Debating Archaeology

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Long ago Albert Spaulding observed, correctly in my opinion, that the science of archaeology could be properly described in terms of (a) its subject matter and (b) the dimensions in terms of which this subject matter is studied (Spaulding 1960). The subject matter that we as archaeological scientists study is simply artifacts. We observe all of those modifications of natural materials and, secondarily, of artifacts themselves that humans and hominids produce as a result of their lifeways. We do not study human behavior, as Schiffer advocates, we do not study symbolic codes (cf. Hodder, Patrlik), we do not study systems (cf. Redman), we do not study ancient cultures, we do not study ancient settlements, nor do we study the past. We study artifacts.

In addition, archaeologists study artifacts with respect to three broad dimensions: form, space, and the inferred dimension of time. Any arguments that we might make about the past in any form—for instance, this was an ancient camping place, ancient peoples were hunters and gatherers, these ancients were organized into egalitarian societies, the producers of the artifacts had certain religious beliefs—are all inferences made from our study of artifacts. This means quite directly that all statements we make about the past as a result of our archaeological endeavors are only as good as the justifications we offer for the inferences that we make. The single most important aspect of any approach to the past through the study of artifacts attributed to the past concerns the methods of inference justification used by the archaeologist so bold as to make assertive statements about the past from the study of artifacts here in the present.

A survey of the contemporary discipline of archaeology reveals a bewildering array of individuals who call themselves archaeologists yet in many cases neglect the most important aspect of the challenge of being one, that is, the development of reliable means for inference justification. There are the advocates of contextual archaeology, behavioral archaeology, social archaeology, Marxist archaeology, historical archaeology, demographic archaeology, Southwest archaeology, Paleolithic archaeology, nationalistic archaeology, humanist archaeology, classical archaeology, and realist archaeology. Many of these labels betray the kinds of pasts that have been targeted as desirable to explore through archaeological endeavor. Since we cannot address the entire past, we carve up what we would like to know about in different ways, which is, of course, perfectly legitimate.

There are other ways in which the advocates of different kinds of archaeology seek to partition our challenge. These are in terms of (a) what they think is most important
to know about, given their contemporary values and their cultural as well as scientific biases, and more important, (b) how to go about the difficult job of inferring any kind of past. In the latter case the divisions represent differing views on how to do archaeology and how to justify statements about the past through the use of contemporary inferential tools. In the former we enter the domain of contemporary values and are strictly speaking not talking about archaeology at all. Instead, we are identifying the intellectual products of archaeologists as either “good” or “bad” postures, depending upon the critic’s values and the popularity of such postures with other archaeological writers.

In the contemporary era there is much confusion in the archaeological literature as many authors shift back and forth among these very different concerns, apparently assuming that there is some regular and self-evident relationship among the different domains that they address. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear the following argument: (1) I believe that symbolic codes are the fundamental explanatory phenomena underlying the meanings we should be giving to archaeological observations on artifacts. (2) I believe that those who do not agree with me are wrong. (3) Those who disagree with me ignore symbolic codes. (4) This proves that their approaches are worthless. Such an argument is, of course, nonsense. One is only led to such a conclusion if one is operating as an ideologue and not as a scientist.

Another common argument of this type is sometimes found in the feminist literature and takes the following form: (1) Understanding gender relationships is fundamental to understanding past social systems. (2) Examination of the archaeological literature reveals that archaeologists either have not addressed this important issue or, when gender is discussed, have dealt with it in terms of the “common knowledge” biases of the author. The conclusion is that we are all culture-bound, and it is suggested that the only way to overcome this situation is to become “self aware.”

Once again, this is nonsense. If the goal of a science is to know something about the past that is dependent upon inference, then one must develop a reliable methodology that permits reliable inferences to the phenomena of interest. In the absence of such methodology, the only possible treatment of the subject of interest will be in terms of unevaluated “common knowledge” or ideas about the subject available to any writer.

How do we put into place a reliable inferential procedure for learning? It is not a matter of “clearing one’s mind of cultural biases,” as Sir Francis Bacon suggested more than 300 years ago. And responding to the exhortations to seek “awareness” only results in the trivial replacement in our prose of offensive words (“mankind”) with neutral ones (“humankind”) but not necessarily with any growth in knowledge. Similarly, the substitution of one set of cultural biases, those being criticized, for another, those being advocated, does not lead to learning. At best our contemporary culture is updated; at worst it is totally misguided, and hindsight, a perspective only accessible to the next generation, becomes the only arbiter. This is negligence, not epistemology.

Clearly, I have criticized two points of view in the examples above. Have I also criticized two persons, two debate participants? The answer must, I think, be yes. Were these personal attacks or were they arguments of the kind that logicians term ad hominem? By asking this question I introduce another major source of confusion and
perplexity for the inexperienced reader of archaeological literature. Any serious student probably knows something about logic and knows that *ad hominem* argument means literally “argument against the man.” These can take the form of insinuations or allegations of bad character or low intelligence in the author of any argument (to cite only two common tactics) and are followed by the recommendation that the argument of such a person should obviously be dismissed. Logicians and those who observe logical conventions reject as invalid an approach that focuses on personal characteristics of the argument maker rather than on any reasoned criticism of the properties of the argument itself.

If, however, the construction of an argument is a personal activity, and if one points out what are considered to be deficiencies in the construction of the argument, is this not also a comment on the skill and thoughtfulness of the author of the argument? It is certainly likely to be perceived as such by the person whose argument is being criticized. Is this, however, an *ad hominem* argument? The answer must be a resounding no. It is a critical assessment of flaws in an argument that the author may or may not interpret as a commentary on his or her skills and scholarship. The ego sensitivity and perception of the criticized persons do not in any way determine whether the debate has any *ad hominem* properties whatsoever.

Frequently the sensitive subject of criticism responds by accusing the critic of *ad hominem* argument, clearly suggesting that the critic’s views should be dismissed since they violate rules of logic and, by implication, scientific ethics. Ironically, this classic form of *ad hominem* argument becomes a major debate tactic by the very person who claims that it is unacceptable. No wonder the discussion of issues in the archaeological literature is confusing to students. What I hope to show as we review several contemporary controversies is that even this ironic response is intellectually conditioned and is not simply a character flaw in those who use such tactics.

**A TAXONOMY OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS**

As I suggested, there is a strange, mushy mixing in the contemporary literature of (a) interest preferences, (b) subject performances, and (c) the crucial issue of inference justification. The mushiness is attributable to the debate that centers on how we learn and how we evaluate ideas, and the themes and postures associated with this issue will be outlined for the reader of the debate literature in the following epistemological field guide and intellectual species list. For instance, there is the Yippie, who is responsible for what I call Yippie archaeology, which is, of course, inseparable from its ideological underpinnings. Fundamental to Yippie archaeology is the assumption previously alluded to that disciplinary progress results from awareness, from self-examination, from the adoption of a heavily value-laden, humanistic approach to improving ourselves. It is therefore somewhat surprising that, in their less humanistic moments, Yippies indulge in name calling: non-Yippie archaeologists are intellectual imperialists, knowledge colonialists, chauvinistic dehumanizers of mankind. These claims are generally made in the context of rejecting science. Scientists are said to make “absolutist” knowledge claims that are then imperialistically imposed on other
eras, peoples, places, genders, and persuasions. Scientists are called dupes of the establishment, which is a windmill constructed during their 1960s past with which Yippies are still tilting. Of course, they are unaware that they might be guilty of blindness to their own particular ideological commitment, and they demonstrate by their own behavior that they are not free, aware, outside observers capable of direct perception of truth.

Archaeological Yippies depend exclusively upon the strict empiricist assumptions of Baconian science, except in one respect: self-evident truth is not revealed through an examination of the external world. Instead, the Freudian approach of introverted self-examination is adopted. We look within ourselves individually or collectively, and if the questions we ask ourselves about the past are good ones, then we will simply know the appropriate meaning to be given to archaeological phenomena.

Religions are philosophies that consider their fundamental assumptions to be intrinsically true and therefore beyond debate, and all argument is of necessity absolutist in character. We are right, say the believers, and thus the rules of logic and reason are suspended and conversion to the "true" way is the only alternative. Discussion presented from such a perspective frequently adopts any argument that supports one's belief. Arguments from authority predominate, although these arguments themselves remain unevaluated as to accuracy, logical validity, or even relevance to the context into which they are inserted. Archaeological issues are presented in these terms in much of the contemporary Yippie literature.

A contemporary and sympatric species, although only distantly related to Yippie archaeologists, are the Yuppies, those gadget-oriented, technologically dependent experts who look to instrumentation of all kinds as the way to advance archaeological knowledge and understanding. As in the case of the Yippies, I agree with some of their interests and concerns. Nevertheless I disagree on the fundamental question of how we learn. Like many practicing traditional archaeologists, Yuppies are examples of that intellectual dinosaur, the true empiricist. They share the Yippie's fundamental belief in self-evident truth, although they differ over where and how to look for it. The Yippie looks inside himself, the Yuppie looks into a microscope, at a report of a specialist, through an EDM (electronic distance measuring device), or at a class of things not previously examined. The annual meetings of archaeological societies are increasingly dominated by Yuppie symposia with such titles as zooarchaeology, microwear studies, reduction sequences, ceramic technology, phytoliths and man, fish remains and culture, palynology and context, debitage and progress, chi-squares I have known and loved, a $K$-means analysis and nonconclusions, using LSA (LANDSAT aids) for PM (predictive modeling) in CRM studies on BM (Black Mesa), and the SEM (scanning electron microscope) and hominin evolution. If there are stylistic markers, isochrestic perhaps, of the Yippie versus the Yuppie, it is the Yuppie's use of acronyms for everything and the Yippie's endless citations to philosophical literature that most readers mistakenly interpret as a knowledge of that literature's contents.

Yuppies do not normally engage in fundamental debate regarding how to gain knowledge of the past. For them it is simple: we look hard at the world, we look at as many different things as we can think of, in as many different ways as we can imagine, and what we see is truth as a function of the sophistication of our aids to observation.
The greater the variety of such formal aids, the more truth we will see. There have been many Yuppie arguments in the recent literature: the SEM as the only true way of seeing cutmarks; the chi-square as the only true way of recognizing patterning; microwear (as evaluated at a stated microscopic power) as the only true way to recognize function, to cite only a few examples.

Because of Yuppies' commitment to strict empiricism, they have rough, competitive lives. A successful Yuppie is one who is the first to use a new device, an SEM, for instance, and then make the claim that he can see truth denied to others not using such equipment. For a while, the Yuppie rides high with his monopoly on truth. But, alas, soon other empiricists gain access to such equipment and they frequently see Different Things! Different Truth! But how can this be, since the empiricist believes that there is only one truth and it can be known directly? The problem must therefore arise from the inability of the observer to see what the successful Yuppie has seen. The observer must be stupid, sloppy, blind, untruthful, misguided, using old equipment, or self-serving. Thus, as in case of the Yuppie, we return by a very different route to essentially the same epistemological position: truth is established by the personal credentials of the claimant. The Yuppie asks: does the claimant have acceptable moral, ethical, and political views? For the Yuppie, debate descends to a less abstract level at which one must defend one's own position by slandering those who have different views: they see a different "truth" only because they are deficient in character, intelligence, honesty, and so on.

There is another group of archaeologists called Guppies. Guppies are either older than the mean age of contributors to the literature of contemporary debate or they are Canadian. Elder Guppies were frequently the renaissance men and women of their time, since none of the Yuppie specialties proliferating today were developed when Guppies began their careers. Like the Yuppies, however, they were and are strict empiricists. They write books in which the word "evidence" is featured prominently in the title. Unlike their role for Yuppies, technical aids are adjuncts to the pursuit of the archaeologist's quintessential goal—knowing the material. Technical aids may be useful, but there is no substitute for having seen the artifacts, dug up the artifacts, gotten to know the material. In short, a Guppy is an empiricist, but the credentials for Guppy knowledge claims are not, like the Yuppie's, based on the sophistication of the equipment one uses. Instead, the Guppy claims that he knows truth directly because he has spent more time with the data and has seen more of or worked more diligently with the data than others. Like the species that they resemble, Guppies have enormous appetites and are prodigious data consumers. No one could possibly see a different reality unless perhaps he can claim to have seen more artifacts, logged more field time, or spent longer periods of time in intimate association with the artifacts. If alternative views are proposed by other researchers, it is not because they are stupid, dishonest, or manipulative persons. Their error simply lies in their inexperience. Male Guppies see themselves as gentlemen. Opposing views come from upstarts who speak out of turn in a world of truth judged by virtue of "time in grade."

The professional life of the Guppy is more dignified than that of the Yuppie. The Yuppie seeks a monopoly on a way of looking at the world, but the accelerated pace and accessibility of technological change makes preeminence difficult to maintain.
The Guppie gains a monopoly on empirically justified truth by accumulating a greater quantity of observations, normally with the naked eye, which is an instrument that is unlikely to become passe. A Guppie’s credentials include numbers of filled-up passports, years of fieldwork, and particularly, years of dedication to a specific region or time period. Given the generational reality in archaeology, this kind of monopoly is rarely challenged during one’s career.

As one might imagine, such an advantage over the Yuppie strategy is clearly recognized by some promising students; hence we have another class of archaeologist, the Puppies. Puppies are aspiring Guppies whose claim for credibility as a young person is their association with and support from an acknowledged Guppie. Puppies are assured an audience for their views because of their privileged access to and support from an acknowledged Guppie.

Guppies can defend their monopolies much more successfully than can Yuppies. They create networks to ensure that unwanted challengers are denied access to the all-important data, which for the Guppie is the means to Guppie status. When at last Guppies retire in glory to contemplate their “Golden Marshalltown awards,” they are replaced by their Puppies rather than by thoughtful challengers, since succession is determined by the Puppie’s access to “the evidence” controlled by a skillful Guppie.

Like the other fauna thus far discussed in this field guide, there is a manner of discourse distinctive to the Guppie. I have already mentioned that the Guppie is a gentleman or gentlewoman. Challengers or those who offer new or different ideas are “taken seriously,” although they are dismissed in other ways. Their failure to cite an obscure reference, or their lack of familiarity with the data, or their less than journeyman investment of energy in the relevant region or time period is certain to be pointed out. Discretion is advised because the challenger or innovator is not a Guppie, although perhaps there is some Guppie potential, but for now the Guppie’s judgment must prevail, and the ideas of the non-Guppie should be viewed as evidence of youthful enthusiasm. Puppies, however, should be taken seriously because they are Guppie proteges, and Guppies frequently use their Puppies in debate with colleagues. This is a subtle form of insult.

Guppies are susceptible to a disease inherent in all empiricist approaches, the tendency to deceive oneself. The true Guppie is a strict empiricist who believes in self-evident truth. Similarly, the true Guppie believes that the Guppie Way is the only valid procedure or reliable set of tactics that result in the ability to see nature truly. Guppies can frequently be heard bewailing the “theoretical,” the “speculative,” the “provocative,” the “philosophical” discussions of non-Guppies. They deny any such unfounded nonsense in their own thought since they reason only “from the evidence.” Because they have invested heavily in the process of acquiring the evidence, their ideas of the past must be untouchable by theory, speculation, and all the other tainted intellectual shortcuts employed by the disadvantaged as compensation for their inability to follow the Guppie Way. Herein lies their self-deceit. There is, in fact, an antidote. Guppies need to take seriously the non-Guppie-generated debates in archaeology, since most such debates at least acknowledge the role that our own ideas play in conditioning the conclusions we draw from experience. In fact, most controversies involve attacks on strict empiricism and come from many different species in our archaeological bestiary.
The Guppie, like the Yippie, Yuppie, and particularly the Puppie, ultimately relies on arguments that are *ad hominem* in character, although the form of such arguments varies with each of these empiricist subspecies. Yuppies use moral, ethical, and political criteria, whereas Yuppies commonly are more personal and attack the character, reliability, and honesty of their adversaries. The Guppie dismisses adversaries by weighing the "time and investment" criteria relative to the Guppie Way. Puppies, however, are more eclectic in their choice of *ad hominem* argument. After all, their perspective is constantly being upgraded by the addition of new data. These are interfertile subspecies, and one can sometimes find hybrids.

There are other species in our midst. Distantly related to the Yuppies and the Puppies, the Lollies are a suite of subspecies that share the ancestral trait of hyper-ambitiousness. They deviate significantly, however, from Guppies, who deny the role that their own ideas play in structuring their conclusions. Carefree Lollies deny that the problem of epistemology and method has any relevance whatsoever to what they do as archaeologists, while at the same time boasting of the importance of their ideas to their conclusions. Lollies are the "model fitters and builders," the voices who claim that the albatross around archaeologists' necks is methodology and a concern with epistemology. The Lollie is musically oriented. His methodological prescription for archaeologists is derived from an old partytime song: "Hey Lollie, lollie, lollie/Hey lollie, lollie-oh." This lighthearted refrain instructs us how to proceed: we are to make up the words as we go along. The winning Lollie, then, is the one who makes up the best words to accommodate the most widely known and appreciated human situations. In archaeology these are frequently identified as the origins of the state, the origins of agriculture, the appearance of stratification, the appearance of sedentism, the peopling of the New World, the appearance of trade—human situations about which any party-goer is likely to have some familiarity. The successful Lollie is one who is able to fit his new words in a clever way to as much previously appreciated experience as possible. An unsuccessful Lollie is one who requires that you appreciate his song by denying previously shared and accepted "knowledge." This means that in the absence of methodology such a Lollie has to sing many songs at different scales and with respect to many different domains of previous observation to keep the party going long enough to get to the really big rendition. Given the "make up the words as you go along" procedure, the preliminary songs rarely hang together and the final rendition frequently falls on its face.

The fate of the overly ambitious Lollie is really no big loss to archaeology. The skillful Lollie, however, may be charming, even convincing some that he offers to the field more than just fun at a party. Eating *R*-selected species may be taken as a serious replacement for other lyrics involving diet breadth, package size, and other concepts developed in the thoughtful context of ecological studies. Songs that tell of great redistributive agents and impressive chiefs in Chaco Canyon can serve as the basis for convening still other parties at our national meetings.

This intellectual safari is meant to be fun, so don't take it too seriously. It is my own Jollie approach to the introduction of a few examples of the species that participate in archaeological debates. If my little excursion into Jollie-ism has been successful, it is only because I allude to a descriptive taxonomy that is widely recognized within the field. My Jollie-esque generalizations are one way of encouraging the reader to realize
that the participants in archaeological debates are comparable to different species, only on an intellectual plane. The reader of debates in archaeology, like spectators at any other scientific combat, must become skilled in recognizing different types of archaeologists and must become knowledgeable with regard to their intellectual clades and phylogenetic interrelationships. Each different species takes certain forms of behavior for granted, has different values, and frequently makes very different ontological assumptions about the world. The reader of debates needs to appreciate such things.

CURRENT DEBATES IN THE LITERATURE

I have long been associated with what critics have called the “new archaeology” of the 1960s. This was a label given to us, and not advocated by us, during the days of debate, primarily in American archaeology, over the degree to which the methods commonly in use by archaeologists at the time could in fact lead to a realistic accomplishment of their goals. The issues were epistemological: fundamentally, how do we have confidence in or render secure the inferences and descriptions of the past offered by virtue of our study of artifacts? This question unites all archaeology, regardless of what one might think is appropriate to know about the past or what regional or temporal segments of the past one addresses.

There was a past. It had properties unto itself. The goals of science are to understand the external world in terms of itself. An archaeological scientist must accept the challenge to understand the past in its own terms. If we can suspect that the past was different from the present, then it should be obvious that we cannot simply project in any simple form our knowledge of the present onto the past. When we do this, we prevent the past from being known in its own terms! At the same time, our complete dependence upon prior knowledge ensures that we do not recognize or even acknowledge phenomena about which we know nothing. The intellectual tightrope that archaeologists must dextrously walk requires that we use our knowledge, knowledge available in the contemporary world, in such a way as to expose new knowledge about pasts previously unknown. At the end of this tightrope is the demand that we work accurately so that the past is described in its own terms. We seek to know a past in terms that do not distort its own characteristics, yet we must accomplish this in our terms, through the use of our available knowledge. Given such challenges, it is not surprising that there are many “points of view” and many approaches. Is each view equally valid and worth investigating simply because the variants represent cultural variety in the contemporary world? I think the answer must be no. The serious archaeologist must accept the intellectual challenge to address the epistemological and methodological problems we all face in our attempts to gain knowledge of the past. We must evaluate and criticize our own work, as well as the proposals of our colleagues of different persuasions, in order to know how we might proceed and what are realistic goals toward which our research efforts should be aimed. An active, serious, and progressive scientific discipline is by nature disputatious.

From the perspective of the serious student who faces the mounds of literature
currently available in archaeology, it might appear that in terms of the "disputatious" criterion archaeology is an "active, serious, and progressive" discipline. Would such a judgment be accurate? I would have to say that perhaps the literature is misleading on this score. Much of the disputatious character of the literature arises from the bruised egos of participants and not from substantive discussion of the issues in the field. In fact, in many of the more visible disputes, one or more participants may be unaware of or deny the validity of the issues upon which their adversaries base their challenge. This situation results in many assertions and rebuttals but no clarification of the argument, much less progress toward its resolution. From time to time a Yippie-like article will appear (sometimes written by a Guppie) pointing out that archaeologists are endlessly calling one another "slimy green frogs" and that such childish behavior is inappropriate in a serious discipline. Nevertheless it continues. Why? Is this a reflection of the character of archaeologists?

I will adopt a non-Yippie position and try to argue throughout this book that such behavior is the only logical outcome of the initial, and to my mind inappropriate, epistemological position of most practicing archaeologists. The species that I have poked fun at share an uncritical acceptance of empiricist principles, and at the same time they behave in ways that contradict those principles. I have been selective in my choice of debates in which to participate, areas of research interest to use as a debate arena, and levels of detail at which I should become involved. These choices have directly influenced my judgments about where and how to criticize what I consider to be intellectual straightjackets that divert productive archaeological investigations and interfere with recognition of important domains in need of serious attention. I will argue that Albert Spaulding's description of archaeology with which I began this introduction is appropriate and, as such, has far-reaching implications for archaeological research and intellectual speciation.