

Archaeology is process

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Assaf Nativ has written an interesting and, I think, important paper. It raises critical issues around the ontological status of 'the archaeological' and indeed about the purpose and aims of archaeology as a discipline. These are clearly topics that require consideration and critical analysis. His arguments are provocative, I believe, in the best sense, in that they will lead us to reflect on some of the basic foundations of what we believe archaeology to be. Such consideration is certainly necessary to disciplinary health. That said, and after some hefty reflection of my own, I have concluded that I disagree with the much of the paper's argument. In the space afforded to me I aim to set out why.

On the nature of the archaeological

Despite distinguishing himself from the broader 'ontological turn' (cf. Harris and Cipolla 2017), it is clear that Nativ is committed to a specific ontological reordering of what we understand by 'the archaeological'. Specifically, he argues, this needs to be understood solely as buried materials (and thus not matter on the surface regardless of its antiquity), and that this should be seen as cultural and not social in any way. Nativ is clearly worried that the move away from the modernist bifurcations such as nature and culture threatens archaeology's disciplinary definition, that it is no longer 'exclusive'. His fear is that in taking a broadly relational approach, whether in the terms of entanglement or new materialism, we risk dissipating archaeology. In contrast he insists we have to 'demonstrate the reality of the archaeological' and only then can 'its relationships with other parts of the world [...] be articulated'. In effect his appeal here is that archaeology needs to have essential, ahistorical and undeniable qualities, which allow its clear definition as a subject. In effect archaeology needs to define its essence. Here there are striking similarities with the work of the philosopher Graham Harman (e.g. 2011), and his Object Orientated Ontology, who argues that we need to

recognise that all objects have a withdrawn essence (which we can never access). For Harman, an object can never be defined by its relations, as the sum total of relations can never exhaust an object's possibilities. Therefore an object always partially withdraws from the world, and this withdrawn essence is what defines it as an object. The similarities with Nativ's concept of the archaeological should be clear here, in that he explicitly wants to define the archaeological as material produced in conjunction with humans (and is therefore cultural) that withdraws from relations (through burial) and is therefore no longer social. As a result of these similarities with Harman's project, his work also bears comparison to the otherwise quite different work of symmetrical archaeologists such as Bjørnar Olsen (e.g. 2012) and Chris Witmore (e.g. 2014). Both approaches seek to move archaeology away from a narrative engagement with the past towards a more specific set of interactions.

Philosophically I come from rather a different school of thought, preferring to emphasise the relational and processual nature of existence (for examples drawing on different versions of this thinking see Crellin 2017; Conneller 2011; Fowler 2013a; Gosden and Malafouris 2015; Harris 2014; Jones 2012). Rather than focussing on the essential qualities of things, these approaches reject the very idea of essence to focus on the way the world emerges from, rather than prefiguring, relations. When it comes to explaining historical continuity and change, such relational explanations have more to offer us, as Chris Fowler and I argue elsewhere (Fowler and Harris 2015). Rather, then, than defining 'the archaeological' as a singular thing with an essence, demarcated entirely in terms of the presence or absence of human beings, I would suggest that we are much better off thinking of archaeology as a process (Fowler 2013a; Gosden and Malafouris 2015). This process takes place through excavation, but also in laboratories, in libraries, in offices, at conferences and in numerous other locales. It involves countless humans and non-humans, and is ongoing. The temporalities of this process are varied, and deny the rather unhelpful distinction between statics and dynamics that Nativ emphasises. Nativ argues that 'ontological' approaches such as new materialism have no room within them for stationary phenomena. I'm not sure I would agree. To take one example, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, a principal source for new materialism, asks us to attend to both 'motion and rest' (Deleuze 1988, 123),

and also to the processes that bring things together, and can bind them into highly formalised strata (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 45). Nativ acknowledges that attempts to fix archaeological phenomena are of course misleading, they are never fixed either in the ground or in the archive, yet nonetheless he maintains that the fixity of the material after excavation is critical. In contrast to this I would argue quite the reverse. Before excavation material is transformed through practices both human and non-human as we alter the drainage patterns in fields that have preserved wood, or as badgers tunnel through barrows, or as pesticides seep into the ground changing soil chemistry. During excavation interpretation of the material is constantly shifting and altering, with differing ideas coming to the fore or departing, and these can be attended to and captured in a variety of ways (Edgeworth 2012; Cobb *et al.* 2012; Yarrow 2003). After excavation, archaeological material is returned to, reanalysed and reworked, allowing new ideas to be mapped and explored, new relations to be created and revealed and new understandings to emerge. The material is altered through conservation and sampling, through handling and wear. Whether it is radical re-dating with Bayesian statistics that transform our understanding of a site (e.g. Bayliss *et al.* 2017) or the closer investigation of a single object (e.g. Fowler 2013b) the beauty of archaeology is that stasis is always temporary, new understandings are always emergent.

Beyond these points, there are also a set of more practical questions I would raise. How, for example, are we to differentiate between the parts of a prehistoric monument that are above ground and those that are below? Are the parts of the trilithons at Stonehenge that lie below the surface archaeological, and those above not? If a Neolithic chambered tomb can be entered (but lies below ground) is this archaeological, or not? I would suspect Nativ would argue that the parts of standing stones that lie above ground are not archaeological because they are social, and the same is true for a chambered tomb. The archaeological, as a condition, thus becomes that with which we cannot interact, because it is buried. Even this definition can be queried though. What happens if I use geophysics to detect an enclosure in a field I might want to excavate? Is that enclosure archaeological? Or does the fact it can take part in social relations (I can show it to funding bodies to persuade them to give me money, or to

students to persuade them to attend my excavation) mean that it no longer meets Nativ's standards? There is no 'concrete boundary' here that I can see. Indeed this reveals one crucial difference between Nativ's argument and that of either Harman or symmetrical archaeologists: Nativ's view is anthropocentric. It is the presence and absence of human beings' awareness that defines what counts as archaeological or not. It is not merely that human beings form one part of a broader set of relationships, or that the archaeological can be defined whether or not humans know about it.

The purpose of archaeology

If we disagree about the nature of the archaeological, I am afraid that I am also somewhat in dispute with Nativ about the purpose of archaeology. Nativ argues explicitly that 'the past, society, human behaviour and cultural evolution do not pertain to the archaeological'. His position, fundamentally, is that these are social concerns, and should be something that historians or anthropologists deal with. Archaeologists' task is to describe the 'the archaeological' and to choose sites that allow us to see how this might manifest differently. There appear to be three reasons that Nativ makes this argument. The first is that he deems this more ontologically accurate, as discussed above. The second is that this would allow archaeology to become more objective and more scientifically rigorous. At its heart, in other words, Nativ suggests that archaeology *cannot* answer the kinds of questions about the past that it has traditionally – whether in culture historical, processual or postprocessual guise – sought to answer. Furthermore, he argues, such a return to scientific 'objectivity' and a turn away from the deconstruction of continental philosophy will allow archaeology – and indeed academia in general – to resist the marketization of universities. The third reason is that this move, he suggests, would free us from engaging in modern political and social debates, allowing archaeology to escape from being deployed to support certain claims over others. Nativ cites the complex situation in his home country of Israel as a case in point, but of course we will all be familiar with comparable (if less contentious) examples.

I have already indicated that I find the first of Nativ's three reasons for abandoning the traditional purpose of archaeology to understand the past unsatisfactory for philosophical reasons, and I am equally uneasy about his other two as well. To begin with, claims to scientific objectivity are inherently political and far from unbiased neutrality (Shanks and Tilley 1987). Indeed, such claims silence certain voices at the expense of others (Henare *et al.* 2007). The reverse of this is not, as Nativ suggests, that truth becomes a matter of opinion or that reality need be rejected. As John Barrett (2001) argued some time ago, the critical realisation is that the material worlds we excavate create room for certain forms of humanity and not others, they do not permit an 'anything goes' attitude where the truth is reducible simply to opinion. As Deleuze (2006, 23) points out one can accept the truth of relations without having to embrace the relativity of truth. There are plenty of positions between the limited positivism that Nativ argues for and the relativism he suggests is the only possible opposition. I also, in passing, find the implicit suggestion that it is a surfeit of post-structuralism that has allowed capitalism to work its way into universities to be a pretty dubious argument. If anything it is the absence of critical analysis amongst both politicians and university leaders that has led us to our current situation, not the other way around.

I also dispute that archaeology would be better off if we could wash our hands of the politics of the present. Whilst I quite agree that archaeology should not be a purely instrumentalised subject – something that only happens in order to engage with political and social problems of the present – it seems inevitable that the human past will be put to use in politics. Indeed more than this, it seems to me inevitable that the human past *is* political. Whether in current issues around migration, or the inevitability of capitalism or even how people respond to changes in climate, the human past – much of which is only available to archaeologists – has an enormous amount to contribute (e.g. Hamilakis 2016). Indeed the past *will be* used in politics, the question is do we want to be the ones telling that story or not? Do we want the past to be deployed around us whilst we proclaim that we are limited solely to the positivist study of material buried in the ground and its formation processes? As John

Robb and Tim Pauketat (2013, 33) have argued in relation to large-scale histories, these stories are going to be told, and it would be better if we did it well rather than other people did it badly.

Conclusion

As I am sure is clear from the above I take a different position on many issues from those outlined by Assaf Nativ. That said, I applaud the author for his focus on these critical themes. The article deserves to be widely read and considered because we should be asking these kinds of big questions. What is it that we study? Why are we studying it? What kinds of things can we do with that material and what consequences does that have? These are questions that are not asked often enough, and that are not reflected upon from as broad a range of positions as they should be. Whilst my desire to write narratives about the past from a new materialist perspective, one that revels in the processual becoming of the world, might be very different from the kinds of archaeology the author here wishes to see, what really matters is that these kinds of questions are being asked at all¹.

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