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In Defense of „the New“: a Response to Dawid Kobińska

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On a first reading of Dawid Kobińska's reflections, I found a lot to agree with. A second reading, however, led me to take a rather different perspective on three grounds: (1) his claims to the global reach of theoretical discourse are mistaken; (2) he adroitly but inappropriately mixes different forms of the "new"; and (3) he tends to dismiss the endeavor of critique as wrongheaded.

I.

Kobińska adopts an implicit framework for his argument that amounts to an acceptance of intellectual colonialism, namely, that there is only one theoretical discourse in archaeology and that this discourse is the anglophone one. All of the main figures listed, from Binford to Hodder, Shanks, Tilley, Olsson and Witmore, have written their main works in English. New theories in archaeology are apparently by necessity to be voiced within this linguistically sharply delimited discursive field. The implication is further that anchors of reference are to be found solely in this discourse and not in one that uses Farsi, Spanish or Chinese as its main means of communication. In this connection, it is also interesting to note that the majority of non-archaeological authors quoted by Kobińska wrote or write in languages other than English (Latour, Borges) or come from a non-anglophone background (Žižek).

When one starts with an assumption that all archaeological theory is by definition anglophone and limits oneself accordingly, it is indeed possible to perceive a tendency to „jump on the latest theoretical bandwagon“, an academic practice criticized by Flannery (e.g. 1982) and others long ago. However,

even a small professional field such as archaeology and the theories it employs has become quite diversified in the last 20 years. Archaeological theory is not a postcolonial endeavor produced by the descendants of former anglo colonizers alone. Rather, it is nowadays also located in those very postcolonial settings themselves, from Palestine to Chile, from Ghana to Iran. The forms of theorizing may differ significantly from the Anglo-American world; some may not even be paraded under the banner of "theory". When one takes a position such as Kobińska's, the result is that a lot of these efforts are rendered invisible as *theories*.

At the same time, some archaeological discursive fields in countries where archaeology has a long tradition display an entrenched and highly specific relation of their own to „the New“. For example, some continental European archaeologies, from French- to Spanish- to German-speaking spheres, work on an assumption that the theoretically new is neither particularly desirable nor necessary. Disinterest in theoretical reflections, and particularly innovative ones, is (still?) widespread.

To put this position in a more positive light: the first requirement in such European archaeological circles is to be aware of the fact that „we stand on the shoulders of giants“. Without a firm knowledge of our predecessors' works, we have no moral or other right to come up with our own ideas, since we would run the risk of re-inventing the wheel. One may euphemistically call this aversion to theorizing „intellectual modesty“ or, more critically, a permanent admonition not to break out of a highly conservative academic framework.

Paradoxically, these same continental archaeologies work on an inner assumption of progress, a world history that is driven by technological innovations. The origins and first development of fire, herding, irrigation, of pottery, bronze and iron metallurgy are core issues in archaeological discourses that have little or no regard for conceptual innovations in their own field.

My general point here is that Kobińska's claim of the adulation of „the New” in archaeology cannot be accepted as globally valid. Rather, „the New“ is treated in specific ways in each particular academic subculture, and many archaeological environments would actually do well to adopt a habitus of avid appropriation and serious attempts at integration of new ideas into their own fields.

II.

Kobińska's theses talk about the process of integrating new ideas in two ways that he works into one problematically intertwined argument. He discusses on the one hand a generalized desire for the „New“. In the following, I refer to this element in his argument as „the New” with a capital „N“. On another plane he addresses innovative practices, the small „news“ in a more concrete sense.

Kobińska depicts the advent of new theories as an unending process or chain of „critique of an old theory - elaboration of a new theory - critique the recently elaborated theory - elaboration of an even newer theory“ and so forth. In his eyes, the critiques brought forth since the advent of the „New Archaeology“ in the early 1960s always amount to the wholesale discard of older theories and a build-up of new ones. Kobińska emphasizes that these new theories, as is perhaps understandable for their proponents, are those „with which one *does* agree: non-problems are very problematic“ (emphasis in the original page 17). Through reference to Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud, Kobińska takes issue with the uncritical acceptance of principles that form

unreflected building blocks of (new) archaeological theories.

However, „non-problems“ are an unsatisfying descriptor of this valid point. Theoretical blind spots stem from the „unproblematized and unproblematizable“ sphere that has been treated in elaborate fashion by Habermas (1984) as a fundamental and unavoidable part of our *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) and by Bourdieu (1994) in closely similar ways as the doxic underpinnings of our thinking. We could even say that Kobińska's above-mentioned claim of globality for the drive towards the New (and the new in archaeological theory) is such a „non-problem“ of his own.

The ubiquity of the unproblematizable elements in our lifeworlds makes it imperative that everything new must include the old. In that sense I agree with Kobińska. We will never completely strip off the past of the world we live in. However, just because some parts of a theory are - by necessity - based on an unquestioned acceptance of elements from one's lifeworld does not mean that an entire theoretical edifice with some new building blocks in it is unworthy of further consideration.

The problem of a mix of „the New“ and „new theories“ in Kobińska emerges when he claims that, „When almost every archaeologist is convinced that his or her research is very critical, new and groundbreaking, maybe there is nothing critical and new about them”, and the consequence then seems to be that „everything new is old and only through the repetition of itself can something old be truly new“ (page 18). One important implication seems to follow from these statements: the development of new theories is based on a generalized desire for „the New”. The New is given high value and priority, no matter in what specific guise it appears - or indeed, the specific guise alone is what constitutes new things. This argument rings true, but only if it is placed in proper context. By that I mean the transformations of modern and hypermodern capitalism.

To understand the role of „the New” in our capitalist environment, we have to go back to the 1920s

in the United States, when automobile production led to lower and lower sales because many people already owned cars, due to Fordist standardized fabrication systems with simple and cheap end products. At that point, the invention of new car styles on a frequent, almost yearly basis, combined with continuity in functional parts such as the car motors, became deeply ingrained in the logic of car production and sales (Lamm 1990). It did not take long for other mass-produced items to follow suit. This whole mechanism of production and consumption is so deeply located within the logic of modern capitalism that it may even go unnoticed today. To take an example from the present: smartphones with slightly increased capacities are not sold because of their minimal functional improvements. Rather, advertisement convinces people who are socialized into a context of producing their Selves through consumption that the acquisition of such items will have a positive effect on their own subjectivity. For such mechanisms, we can indeed claim that “everything new is old”. The New in capitalist material production as I defined it above is realized in constant micro-changes, a “new” of design around an old core. Those pseudo-changes go hand-in-hand with the production of obsolescence and truly gigantic mountains of garbage.

Can this scheme be transferred as easily to academic production as Kobińska claims? On a formal level, I would think so. We live in societies that transform themselves rapidly into so-called knowledge societies. To use Virno’s (2004) and Hardt and Negri’s terms (2004), “immaterial production” is nowadays the dominant form of labor, and one of its largest sectors is the production of “knowledge”. As this has become a major capitalist product for sale, knowledge production must be trimmed into manageable entities. University reforms that I am familiar with, in Europe the “Bologna process” and in the U.S. the propagation of curricula that end in a terminal Master’s level after 5 years of study, both show a tendency to produce people with a restricted set of *applicable knowledges*. In addition, “soft skills”, the ability to present oneself and specific bits

of knowledge convincingly to a public, have become a key goal of this process.

Questioning of basic ideas, critical thinking and the time to find one’s own intellectual perspective by reading widely and without a clear goal, are actively discouraged. Capitalist businesses such as McKinsey and Bertelsmann (see Müller-Böling 2000), both of which are main consultants of many university administrators, are behind such radical changes in academia (Hartmann and Geppert 2008: 91-94). The process has clear parallels in 19th century deskilling of labor, so sharply analyzed and radically criticized by Marx (1979 [1867]: 391-530). In the future, immaterial laborers will not and must not have the ability of critical thinking. Rather, they need to have the basic capacity for the production of some knowledge, but especially the skill and “competence” to ready themselves for ever-new packaging modes of their knowledge products (see Gelhard 2012). On the university level, what matters is the willingness to promote institutional corporate identity, “portfolios”, the ability to pick up and employ constantly new versions of Powerpoint, Blackboard and other forms into which knowledge is pressed. Examples for obsolete knowledge products can likely be found on anyone’s computer with files and software no longer functioning, etc. This is the context of “the New” in a professional field that is peopled increasingly by a precariate of knowledge producers, archaeologists included.

But are theoretical innovations part of this process? Are they in their entirety “old wine in new skins”? I see two problems with such an argument. First, Kobińska makes a categorical distinction between “new” and “old”. Apparently, new theories are those that can attach themselves as an adjective to the noun “archaeology”, as in “symmetrical archaeology” or “postcolonial archaeology” (see also Bernbeck and McGuire 2011). But what about other, less declarative ways of pushing new theoretical elements? Is a detailed archaeo-ethnography of subsistence looters not also a theoretical innovation? Is the performance of street theater with archaeological themes just a praxis, or does it have a theoret-

ical side? Distinctions between “new theories” and “other reflections” in archaeology cannot be made as easily as Kobińska would have it. From when on is something a “new theory” rather than an innovative way to interpret past conditions? On what scale of generality of claims can an intellectual product be rated as a theory? In my view, the notion of theory has extremely fuzzy edges and is not a box filled with toy blocks of precisely delimited shapes.

If the combination of an unproblematized and unproblematizable background with a generalized desire for the New renders new theories “old”, this constitutes an analogy with the process of obsolescence in 20th century industrial production. What comes across as theoretically new, the explicit refutation of some older principle and the propagation of new ones, is nothing other than a veneer, a style of argument perhaps. It is like the tip of an iceberg that is remodeled, whereas its main and invisible parts, the unquestioned elements, remain unchanged. The old “New” lurks behind the concrete “new” issues. As said, the basic understandings of our background reality cannot be pulled out into the realm of an explicit discussion: the term “unproblematizable” is to be taken literally as that which remains hidden from the realm of questioning.

Kobińska asks us to believe in this analogy. New is only to repeat the old in new ways. But how should this work? He gives us only a few non-archaeological examples from philosophy and literature. However, since his main point is archaeological theory, let me try to offer an example:

Among the most profound stories humans tell each other are those about the very meaning of being human. And story-telling in science is not just a way of communicating complex ideas but a mode of exploration and a kind of model-making that allows us to create comparative frameworks for evaluating different theories. This is not only a matter of practical training but also of intellectual focus. Archaeologists will need to get better at telling such stories effectively. Sites or objects evoking death, decay and forgetting provoke existential reflections. Even sites that may not be archaeological at all can successfully evoke meta-

stories of archaeology. This is not only a matter of practical training but also of intellectual focus. Archaeologists will need to get better at this. How will their own culture end one day? What will remain of it, both physically and in people's memories?

This text is a repetition, and repetitious in that repetition (for the source of my textual blocks, see Holtorf 2010). I have plagiarized and scavenged one specific paper with the goal of enhancing a neglected aspect of that very text: creative archaeological narratives can lead to theoretical insights. I have changed the text's more general purpose - the importance of addressing a non-archaeological public with stories - through a modified repetition of Holtorf's own narrative (Holtorf 2010). In Kobińska's parlance, I have made this text „more Holtorfian than Holtorf himself“.

But it would be unrealistic to claim that this is the main, if not only way of moving archaeological theory forward. Quite the opposite. Abandoning the old, and pretending to start from a clean slate by taking as a point of departure the critique of a few theoretical or other works is a meaningful way to gain new insights. It is necessary to disregard a lot of what has been written in the past, to free oneself from a crushing mass of accumulated knowledges. Anyone who has been told in good old German fashion to read „everything available“ on a certain topic, and wanders through a library with tens of thousands of books considering what may have been meant by this statement will understand what I mean.

III.

A last point of concern is Kobińska's view of critique. Apart from a highly problematic link between critique and the New, he depicts critical praxis as negative, as leading to wholesale discard of others' intellectual labor, as a kind of arrogant „knowing better“. This sentiment fits all too well into our post-critical age. Latour, in his sharp but unconvincing diatribe against critique (1983: 5-8), is just one, albeit a very powerful voice in that chorus. Another

anti-critical intellectual, openly anti-democratic and ultra-conservative on top of it, is Peter Sloterdijk, who, from his early *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988) onward, has derided critical thinking as overly negative. Interestingly, in one of his latest books, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* (2009), he favors an approach to life that is based on repetition. However, repetition plays a very different role in Sloterdijk's thought than in Kobiałka's: Sloterdijk promotes „exercise“ and monasterial „*exercitium*“ as constant repetition.

How did we arrive at a *Zeitgeist* where “knowing better” has become taboo? One of the main culprits for this situation is Michel Foucault (1997), with his conviction that we should engage in an analysis of discursive fields rather than a critique of ideology. According to Foucault, we can only compare discourses that claim a truth, but should not offer ourselves any truth claim. Insightful and impressive as his work may be, it also has a damaging effect. It never endeavors to evaluate faults and errors that appear in discourses. Foucault's intellectual influence is such that taking a stance in which one claims some knowledge to be superior to other knowledge has become almost anathema.

At the root of this problem is a deep misunderstanding of what “critique” means. Instead of critique as a simple negation, in Kobiałka's terminology a “discard” of others' ideas, the central movement of critical, dialectical thinking is an act of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*). This Hegelian term has three meanings at once. It denotes the act of negating of something, but at the same time its conservation; and finally, it also means to elevate the original thing/term to a new level (Hegel 1970 [1807]: 103).

Most new theories in archaeology fit these three characteristics of *Aufhebung* quite well. While they often - not always - start with a negation of some central notion of an older theory, they also always retain some other elements; that is also why the “new” is partly old, although that does not mean that the “new” cannot be new at the same time. Finally, the internal antagonism (in our case: of old and new) in any such introduced theory is the reason for an

inextricable but productive entanglement of the new with the old, or what one can claim to be a new level of theory.

Theoretical innovations are only in rare instances part of chic, vain and empty pretention. Mostly, they derive from a sincere and deeply contextualized investigation into and unease with principles of explanations and approaches that have existed hitherto. The emergence of new theories needs to be understood within specific historical, conceptual, cultural and linguistic settings, and the limits of their own capacities should of course be tested as well.

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