THE CULTURE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Highway 128 Boonville California

Since I moved to the United States a dozen years ago, I have spent a good deal of time in Northern California in a small back woods town called Boonville in the Anderson Valley on Route 128 as it makes its way to the Mendocino Coast. Always an agricultural community, logging, sheep and fruit trees are giving way to vineyards, the soil and climate especially suited to Pinot Noir, and, for some, there is renewed prosperity. A very strong sense of local identity and awareness of the history of the valley over the last 150 years includes the celebration of the unique local dialect, Bootling. Not really a dialect, this is an argot or secret(ish) language developed back in the late 19th century probably by only a couple of the valley's 700 or so residents. Folklore specialists and local historians got interested in the 1960s and documented its thousand or so unique words and phrases that betray some origins in Gaelic (Scottish and Irish), Spanish, and Pomoan, the language of the local native Americans. I am not sure how many locals now seriously use Boontling, to what extent it has gone the way of so many other features of local and regional heritage worldwide, becoming self-conscious

and nostalgic revival and anachronism. For me, with my archaeological sensibilities, Boontling is certainly an intangible feature of the cultural landscape, alongside the old forest tracks, the odd solitary apple tree, legacy of the fruit industry, barns and run down saw mills, quite a stark contrast to the very smart wine tasting rooms that started appearing only a few years ago. Boontling is heritage; as a trace of the past, fragmentary, in revival or sorts, and somewhat cherished, it has a distinctively archaeological character. [Link]

Old apple boxes under the Standish tasting room, Philo, Anderson Valley

One afternoon this summer of 2012 I was exploring the secondhand bookstore in the middle of town – Laughing Dog Books. There are always a few titles that catch my interest, in contrast to the many and familiar paperback novels. This time it was a fine hardback copy of *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*, by Marvin Harris (Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1968). I had been much influenced by this great intellectual history as an undergraduate at Cambridge in the late 70s, and, while not agreeing with the way Harris contrasted historical and

cultural materialism, there was no doubting the exemplary scholarship of the book, and the importance of grounding our work as anthropologists and archaeologists in a clear awareness of the history of ideas. Quite a contrast with the setting, this bookstore next to the general store in an out-of-the way valley two hours drive north of San Francisco. The words of Marvin Harris, or rather the worn dust jacket, took me back over three decades.

My trip into town was a break from correcting the proofs of the book I've edited with Bill Rathje and Chris Witmore – *Archaeology in the Making*, to appear later in the year [Link] [Link]. This began as a conversation with Bill, when he arrived in the Bay Area, retired early from University of Arizona Tucson. We started talking about our shared interest in modern material culture, what is now called the archaeology of the contemporary past, his invention of garbology, my fascination with what I call the archaeological imagination, ancient civilizations in the old and new worlds, anthropological theory and method – all things archaeological. We went on to share the conversation with friends and colleagues who came to visit Stanford University and our lab *Metamedia* [Link], ran a seminar together centered on these personal discussions about the current state of archaeology, and came to realize that we were gathering a remarkable set of insights into the workings of contemporary archaeology, as seen through this quite unrepresentative, though, we suggest, very interesting sample of archaeologists. The frequent reminiscences took this picture back into the 1960s and the great changes that came with the expansion of anthropological archaeology in the Anglo-American academy. Chris Witmore later joined the ongoing conversation, and, particularly as Bill's health failed, guided the project from a series of occasional get-togethers to publication, and a large one, of some 400 pages.

What did we find? That there is a yawning chasm between the way archaeology is presented in the histories of the discipline, in textbooks, and what archaeologists tell of their experiences.

Intellectual histories like that of Marvin Harris, or Bruce Trigger's *History of Archaeological Thought* (first edition, Cambridge University Press, 1989) select, synthesize and project an analytic architecture through archaeological practices, offering a more or less coherent account of the development of academic archaeological publication, typically in hindsight. It is no surprise that doing archaeology is much messier. Textbooks introductions to the discipline often use

particular projects as examples, but then they are *paradigms* or *models* of practice. The actual experience of doing archaeology is left to popular literature, to TV documentaries, to mostly media clichés, and to anecdotes, stories told to fellow archaeologists.

What is it like to be an archaeologist?

Science Studies, new approaches to understanding the history and practice of science, grew out of similar, let's call them ethnographic, encounters with what goes on in labs and lecture rooms, in fieldwork and in the work of professional associations, in the award and management of research funding. Back in the 1970s anthropologists Steve Woolgar and Bruno Latour went into a neuroendocrinology research laboratory at the Salk Institute and found that what was going on bore little resemblance to what was held to be scientific method (their book was called Laboratory Life). Latour expanded on this in 1987 in his book *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*.

Our conversations with archaeologists reveal the human face of archaeology.

We ranged over careers, projects managed, personal experiences, and, perhaps above all, the rewards of lives spent in pursuit of the archaeological. Transforming the visual properties of a clod of soil into a Munsell color code; sorting through a bag of garbage in Tucson; investigating a warehouse full of illicit antiquities in Geneva; setting out into the ice with a Nunamiut hunting party; lobbying in Washington DC for protective legislation: much mundanity perhaps, but in pursuit of the electro-cultural articulation of the past-in-the-present.

The shape and character of archaeology actually resists our efforts to document and expound. Archaeology goes all over the place. It is incoherent.

Archaeological science is a flawed assemblage of thinking, aspirations, practices, highly personal, constantly confronting institutions and discourses. It is a weakly articulated assemblage because there is no teleology here, no end, no great drama or inexorable journey from less ignorance to more enlightenment, from one paradigm or theory of the past to another, with debates between coherently constituted communities of processualists and Marxists, or fieldworkers and academics, whatever. We found nothing like the accounts of intellectual history in our interviews with some who are held, and appropriately, to be key figures in

archaeology over the last 50 years, and even though they were all very familiar with the terms that are used to describe archaeological method and thinking, and even though everyone *readily used* these terms. Instead, in our conversations, we heard more about the opportunities opened up (and as often closed down) in our labors as archaeologists, the potential to affect the ways that the past appears in the present, as we were led in such wonderful places as spelunking with Patty Jo Watson, among the Inuit with Lew Binford, into housing blocks in ex-Soviet states with Victor Buchli, as we shared with Colin Renfrew the concerns prompted by the contemporary looting of ancient sites, heard Ruth Tringham's memories of setting out on her own archaeological journey in eastern Europe in the 60s, as we faced the challenge of constructing prehistory for a new Europe with Kristian Kristiansen.

The usual accounts of archaeology are too coherent. Over dramatized. They're not wrong; but they are rationalizations, justifications.

We need some new words to describe getting on with what remains of the past.

Isabelle Stengers came up with the notion of 'ecology of practices'. This is a great start. What is ecology about? First, interconnection. More than just describing interconnected practices, an ecology of practices *intervenes*; ecology is about process and transformation.

Ecology comes from the ancient Greek *oikos*, a word that refers to the common household, its management and habitat. Ecology is about interconnection, management, and local adaptation. Renfrew's account to us of his collaboration with geologists researching ancient obsidian sourcing showed the way that practices transform and become something else when they pass into a new milieu, or *ecology*. Obsidian sourcing in archaeology has quite different impact than in geology. An ecology of practices aims to capture, as Stengers puts it, "the construction of new 'practical identities' for practices, that is, new possibilities for them to be present, in other words to connect". So archaeological practices such as excavation and visualization are not copies of practices developed by soil scientists, photographers, architects, nor should they be regarded as derivative. Instead, because they *connect*, they are distinct and different. Ecology is about interconnection and process.

So rather than offer a definition of archaeology, we do better to consider that archaeology is no more or less than what archaeologists do.

What do archaeologists do? They work on what becomes of what was, and they work with old things in order to achieve particular ends. These ends may be accounts through the long-term of the use of wheels, models of the origins of agriculture, the kinetic experiences of holding a pot, or the act of sharing the sensory intimacies of exploring a long-forgotten cave; they may be more tangible ends, such as the construction a museum or a visitor center, the writing of a paper. Archaeologists deliver stories, big and small. Archaeologists generate tacit experiences with the things of the past.

This still all sounds very woolly. Archaeology could be just about anything?

Simply listening and watching archaeologists challenges the way we typically think of archaeology. So we offer three new summary concepts to describe the work of archaeology: *pragmata*, *tekhne*, and *demokratia*. We make no apology for neologism and our use of ancient Greek words (and I am a classics professor, after all!). We argue that new concepts are needed to see freshly into what our conversations are telling us about our discipline, its practices, scope and reach through the heritage industry, to reframe our perspective on the workings of archaeology. Greek terms distance us from conventional common sense understanding of academic disciplines and their contexts.

Pragmata. The objects of (archaeological) interest. Encompassing the richness of the old Greek meaning of the term, *pragmata* are “things,” but also, “deeds,” “acts” (things done), “circumstances” (encounters), “contested matters,” “duties,” or “obligations”. The verb at the root of *pragmata* is *prattein*, to act in the material world, engaged with things, working on things. Making things is *poetics* (the Greek root is *poiein* – to act, do, perform) – the creative component to practice generally. Here we place emphasis upon the care archaeologists take regarding what concerns them, and their larger loyalty to what we can call *ta archaia* – old things. Remnants, vestiges, monuments, artifacts hold memories which archaeologists attentively piece together with, typically, an aspiration to fidelity and authenticity. Of course, *archaia* demand a particular orientation, both practical and imaginative in the quest to reconstruct, repair, respect the remains of the past, in creative use of whatever resources are available – material, social,

cultural, emotional – to enable archaeological purpose. To regard the old things of archaeological interest as *pragmata* reminds us of the primacy of *engaging* with things, that many are drawn to these matters in different ways, in different engagements or encounters, and so may even treat them as different things, because *pragmata* do not stand on their own. Things become what they are through our relationships with them. This involves the work of what we can call the archaeological imagination.

Tekhne refers to the craft of archaeology, the art/science, the know-how, the competencies and agencies in pursuing (archaeological) projects. *Tekhne* denotes adept and skilled making, the means and ends by which something is accomplished. Techniques and skill are not only requisite for delimiting the edge of a wash deposit; they are also critical attributes of negotiating with descendant communities in Oakland, writing a funding application for archaeometry, or teaching prehistory in a classroom. *Tekhne* therefore refers to artifice – following the cut of a ditch, recognizing *terra sigillata*, negotiating review boards, teaching the "Harris Matrix", or writing to funding agencies. *Tekhne* refers to the atmospheres of archaeology, its practical milieu or infrastructures – composed of corridors and offices, classrooms and archives, laboratories and museum storage depots, excavation trenches and survey transects. Institutions have played a crucial role in professional archaeology and heritage management since the mid nineteenth century; their composition, who sits in offices, what books go on the shelves, how can they be made to follow an agenda, are key components of archaeological practice. Beyond institute corridors there are matters of tacit knowledge and skill in archaeological practices and how competent archaeology is perpetuated. Competence is tied up with one's ability to negotiate diverse sets of interest in the world of cultural resource management as well as the academy. And this begins with cultivation of a professional self-image centered upon a commitment to communities and their material pasts.

Demokratia is not democracy, but the agency of the commons, the powers of association, issues of establishing a commons centered upon the past-in-the-present, bridging the past and its representation or mediation, connecting and acknowledging diverse interest. This is the politics of the past, and we might leave it at that, but for that we need to be more nuanced and avoid some of the connotations of "politics". The commons refers to a community and its mode of inhabiting its world of goods, including tangible and intangible heritage.

Ultimately *demokratia* is about the civility of archaeological practice, care and respect for people, sites and things. The term *demos* also includes “district, land, or country,” “the place where people live,” or the “commons or commonalty.” *Demokratia*, for us, forefronts the past as a matter of *res publica*, literally the public goods, republic, a matter of common concern and involvement. (See my comments on res publica in the design process – [Link])

Quite technical, all this.

It needs to be. At stake is memory, the vitality, or not, of pasts-in-the-present. The temporal life of a community. We need insight in order to make appropriate intervention.

What held all the conversations together?

That working on the material past is indeed a vital concern that transcends petty academic squabbling. (Perhaps this is why there was so little discussion of what fills archaeology text books and journal papers?)

Values like authenticity and responsibility to past and present communities.

Care for (old) things.

Old refrigerators, Boontberry Farm, Highway 128