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An interpretive archaeology

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION



Time, Culture and Identity is a book which sets out to write about prehistory, while at the same time reflecting on what that writing involves. It is best understood as the outcome of my own attempt to grapple with a series of more or less abstract issues. I began in the belief that in order to gain a better understanding of the British Neolithic I would need to address certain philosophical problems, and in the process of doing so found that new approaches to the evidence suggested themselves to me. Quite arbitrarily, the book was divided into two sections, one of which contains a sustained investigation of themes of time, identity and materiality, while the other places these ideas into the context of prehistoric archaeology through a series of case studies. Some reviewers have suggested that the two halves may be read as entirely separate books. I do not feel this to be the case, for if the two parts are distinct within the volume they were none the less written together. In writing the book I moved back and forth between the two sections, and I suggest that the reader might find it productive to do the same, rather than to view the text as purely linear.

The central theoretical argument of the volume is that while time, culture and identity are concepts which are implicit in the writing of virtually any form of archaeology, their character has seldom been directly addressed within the discipline. Thus we have dating methods and chronologies, yet we seldom ask what time *is*. We write about ‘people’, ‘communities’ or ‘groups’ in the past, without considering how entities of this kind might have emerged and come to recognise themselves. Above all, we study something called ‘material culture’, seemingly untroubled by the knowledge that the division between culture and nature which it often implies is a relatively recent invention. These three issues seem to me to be deeply interlinked. Time, culture and identity can be passed over and taken for granted as given phenomena because they are so fundamental to archaeology, and also because archaeology itself is wholly embedded in the ways of thinking which characterise the modern West. Indeed, archaeology first emerged with modernity, as an investigation into the origins and depths of human historical achievement through the medium of its material residue. I take this to mean that it is actually difficult to unravel the assumptions of archaeological analysis without questioning the foundations of modernist thought.

This argument runs parallel with one proposed by the philosopher Martin Heidegger regarding the category of 'Being'. Since the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers, he suggested, the issue of Being had gradually been obscured and 'covered over' by the Western tradition. It is Heidegger's attempt to challenge the commonplaces of contemporary thought which potentially makes his ideas attractive to archaeologists, since an important element in our enterprise is the recognition that past peoples need not have constructed their worlds using the same concepts or habits of mind as ourselves. Moreover, Heidegger's extensive writings dwell at length upon time, materiality, art, personal identity, place, architecture and a number of other topics which are central to current archaeological debate. Heidegger was the main thinker whose work I used in writing *Time, Culture and Identity*, and the book represents something of an attempt to investigate what a 'Heideggerian archaeology' might entail. Having said that, it did not involve a slavish adherence to Heidegger's ideas, and it consciously attempted to place his philosophy both into the context of archaeological practice and that of more recent traditions of thought. More than most philosophers, Heidegger's personal history renders his work problematic, and this provides an additional reason to engage with it in a critical way.

On reflection, one of the aspects of this volume which is of broadest significance is the view of the material world which it promotes. Rather than accept that objects are simply 'given', I follow Heidegger in arguing that material things disclose themselves to us through a structure of cultural intelligibility. Recently, this focus on the materialisation of things has re-emerged in the context of feminist investigations into the materiality of the human body (Butler 1993). For archaeology, it is of the utmost importance to overcome the perceived dichotomy between 'social constructionism' and out-and-out empiricism. It is possible to assert that there is a real material world, and yet recognise that the way in which we come to understand it is problematic and unstable.

Another point is related. Throughout the book I was at pains to emphasise that the social and material worlds are not in any sense separate. Social relations and cultural interpretations are not a metaphysical supplement to a material base. Objects and artefacts are not merely the outcome of the operation of society, but are implicated in social life. Indeed, although the conditions of generalised alienation which characterise the modern West tend to present people and things as radically separate, I have suggested that both are embedded in relationships which are social in character. As Latour (1993) would say, society is a hybrid composed of humans and non-humans. This way of thinking potentially revolutionises archaeology, making it far more like ethnography than antique-collecting. The task of the ethnographer is to enter into social relations with those studied. Like anthropologists, archaeologists must enter into a set of relationships in order to create their particular kind of knowledge. If

material things are integral to a society, rather than just the detritus which it leaves behind, our engagement with those things is a meaning-producing practice that is analogous to social activities which took place in the past.

The kind of prehistory which emerges from this way of thinking is one which attempts to transcend the dichotomies between culture and nature, the mental and the material, base and superstructure. In writing about the Neolithic in this book, I concentrated on monuments, funerary practices, structured deposits, pottery and exchanged goods. This is partly because these phenomena make up the predominant forms of evidence surviving from the period. But beyond this, I was attempting to make the point that these material things and practices were not superficial manifestations of a way of life whose essence lay in a more fundamental productive base or set of routine practices. They were integral to the Neolithic, in that they were bound up with the ways in which these communities reproduced and understood themselves.

Julian Thomas

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A NOTE ON CONVENTIONS

Throughout this book, 'Being' with a capital 'B' is taken to refer to the category of Being in general, while 'being' with a small 'b' refers to a particular being or creature.

In the case of dates, 'bc' indicates an uncalibrated radiocarbon date, and BC a date in calendar years. Throughout, the Stuiver calibration curve is employed (Stuiver and Becker 1993; Stuiver and Pearson 1993).

INTRODUCTION



ABOUT THIS BOOK

This volume probably requires a certain amount of explanation. Some books are written as a means of imparting a body of information which already exists in a fairly coherent form before the writing begins. In other cases, the writing itself forms the means by which ideas and evidence are brought together and synthesised. In this way of working, the author is writing as a means of collecting their thoughts on a particular issue. This book is certainly of the latter kind. When I was in the final stages of writing *Rethinking the Neolithic* (Thomas 1991a), one particularly perceptive reader suggested that what I was doing with that book was establishing a personal agenda for future work. What he had in mind, I think, was that I should follow up the rather broad-brush approach of *Rethinking the Neolithic* with a series of more detailed studies, concentrating on artefacts, funerary practice and so on. It is certainly the case that I no longer feel a need to attempt to rewrite a whole period of prehistory, and am happier undertaking a project which is much more focused. None the less, in this book I have followed a rather more perverse strategy than that of concentrating on a particular set of material. While *Rethinking the Neolithic* outlined a general approach to prehistory, by the time that it was published I found myself painfully aware of a number of problems which it had not addressed. These were both theoretical and empirical questions, several of which seemed to me to be linked to each other. My feeling was that I would be unable to find adequate answers to some of the problems which I recognised in British prehistory until I had addressed certain theoretical issues, and vice versa. As Gilles Deleuze once wrote, ‘practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another’ (Deleuze in Foucault 1977, 206).

This is not intended as either a book about archaeological theory or a book about British prehistory. Although this volume is separated into two parts, one of which is overtly theoretical while the other is composed of a series of case-studies, these two sections were not written separately. There is no sense in which I formulated a set of theoretical principles and then proceeded to ‘apply’ them to the material. In practice, I moved back and forth between theoretical problems which were suggested to me by the

evidence, and empirical problems which were set up by theoretical arguments. As the project proceeded it became clear to me that the issues of temporality, material culture and human identity were central to what I was attempting to achieve. Thinking about each of these concepts seemed unavoidably to lead back into a consideration of each of the others. It seems to me that this nexus of questions has been axial to the history of archaeological thought, and yet that more often than not the concepts of time, culture and identity have been taken for granted. Moreover, it may be that the ways in which they have been conceptualised within archaeology are lodged within broader formations of modern western thought. By concentrating on these problems directly, it appeared to me that I might be able to clarify some of the areas of prehistory which I had found intractable (What was the role of material things in the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition? Were the complex artefacts of the later Neolithic constitutive of identities rather than a reflection of prestige? How were architecture, movement and depositional practice linked in the use of later Neolithic monuments?).

Two factors were to condition the way in which this project developed. The first was the continuing debate within archaeology concerning the nature of material culture: as record, as semiotic system, as text, as evidence (Patrik 1985; Barrett 1988a; Tilley 1989). The second was my introduction to the thought of Martin Heidegger. Over the period between 1988 and 1990, while working at St David's University College, Lampeter, I was lucky enough to be able to sit in on David Walford's seminars on *Being and Time*. Before this, I was aware of the influence which Heidegger had exerted on a number of thinkers whose work I had found useful (Derrida, Foucault, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Bourdieu, Giddens, and the list goes on), and it seemed logical to want to follow certain ideas back to their 'origin'. My initial reaction to Heidegger's work was one of slight disappointment: much of what I read seemed rather distant from my immediate concerns. However, after a while I began to feel that this body of thinking might profoundly challenge the way in which I thought about archaeology. As I progressed, the first part of this book became more and more an exercise in working out what a 'Heideggerian archaeology' might look like, and I found myself increasingly willing to follow Heidegger's ideas through to their conclusions, rather than simply lifting the odd concept or turn of phrase. This, in itself, raises certain problems.

USING HEIDEGGER

If Heidegger believed that his philosophy could provide spiritual direction for National Socialism, does this mean that his philosophy is essentially fascist?

(Zimmerman 1990, 35)

Over the past decade or more, many of the more interesting developments within the discipline have stemmed from the consideration of the archaeological implications of the ideas of philosophers and social and cultural theorists (e.g. Tilley 1990). While this practice has frequently been derided as an attempt to increase one's academic capital by discovering a new and more difficult continental thinker (Bintliff 1991a), the growing body of archaeological analysis which draws on these ideas suggest that this is not entirely the case. None the less, it is clearly not adequate to simply pick up theories from other disciplines and apply them unquestioningly. Ideas are transformed by the context within which they are deployed (Thomas 1995), and it is essential that archaeologists should *work with* the concepts which they routinely employ. Yet, over and above this, making use of Heidegger's work in particular introduces much more serious issues. Although I am convinced that this material is of critical importance for the development of archaeology, recent revelations concerning Heidegger's political activities (e.g. Farias 1989; Pöggeler 1993; Wolin 1990) must render its use problematic. There is by now little doubt that Heidegger was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party from the time of his election to the rectorship of Freiburg University in 1933 until 1945. It is also beyond question that in the postwar period he went out of his way to obscure the extent of his complicity with the Nazi regime (e.g. Heidegger 1993a), and that he repeatedly failed to properly acknowledge or atone for his guilt in this respect (Habermas 1993). To be sure, there are defences which can be raised on his behalf. It seems probable that Heidegger's philosophical version of National Socialism came into conflict with party ideology very quickly, and that he did realise he had made a terrible mistake in choosing his allies. And of course, it is easy with hindsight for us to recognise the utter evil of fascism in a way which might not have been immediately apparent in the early 1930s. And it is possible that, as he claimed, Heidegger's reluctance to disavow his political past in 1945 arose from his disgust with those former Nazis who made elaborate shows of repentance as a means of securing positions in the postwar regime.

However, these are excuses. Introducing the ideas of such a person into archaeology involves a responsibility, and this simply cannot imply one's becoming an apologist for someone who may or may not have been a convinced Nazi. It is by far the most prudent course to assume the worst, and then to ask whether Heidegger's philosophy bears with it the irreducible burden of fascism. This, it would seem, is not a straightforward question. As Bourdieu (1990a) has argued, Heidegger's ideas cannot be reduced to a political ideology, yet it is not possible to consider his philosophy in abstraction from the social and political context in which they were written. There seem to be three possible answers to dealing with Heidegger. The first is that taken by many philosophers: the ideas are the ideas, the man was the man, and what should concern one is the validity or usefulness of the

ideas. For the reasons cited by Bourdieu, I do not consider this argument to be acceptable. While some of Heidegger's thought certainly has no political content, one must be aware that some aspects of his philosophy could be given a particular slant and fitted into the Nazi programme, as is evident in the 1933 rectoral address (Heidegger 1993b). Secondly, one could take the view that some Marxists have taken, that Heidegger's thought is so tarnished by its association with Nazism that one simply cannot entertain any element of it. Using this philosophy will unavoidably lead one into fascist modes of thought. On reflection, I do not find this argument any more satisfactory than the first. What it seems to suggest is that ideas can be intrinsically 'true' or 'false', 'correct' or 'wrong'. This would seem to me to be a dangerous essentialism, in which the worth of a philosophy can be established independently of its context. It smacks of the distinction between ideology and science, in which corrupt ideas can be separated from pure and wholly good ways of thinking (Foucault 1980, 84). This itself can be used as a means of establishing hegemony, since it enables one to declare certain knowledges illegitimate without having to seriously engage with them (Smart 1986, 161). In the case of Marxism itself, it is evident that the ideas themselves cannot be evaluated in isolation from the contexts in which they have been deployed. Marxism has simultaneously been the inspiration for numerous liberation struggles and the instrument of state repression in the former Soviet Union. It is meaningless to argue as to which of these manifestations represents the 'true' essence of Marxism.

The third possible attitude to Heidegger's philosophy lies, then, in recognising that no set of ideas is likely to be either so wholly correct as to be above suspicion or so wholly corrupt as to be dismissed out of hand. Instead, all sets of ideas deserve to be regarded with equal suspicion. Marxism was not so perfect as to prevent the Gulag from being constructed. Heidegger was not so perfect a philosopher as to prevent his complicity with Nazism and, by implication, the Holocaust. There are insights to be found in both of these systems of thought, but in both cases history makes us aware that anything which we take from them must be treated with the utmost scepticism. The most powerful ideas may also be the most dangerous, and the most susceptible to abuse, even by their own authors. Foucault (1984a, 245) once argued that nothing in life should be seen as absolutely liberating. In contrast to a utopian belief that certain ideas could lead to an end of history in which all social conflicts had been dissolved, Foucault asserted that liberation was a practice, a struggle that can never come to an end. Accordingly, ideas must be assessed in terms of usefulness, and of their likely effects and consequences. Ideas can help us to understand the world, but we must also be aware of their ethical implications. By ethics, in this case, I do not mean an abstract value accorded to conceptual schemes, but the practical ways in which they encourage us to think about and act in relation to other people. If I am

advocating some use of Heidegger's philosophy as a means of investigating past societies, then this must be in the context of a critical engagement with and evaluation of that philosophy. At every step of the way, these ideas must be questioned and their implications considered. As Habermas (1993, 197) wrote, our task may be one of 'thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger'. Following Derrida (1989) I will suggest that the major problem with Heidegger's thought is his failure to follow his arguments to their radical conclusion and finally overcome metaphysics by obliterating all essences and presences. It is a nostalgic yearning for some transcendental wholeness which betrays Heidegger to totalitarianism.

In order to make use of Heidegger's ideas at all, it is absolutely necessary to understand which aspects of the philosophy allowed it to find an affinity with National Socialism, and to consider how the remainder might be put to work. I should make it quite clear at the outset that I do not believe that any discourse can be rendered apolitical, and it is not my objective to construct a politically neutral version of Heidegger. Rather, I suggest that while the authoritarian tone of Heidegger's more millenarian ideas found an easy alliance with Nazism, his arguments against positivism, naturalism, Cartesianism and essentialism have far more affinity with aspects of contemporary left thought, such as feminism, 'deep' ecology and radical democracy. These considerations can be drawn out by dwelling for a while on the nature of Heidegger's political engagement in the 1930s. Although Heidegger had considered himself largely apolitical during the 1920s, in the period after the writing of *Being and Time* his concern shifted from the *nature* of Being, as having been covered up by western thought, to the *history* of Being. In particular, he was interested in the changing place of human beings in relation to the world within which they found themselves enmeshed. Several different influences on his thought at this time can be discerned. First, following Kierkegaard, Heidegger was concerned with the emergence of nihilism, in the sense of a meaningless, drained, directionless condition of humanity (Dreyfus 1993, 291). Second, he drew increasingly on German Romanticism, and in particular the poetry of Hölderlin, which represented a critique of the atomised, scientific thinking of the Enlightenment. Finally, he had developed an interest in the work of a number of contemporary reactionary political thinkers, such as Spengler and, particularly, Ernst Jünger (Zimmerman 1990, 34). Jünger's critique of the modern era was based upon the premise that in nations which were increasingly concerned with material production, human beings were gradually becoming reduced to the status of workers, representing no more than cogs in a gigantic technological apparatus. While Heidegger rejected the notion that one might return to any bucolic idyll, he none the less held that Jünger's 'era of total mobilisation' must be overcome by the foundation of a new way of Being on earth.

Heidegger's perception of Germany's position in the early 1930s was of a people afflicted by a series of 'deadly symptoms' of decline: positivism, scientific reductionism, industrialism, American democracy, communism (Zimmerman 1990, xviii). Germany was at 'the sharpest squeeze of the pincers' between America and the USSR (Habermas 1993, 193). To the west was the rampant egocentrism and all-consuming industrial capitalism of America, to the east the anonymous workerism of the Soviet Union. Throughout Heidegger's later philosophy, the history of Being is presented as connected with a history of technology in which the relationship between people and the material world declines away from the 'golden age' of the Greeks. If for the Greeks *techné* represented an attuned and craftsmanlike attitude to materiality which covered both art and technology, the modern era had seen the development of industrial production and eventually cybernetic control (Dreyfus 1992, 175; Heidegger 1993c). In such a world, technology had seemingly solved all problems, systems theory had replaced philosophy, and the planet was conceived as no more than a vast storehouse of resources to be freely exploited by humankind (Heidegger 1977a, 14; Dreyfus 1993, 305). Society was dominated by an instrumental logic, in which all things might be assessed in terms of their function, and people sank into a listless, aimless nihilism of sensory gratification and spiritual homelessness. In separating themselves from a condition of *dwelling* on the earth, and instead continually *challenging* the earth to produce ever more resources to be consumed, human beings had rendered themselves strangers in their own home. It need hardly be added that while all of this was to lead Heidegger in a disastrous direction, some elements of the argument connect with contemporary radical thought, and the themes of alienation and estrangement have some resonance with Marx (Ollman 1971).

Placed in this world-historical predicament, Heidegger considered that the Germans might prove uniquely capable of developing a 'third way' beyond capitalism and communism. Since the Germans had a particular cultural heritage which derived ultimately from Greece and expressed itself in Romanticism, it might be possible for them to take up the destiny which historical contingency had imposed upon them. Their particular historical experience was such that they might achieve a rethinking of the western tradition (Heidegger 1993a, 113), a goal which could not be attained through the importation of an external framework, such as Zen Buddhism. What this would require would be a drawing together of the national, ethnic community of Germans, submitting resolutely to a higher power, thereby achieving renewal through the renunciation of egotism. Heidegger's hope in 1933 was that National Socialism would provide Germany with a new myth within which the national community would cohere, gaining a sense of purpose and resisting the complacent nihilism of the age (Dreyfus 1993, 314). Heidegger's belief that a work of art founds and enables human dwelling on earth finds an echo in the 'aestheticisation of the political' of

Nazism (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990, 61). Yet while Heidegger saw art as revealing and opening up the world, Nazi aesthetics were monolithic and transcendental, geared to the foundation and expression of the ‘thousand-year Reich’. That Heidegger could mistake the aestheticisation of the state for the healing power of the artwork may suggest that he was simply desperate to find an optimistic trend in world history, but he was evidently foolish enough to believe that the actual course which the party took was one which diverged from ‘the inner truth and greatness of that movement’ (Heidegger 1959, 199). For while Heidegger approved of the *Führer* principle, submission to the leader as the embodiment of the nation, he saw the racism and anti-Semitism of the Nazis as a form of scientific naturalism, another abomination of Enlightenment science (Zimmerman 1990, 4; Heidegger 1993d, 86). By the end of 1933, Heidegger had evidently lost faith in the possibility of spiritual renewal through Nazism, and had resigned from the Freiburg rectorship. On his own account, his course of lectures on Nietzsche in the mid-1930s was conceived as ‘a confrontation with National Socialism’ (Heidegger 1993a, 101). This is almost certainly a generous self-estimate. It is more likely that, although disillusioned and compromised, Heidegger was simply not brave enough to criticise the murderous regime with which he had sided.

What all of this suggests is that while Heidegger had to tailor his philosophy in order to suit it to the demands of National Socialism, totalitarianism is at least an implicit danger within his thought. However, as Lacoue-Labarthe (1990) points out, most of the details of Heidegger’s complicity were well known long before the publication of Victor Farias’ *Heidegger and Nazism* (1990). The question thus immediately arises as to why so much interest was generated by the ‘Heidegger affair’ in France and America in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Spanos 1993). In the case of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, whose *Heidegger and Modernity* (1990) draws upon Farias’ work, Spanos (1993, 183) suggests that the attack on Heidegger serves as a means of de-legitimising those whose ideas ultimately derive from Heidegger. Ferry and Renaut advocate a return to humanism, and thus represent Heidegger, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud (and by implication their post-structuralist heirs, Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu and Lacan) as writers who would deny human agency. It might be more accurate to suggest that these thinkers *problematis*e agency, rather than taking the human subject for granted. Heidegger’s critique of humanism points out that it is always a metaphysics. Humanism holds that certain transcendental and ahistorical characteristics of humanity can be defined (Heidegger 1993e, 225). Thus human beings are fundamentally the same in all epochs of history. Humanism looks for a metaphysical essence for ‘Man’ (*sic*), without first asking the question of Being which underlies the existence of humanity (*ibid.*, 247). How is it, after all, that we come to ask such questions about the kind of being that we are? In America, Spanos goes on to suggest, the

same set of accusations are used as a means of attacking the scourge of the literary establishment, deconstructive criticism. Thus in both cases the Heidegger issue is used as a means of discrediting the left by association with the excesses of the right.

This book is in no sense to be seen as an apology for the particular actions or views of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was a great philosopher, whose thought (I believe) can be of critical importance to the archaeological project of understanding social life in the past. But he was also fallible, and as a result became implicated in some of the most monstrous crimes which human beings have ever committed. Let us be in no doubt: no excuse for the Holocaust and its perpetrators can ever be tolerated. What this means is that if we are to read Heidegger and use his ideas, we must do so critically, and with the utmost vigilance. In a sense, this kind of scepticism is no more than we should afford to any set of writings. Any philosophy might potentially be turned to barbaric ends. The difference is that in Heidegger's case *it was*.

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