

Changing perspectives: Towards a reflexive (and Indigenous) Australian archaeology

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The last 50 years have left Australian archaeology somewhat polarised and at a crossroads, as the recent *Dark Emu* debate indicated (Lourandos 2021): in what direction to go now? How did we get here and how might the next 50 years play out? Explored here is the *trajectory* of changing perspectives leading to today's Indigenous archaeology and beyond.

Australian archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s was largely shaped around the British Cambridge school and North American processual archaeology (Cultural Ecology).

Critiquing Australian archaeology

Critique of Australian archaeology in the 1970s and 1980s was mainly a reaction to approaches and narratives of the time framed in terms of long-term cultural stability, with *environmentally deterministic* undertones. In contrast to these, the Australian Intensification debate, for example, emphasised change, sociocultural dynamics and a critique of the environmental/ecological paradigm that has dominated Australian and world archaeology since the 1970s and 1980s and still continues to do so today (Lourandos and Ross 2021). The debate opened up new conceptual spaces and steered archaeology towards more nuanced socioecological frameworks that welcomed diversity, including Indigenous and minority perspectives. Representations of Australian 'hunter-gatherers' also were reshaped, from passive societies, largely controlled by the natural environment, to active participants within both natural and sociocultural environments.

The debate was an extension of similar world debates which resulted in the 'post-processual' movement of the late 1980s that questioned the dominant techno-environmental approaches of the time and opened wide the door to new



understandings and voices. Despite this critique, contrasting, dichotomous models of Australian and New Guinea archaeology predominated, including their representations of 'hunter-gatherers'. And the more *consensual* ethno-anthropological approach of the day, that demonstrated significant *overlap* between Australian Aboriginal practices of plant management and those of New Guinea, was largely sidestepped; *even though it offered a potential clinal archaeological model through time for Australian archaeology*.

Indigenous (First Nations) voices emerged more strongly from the mid-1980s, along with a wider representation of participants in world archaeology including those of the Third World, who questioned the *post-colonial* narratives that underlie much of archaeology's explanatory framework. In all, these changing perspectives resulted in a widening of approaches, voices and attitudes throughout the archaeological world including Australia. In the mid-1990s, Indigenous concerns and studies were made a priority by the Australian Archaeological Association.

New voices: A reflexive (and Indigenous) archaeology

New voices and reflexive approaches have released a slew of important new issues for archaeologists to work with.

Reflexivity, for example, acknowledges *your* own role in the research process, your beliefs, judgements and experiences, and your effect (and that of the research) upon others and the surrounding environment. Reflexivity operates between *investigator* and *investigated*, *action* and *consequence* (each affecting the other) and thus reshapes *both* within their environment. A reflexive perspective is a *socially conscious*, critical, analytical archaeology that focuses

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upon interpretation, which occurs at all analytical levels.

This battery of issues might seem far removed from laboratory and field work, but it is not. Those who see 'science' as largely free of these broader issues, often forget that 'scientific' procedure and its interpretations are *influenced* by (as well as influence) the sociocultural environment which surrounds them. They cannot be assumed to operate '*objectively*'. Many of the key debates of Australian archaeology, for example, have largely shaped the course of archaeological procedure including research design, excavation, analysis and interpretation of material over the past 60 years or so in both academic and public archaeological arenas. That is, these debates lie at the core of *knowledge creation* in archaeology.

Post-processualism, new voices and the increasing integration of First Nations peoples' views and beliefs in archaeology, continue to challenge narrow behavioural ecology paradigms such as optimal foraging, evolutionary ecology, and environmental determinism and their *underlying* narratives of human behaviour.

In their place, methodologies derived from Indigenous Archaeologies seek to integrate Western and Indigenous knowledge systems into multivocal understandings of the past. Indigenous histories of artefacts and locales, for example, are embedded in traditional histories of people, place, and landscape.

New directions, including the phenomenological, begin to leave behind the old split between *nature* and *nurture*; a division drawn from early colonialism. Here no clear separation exists between socio-cultural and natural environments; culture versus nature is blurred not dichotomised and both are *interrelated*. For example, what exactly is the *natural environment*?

And post-colonial studies critique the politics behind the construction of Indigenous peoples' identities in historical and contemporary texts, together with their *underlying* post-colonial narratives. Broadly similar, important issues also challenge today's archaeologists and the ways they construct the past.

Regarding the construction of both *past* and *present*: as the past is always viewed through the lens of the present, both concepts can be seen as being created together, rather than separately. Our views of the past, therefore, are coloured by our vision of the present; the two ideas appearing *intertwined* into a kind of *present-past*.

Developing a socially conscious archaeology thus allows also for current concerns, such as Indigenous marginalisation, climate change and the effects of globalisation, to name a few, to be more freely and widely debated and integrated with archaeological

research. These are not just challenging issues for other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.

All in all, a clear historical trajectory is visible, stemming from the debates, issues and literature surrounding the wider Intensification debate of the 1970s and 1980s, via post-processualism through to today's Indigenous Australian Archaeology, social archaeology and beyond (Lourandos and Ross 2021).

The original debates flourished during the more liberal sociopolitical climate of the 1970s and 1980s, that was characterised by exploratory, interdisciplinary academic studies challenging prior, often narrower, approaches. In contrast, the more conservative 1990s succumbed to globalisation, bureaucratisation and a tightening of disciplinary boundaries; trends that continue today. There was a greater focus upon middle-range approaches (often, with limited objectives) and a shying away from broader, theoretically-based perspectives as had defined the 1970s and 1980s.

Uniting voices

Strong clues to the Australian archaeology of the *next* 50 years can be found in the issues and examples of the above historical trajectory.

One of the most significant results of Australian archaeology is the inclusion of the Indigenous voice and perspective. Similar Indigenous 'renaissances' can be found, to varying degrees, in the archaeologies of regions previously colonised by Europeans, including South and North America. Unlike their predecessors, however, now silenced by time, these present-day descendants of the past found their voice and 'spoke up'. Archaeology would never be the same again.

Indigenous methodologies, perspectives and voices provide alternative narratives and ways to view past and present, and challenge conservative, post-colonial narratives often buried deep within archaeology's explanations. Multivocality, post-colonial studies and anthropological and sociological perspectives add even more. Investigating the richness and diversity of Aboriginal Australia, as sought by the *Dark Emu* debate (Lourandos 2021), will need to enlist all these traditional skills and more, including the phenomenological and wider anthropological tools.

The tensions, however, between materially oriented techno-environmental approaches (often located within environmentally deterministic paradigms) and more critical voices and viewpoints, have not gone away. Tensions have increased in more conservative times, beginning in the 1990s and continue today.

With the integration of Indigenous perspectives, ongoing critique and a *reimagining* and reworking

of old paradigms (both ecological and socio-cultural) this theoretical and methodological *divide* can be overcome. While the divide may widen during more conservative sociopolitical climates, past experience should enable archaeology to tackle the more challenging times.

Worrying signs today, however, alert us to future possibilities: such as the closing and disassembling of humanities departments and the divorcing of archaeology and laboratory studies from the wider teachings of anthropology. And present political dissent from a unified Indigenous Voice to Parliament has deep and conservative historical roots and points to ongoing, perhaps protracted, struggles.

In all, the issues above are the foundations upon which knowledge in archaeology today and tomorrow is structured, organised and created. Foreknowledge of their beginnings and development

forearms us in constructing tomorrow's Australian archaeology.

Disclosure statement

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