

SHARING GROUND

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As Gavin Lucas outlines at the outset of his paper, it appears that archaeology, or archaeological theory/theorizing, finds itself at a certain breaking point. This is illustrated in a theoretical discourse disseminated concurrently with nostalgic postulations of past revolutions, a cynical attitude toward the current situation and, importantly, positive forecasts for what may lie ahead. The now classic critique of archaeology's passive theory consumption is coupled with optimism for genuinely archaeological theory constitutions; for material or practice-led approaches where the sources of theorizing, moreover, lie within rather than beyond the discipline and the archaeological record. Once again revolt is in the air, one might claim – or is it? Are we perhaps, as suggested by Julian Thomas, biased by our own historiography of the discipline's past, fixated on a development of theory within a paradigmatic trope and, thus, mechanically expecting "... a kind of Maoist continual revolution" (Thomas 2015:20) – the "next big thing"? Possibly. At least I believe Thomas is right when suggesting that the theoretical transformations currently under way differ from the previous processual and post-processual *revolutions*. That is, that unlike previous conversions archaeological theorizing is now more directly and critically involved with these ideas' *gradual* inter-disciplinary development. Hence, I also

agree with Lucas that it may be timely to rethink the now normalized disciplinary historiography and explore alternative ways of thinking (archaeological) theory. This also in order to attack postulations of archaeology's docile theory borrowing from another angle, asking instead, as Lucas does, whether the difference between theory building and borrowing, between bottom-up and top-down approaches, may actually be "over exaggerated".

The questions posed in Lucas's article, thus, are important and relevant ones. It is interesting to consider what archaeologists truly mean when emphasizing "bottom-up" approaches. What was, for example, implied with the general theme *Archaeology as a source of theory* at the Stockholm TAG; or, what is Edgeworth (2012) getting at when suggesting that following cuts is a theoretical endeavour? However, despite the promising motivation Lucas remains surprisingly faithful to the conventional hierarchy of oppositions he aims to attack. His rhetoric is accordingly one of either/or – top-down/bottom-up, general/middle-range, derivative/contributive, etc. – and though his conclusion reflects an indicative withdrawal, it is difficult to grasp his concrete argument or overall position. Moreover, one might claim that his emphasis on the *mobility* of theorizing misses some of its potency when wedged within the parameters of these binary poles.

In my comments I will focus on some postulations made by Lucas regarding bottom-up theorizing and how a genuinely archaeological theory may contribute to interdisciplinary theorizing. One is his claim that the old theory-data opposition is an unfruitful way to approach bottom-up theorizing, partly because "this battle has already been won" but also because in the most "naïve" form deconstructions of this binary may infer that theory and interpretation simply "magically" arise from data. Another is his assertion that the current emphasis on bottom-up theorizing is driven by ontological rather than epistemological concerns and, thus, that what we are encouraged to stress is really "the materiality of our data, not its epistemic status." Finally, I address his claims regarding the commensurability, and thus mobility, of theories constructed within different disciplines and the idea of a "shared domain" or middle ground where these may meet. Here Lucas states that "it is difficult to conceive how a bottom-up theorizing can ever cross disciplinary borders", as this will presuppose a shared purpose or overarching theoretical domain, which in turn would lead us back to a top-down realm of theory. These questions and issues are of course interconnected and I will address them conjointly.

First, and to situate my own perspective, I believe it is important to see the *current* claim for archaeological theorizing in the context

of *current* theoretical development in the humanities and social sciences generally (and, importantly, by this I am not implying an either-or derivative/contributive relationship). Though this theorizing draws on a long pedigree of ideas, and therefore may be said to reflect a somewhat “dated” orating, its contemporary (re)surfacing is arguably taking place in a specific theoretical landscape, moulded not least by the ontological/material/affective/speculative turn(s). Hence, scrutinizing it through the kind of “traditional” top-down/bottom-up trope Lucas employs is, I argue, not particularly fruitful. Indeed, the two may actually be said to presuppose the same; that, whether descending from the top or rising from the bottom, theory is always “up”, always abstracted. In other words, theory never stays *on the ground*, never exists *on a level with* data. Therefore, contrary to Lucas I would say that scrutinizing/deconstructing the theory-data opposition is very much an ongoing battle and, moreover, one of great importance to current archaeological theorizing. Following this, what I miss from Lucas’s discussion is not least a genuine attempt to address what theory *is*. What is its relation to the “reality” it seeks to cope with and explain? Indeed, following Lucas, is it possible to think of theory in a different way – not as detached, or overarching, but as something embedded with and mobilized through data? Or is that to naively suggest that theory/interpretation “magically” arises from the things and stuff we work with?

Possibly. Nevertheless, I think it’s important not to rule this out *a priori* as some illogical nonsense in the aftermath of a battle already won. In fact, the material turn, the turn to things – much of the present theoretical turmoil – is very much about regaining or relearning this kind of *speculative magic*; wondering not merely how things are represented in our minds but how they *are*, in themselves and towards us. And approaching the theory-data opposition with this attitude is, I believe, quite rewarding – especially in archaeology. Lucas is certainly right in asserting that the new emphasis on such “grounded” approaches is driven by ontological concerns, or is at least ontologically positioned. However, I don’t take this to mean that the epistemological status of our data is being somehow downgraded – that focus is on archaeological material as things and *not data*. Surely, emphasizing the materiality of archaeological stuff affects its status as evidence in a conventional culture-historical understanding, but the question is whether this is what we now are aiming at or whether the ontological turn rather implies a *change* to archaeological epistemology and the way we look upon our data. I would like to think so. And an important difference between much earlier theory building in archaeology and the current emphasis on bottom-up approaches is that the focus is no longer on *translation*;

in other words, there is no need to make excuses for the being of our data, and theorizing, therefore, is not about establishing correctives for its “incomplete” or “static” nature (in a traditional social or culture-historical sense) but about considering how this material *matters as such* – also in processes of theorizing.

Though the quest for correspondence may in itself be a problematic issue (cf. Pickering 2011), what grounds it – and seems dismissed in many takes on the theoretical or “interpretative” dilemma in archaeology – is the taken-for-granted ontological divide between, on the one hand, “inert” things and, on the other, not only the “social context” to be reached through these things but also *interpretation, meaning and knowledge* itself. This has, furthermore, inevitably rendered interpretation/theorization an act of reaching what is on the other side of this bifurcation – that which is beyond data. In other words, the very notion of theorization is arguably grounded in a particular metaphysics that has created specific expectations of what it should be about, and also of *how* to reach it. I think Lucas is right when he comes to the conclusion that the processes of bottom-up and top-down theorizing are not really that different. However, more important than scrutinizing a constructed difference is, I argue, eliminating the internal hierarchy, the “top” and “up”, from this formula to see things on a level; to consider relations between theory and archaeological stuff and practice not along a vertical axiom or in terms of what is derivative/contributive, but with an openness to how they blend and emerge, how each feeds into and affords the other.

The root of much epistemological and methodological debate in archaeology (such as the recurring question of how to bridge between a static archaeological record and the dynamics of past societies) has arguably been the understanding of societies and cultures as primarily *human* entities. Indeed, for long this rendered things mostly irrelevant to mainstream social/cultural theorizing and, simultaneously, archaeology’s social identity somewhat fragile. The changes associated with the current theoretical development have opened for a different take on these issues. When no longer treated as epiphenomenal witnesses of society but as its indispensable constituents, fundamentally involved in human conducts and social trajectories, the epistemological status of things as “data” has been radically changed. Archaeologists don’t work with expressions of the social or cultural – they work with its solid fabrics. Therefore, we may not have to search afar, beyond or above for a “shared domain”. While Lucas seems to imagine this as abstract, “theoretical” and overarching, I would argue that it is in fact closer, more tangible and “mundane” than that; in other words, that the archaeologi-

cal record (and indeed archaeological practice and theorizing) already belongs to the same domain as, for example, quantum physics, ocean currents, right-wing politics, nuclear waste, greenhouse gases, and anthropological theory. And if it may serve to *bring things close*, these and others, I simply cannot see why archaeological theorizing should respect disciplinary borders.

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