 16), but the contrast can be drawn with the very rich and productive intellectual space that connects interpretive archaeologies with cultural evolutionary theory, that is, the theoretical tradition stemming from the social thought

of Spencer rather than the biological thinking of Darwin, which characterises and classifies social life in chiefdoms and states. In this latter field, there has been an extensive and often productive dialogue with postprocessual thinking, as seen for example in discussions of power, materiality, heterarchy and related concepts, and which often relates themes such as gender and structuration theory to questions of social process and state formation (cf. various in Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Crumley and Levy 1995; DeMarrais, Gosden and Renfrew 2004; Hegmon 2003; Beck et al. 2007). In a vulgarised conception of theory, traditions of cultural evolution stand in greater proximity to interpretive ideas than does Darwinian evolution. If this edited volume achieves one thing, it may be to show this perceived lack of proximity between Darwinian and interpretive approaches to be at best an oversimplification and at worst misleading.

In this chapter, I want to outline a few elements of the goals and intellectual aims of archaeology as a discipline. My perspective is broadly an interpretive one, though I want to draw out some common elements and themes, and make some critical remarks about interpretive and other approaches along the way. In particular, I want to grapple with archaeology's aspirations. Archaeologists claim to be able to understand and account for the past in an empirically and theoretically rigorous way, to reach out beyond the material traces of the past to past cultural life. While interpretive archaeology has been glossed by many of its detractors as abandoning these claims in the face of a disabling plurality of views of the past, I have never accepted such an analysis. In this paper, I want to re-assert these claims, and more broadly to re-assert the roles and responsibilities of archaeology as a serious social science.

I will develop this position by responding particularly to positions and statements found in Stephen Shennan's book *Genes, Memes and Human History* (Shennan 2002), and to Shennan's paper in this book. Central to the position I want to develop will be a revisiting of the 19th century, both in terms of the intellectual genesis of modern archaeology, and in terms of the social and historical context of the thought of Charles Darwin.

H1 The entangled bank

Shennan throws down a challenge at the end of his book which I would like to take up:

> "On the last page of *On The Origin of Species* Darwin famously asked his reader 'to contemplate an entangled bank, with birds singing in the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us'. It is time for archaeologists to stop being beguiled by the complexities of their own entangled banks and to start producing accounts of human history that make use of the principles Darwin established" (Shennan 2002: 271).

This is a powerful plea with which I have much sympathy. However, the target of Shennan's comment is in my view misplaced. Throwing one's hands up at the complexity of the bank is not a position easily identified with interpretive archaeologies; when interpretive traditions protest against what they see as excessive reductionism, the alternative proposed is never simply to allow oneself to be beguiled by complexity. Rather, being beguiled by complexity is a position of mindless particularism, of the accumulation of data devoid of an explicit theoretical framework.

Such an inductive particularism can only be intellectually credible if allied to the expectation that a future generation will put all the pieces together, or to a naïve empiricism in which no theoretical labour is needed as the data will simply speak for themselves. Such an explicit position ran out of intellectual steam a long time ago, but is still regrettably common in much of traditional archaeology and continues to drive much archaeological enquiry at an implicit and untheorised level (I discuss this continuing empiricism in Johnson 2007 and 2010).

The interpretive response is actually very different. It is (at least for this author) to re-frame the challenge – in this case, to ask questions about Darwin's and Shennan's very powerful image: to engage with the historicity of the entangled bank. I am going to argue in what follows that *a central terrain of engagement between interpretive and Darwinist archaeologies is the 19th century historical context of Darwin's ideas*. When understood in their context, these ideas are actually central to an understanding of their application to archaeology now and in the future, though not necessarily for the reasons Darwinian archaeologists themselves choose to put forward.

The interpretive response starts by decentering the claims to a 'scientific' superiority made by Darwinian archaeologists. Before the 'discovery' of genetics, evolutionary theory had a quite tenuous claim to completeness and rigour. There was a central element to its arguments that remained quite unverifiable – it could not grasp the central question of the source of variation in the natural world. The missing element was genetics. The genetic causes of variation in the natural world were not known to Darwin, and would not be integrated into evolutionary theory until the early 20th century rediscovery of Mendel's work on genetics. It can be argued that his theory was incomplete. The literary and cultural critic Gillian Beer (2000: xviii)

makes the point that 19th century Darwinism was 'poised on the edge of metaphor' because the genetic basis of variation was not known.

Darwin's use of the image of the bank, then, was rhetorical, allusive and literary and must be understood in those terms. Indeed, it is commonplace to assert that Darwin cannot be understood without understanding the literary construction of his books: there is an extensive discussion on the relationship between 19th century evolution and literature (for example Beer 1996a; 1996b; 2000). In possibly his most well-known passage from *The Descent of Man*, Darwin famously uses literary devices, including a portrayal of early humans as devils or imps, to make his point:

> "The various facts … have been given in the previous chapters. The early progenitors of man were no doubt covered with hair, both sexes having beards; their ears were pointed and capable of movement; and their bodies were provided with a tail … our progenitors, no doubt, were arboreal in their habits, frequenting some warm, forest-clad land. The males were provided with great canine teeth, which served them as formidable weapons" (Wilson 2006: 894).

Observation of a central role to rhetoric and allusion in Darwin's work, and of missing elements, does not make it somehow less 'scientific'. After all, the history of science is replete with famous narratives featuring politics, passion, and personal rivalry (the discovery of the structure of DNA; Galileo's decision to write in Italian rather than Latin to appeal to a wider audience; Friedrich Kekulé's 'daydream' in which he 'discovered' the structure of benzene [Wilcox and Greenbaum 1965]). What it does do is to decenter the notion that there is a single way to do science, and that there is a straightforward and fundamental distinction to be made between the methods of Science and those of non-science. After all, Darwinian archaeologists

themselves have debated the notion of Darwinian explanation as metaphor (Bamforth 2002; O'Brien and Leonard 2003; Bamforth 2003). If metaphor is an unacknowledged but nevertheless central element to Darwinian archaeology, then Darwinian archaeology remains a valid project, but it must give up the high ground: Darwinian claims to be producing materially better explanations than their fluffy humanist counterparts must be severely eroded. Such a point is familiar, even uncontroversial in many circles; however, I am going to go on to argue that one of the least attractive aspects of modern Darwinian archaeology is its (rhetorical) assertion of just such a 'scientific' high ground and its (rhetorical) denigration of others as standing outside this ground.

So the way is open to the asking the classic question of the interpretive turn – the question that directs us to the intellectual, cultural and political framing of any given set of ideas – in other words, to context: why did Darwin choose the image of the entangled bank?

Darwin's image is historically particular. You get entangled banks in the temperate surroundings of the English countryside, not, arguably, around the plains, deserts and rain forests of the world. Recent scholarship has emphasised how the material for Darwin's insights came from the local, English landscape just as much as his better known voyage in the *Beagle* (Boulter 2008). There is no obvious physical correlate for his bank, unfortunately (such was the impact of Darwin's image that other writers imagined themselves to be looking at just such a bank in other parts of the country, for example Williams-Freeman's pioneering work on field archaeology in Hampshire: Williams-Freeman 1915: 90). I will take it as one of the banks to be found in the countryside on the borders of Kent and Sussex around Down House, Darwin's home. When one visits Down House, or reads much of the biographical

literature around the Darwin legend, Darwin's walks around this landscape, and in particular his pacing up and down his 'thinking path' at the bottom of the property, are referred to repeatedly in what is a standard trope of the history of science in which the intellectual journey of the lonely genius is told in terms of toil and enlightenment (for example the classic introduction to Darwin: Miller and Van Loon 1982; and the English Heritage guidebook to Down House: Morris et al. 1998).

As such, the entangled bank may well have been a product of enclosure, a banked hedge thrown up in the 18th century. Banks of this kind were part of an historical process of commodification and privatisation of the countryside. In much of England, they represented a sudden break with the rural practices of the past, cutting across previous community-based patterns of farming the land through large open fields and commons within which ordinary people held a cluster of rights and mutual obligations. Hedging and ditching, then, marked and enforced private ownership of the land. For this reason, the creation of the hedges and banks of enclosure was a contemporary topic of engagement with Romantics, Marxists and others (Johnson 2007: 11-14; 1996).

Perhaps, even more suggestively, the entangled bank was one of those which separated Darwin's home from the neighbouring Lubbock family estate. John Lubbock is routinely cited as one of the great 'founding fathers' of prehistoric archaeology; his work brought together an appreciation of time depth and the principles of evolution from Lyell and Darwin with the record of prehistoric stone tools and other implements and their parallels with ethnographic examples. Lubbock's neighbourly relationship to Darwin and the relationship between Darwin's work and Lubbock's seminal *Prehistoric Times* are well known (Trigger 2006: 171-176),

though modern Darwinian archaeologists explicitly disavow Lubbock's governing model of progressive cultural evolution through stages.

What interests me about the neighbouring Lubbock estate is that it is laid out according to the principles of Romanticism. It comprises grassland interspersed with clumps of trees, laid out across the rolling Downland. Such landscapes were artificially laid out, but strove to appear natural. Further, such English landscape gardens were held by the culture of the time to be emblematic of what were held to be distinctively English values of political freedom, the contrast being drawn with French and Italian formality and geometrical pattern, being the product of political tyranny and, of course, what was perceived as the pernicious and foreign influence of Catholicism. For many, under the influence of the 18th century antiquarian Stukeley, such 'natural' landscapes were also a return to the appearance of the prehistoric or (what was held to be) Druidic landscape before the arrival of the Romans (Johnson 1996: 149-151; Williamson 1995).

To understand the bank in the manner of interpretive archaeology, then, is not to throw up one's hands in despair at its complexity and abandon any attempt at explanation, but rather to engage with human history. Attempts by Darwinists to engage with the history of enclosure and of landscape change in the postmedieval period do exist, but have been faltering. There is a useful literature on the formation of the medieval common fields as a response to risk, and conversely on the dissolution of the open fields and their replacement with enclosed fields as being due to the growth of a market economy. The growth of markets, it is suggested, meant that individual farmers could always buy their food in lean years (McCloskey 1979; see also Dahlman 1980, and Winterhalder 1990 for a comparative view). There has also been a suggestion from human behavioural ecologists that the apparently 'natural'

layout of such landscapes, with grassland interspersed with clumps of trees, appeals to the hard-wiring of the human brain, in that it repeats the spatial ordering of the African savannah (Heerwagen and Orians 1993). Neither of these attempts convince fully, particularly in the latter case.

H1 The goals of archaeology: fundamentalism/plurality

Is this exploration of the entangled bank anything more than an intellectual parlour game? I suggest that it is directly pertinent to an exploration of the goal or goals of archaeology. One such goal, possibly the central goal, has to be to account for past human behaviour in a rigorous and scientific manner. Many Darwinist archaeologists make the claim that it is not just another narrative to be placed alongside the plurality of so much of modern archaeology, a plurality which many Darwinist and more broadly processual writers see as potentially disabling in that it opens the door, in their view, to an unbridled relativism. I have argued above that such a claim needs to be decentered. Further, I think that this claim of scientific rigour, and conversely the imputation of a lack of scientific rigour to much of interpretive and indeed culture-historical archaeology, is paradoxical in nature. Scientific rigour is one of the key attractions of much Darwinist thinking and also one of its key weaknesses.

Scientific rigour, or more accurately the perception of science as a single, fundamentally 'correct' way of doing things in which other ways of thinking are possible but cannot be placed within the domain of Science, is loaded ideologically. Dependening on who is speaking, rigour turns into dogmatism; method turns into inflexibility; principle turns into fundamentalism. Your thought is inflexible and dogmatic, whereas mine is rigorous; conversely, your thought is fluffy, whereas mine

is flexible and eclectic. Rigour in itself, then, is not a necessarily or automatically desirable attribute; it is one of a linked set of rhetorical terms of praise or denigration whose worth depends on the observer's viewpoint.

More fundamentally, 'scientific rigour' is a zero-sum game. The more 'rigour' the archaeologist has, the less she or he can be argued to engage eclectically with the varied experience of the world, and the less he or she engages constructively with what archaeologists actually do. The most rigorous Darwinist programmes are those of Robert Dunnell and his students, often writing from North America, who pair a commitment to a Darwinist archaeology with a commitment to Science with a capital S (for example O'Brien 1996; Barton and Clark 1997). In such views, Darwinism becomes a fundamentalist and sectarian programme which, by its own affirmation, fails to engage with the discipline as a whole (for example in its rejection of traditional culture-historical concepts such as culture, phase and type, concepts which for better or worse continue to structure a large part of traditional field and analytical enquiry; O'Brien and Lyman 2002 discuss this issue). Shennan's *Genes, Memes and Human History* is in implicit agreement with much of my assessment of the Dunnell school, since there is no reference to Dunnell's writings in his book (apart from a single 1979 article; see Preucel 1999 for an effective critique of selectionist archaeology).

The alternative, which Shennan follows and which is more characteristic of British writing on evolutionary archaeology, is to pursue a much looser and more eclectic mix of Darwinist ideas, seen also for example in the varied work of Stephen Mithen (2005), Clive Gamble (2007), and indeed a great many of the 'evolutionary' contributors to this volume. As a result, Shennan's suggestions and arguments are more engaged and more convincing, more productive of dialogue.

I fear, however, that Shennan, like all archaeologists including myself trying to work in the difficult space between scientific fundamentalism and a disabling plurality, is trying to have his cake and eat it too. Shennan holds on to a commitment to science, most explicitly in his rejection of empathy, prehistoric ethnography, and (it is implied) agency theory in the first few polemical paragraphs of his Introduction (2004: 9-10) and in the opening part of his paper in this volume. Shennan also asserts that we should play to archaeologists' strengths – that the archaeological record is best suited to explorations of long-term stability and change, and conversely, unsuited to what he sees as 'prehistoric ethnography'. As a scientist, my response is that I have no *a priori* expectations of what I will find in the archaeological record. We might indeed find patterns which suggest very long-term stability or trajectories of change, for example as Shennan has convincingly explored for the Palaeolithic (Shennan 2001), or we might find evidence of sudden, qualitative transformation – as any appreciation of the Darwinist concept of punctuated equilibrium would affirm. It is difficult to stand in the middle of the ruins of the Forum in Rome, or in front of the north façade of Bodiam Castle, and assert on an *a priori* basis that an exploration of the values, meanings and lived experience of such monuments, and an understanding of agency, is somehow a less valid – or a less intellectually rigorous – requirement than what are often rather tortured attempts to fit such phenomena into a framework derived from Darwinian evolution. Whatever Shennan's rhetoric in the first and last few pages of the book, the mix of ideas presented in *Genes, Memes and Human History* comes very close to abandoning any claim to scientific fundamentalism: it comes closer, then, to being just another narrative. Kristian Kristiansen says something similar when he attempts to locate both Darwinist ideas on the one hand and agency theory on the other not as all-encompassing explanations but rather as

suited to particular phases or elements of the archaeological record (Kristiansen 2004).

More fundamentally, what can be called 'the eclectic turn' opens Darwinist archaeology up to the same issue that confronted Darwin and his followers in the period before the discovery of genetics. Shennan discusses the issue that there is no obvious or reliable counterpart in human culture to the idea of the gene. He explicitly proposes the idea of the 'meme' as its counterpart (2004: 7-8 and succeeding pages). This idea is attractive, but it is unclear how it can attain more than the status of an extended metaphor, however fertile or persuasive such a metaphor might be. Indeed, Shennan gets tired of the metaphor very quickly; it makes no appearance after page 64 of his book.

Such lines of argument are not ones that many interpretive archaeologists will have an *a priori* or base-line objection to: it leads archaeologists to some interesting explanations of particular episodes or phases of the prehistoric past. But insofar as they rest at their core on a metaphorical conception of reproduction through memes rather than genes, models of this kind implicitly retreat from any attempt or pretension to a single method or scientific 'high ground'. An archaeological audience, then, is quite entitled to be sceptical when Darwinist arguments become excessively complex or counter-intuitive. Not only do such arguments abandon the scientific high ground, they appear to move away from the economy and simplicity which is such a hallmark of the best of Darwinist thought (see Layton, this volume for a similar argument). For example: are Bronze Age leg-chains about women's choice in reproductive success (Shennan 2004: 204)? No they're not, they're about male domination. Is handaxe symmetry about male competition and display (Shennan 2004: 197-8)? No, it is about a recursive relationship between agency and artefact. Both these Darwinist arguments

push the evidence to an interpretive distance, and propose a complexity of archaeological explanation, that would make the most ardent postprocessualist blush (see also the very complex language and equations to be found in Bentley and Shennan 2003, which equals the difficulty of the most 'obscurantist' postprocessual writing; or the interpretive gaps found in Kohn and Mithen 1999, where the argument rests on a set of interesting but unproven assertions about what early hominid behaviour might have been). They remind us of a much older theoretical decline and fall, that of Marxism, from the beauty, economy and structure of the classical Marxist theory of history, fashioned again in the later 19th century, to the more complex and obscure later western Marxist traditions.

A metaphorical conception of Darwinist explanation means, then, that there is no fundamental, base-line distinction to be made between the core nature of Darwinist arguments and those of interpretive archaeologies. A good example in this regard is Fraser Neiman's account of 'the lost world of Monticello' (Neiman 2008). Shennan is correct to single this article out for praise as an important and compelling argument (Shennan, this volume). Neiman's discussion of the economic and social strategies of free and enslaved peoples in the 17th and 18th century Chesapeake and the way these strategies are manifested in the archaeological record is intelligent, insightful, and reflects a deep understanding that comes from a lifetime working with the material. The trouble is, it's not particularly Darwinist. A rigorous and even brutal editor could strip out from the paper elements of jargon, references to evolutionary game theory, rephrase 'fitness interests' as simply 'interests' and 'demic spread' as simply 'spread', and insist that 'emphasising the causal connection between artifacts and their meaning' (Neiman 2008: 164) does not necessarily equate to an evolutionary approach, any more or less than it equates to, say, a Marxist approach. Though it does

not reference it, Neiman's detailed and perceptive discussion of Monticello shares much in common with Upton's discussion of different axes of status in Monticello I and II, and the derivation of these axes from local and vernacular traditions, with an emphasis on symbolic and cultural divisions (Upton 1998: 20-38). Upton's account is also centred on the tensions between master and enslaved servants, and comes from an intellectual position within architectural, folklife and historical studies very similar to that of interpretive archaeology.

The point here is not that Neiman is incorrect or somehow insincere in his claim to be inspired by Darwinist thinking in his interpretations. It is, rather, that there is no *necessary* contradiction between a more eclectic approach to Darwinian arguments and elements of interpretive archaeology. Neiman, like Shennan, makes strong rhetorical claims about the insufficiency of interpretive approaches to historical archaeology, but his objections seem to be centred on what he sees as an undue fragmentation of different interpretive theories and a lack of engagement with the archaeological record in the work of some scholars. These points are arguable and I have some sympathy with the implicit position taken, but they do not add up to a sustained demonstration of the superiority of a Darwinian historical archaeology.

I am arguing here that we have returned to the entangled bank – that the more eclectic versions of Darwinism actually represent a return to an intellectual space last occupied by late 19th century Darwinism before the development of genetics. Shennan himself comments that the book *Genes, Memes and Human History* "is a very 19th century one in the issues it addresses. If that is so, it is because the 19th century pioneers of anthropology asked most of the right questions" (2002: 262; he very sensibly avoids implying that they found anything like the right answers). For the 19th century, as Shennan implies, the role of anthropology, and implicitly archaeology,

was to be reductionist: that is, to reduce the study of human behaviour to a single evolutionary scheme that could be expressed simply in terms of a few fundamental drivers and variables – the set of processes that produce the entangled bank. I do not mean to be perjorative or dismissive here; 'reductionism' has become, like 'empiricism', 'positivism' or indeed 'relativism', a routine term of abuse that often serves as a poor substitute for the hard work of critique. Any attempt to explain the world involves a degree of reductionism, and conversely any accommodation of 'theory' to 'practice', however defined in the human sciences, involves an amelioration of that reductionism.

In many respects, though not in all, 19th century Darwinism can be represented as a reaction to the concerns of the 18th century Romanticism that produced Lubbock's landscaped park. Romanticism, particularly in its more vulgarised and popular forms, proceeded from assertions about what human beings were, fundamentally, and concerned itself with questions of human essence and Man's relationship to Nature. Discussion of these questions of ontology and essence, of what humans essentially are, their essence and relationship to the world, often bordered and continues to border on the metaphysical. In its vulgar forms, Romanticism habitually spoke about the world in emotive and mystical terms, and in particular about the importance of the individual and of emotional empathy between human beings (Wordsworth's famous maxim was: 'What is a Poet? A Man speaking to other Men'). As such, its project is largely recognisable to a modern archaeological audience, because the concerns of Romanticism are picked up today in interpretive archaeology and in much phenomenological writing. When Shennan condemns recent writing on phenomenology as "attempting to empathise with people's lived experience" (2002: 271), he is implicitly levelling the charge that interpretive archaeology is following a

Romantic agenda (this argument, which I feel has some validity, is developed more fully in Johnson 2006 and 2007).

What I am suggesting here is that much of the gap between interpretive and evolutionary approaches apparent in discussions of the goals of archaeology today stems in part from a replaying of much earlier debates and concerns at the genesis of modern archaeological enquiry in the late 18th and 19th centuries. This is not to imply that archaeological theory is going around in circles or that debate is useless; it implies rather that many of the questions we are concerned with in archaeology remain enduring ones, and these enduring concerns are about the very widest questions of the discipline's role now and in the future. Such an argument shares some intellectual ground with Kristansen 2008, particularly his figure 2.

These questions are enduring because they address the same enduring problems. 19th century archaeology and anthropology sprang from the twin roots of Romanticism and Darwinist science as two opposed but related responses to the world around them. European men and women saw the massive changes and transformations in the world around them, of industrial and agrarian revolution, the development of colonialism and Empire; their intellectual reaction was either to attempt to grasp the authentic roots of a culture and an unmediated Nature they felt was being left behind (the Romantic response), or to order, systematise and legitimate the study of human transformation into an evolutionary system and ladder. I am suggesting that archaeology remains, then, in the grip of these fundamentally opposed but also strongly related questions. However, such an observation raises a further issue: is archaeology fundamentally about the cultural and political concerns of the present or about the past?

H1 The goals of archaeology: past/present

One of the points Shennan makes strongly is that archaeology has lost sight of its role in explaining and accounting for the past, and I think he has a point. For me, the central goal of archaeology is very simple: to find out about the past, through the study of material remains that are here with us, in the present. Further, I am interested in process. I want to know what factors shaped human history. I want to know why human social development took the path that it did.

Such a stance is not one that is common to all strands of interpretive archaeology, however defined. A series of famous statements by Shanks and Tilley veer close to the line that archaeology is about critique in the present rather than the past – though in fairness, they never quite cross this line and elsewhere deny such a dualism should be drawn in any case:

> "6.5 Archaeology is nothing if it is not critique.
>
> 6.5.1 We do not argue for truths about the past but argue through the medium of the past to detach the power of the truth from the present social order" (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 213; see also 1987: 189).

Julian Thomas also shies away from such strong formulations (2000: 6-7), while for the Lampeter Archaeology Group (1997), no-one ever claimed to judge arguments on exclusively political grounds.

There are three points to be made here. First, there is no necessary epistemological conflict between focus on the past or on the present. Lewis Binford (1987) is the first to rightly insist that we do not study the past, we study the present, and the position that the past is constructed by archaeologists independently of the present is held by only a very few hard-liners – again, it is characteristic of a mindless atheoretical particularism rather than by anyone engaged with theoretical debate on

either side. In a sense, the choice to stress one or the other, the past or the present, is a rhetorical one, an act of positioning made by different people and groups for different reasons – which should prompt the observer, just as we have done with Darwin's entangled bank, to ask about the framing of the question, to enquire why this person or group chooses to position themselves in such a way. Contrast these two positions and ask why the speakers choose to foreground certain concerns:

> "… our core strengths… are our diversity and international representativeness… our dedication to redressing inequality and our commitment to innovation, critique, experiment, and excellence. An appreciation of the richness obtainable from global diversity and a willingness to face the challenges of engaging in social justice issues are integral to WAC" (Smith n.d.)
>
> "…the main aim of archaeology is to obtain valid knowledge about the past…. the growth of 'cultural heritage' studies, important though they are, should [not] be allowed to displace an archaeology concerned with finding out about the past." (Shennan 2002, 9).

Second, there is an issue of plurality, or to put it another way, a hierarchy of knowledge. Whatever my view, or Shennan's view, there remain other positions, and there remain different views on the extent to which archaeologists could or should attempt to marginalise, 'redline' or shut these other positions down. This concern is seen most explicitly with issues relating to indigenous archaeology or with theoretical voices outside the English-speaking world. The pretty routine position taken by interpretive archaeology is to endorse plurality, but I do want to raise a concern with this: an unthinking plurality or 'tolerance' can lead, in practice, to a refusal to take other positions seriously and a slide into an archaeology which refuses to challenge or

critique. This point was made by Shanks and Tilley in critique of Hodder back in the 1980s and surfaces indirectly in Marxist attacks on postmodernism's endorsement of plurality; it is a position hinted at by Maria Berglund (2004).

The limits to plurality can be seen in the 'debate' over intelligent design. Both Darwinists and interpretive theorists have a problem with intelligent design. Steven Jones has famously given up attempting to debate with creationists, a failure he attributed to their intellectual obstinacy, but which to the outside observer suggests that something deeper is going on here. Darwinists have nothing to say to its proponents. 'Postmodern relativism' is often accused of creating an interpretive space within which intelligent design can be given 'equal status' (for example Gross and Levitt 1997). But it is difficult to point to a single postmodernist who explicitly endorses any kind of intellectual credence being given to such arguments. Conversely, however, interpretive responses fail to convince; the criteria by which indigenous groups are encouraged in a plurality of views and yet religious fundamentalists are denied analogous rights remain quite unclear, except on the grounds of judgments made in the political present (see the discussion in Layton 2002). Proponents of intelligent design themselves use a rhetoric that draws from both sides – it is laden with scientific jargon, yet makes powerful appeals to 'teach the debate'; it has been suggested by cultural anthropologists that it is precisely this political flexibility that accounts in part for the greater success of creationism in North America (Coleman and Carlin 2002).

Third, there is an issue of history, or more loosely a consciousness that archaeology is never produced in a cultural or political vacuum. Again, we return to the late 19th century context of Darwinist thought, and its association with racist and other politically repugnant standpoints, for example in the work of Pitt Rivers. Most

would agree that moral condemnation of such forms of politics is no substitute for serious and empirically informed analysis of statements made about the past. Equally, however, most would I think reject the other end of this spectrum, the empiricist fallacy – that is, that accounts of the past can be evaluated in a vacuum, completely independently of present cultural and political conditions.

What this means, I think, in terms of the goals of archaeology, is that the question of whether archaeology is 'fundamentally' about present or past is a philosophical red herring. This does not mean that it is unimportant. The rhetorical strength with which Shennan and others question recent stress on heritage, when compared with the rhetorical strength with which activists in WAC foreground political issues, is telling us something very important about the nature of intellectual life today. I'll return to this point in the Conclusion.

H1 The goals of archaeology: human beings

A second element of the 19th century divergence is in its understanding of human beings. One of the most frequent clichés in archaeology is that its goal is to understand human beings, not artefacts (though it has to be said that such claims invariably come on the last page of books otherwise utterly devoid of human interest or understanding). Arguably, such a goal was central to New Archaeology, most obviously in the citation of Willey and Phillips' dictum that 'archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing', referred to in Binford's classic article *Archaeology as anthropology* (1962: 217; Flannery's selection of the ecosystem behind both the 'Indian' and the artefact gives a rather different emphasis; 1967: 120). It is also found in many versions of interpretive archaeologies, most obviously forms of agency theory; and it is a position I am passionately committed to. However, it is not central

to all forms and one might point to a tension between an agent-centred approach derived from the work of Giddens and the anti-humanism present in strands of Derrida and Foucault's work. (Foucault was not in my view an unqualified anti-humanist; he traced the different ways the human subject was constituted within different discursive formations, but never denied the existence of a human subject). A common tactic is to deny the human/object dualism by asserting, in different ways, that objects have agency, a position that usually traces its intellectual ancestry back to the work of Alfred Gell (for example, Sillar 2004) and/or actor network theory (Latour 2005; see also Gardner, this volume).

I think that there is a potential convergence here between certain forms of postprocessualism and evolutionary archaeology. The decentering of the human subject that is so central to poststructuralist and postmodern thought is most powerfully demonstrated not by Derridean critique, but rather by the concrete history of human evolution. The archaeology of early hominid species carries the powerful message that there is no essential core to being human; it is the emergence and development of a combination of a number of different traits, with a process of Darwinian selection acting partially or totally upon this development (Gamble 2007). And if that process is a partly contingent one , then it could be argued that there is no necessary essence to humanity – a strikingly postmodern and anti-essentialist conclusion that has been reached by a Darwinist argument. I'll return to this question in my Conclusion.

Genes, Memes and Human History approaches the question of human beings in a more direct way: in parts, it advocates a return to culture history and artefact typology, most obviously in its visual language. Several diagrams show development and evolution of artefacts almost as if the pots have developed little legs and are

running around (as well as little genitalia and are reproducing genetically/memetically modified versions of themselves). His intellectual project, then, ends up being profoundly opposed to early New Archaeology in this sense, whereas interpretive archaeologies are the direct descendant of New Archaeology (also in early New Archaeology's confidence to say things about past lifeworlds, which Shennan rejects as an attempt to do prehistoric ethnographies).

Now of course, culture history always paid lip-service to human beings: 'the Indian behind the artifact'. But in practice, it tends not to do so. For Mortimer Wheeler, ex-director of the Institute of Archaeology: "dead archaeology is the driest dust that blows" (1954: 13). But Wheeler's work avoided dead archaeology not by reformulating culture history, but I would argue because his genius transcended the theoretical limitations of the intellectual framework.

H1 Conclusion: the discipline's role in the present and in the future

Surely, if the discipline has any role now and in the future, it is to engage with concrete issues at points where different dualities meet: present and past; culture/politics and scientific knowledge; human culture and natural environment.

Whatever one's theoretical views, archaeology holds a very privileged position in the humanities and sciences. It enjoys an intellectual and cultural space where instead of asserting *a priori* notions about what makes us human, they can be subjected to empirical investigation. What is interesting in this context is the rather hoary old point that archaeological theory of whatever stripe has relatively little impact on practice, and more broadly, little impact on the public perception and role of archaeology in contemporary debates. This view is debateable, but insofar as it holds any validity we can point towards a striking common ground between

interpretive and Darwinist approaches. Both make extremely strong claims for their intellectual importance, yet neither have had the wider impact that such claims, if true, might warrant.

Clifford Geertz wrote many years ago that the debate over relativism in anthropology was an exchange of worries rather than a meaningful engagement of views (Geertz 1984). What I have tried to show in this paper is that the debate over Darwinist and interpretive ideas has very deep roots of at least a century and a half. What I am proposing for the future, then, is that it is surely an overdue time to move away from an exchange of worries to a substantive exploration of past humanity. Perhaps, beneath the discursive consciousness of the archaeological community, this is already happening; perhaps this is why, since the postprocessual polemics of the 1980s, there has been no further (claimed) revolutionary change in archaeological thought. If so, what we have seen is not intellectual stagnation, but the developing maturity of the discipline.

H1 Acknowledgements

I thank Andrew Gardner and Ethan Cochrane for asking me to give this paper, and for extensive comments that helped me sharpen and extend its arguments; also Rebecca Johnson and Fraser Sturt for comments that informed its content.

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