

On (very) new and (extremely) critical archaeologies, or, why one may remain forever eighteen years behind the truly new

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Abstract

Contemporary archaeologies are complex and diverse. It is easier to find things that differentiate prehistoric archaeology, for example, (e.g. Childe 1929) from the archaeology of the contemporary past (Buchli and Lucas 2001) than to identify what both share. The same claim applies to a history of archaeology as such. To simplify, to indicate the differences between culture-historical archaeology, processual archaeology and post-processual archaeologies does not cause many problems (Trigger 2006). However, in this article I claim that these archaeologies use in a very same way the ideas of what ‘new’ and ‘critique’ in archaeology are about. The thesis of this text is: there is usually not so much truly new in the ideas that are described as new and innovative (Žižek 2008).

Keywords new archaeologies, critique, repetition

Zusammenfassung

Heutige Archäologien sind komplex und vielfältig. Es ist z.B. einfacher, die Unterschiede zwischen prähistorischer Archäologie (z.B. Childe 1929) und der Archäologie der nahen Vergangenheit (Buchli und Lucas 2001) zu bestimmen, als ihre Gemeinsamkeiten zu finden. Das Gleiche gilt für die Geschichte der Archäologie als solche. Vereinfacht ausgedrückt, bereitet es keinerlei Schwierigkeiten, die Unterschiede zwischen kulturhistorischer Archäologie, prozessualer und postprozessualer Archäologie aufzuzeigen (Trigger 2006). In diesem Artikel behaupte ich jedoch, dass jede der genannten Archäologien dieselben Ideen darüber beinhaltet, was „neu“ ist, bzw. was „Kritik“ bedeutet. Die These des vorliegenden Textes ist, dass sich für gewöhnlich nicht viel Neues hinter den Ideen verbirgt, die sich als neu und innovativ ausgeben (Žižek 2008).

Schlüsselwörter neue Archäologien, Kritik, Wiederholung

On (very) new and (extremely) critical archaeologies, or, why one may remain forever eighteen years behind the truly new

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Introduction

How does a new method or theory emerge in science? To put it in somewhat simplified terms, new sets of methods and theories seem to appear when existing questions and scientific problems cannot be solved by a previous way of thinking (Kuhn 1962). A history of archaeology can be read along these lines. ‘New Archaeology,’ later identified with processual archaeology, was born as a critique of culture-historical archaeology (Binford 1962). A few decades later the same processual archaeology was the object of critique by Ian Hodder (1985) and post-processual archaeologies (Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b). The story goes on: today’s post-processual archaeologies are also criticized precisely because they are not able to give proper answers to burning new problems (Olsen 2003). However, as much perspicuous research indicates, nowadays “paradigms” often supplement each other rather than substituting for the old ones (e.g. Hodder 2012).

It can be said that the history of archaeology has been focused on two words, ‘new’ and ‘critique’, which have been deeply interconnected. Every new way of doing archaeology was the result of a critique, that is to say, indications of errors, misunderstandings, limitations of previous archaeologies, and, as a consequence poses its own new problems. And this very simple observation should give us pause for thought. What does it really mean to do new things? What is a prerequisite of such reasoning?

Posing a non-problem

There is a well-known saying according to which “everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler”. The words are usually misattributed to Albert Einstein, but they nonetheless sound very Einsteinian. In accordance with this statement, science is about simplifications. I will risk making one in the following à propos of different new approaches in archaeology.

It was an easy task for Binford to criticize culture-historical archaeology when one describes one’s own approach as ‘New Archaeology’. What such a designation implies is that the previous, culture-historical archaeology, is ‘old’ and out of date. The American archaeologist went so far as to claim, without any hesitation: “The lack of theoretical concern and rather naïve attempts at explanation which archaeologists currently advance must be modified” (Binford 1962: 224).

Of course, the conviction that one’s research is ‘new’ has not only been presupposed by Binford. The belief that previous research is out of date or – as it was stated by Binford – “naïve” is at the heart of archaeologists’ reasoning. Even among theoreticians such as Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, understanding what is ‘new’ also converges with Binford’s and culture-historical archaeologists’ understanding in general. For example, Hodder describes in the following words the advance of interpretive archaeology:

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An interpretive postprocessual archaeology needs to incorporate three components: a guarded objectivity of the data, hermeneutic procedures for inferring internal meanings, and reflexivity. The call for an interpretive position is related closely to new, more active roles that the archaeological past is filling in a multicultural world (Hodder 1991: 7).

One of the milestones of archaeology in terms of where it is today was Shanks and Tilley's *Re-Constructing Archaeology*. The book is deeply theoretical and touches upon many different aspects of doing archaeology at the end of the 20th century. The British archaeologists are ready to think critically about almost every aspect of archaeology. However, the prerequisite of the book is very similar to what I have just indicated in the case of Binford and Hodder. There is a lack of theoretical reflection about the idea of what it really means to do new things. In other words, it appears that – to put it tautologically – new is simply new, and because of that, it is needed:

The main problem is one of trying to deconstruct our textual representations of the past. This book [Re-Constructing Archaeology – D.K.] is, in a sense, a protest against the mythology of a fixed and unchanging past. The archaeologist may textually cement one piece of the past together but almost before the cement has dried it begins to crack and rot. We suggest that archaeology should be conceived as the process of the production of a textual heterogeneity which denies finality and closure; it is a suggestion that archaeologists live a new discursive and practical relation with the past (Shanks and Tilley 1987a: 20).

The story goes on, the same is done today as well. It is not so difficult to critique post-processual archaeologies because of their loss of the 'hard kernel of materiality':

It is interesting, and probably rather revealing, too, that the discipline known as the discipline of things, even as the 'discipline of spade', devotes so little time, so little place, to its own instruments, equipments and dirty practices, when recollecting its own past. This mundane trivia of the practical world, this repugnant

kitchen of dirt and soil, becomes a source of embarrassment for a discipline aspiring to the ranks of the social sciences. Instead, attention turns to thought, meta-theories, politics and society, in short, to the 'noise of discourse'. Thus, the need for a new regime, 'a democracy extended to things' (Latour 1993: 12), becomes ever more evident (Olsen 2003: 100).

Although the above quotes do not pretend to be an exhaustive overview, I hope that they show at least one thing. Many different archaeologists, and as a consequence archaeologies, use a presupposition of the need for new archaeologies in a very similar way. This presupposition should, however, be called into question. When different and often opposing archaeologies use a particular idea in a very similar way, it does not mean that a consensus, middle way, or a proper perspective of doing archaeology has finally been found. Rather, it means that one has not posed the proper question.

When all follow the same approach, it usually means, to put it simply, that we are all in trouble. This is also a crucial lesson to be learned from Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud, a point I come back to below.

Posing a problematic non-problem

It was David Clarke (1973) who pointed out that archaeology in the 1960s finally lost its innocence. It is worth adding that the British archaeologist had in mind specifically the theoretical ignorance of archaeology. It was no longer possible to do archaeology without theoretical reflection.

Many interesting theoretical remarks were made by New or processual archaeology (Binford 1978). However, it seems that milestones in the field of theoretical archaeology have been achieved by post-processual archaeologies (Hodder 1985; Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b; Shanks, Pearson 2001). This is one among a variety of reasons why contemporary archaeologies are so diverse, interesting, and often theoretically mature. This is also why we nowadays have such archaeologies as the archaeology of the

contemporary past (Buchli and Lucas 2001), postcolonial (Lydon and Rizvi 2010), queer (Dowson 2000), or symmetrical archaeology (Olsen et al. 2012), to mention only a few. All of them appear to be critical about previous research as well as offering new and worthwhile theoretical paths. I am completely in favor of such archaeologies, which broaden and open alternative fields of archaeological approaches.

Nonetheless, this very spontaneous assumption of the need for new archaeologies should be called into question. There is nothing obvious in a belief that science in general is about critical approaches and new theories. In other words, problems lie not only in these ideas and theories with which one does not agree; even more problematic are the ideas and theories with which one *does* agree. Non-problems are very problematic. This is a fundamental lesson to be drawn from both Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud.

According to popular clichés Sherlock Holmesian investigations rely on careful gathering of clues, which then help to find the truth in the end (e.g., who was a murderer). It is how the public thinks of Sherlock Holmes and of archaeology (e.g., Holtorf 2007), and surprisingly, archaeologists do so, too (e.g. Shanks 1996: 5). I claim that Sherlock Holmes can be seen through a different lens, too. It can be said that his way of thinking is not so much based on gathering clues that are unseen by Dr. Watson and the police. The ‘zero level’ of Holmesian logic relies rather on the assumption according to which non-problems are very problematic. It is not that Sherlock Holmes gathers clues to let them speak for themselves, and then all of a sudden the truth appears. On the contrary, when everything is clear and obvious, when facts speak for themselves, it means one thing for Holmes: that one has not posed the correct question and the investigation must begin. When the police and Dr. Watson are convinced that a murderer has been found, then Sherlock Holmes actually starts his critical analysis. Non-problems (for the police and Dr. Watson) are problems *par excellence* (for Sherlock Holmes).

Freud says the very same thing. There is a well-known story in which Freud was once visited by a certain man as a part of his therapy (see, e.g., Žižek 2012: 775). The man described a dream in which an unknown woman appears. The man was convinced that whoever she may have been, she was not his mother. How did Freud interpret the case? His answer was more or less that it was precisely his mother of whom he was dreaming. What was obvious for the patient was at the same time the problem *par excellence* for Freud.

Is this not precisely a matrix through which one can interpret the previous quotes of Binford, Hodder, Olsen and Shanks and Tilley? When almost every archaeologist is convinced that his or her research is very critical, new and ground-breaking, maybe there is nothing critical and new about them? Or, as Sigmund Freud would have advised, you say that your studies are new and innovative; hmm... actually the opposite is true, and (maybe) there is nothing new in them.

So, how may one then think differently of the new in archaeology?

Back to the Future, or in praise of repetition

Back to the Future (1985) is an American blockbuster directed by Robert Zemeckis. The film indicates one issue worth analyzing. On a first approach, one can go back to the things from the past. Following this reasoning, one can go back to a family house or one’s own childhood through recollections. However, what the film presupposes is the fact that paradoxically one can go “back to the future” as well: there might be things which still await a closer consideration that could belong to the future, in our context, of archaeological discourse. What this entails is that there are situations in which doing new things, going to the future, demands first of all returning to the past, repeating it. This is the reason why Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox), the main hero of the film, goes “back to the future.”

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2008) elaborates in *In Defense of Lost Causes* an interesting reasoning about repetition. The starting point is Kierkegaardian repetition as “invented memory”. According to Kierkegaard, repetition has nothing to do with a naive going back to the past to make the same mistakes as those before us. Repetition is, in a way, a step forward; it is a production of something new on the basis of the past. Žižek (2008: 140) claims that the cliché according to which there is nothing new under the sun “is the strongest contrast to the movement of repetition”. The point is that the new can appear only through the movement of repetition.

Žižek uses Immanuel Kant as an example. How can one repeat Kant? There are at least two ways. One can follow his philosophy by elaborating in detail his output similar to today’s neo-Kantianism. There is also a second way: one can try to “regain the creative impulse that Kant himself betrayed in the actualization of his system (that is, to connect to what was already “in Kant more than Kant himself,” more than his explicit system, its excessive core)” (Žižek 2008: 140).

By the same token, there are two ways of betraying the past. First, one betrays an author by remaining faithful to his or her work. Second, paradoxically, one betrays the past through elaboration, critiquing previous scholars and offering a new way of thinking (a new way of doing archaeology):

If one does not repeat an author (in the authentic Kierkegaardian sense of the term), but merely “criticizes” him, moves elsewhere, turns him around, and so forth, this effectively means that one unknowingly remains within his horizon, his conceptual field (Žižek 2008: 140).

Such understanding of repetition can be seen as a crucial for the entire history of archaeology. It is rather an easy task to critique previous ways of thinking and propose a new agenda for doing archaeology. A much more difficult thing is to remain faithful to the core of previous archaeologies, of their creative impulse; in other words, to take seriously what – to use Žižek’s metaphor – is “in Kant

more than Kant himself”; e.g., what is in Childe more than Childe himself.

A thinker who shows most clearly the paradox of repeating the past, as well as of the ‘new’ is Jorge Luis Borges (2000). *Two Books* is a short essay where Borges ponders some aspects of Herbert George Wells’ and Bernard Russell’s work. Borges refers to Wells’ observation about how the people who criticized German Nationalism perpetuated exactly the same thing, but from the position of a British belief in their own inner greatness. The Argentinean writer points out in this way how things that appear at first to be on opposing sides are usually two faces of the same problem. He concludes, “that is why the true intellectual eschews contemporary debates; reality is always anachronous” (Borges 2000: 132).

The paradox described by Borges relies on the fact that reality does not abound in new provocative ideas. On the contrary, reality is usually, so to speak, burdened by the critical shadow of the past. In accordance with it, touching what at first glance appears as a new burning question ends up in reawaking shadows of the past. So, why does Borges recommend “eschewing contemporary debate”? The answer is quite clear: because the past itself hides unrealized, betrayed by the next generations’ potential to truly change reality.

Accordingly, is there a more critical thought than one that suggests that the problem with today’s debates about new archaeologies, new theories, new perspectives, etc. is not how new they are, but rather how old? Reality, Borges said, regarding contemporary things, is anachronous. To put it more poetically than Borges did: everything new is old and only through the repetition of itself can something old be truly new. I believe this to be the key to understanding one of the most influential and innovative essays of the 20th century, Borges’ (1962) *Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote*. The essay was so new and opened truly new perspectives because, to put it simply, crucial fragments of the text are literal quotes from *Don Quixote*: translation is a creative practice; doing new things means to repeat the past.

Instead of a conclusion

There is always something to learn from popular culture. One of the most useful ideas à propos of archaeology is to be found in Peter Jackson's film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). At the moment when Frodo and his friends have to withdraw from the plan to pass the mountains of Caradhras, they decide to go through the mines of Moria. There is a scene when the fellowship stands in front of the wall to the mines and tries to open the magic doors:

Gimli: The walls... of Moria. Dwarf doors are invisible when closed.

Gandalf: Yes, Gimli, their own masters cannot find them if their secrets are forgotten.

Legolas: Why doesn't that surprise me?

Gandalf: Well, let's see. Ithildin. It mirrors only starlight and moonlight. It reads, "The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. - Speak, friend, and enter."

Merry: What do you suppose that means?

Gandalf: It's simple. If you are a friend, you speak the password and the doors will open.

Then Gandalf tries for a while to open the doors, but without success. He even desperately complains about the inefficiency of his long studies of the ancient scrolls: "I once knew every spell in all the tongues of Elves... Men and Orcs". The last fragment of the scene is especially important and thought-provoking:

Gandalf: Oh, it's useless.

Frodo: It's a riddle. "Speak 'friend' and enter."

What's the Elvish word for 'friend'?

Gandalf: Mellon.

And the doors open themselves (see Kobiałka 2013 for a more extensive discussion on *The Lord of the Rings*).

Gandalf, who stands for the embodiment of critical thinking that he possessed due to the long years of studies of the ancient secret scrolls, is useless. It can be said that he tried to be too critical. He relied on "deep understanding." It was Frodo who got the

point. It was enough to say the word "friend" in Elvish and the doors would be opened. My point is very banal here: being very critical sometimes means to be superficial in reality².

This is the situation in which I unfortunately found myself during work on a PhD thesis. Like many others I wanted to practice new and critical archaeology. Many PhD students of archaeology in Poland, but probably in many other countries, too, dream about practicing a new and groundbreaking archaeology, of being the next Hodder or Shanks. In my own case, I thought that I possessed critical thinking skills due to the long years of studies of new theoretical *secret scrolls* of the next archaeologies. This is the reason why I saw the history of archaeology as something useless and banal – in short, out of date. This could not be further from the truth.

The paradox of how a desire to be new, critical, 'post-' ends up in being old and outdated was in an ironic way described by Žižek (2008: 140), too:

When G.K. Chesterton describes his conversion to Christianity, he claims that he "tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen years behind it." Does the same not hold even more for those who, today, desperately try to catch up with the New by way of following the latest "post-" fashion, and are thus condemned to remain forever eighteen years behind the truly New?

To summarize, great archaeologists to whom I have referred in this article definitely did many good and 'new' things for archaeology. Nonetheless, these thoughtful and influential theoreticians of archaeology have in their works a very untheoretical, one is tempted to say, even commonsensical comprehension of what 'new' and 'critique' in archaeology are about. In contrast to them and by referring to *Back to the Future*, Žižek and Borges, I wanted to elucidate the idea that there are situations when doing truly

² Of course, this claim causes its own problems. There is no direct way from long studies to practicing critical thinking.

new things means to repeat the past itself. Based on this insight, perhaps the time has come to do fewer new things but instead to pay more attention to the very old ones?

That is also why archaeologists should be especially critical about their own critiques. Those who are (very) new and (extremely) critical might at the same time be those who are (not very much) new and (not very) critical about their own presuppositions.

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