A History of Archaeology Thought (Second Edition)

by Bruce G. Trigger. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 710 pp. ISBN 0–521–84076–7 (hardcover) US$90. ISBN 0–521–60049–9 (paperback) US$31.99. 2006.

and

The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger

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BRUCE TRIGGER OCCUPIES A TOWER-ing and distinctive position in Anglophone archaeology, having successfully steered an apparent middle intellectual course between the Scylla of extreme positivism and the Charybdis of extreme relativism during his career. I say "apparent" because while he quite explicitly does that in some publications, in others, such as *A History,* he seems to offer a third ground, not a middle course. Some of the 16 chapters in *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger* also wonder whether his distinctive position and influence stem from being a Canadian archaeologist.

Ronald Williamson, Jeremy Cunningham, and Jane Kelley, in the essay ("The Many Influences of Bruce Trigger") that opens *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger*, suggest Canadian archaeology possesses an important critical distance from the theoretical debates between and among British and American archaeologists. This distance gives Canadian archaeol-ogy a distinctive and perhaps somewhat skeptical perspective that both influenced Trigger and which he influenced in turn. They find interesting contrasts between the contents of the *Journal of Canadian Archaeology (CJA)* and *American Antiquity (AA). AA* papers are far more likely to be concerned with culture process, whereas more *CJA* papers are concerned with archaeological practice and archaeology's role in the broader contemporary society. They do not mention that one of the major papers on practice in *AA* in the last decade was by Canadian authors (Pokotylo and Guppy 1999). On the other hand, most such papers in the United States are published in *The SAA Archaeological Record*, a companion publication to *AA.* As someone who has worked in both countries, I don't think American archaeology is less concerned with practice, although I doubt an edited book celebrating Lewis Binford, for example, would contain papers contem-

plating the degree to which his impact can be related to his nationality.

Allison Wylie further develops the notion of Canadian archaeology having a critical distance, applying what she terms "standpoint theory," the argument that those situated on the margins may be able to "develop a critical perspective on knowledge production" (p. 32). This view of Trigger's position and role in global archaeology reminds me of Winston Churchill's comment that Canada is the lynchpin of the English-speaking world. The discussions about the marginality of Canadian archaeology also brought to mind a comment by H. L. Mencken, the famous Baltimore curmudgeon of the early 20th century, that living in Canada must be a lot like living in an apartment over a loud, noisy bar. Throughout the collection of articles is the thought that Trigger's strong emphasis on diversity and multivocality reflects deep Canadian values. Over his career Trigger stressed the importance of different traditions of archaeological practice and this is an important theme in *A History*. He expands on his commitment to Canada and Canadian archaeology in his "Retrospection" at the end of this volume.

Other chapters in *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger* include Ian Hodder's brief essay entitled "Triggering Post-Processual Archaeology and Beyond," in which he both lauds Trigger's efforts to steer his middle course and criticizes him for being trapped by the subject-object dichotomy. Besides being the one who here seems trapped in his own thinking, Hodder falls victim to two qualities of Trigger's work that contribute to what some see as its ambiguity: it is vast and it has evolved. The corpus of Trigger's publications is so enormous that, like the Bible, one can find contradictory

statements if one looks. While Trigger steered a consistent intellectual course during his life, his thinking evolved over time. Wylie also examines Trigger's "moderate relativism" (on that, more below) and while being generally supportive, criticizes him for arguments he makes in his 1998 article, "Archaeology and Epistemology: Dialoguing Across the Darwinian Divide." In that paper, Trigger develops ideas that appear again in *A History* and his "Retrospection," that it is important to understand what he terms evolved human nature and how that operates within the constraints of cultural and social systems. Wylie seems to misunderstand Trigger's point here.

Stephen Chrisomalis examines Trigger's favoured methodology, the comparative method, in studying the development of civilizations. Lynn Meskell discusses Trigger's contributions to social archaeology, noting that Trigger's approach differs from that of the journal *Social Archaeology*. Randall McGuire examines Trigger's Marxism (discussed further below). Junko Habu and Clair Fawcett discuss V. Gordon Childe's impact on Japanese archaeology. Silvia Tomaskava reviews the history of thinking about shamanism and gender in archaeology, following Trigger's advocacy of disciplinary histories. These are followed by five chapters exploring in varying ways Trigger's contributions to Native issues through ethnohistory, archaeology, and advocacy: "Bruce Trigger's Impact on Ontario Iroquoian Studies" (by R. Pearce, R. MacDonald, D. Smith, P. Timmins, and G. Warrick); Martha Latta on *The Children of Aatentsic*, Trigger's monumental study of the Huron; Toby Morantz's "In the Land of the Lions: The Ethnohistory of Bruce Trigger"; Alexander von Gernet's "The Influence of Bruce Trigger on the

Forensic Reconstruction of Aboriginal History"; and Eldon Yellowhorn's "The Awakening of Internalist Archaeology in the Aboriginal World." The final three chapters are Michael Bisson's appreciation of Trigger at McGill University, Brian Fagan on "Bruce Trigger: Ambassador for Archaeology," and Trigger's own "Retrospection." This is followed by Trigger's truly overwhelming bibliography. I apologize to article authors for not discussing each of their contributions, but I have to move on to *A History of Archaeological Thought.*

The second edition of *A History of Archaeological Thought* is expanded and considerably reworked relative to the first edition (548 pages of text vs. 411, not counting bibliographic essays). In grappling with *A History*, I found *Understanding Early Civilizations* (Trigger 2003), Trigger's other recent vast book, extremely helpful. The primary goal of both editions of *A History* is to assess "problems of subjectivity, objectivity, and of the gradual accumulation of knowledge" (p. 1). These problems arise from the conflicting claims of what he sees as the three "alternative epistemologies … currently being applied to archaeology": positivism, extreme relativism, and moderate relativism. In Trigger's words:

> Positivist epistemologists maintain that society and culture exert no significant influence on the development of archaeology, which is shaped by explicit theories being tested in the light of adequate evidence and according to proper scientific methods. Extreme relativists argue that the interpretation of archaeological data is so influenced by the intellectual persuasions, class interests, ethnic loyalties, gender prejudices, and

> personal self-interest of archaeologists that objectivity is impossible. There is no such thing as objective knowledge, and, therefore, no one truth but many possible antithetical truths. Moderate relativists concede that archaeological interpretations are influenced by society, culture and self-interest but maintain that archaeological evidence constrains speculation (p. 2).

It is also his purpose to demonstrate the importance and usefulness of historical and comparative analyses in filtering through competing knowledge and epistemological claims. Trigger's account and analysis of archaeology's history is structured by his historical materialism and by his commitment to a Realist philosophical stance (e.g., Bunge 2006).

Trigger's Marxism is examined by Randall McGuire in *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger.* This fine essay is both an excellent explication of Marxist fundamentals, perhaps the best one-chapter account of Marxism of which I am aware, and of Trigger's development as an historical materialist. McGuire reviews V. Gordon Childe's profound influence on Trigger and notes that Trigger embraced Marxism's three goals: to know the world, to critique the world, and to change the world. One of McGuire's goals is to demonstrate the role of the dialectic in Trigger's thinking. McGuire suggests that much of the apparent ambiguity of Trigger's published thought (e.g., the difficulties in pigeonholing him into ready-made theoretical boxes) stems from the dialectical nature of his thinking. The dialectic is perhaps clearest in *Understanding Ancient Civilizations*, in which Trigger sets up a clear opposition between what he

calls rationalist and romantic accounts of human behaviour and it is also at play in *A History*, although more subtly. However, in his focus on the dialectic, McGuire misses one of Childe's most important influences on Trigger: Childe's propositions: "(1) that the world people adapt to is not the world as it really is but the world as people imagine it to be and (2) that every understanding of the world must accord to a significant degree with the world as it really is, if people and their ideas are to survive" (*A History:* p. 482).

This syllogism grounds Trigger's "moderate relativism" and is his bridge between positivism and idealism by making both ideas about the world and the real world important and the proper subjects of archaeological investigation. He comments ruefully in *A History* that if archaeologists had paid attention to it, we might have been spared considerable bootless theoretical debate, although he also suggests that archaeology had to go through the debate, had to struggle, to be able to appreciate Childe's insight.

The recognition that there is a real world to which ideas about the world have to correspond or which at least limits ideas about the world is also at the core of Trigger's advocacy of realism, an epistemological approach that he saw as an alternative to both positivism and idealism. Mario Bunge, one of realism's chief architects (e.g., Bunge 2006), is a Professor of Philosophy at McGill University, where Trigger taught for most of his career. It interests me that despite his presence at McGill and the frequent citations to Bunge's work in *A History* and elsewhere, he is not mentioned in *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger,* even by Trigger in his "Retrospection." Realism for Trigger is a materialist epistemology that, for archaeologists, accepts the exis-

tence of a past separate from and independent of the ideas and perceptions of archaeologists or others about it, and of an archaeological record independent of archaeologists in the same way the world is separate from our imagining of it in Childe's syllogism. Realists study both things (appearances) and the effects of things or processes that cannot themselves be directly observed (e.g., ideas). For Trigger, this provides a materialist basis for studying ideas and their effects. Why does a materialist basis matter? Elsewhere Trigger asserts that it would be difficult to be other than a materialist if one accepts that we humans, our bodies and brains—and by implication what they do—evolved as adaptations to a material world (Trigger 1998: 10).

Trigger did not regard materialism as an epistemology (a way of knowing about the world) but as an ontology (in his terms, how we understand the world). He distinguished ontological materialism from ontological idealism, which "in its most extreme form denies the existence of the world, holding only ideas to be real. A less extreme version of ontological idealism that is prevalent in the social sciences accepts the existence of the material world but asserts the autonomous existence and primacy of ideas" (Trigger 1998: 10). It is these latter two positions together that he labels "extreme relativism" in the lengthy passage from *A History* quoted above. However, he does not equate ontological materialism with the positivism of that statement. For Trigger, we have ideas because we evolved to be a symboling species and our ideas and perceptions mediate between us and the world as it is. Archaeological interpretation and explanation therefore must grapple with ideas in the past or at least their effects as visible in the archaeological record,

as well as our own ideas about the past. In the 1998 article, he suggested that the three available epistemologies—realist, positivist, and idealist (distinguished from ontological idealism)—actually are complementary approaches, accounting for different aspects of human behavior. It is not so clear that he saw them in the same way in *A History*.

In *A History of Archaeological Theory,* Trigger sets out to explore the extent to which archaeological theories about the past are independent of the accumulated empirical knowledge of that record and the extent to which that empirical knowledge accumulates independently of our ideas and the cultural context through the explicit application of scientific methodologies. He begins with "Classical and Other Text-based Archaeologies" (Chapter 2), which start in antiquity, and ends in the 1990s with the debates between processualism and postprocessualism (Chapter 8). Between them he examines "Antiquarianism without Texts" (Chapter 3), "The Beginnings of Prehistoric Archaeology" (Chapter 4), "Evolutionary Archaeology" (Chapter 5), "Cultural Historical Archaeology" (Chapter 6), and "Early Functional-Processual Archaeology," which includes his discussions of Soviet Archaeology and V. Gordon Childe (Chapter 7). He concludes with what he calls a "Pragmatic Synthesis" (Chapter 9) and "The Relevance of Archaeology" (Chapter 10).

Trigger finds that, indeed, "there is no evidence that in their interpretation of archaeological data archaeologists today are less influenced by the milieu in which they live than they were formerly … By contrast, the history of archaeology suggests a growing body of archaeological data offers ever stronger resistance to the misapplication of such

ideas and the specific misinterpretation of archaeological data" (p. 484). A key issue is how that body of data grows. Trigger looks to what he calls "Middle-Ranging Theory," distinguishing it from Binford's middle range theory (which he includes in middle-ranging theory), as essential to accomplishing this. He sees middle-ranging theories as methodologies that archaeologists are converging upon globally, regardless of local traditions of archaeological practice and commitments to high-level theory. He identifies some middle-ranging theories as better than others. He also sees multivocality as ensuring what might be called cumulative objectivity and endorses both the notion of multiple working hypotheses and Wylie's analogies of archaeological lines of evidence and inference forming inferential cables and of tacking between cables. Beyond that, the history and state of archaeology is too complicated for simple summation. A selected list of other conclusions that I found particularly interesting includes:

• The development of archaeology does have a degree of directionality not allowed by extreme relativism and the on-going accumulation of archaeological knowledge does allow for the detection of error;

• Perhaps the most important distinction in the development of archaeology will not be among theoretical schools but between text-based and non-text-based archaeologies, because it is only in the former that anthropological theories can be fully explored while only in the latter can archaeology investigate long-term sociocultural change, a task only archaeology can undertake and which is its primary contribution to the social sciences;

- That regardless of inevitable structural and cross-cultural frustrations, archaeology benefits by close ties with anthropology;
- Archaeologists should work towards empowering Indigenous peoples to "guard and protect their culture heritage," including training Indigenous people to become "fully qualified archaeologists." He takes the stance that, "Cultural heritage should be legally recognized as the dual possession of the descendents of the people who created it and of all humanity, to whose cultural creativity and diversity it attests" (p. 545). He warns against allowing local groups that exercise "political or economic control" to dictate the conclusions that archaeologists draw from their research. Interestingly, he is cautious about the role and use of oral traditions in archaeological interpretations;
- He warns against allowing high-level theories (e.g., Marxism, Processualism, Post-Processualism) to exert their own "nefarious influences on archaeological interpretation" (p. 545). He worries, for example, about extreme relativists treating creationist and archaeological reconstructions of the past as equally valid. We are challenged, he says, to rescue the study of the past from "an aggressive miasma of atavistic speculation" (p. 547).

On a larger scale, in *A History of Archaeological Thought* and *Understanding Early Civilizations* and elsewhere, he seems to me to have been grappling with a much larger intellectual project, which is accounting for cross-cultural continuities and similarities, sources of local variation and the interplay between them to explain the course of history. This leads him in his "Retrospection" and in *Understanding Early Civilizations* to advocate strongly the necessity of understanding human nature, how we are hard-wired into certain patterns of thought and action. He suggests that we need to do this to counter what he terms the "vapid speculations about human nature by biologists, psychologists and social anthropologists that currently are flooding the book market [and] may prove as socially dangerous as racial explanations ever were in the nineteenth and early twentieth century." He goes on to say, in what might be the best short summary of his intellectual career, "While these findings cast doubt upon beliefs I have held all my life, I regard this not as an intellectual defeat but as a welcome challenge. Cherished ideas should not be abandoned lightly, but they should also not go unexamined" (*Retrospection,* p. 252).

A History of Archaeological Thought is humbling and overwhelming in its command of ideas and evidence and the lucidity of its prose. This book would be the largest jewel in the crown of any scholar's career; that Trigger published two vast works within three years simply confirms Trigger's abilities. One could, I suppose, quibble that *A History* is a revision. Having taught with both editions, I can attest that the second is a thorough revision.

One cannot read a work of such scope and not find points of disagreement. The dichotomies he establishes at the beginning of the book (e.g., extreme positivists) are over-simplifications and I think his narrow linking of science and scientific methodology with positivism is over-drawn. I would include scientific methods appropriate to an historical science such as archaeology as the first on my list of methods to ensure cumulative objectivity (particularly testing through

recursiveness). On the other hand, his discussions of realism sent me off to read Bunge (whose views I find appealing), to renew my long-term acquaintance with Childe, and to read a lot more Trigger. I think he is correct to endorse realism (what I call Childe's syllogism) and to tackle evolved human nature.

Clearly, *A History* should be read by all professional and budding archaeologists, and *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger* by those interested in Trigger as an archaeologist, a person, and a major figure in Canadian archaeology. *A History* works well in graduate level courses on archaeological theory and history, although I think the first edition works better because it is shorter, allowing students to read a wider range of publications. The second edition is so encompassing that students can suffer from theory and Trigger fatigue.

I end this review with Trigger's final words in *A History*, words that to me are a call for archaeologists to move beyond the sometimes sterile and trifling theoretical debates that have absorbed us and to get on with the business of studying long-term change: "In a world that, as a result of increasingly powerful technologies, has become too dangerous and is changing too quickly for humanity to rely to considerable extent on trial and error, knowledge derived from archaeology may be important to human survival. If archaeology is to serve that purpose, archaeologists must strive against heavy odds to see the past and the human behavior as each was, not as they or anyone else for their own reasons wish them to have been" (p. 548).

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