Archaeology Without Gravity: Postmodernism and the Past

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Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the past and the present have become commonplace: anthropologists now situate cultures in their historical contexts, while historians pursue particularistic ends within politicoeconomic or ideational structures. Archaeologists have cast their nets even more widely, not only toward anthropology and history, but to fields ranging from molecular biology to hermeneutics. Postmodernist approaches maintain that archaeologists should be looking at the past from multiple perspectives and listening to its multivocality. Archaeologists, in fact, not only develop different ways of understanding the past, but actually develop alternative pasts. This paper argues that multiple paths to alternative pasts enhance archaeological understanding and, at the same time, stimulate the development of archaeological theory.

KEY WORDS: postmodernism; modernism; postprocessualism; social/interpretive archaeology.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent essay on the “Crisis in Hunter-Gatherer Studies,” Richard Lee (1992, p. 36) lashes out at the poststructuralist critique in anthropology. To exemplify the position of cool detachment and distancing considered to be the hallmark of the postmodern “condition” (Jameson, 1984; Harvey, 1990), Lee targets the advertising media and suggests that the consumers of the world today may be excused for donning a shell of cynicism to ward off such postmodern assaults. Lamberg-Karlovsky (1989, p. 13), referring to postmodern anthropology, is even less charitable:

The proliferation of such twaddle is perhaps only comprehensible in the narcissistic appreciation of self—a strong component of all that passes for “post-modern.” One

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can only hope that such inane, post-modernist, reflexive, critical, post-structuralist abscesses do not affect archaeology.

Turning to archaeology, Bintliff (1993, p.92) finds little to “salvage from the wreck of Post-modern archaeology.” Peebles (1993, pp. 251, 253), in turn, delivers a scathing critique of certain tenets of postmodernism within archaeology:

The excess of reason came to archaeology in the form of logical empiricism; its opposite, the deficiency of reason, came most recently with the tenets of post-modernism. . . . [This is] a world of sham and illusion, and this world is being imported to archaeology, under the banner of a cognitive archaeology, sometimes as a post-structuralist archaeology, and sometimes as a post-processual archaeology.

Thomas and Tilley (1992, p. 106) maintain that postmodernism is the “most nebulous of terms” which refers to a “loss of faith in progress and western rationality, a loss of confidence in the fixity of meaning . . ., [and] a reduction of identities to the status of alternative commodities.” Postmodernism, then, is not an intellectual movement as much as “a set of actually existing circumstances” (Thomas and Tilley, 1992, p. 106). Another archaeological impression holds that postmodernism has consecrated rapid change and instability in our material conditions: changing forms of production and attitudes to consumption now provide us with new goods to meet needs we never knew we had (Gosden 1994, p.60).

Given these essentially caustic opinions, it might be concluded that most anthropologists and archaeologists today are highly skeptical of poststructuralism and postmodernism. A broad survey of the current archaeological and anthropological literature demonstrates otherwise, although one must wonder how many fieldworkers actually practice postmodern anthropology or archaeology. Whereas consideration of anthropological and sociological perspectives is never far distant in this study, the main concern is with archaeology. How has postmodernism, or the plurality of other “isms” that characterize social theory today, affected the field of archaeology? Is the past “real”? How, and to what extent, is postmodernism related to postprocessualism? And how has the latter impacted upon an archaeological view of the past?

Of course, it is not only archaeology, anthropology, or history that has been affected by the spread of postmodernism: other fields include architecture (where it all started), literary criticism, English, psychology, feminist and masculinist studies, and “science.” One can comprehend easily some postmodern trends or debates in architecture, the visual arts, and literature (e.g., Fokkema and Bertens, 1986; Burgin, 1986; Soja, 1989). But when one turns to mainstream social theory (e.g., Nicholson, 1990; Rosenau, 1992; Seidman and Wagner, 1992; Seidman, 1994), postmodernism is regarded more as a threat to the integrity of the field, at the