

Pragmatic Archaeology and Semiotic Mediation

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Abstract: Archaeology is a semiotic enterprise engaged in the study of meaning-making practices by past actors and of archaeologists themselves. Archaeology embraced its semiotic character in the context of the processual and postprocessual debates, and in terms of various postprocessual developments. Recently some archaeologists have drawn inspiration from the material semiotics of Bruno Latour to advocate for a symmetrical archaeology. This perspective offers a novel approach to object agency and focuses on how objects and humans together form assemblages. However, it neglects a satisfying account of how objects and things transform each other. One productive way forward is a consideration of semiotic mediation offered by a pragmatic archaeology linked to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce.

Keywords: Peirce; semiotic mediation; transformation; assemblages; object agency; archaeology

To say that archaeology is a semiotic enterprise is simply to state the obvious. Meaning making or signification underlies everything that archaeologists do, from the contextual interpretation of specific social practices, to the comparison of those practices across cultures, to the communication of these practices to the public. The history of archaeology's explicit engagement with semiotics dates to the 1980s. Semiotics and structuralism played an important role in the emergence of postprocessual archaeology. Together, they provided a framework for understanding past cultural meanings and served as a valuable counterweight to the functionalism favored by processual archaeology.

Recently, some archaeologists critical of the social underpinnings of postprocessual archaeology have advocated an approach influenced by the "material semiotics" of Bruno Latour. This new approach, called "symmetrical archaeology," emphasizes the entanglements of objects and people in dynamic assemblages. Most controversially, this approach has decentered the idea of agency, moving away from considering people to be at the heart of social action, to regarding things as actors in their own right. This move shares an affiliation with the "ontological turn" in contemporary anthropology (Alberti et al. 2011, Paliček and Risjord 2013) and has linkages to the "New Materialisms" in political science (Coole and Frost 2010).

There are, as yet, few evaluations of symmetrical archaeology (see Fowles 2016; Hodder 2014) and, for this reason, I offer a few critical comments. My main thesis is that while intellectually interesting, symmetrical archaeology suffers from some serious flaws. The focus on identifying assemblages of people and things across time and space appears to abandon the Enlightenment project of understanding free will. There seems to be little attention to how assemblages form and dissipate. Most problematically, the emphasis on object agency independent of humans draws attention away from studies committed to deeper understandings of how ideology and power relations structure social action.

It is possible to adopt a semiotic approach that does not reify the posthumanism of symmetrical archaeology and takes people-thing interactions seriously. One such an approach, which might be called a pragmatic archaeology, is provided by the Peircean view of semiotic mediation (Preucel 2006). A pragmatic archaeology, modeled on pragmatic or semiotic anthropology (Mertz 1985, 2007), draws attention to cultural performances as social practices and emphasizes how people mobilize signs, both words and things, in the pursuit of semiotic ends. Words invest things with meaning just as things ground words as material metaphors (Tilley 1999).

Semiotics and Postprocessual Archaeology

In 1982, Ian Hodder edited a book entitled *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Hodder 1982a). This book is a landmark in the history of archaeological theory, signaling the emergence of what later came to be known as "postprocessual archaeology." In his preface, Hodder identified archaeology as a cultural science and explained that "all social strategies and adaptations need to be understood as part of cultural, symbolically meaningful contexts" (Hodder 1982b:viii). As he put it,

burial, refuse deposition and ceramic variation are not simply behavioural reflections of adaptive strategies, functioning to allow information and energy flows. They are culturally and symbolically formed as part of, respectively,

concepts of death, dirt, and food preparation and consumption. Equally, observation, analysis and interpretation are themselves relative. Culture, the sociology of knowledge, and meaning are central problems and must not be swept aside in attempts to achieve an apparent rigour and the veneer of natural science. (Hodder 1982b:viii)

As is well known, Hodder was reacting against the standard processualist model that dominated archaeological theory. He was particularly critical of functionalism and its view of material culture as "fossilized action" (Hodder 1982c:4). He argued that the study of culture requires more than functions and activities, it also requires structure and content that has to be understood in its own terms. Significantly, he was equally critical of structuralism and its inadequate notion of how change is generated (Hodder 1982c:8). For him, semiotic analysis failed to provide an adequate account of both meaning content and the relationships between signs and the world of material action (Hodder 1987:2).

For this reason, he adopted elements of a poststructural approach. In 1988, he advanced the idea that human action can be conceived as having the properties of discourse and text. He wrote, "any material action, such as the forming of a pot or the discarding of an artifact, has a 'propositional' content which can be identified and reidentified as the same" (Hodder 1988:257). Similarly Christopher Tilley (1991:20) proposed that material culture patterning consists of "sentences and texts within texts." As an example, he suggested that "a series of pots in a grave may form a sentence constituting part of the text of a cemetery" and that "the text of material culture is like an edited book, sentences written by different authors within a text constituting a larger overall text." He acknowledged that words and things, however, are not identical, but analogous since they involve "breaking up space (or silence in the case of the spoken word), creating and establishing difference, articulating and rearticulating units" (Tilley 1991:17).

Hodder also questioned the standard view of intentionality. He argued that meaning is not solely determined by the author or actor since, "just as a written text becomes divorced from its author, so too an action may have consequences of its own separate from the intentions of the actor" (Hodder 1988:257). He saw text and action as being "distanced" in similar ways from the author, actor, or producer since the "meanings of the texts and actions become linked to the intentions and practical contexts of the reader, user, or viewer" (Hodder 1988:257). For Hodder, the archaeological implications are twofold. First, it reveals that material culture meanings are continually generated through practice and these meanings both structure and constitute thought. Second, text links power and

social strategy with symbolic meaning. This follows because not everyone in a particular society is authorized to write a text or to give it a particular meaning.

Bjørnar Olsen has offered perhaps the strongest critique of this text approach. While acknowledging the value of the textual analogy, he claims that it has caused us to ignore the differences between things and text. For him, "material culture is in the world and plays a fundamentally different constitutive role for our being in this world than texts and language" (Olsen 2007:90, his emphasis). He continues to say that things "do far more than just speak and express meanings; and at some point it just stopped being fun conceiving everything as a text that writes itself, the past as a never-ending narrative, an endless play of signifiers without signifieds (e.g. Olsen 1987, 1990)." He then asserts that the archaeologists who have adopted the text approach are complicit in reinforcing the hegemony of the text. He concludes that this treatment is evidence of a hierarchy of value in which matter is subordinate to text in accord with a logocentric tradition that privileges the human. This critique created the conditions for emergence of symmetrical archaeology.

Symmetrical Archaeology

Several archaeologists, dissatisfied with the emphasis on the social in archaeological interpretation, have begun to work with different aspects of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). This intervention has come to be called symmetrical archaeology as a way to signal an alliance with Latour's symmetrical principle (Martin 2013; Olsen 2003; Shanks 2007; Watts 2007; Webmoor 2005, 2007; Webmoor and Whitmore 2008; Whitridge 2007; Witmore 2007).

ANT is a radical theory of sociology advocated most notably by Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon, among others. It is radical in the sense that it shifts the grounds of sociology away from the study of society, its traditional domain, to the description of networks or assemblages composed of the intersections of people, collectives, and things. Its advocates argue that it requires nothing less than a wholesale revision of the methods and theories that underlie contemporary sociology.

One of ANT's most controversial moves is its extension of agency to non-human entities. This is accomplished through the "symmetrical" treatment of human and non-human actants. Here symmetry means viewing the power of humans and non-humans as equally uncertain, ambiguous and disputable (Callon 1986). There is, therefore, no necessary agential priority to be accorded to the social, institutional, conceptual, and material (Callon and Latour 1992). Power thus lies not within individual actants themselves, but through their various relations, associations, and alliances (Law 1991).

Bjørnar Olsen is one of the leaders of this new movement in archaeology. Olsen played an important role in the early days of postprocessual archaeology and contributed essays on the language of archaeology (Olsen 1991) and nature of hermeneutics (Olsen 1990; Johnsen and Olsen 1992). In 2003, he published the first archeological engagement with ANT in which he explained that his central research question is “how do things, objects - the material world in general - relate to human beings and what generally is thought of as ‘social life’” (Olsen 2003:87). He observes that the philosophical discourse has marginalized the materiality of social life and material culture studies have moved away from the thing’s materiality to emphasize social constructivist theories. As a corrective, he proposed a “symmetrical archaeology” based upon the idea that “all those physical entities we call material culture, are beings in the world alongside other beings, such as humans, plants and animals” (Olsen 2003:88). Their difference is not given by ontological dualities, like culture/nature, but rather by way of mediation and translation involving heterogeneous networks linking a variety of entities.

For Olsen, contemporary social theory is impoverished because it has failed to develop an adequate view of the world. He explains that “the main reason why the materiality of things still is being kept firmly at arm’s length is that a thing-hostile ontology continues to inform dominant approaches in material culture studies: an ontology that since Kant, at least, denied any direct access to things, and which has since surfaced as a skeptical attitude in which the material is always treated with suspicion and never allowed more than a provisional and derivative existence” (Olsen 2007:580). For him, reality is not to be found in essences, but rather in imbrolios and mixtures that characterize people/thing relationships (Olsen 2003:98).

Olsen is appropriately critical of the standard semiotic perspectives in archaeology. He holds that “Things, of course, are not experienced solely as linguistic signs or signifiers, despite their ability of being transposed and represented in other media. We may talk and write about New York, for example, as a concept or an idea, as a mental wish image, as something social, symbolic or purely textual. Still the concept ‘New York’ relates to, and emerges from, a complex material infrastructure of streets, buildings, parking lots, art, public transport, people, cars, etc.” (Olsen 2010:58). He claims that “to conceive of our dealing with material culture as primarily an intellectual encounter, as signs or texts to be consciously read, is to deprive things of their difference and their ability to ‘speak back’ in their own material way” (Olsen 2010:60).

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This new interrogation of object agency is a valuable corrective to the passive view of things since, as Alfred Gell (1998) might argue, things have the ability to enchant us. And yet, it risks devaluing the ways in which humans interact with the world, namely by

reading, writing, speaking, making things, acquiring things, and using things. Symmetrical archaeology is critical of the semiotic approach to representation and the idea that signs stand for something other than themselves. But this seems to be a slight of hand. We cannot escape talking about meanings be they the meanings of past actors, present interpreters, cultural practices, evolutionary trajectories, actants, or assemblages. Perhaps the problem is not the representational model, but with how we choose to understand what counts as meaning, that is to say, the narratives we construct about the past in the present, our semiotic ideologies.

Several archaeologists have drawn inspiration from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce as a way of overcoming the limitations of postprocessual approaches to semiotics (Bauer 2013; Crossland 2014; Jones 2007; Preucel and Bauer 2001; Preucel 2006). Saussure regarded semiotics as a signifying system based upon the sign-referent dyad that is taken to be arbitrary. Peirce, by contrast, regarded semiotics to be an irreducibly triadic relationship between a sign, an object, and an interpretant. Significantly, not all signs are arbitrary and some, known as indices, describe causal relationships. These causal relationships are particularly important because they can be used to ground interpretation and build up explanatory narratives. The meaning of a sign can be understood as the action that it routinely generates. In this way, a pragmatic perspective transcends the problematic dualism of Saussurian semiotics and introduces the idea of habitual action underlying culture practice.

Pragmatic archaeology builds upon pragmatic anthropology, a movement that encompasses to varying degrees the subfields of linguistic and sociocultural anthropology and adopts a pragmatic perspective on language and culture (Preucel and Bauer 2001; Preucel 2006). Pragmatic or semiotic anthropology includes a wide range of distinctive concepts and approaches (Mertz 2007). Perhaps the most important is indexicality, the sign mode that signals the contextual existence of an entity (Silverstein 1976). This is a key topic in linguistic anthropology where research has focused on deictics (Hanks 2005; Manning 2001), referential language (Hanks 1990), and linguistic ideologies (Schieffelin et al. 1998).

What is semiotic mediation? As used by pragmatic anthropologists, the term combines elements of its origins in psychology, linguistics, and philosophy (Mertz 1985). In psychology, the term is usually associated with the approach of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky who argued that language plays a crucial role in mediating the growth of cognitive abilities in children. In linguistics (especially the Prague school), it refers to the recognition that diachrony is a crucial part of the language system. In philosophy, it can be linked to the work of Peirce who regarded "mediation" as a summary description for all semiotic processes at the most general level ("Thirdness" in Peirce's famous typology of

categories). For the purpose of this presentation, it is useful to define "mediation" as any process in which two elements come together due to the action of a third element that serves as the vehicle of communication (Parmentier 1985:25).

In archaeology, we can consider semiotic mediation at a number of levels and scales (Joyce 2007; Knappett 2005, 2011). Artifacts were and are produced in the context of explicit understandings and implicit assumptions about how material culture communication works. These understandings and assumptions were and are themselves products of social institutions that regulate usages, impose canons, and codify belief systems (Parmentier 1994:142). In this respect, material culture signs are no different from linguistic signs. And because of the inherent ambiguity in interpreting some of these meanings (not all interpreters share the same understandings and assumptions), they also have the potential to generate new meanings. When actors offer their "non-standard" views of meanings, these can be used to challenge existing conventions and even interpretive frames. Archaeologists need to attend closely to the canons governing the articulation of words and things in ethnographically documented cultural performances. These then can be used as provisional analogies with which to interpret past social practices.

I have investigated the bundling of linguistic and material elements in semiotic mediation. For my case study, I have examined the tumultuous period following the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 (Preucel 2006). Spanish historical documents based upon depositions of Pueblo captives reveal that Pueblo Indian leaders sought to persuade their followers to relinquish Spanish customs and practices and return to their traditional lifeways. Actual speech acts are recorded and they highlight a revitalization discourse that emphasizes the "laws of the ancestors." I then examined how material practices such as village location, architectural form, and pottery design may have articulate with this discourse. I found evidence for archaizing elements in village layout (Ferguson and Preucel 2005) and pottery design (Capone and Preucel 2002). I conclude that these material symbols functioned alongside the revitalization discourse as mutually supporting practices and that collectively they mediated a new form of temporality and created a new social being.

Conclusions

Archaeologists are remarkably ambitious in our semiotic goals. We seek to address complex issues of meaning and identity as understood by past actors, but without direct access to informants. We are also committed to understanding ourselves and how we engage in meaning-making practices in the present. Our challenge in both cases is to develop satisfactory accounts of how some objects come to hold specific meanings for different people and how these meanings are sometimes promoted to semiotic ideologies. It is the nature of archaeological science that we are always dissatisfied with our

interpretations since they are necessarily partial (not all the data we might like are available) and always provisional (new studies may overturn them).

There is a popular tendency in archaeology to make a virtue of a necessity, that is, to allow the "material" to outweigh the "immaterial"- for example, to argue that changes in pottery types are responsible for changes in social organization. Symmetrical archaeology takes this tendency to an extreme by insisting that we have not appropriately theorized the material and need give it its due. It seeks to foreground the "beingness" of things independently of the social lives of people in their representational and communicative practices. This approach raises certain questions such as why is there a shift away from the social at this moment in time and whose interests does it serve.

One could argue that a truly "symmetrical" approach should not oppose people and things, but rather consider how humans combine the material (artifacts) and immaterial (words) in cultural performances to achieve specific semiotic effects. Indeed, this is what a pragmatic archaeology allows. It draws attention to the fact that all cultures deploy signs and sign combinations in cultural reproduction. Of special interest, however, are the particular ways in which they do so. Certain meanings, composed of sign bundles- ways of handling and talking about particularly valued signs- can be given preeminent status and, by virtue of this, exert social agency. And as Peirce shows us, it is the indexical qualities of objects rather than their abstract semantic meanings that helps ground social action and accounts for the durability of these ideologies.

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