CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	"I didn't know you were into that sort of thing?!": Or theoretical confessions of an environmental archaeologist
Authors	Gearey, Benjamin R.
Publication date	2019-01-01
Original Citation	Gearey, B. (2019) "I didn't know you were into that sort of thing?!": Or Theoretical Confessions of an Environmental Archaeologist, Internet Archaeology, 53, available online: https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.9
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue53/editorial.html - 10.11141/ia.53.9
Rights	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/.0/
Download date	2026-11-08 03:12:06
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8945



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Like
Tweet
Altmetric
Citations

"I didn't know you were into that sort of thing?!": Or Theoretical Confessions of an Environmental Archaeologist

Benjamin Gearey

University College Cork, Department of Archaeology, Connolly Building, Cork, Ireland. Email: B.Gearey@ucc

Cite this as: Gearey, B. 2019 "I didn't know you were into that sort of thing?!": Or Theoretical Confessions an Environmental Archaeologist, Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.9

Some years back I remember mentioning to a colleague, as I was leaving a certain conference early to head to another one, The Theoretical Archaeology Group Conferen (TAG Dublin in fact, which is now, I suppose, more than 'some years' back) to be met with the response: 'I didn't know you were into that sort of thing!?'. Those words stuc with me; they made me laugh, as if I'd admitted to something really very risqué and inappropriate. I'd apparently acquired an interest in 'that sort of thing' as a callow postgraduate in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sheffield in the early 1990s. It was impossible to avoid 'theory' there, with Mike Parker Pearson, Paul Halstead, Glynis Jones, John Moreland, the late Marek Zvelebil and others teaching an researching, although I was studying on the slightly less fashionable MSc rather than the MA (to this day, I can only think of Shanks and Tilley (1987) as 'The Red Book' as result of joining conversations with the latter students).

Confession #1: I arrived at Sheffield armed with a degree in History, with my archaeological knowledge extending to Roman Britain: I was totally unprepared for th business end of Halstead's 'Middle Range theory' or Parker Pearson's 'post-processualism' and spent quite some months wondering what the hell everyone was talking about. But what it did instill in me, once I'd got over the initial shock and confusion, was the importance of a questioning perspective and a critical attitude to th belief that the past was important just *because…*

Probably the one surefire way to start a debate in a given room of archaeologists, no matter their period, specialism, or place of employment, is to mention the 'T-word'. Fe subjects in the discipline polarise opinion more than archaeological theory. Anyone els who's ever mentioned that they're going to TAG has probably been met by a groan an

eyes thrown to heaven by some colleague, and perhaps a comment similar to the on delivered to me that time. This is in many ways understandable: phrases such as 'the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*', 'Ingoldian taskscapes' or 'flat ontologies', which ma be part of the vocabulary of the theoretically engaged, can sound like the deliberate language of exclusion to others.

How many people have read *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927) in the original? Confession #2: not me. (But I have read the excellent and clear summary of Heidegger's work and thought by Caputo (2018); highly recommended.) Over the yea I've been going, TAG has provided both the most thought-provoking as well as at time the most impenetrable discussions, employing language and concepts I have a tenuou grasp on at very best and no idea what is being discussed at worst (Confession #3). B here's the other thing: no one else who regards themselves as 'theoretically engaged' has time to engage theoretically with every new (or often, old) school of thought. Nor, would suggest, is this desirable or necessary.

Probably the biggest single issue for me concerns the definition or *assumed* definition 'theory'. For many people, and this split is not one of 'environmental' versus 'other' archaeologists, the word theory is often pejorative: 'arm-waving bullsh*t' or worse. Fc some, the definition is critical in a foundational sense: 'real' practitioners don't 'do' theory; theory is unimportant to those at the trowel's edge or, in the context of this publication, to those at the microscope's eyepiece…

I've always taken a fairly simple, possibly naive, starting point: to practise any archaeology of any form is to assume a theoretical position whether one acknowledge or recognises it or not: from the most basic assumption that the study of the past is valuable in some form, through to the interpretative frameworks we utilise in different sub-fields: it's theory of one form or another all the way down. How can it not be? Thi belief is of course hardly original (see Johnson 2010). To state that theory is 'arm waving…' is itself to adopt a theoretical stance: one that implicitly holds one's own approach is of incontrovertible self-evident value and definition. As I try and encourag the 2nd year archaeology students in seminars held as part of the 'History of Archaeological Thought' module at UCC, I regard a theoretical archaeological engagement as being defined first and foremost as *thinking about thinking* (Confessio #4: this is my short, inadequate summary of 'theory', if pushed to make one). So any reflection in this way is 'practising' theory: it's not by definition necessary to employ arcane language or concepts from the first off. But, what it does require is a willingnes to confront one's own intellectual vulnerability and assumptions.

The deeper down this rabbit hole one descends (or tumbles…), certain words and tric concepts, become useful or necessary to frame or capture the essence of thought. Which leads me to Confession #5: I enjoy the sense of disorientation and at times, mixing metaphors, loss of the reassuring gravity of one's own disciplinary orbit, that thinking theoretically can bring. Another way of putting it, and I owe this concept to many discussions with Prof. Henry Chapman over the years: to think theoretically is tc view familiar concepts through a different lens, one that can lead to new perspectives on old questions (see Chapman 2018). Looking through a different lens can make familiar territory look rather alien. There can of course be dense language in theory th is sometimes apparently impenetrable: but then so is the average palaeoecological paper, or many other archaeological science publications, if that's not your '…sort of thing'.

The articles in this issue of *Internet Archaeology* are, with two exceptions, written versions of presentations given at the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference in Bradford in 2015. The session was entitled '*Short on cover and humming with crossfir Revisiting Environmental Archaeology Method and Purpose* (EAMP for short; Albarella 2001). The latter volume was itself the product of a session held at TAG Birmingham i 1998: over 20 years have thus passed between the two. The intention was not to revi all the questions and issues in close detail, but to use the publication as a touchstone reflect on changes and developments in environmental archaeology since the late 20th century.

Something that stands out in terms of both sessions and publications is the underlying motivation for the contributors to question assumptions about *why* environmental archaeology is a worthy subject of enquiry and *how* this value is defined, developed ar communicated. In many ways the intellectual landscape is noticeably different. In particular, the development and progress made through new analytical techniques has led to claims of another 'scientific revolution' (Kristiansen 2017). Less positive 'turns' include those in higher education, particularly in the UK, leading to new research pressures on the discipline (see Howard, this issue). Other agendas such as Public Archaeology (Law, this issue) did not feature in the original session but have grown significantly since 1998. The potential synergies between archaeology and other fields such as the Environmental Humanities offer new perspectives for both: Andy Hoaen draws palaeoecology into conversation with ecocriticism, while Erin Kavanagh and Mar Bates demonstrate how the arts, sciences and humanities can also meet through different 'ways of knowing' and The Deep Map.

The TAG Bradford session was also fortunate to include input from Professor Terry O'Connor, who was responsible for the original evocative expression: '…short on cover and humming with crossfire…' (O'Connor 2001) and he presents his take on the chur up (and now corpse strewn?) 'no persons ground' two decades on (O'Connor, this iss Liz Pearson was also in attendance at both sessions and her article considers the state of play in commercial environmental archaeology, reflecting in particular on the potent for contribution to research questions despite ever-present pressures (Pearson, this issue).

Another issue related to what may be referred to as epistemology, is that since the publication of EAMP, certain of the separate 'sub-fields' of 'environmental archaeology' have clearly developed their own theoretical agendas more explicitly than others. The emergence of 'social archaeozoology', for example (e.g. Russell 2011), or the developments in archaeobotany that Lisa Lodwick discusses in her comprehensive summary (Lodwick, this issue). This can be contrasted with palaeoecology, especially palynology, which as a rule has little tradition of explicit theoretical exposition (Richer and Gearey 2017). Just to be clear, I don't intend that comment as a denigration of al the technical and methodological progress that has evidently been made in this field, more a statement of fact that I expect few palaeoecologists would disagree with.

Some might also say that theory is someone else's problem, to be applied after the da are collected (Edwards *et al*. 2015); to which in part at least I would respond by pointing them at Confession #4. Critical reflection, attempting to examine the 'substructure' underlying our disciplinary assumptions, in whatever field or sub-field w work in, is important in leading to new debates, perspectives and ultimately applied research directions. See for example, current discussions of 'decolonising' subjects suc as anthropology and democratising the generation of ecological knowledge (Ramirez *e al*. 2018), challenging contemporary issues from which no discipline should feel immune, and rooted in theoretical reflection. The article by Richer *et al*. (this issue) ca be flagged here: if we intend our data to be accessible to others then we cannot assur that its application or use is entirely self-evident. Such discussion is relevant at a time when archaeology more generally seems to be attempting to find ways to better enga with political and social issues.

My own recent attempts to 'see' palaeoecology through 'different lenses' owes much t collaboration with my editorial colleagues on this publication, to Suzi Richer (Richer an Gearey 2018; and other Richer and Gearey meanderings) and to Seren Griffiths (Griffiths and Gearey 2017); I'd hope that, if anything, these might spur reflections ar

maybe disagreements on the practice of palaeoecology in the 21st century. Maybe th also help demonstrate that theoretical perspectives don't always have to draw on arca knowledge or philosophies.

The editor of *Environmental Archaeology: Meaning and Purpose*, Umberto Albarella, w discussant for the TAG Bradford session but was unable to contribute to this publicatio However, he has recently revisited one of the central questions and motivations for the original session: what is environmental archaeology? Or perhaps, what should it be? H conclusions are that now, as then, to separate environmental archaeology off from archaeology in its broadest sense is to ignore the common ground that should unite both (Albarella 2018). My own reflections on this have also been published recently (Gearey 2018) and I wonder if the time is perhaps overdue that we stop using the expression 'environmental archaeology', other than as shorthand for a set of techniques? To return to the previous paragraph, even that definition is problematic as the techniques included under this umbrella clearly don't apply *themselves* to archaeological remains, but are employed in different contexts by different communiti of practice. Whether it is possible to separate the two is possibly a question for, well, further theoretical reflection.

A final note: the colleague who made that pre-TAG comment all those years ago, is th author of one of the papers in this volume. So it transpires they were, just a little bit, into that sort of thing' too. But that's a confession for the person involved; I couldn't possibly 'out' them as being a 'theory head' after all…

Bibliography

Albarella, U. (ed) 2001 *Environmental Archaeology: Meaning and Purpose*, Dordrecht: Kluwer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9652-7

Albarella, U. 2018 'Environmental archaeology: the end of the road?' in Evangelia Pişk Arkadiusz Marciniak and Marta Bartkowiak (eds) *Environmental Archaeology: Current Theoretical and Methodological Approaches*, Basel: Springer. 15-19.

Caputo, J.D. 2018 *Hermeneutics: Fact and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, Pelican.

Chapman, H.P. 2018 *Iconoclasm and Later Prehistory*, London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177236

Edwards, K.J., Fyfe, R.M., Hunt, C. O. and Schofield, J.E. 2015 'Moving forwards? Palynology and the human dimension', *Journal of Archaeological Science* **56**, 117-132 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2015.02.010

Gearey, B.R. 2018 'Review of *Environmental Archaeology: Current Theoretical and Methodological Approaches*', Evangelia Pişkin, Arkadiusz Marciniak and Marta Bartkowi (eds) *European Journal of Archaeology* **22**(1), 131-4. https://doi.org/10.1017/eaa.2018.60

Griffiths, S. and Gearey, B.R. 2017 'The Mesolithic-Neolithic transition and the chronology of the Elm Decline: a case study from Yorkshire and Humberside, UK', *Radiocarbon* **59(5)**, 1321-45. https://doi.org/10.1017/RDC.2017.73

Heidegger, M. 1927 *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

Howard, A.J. 2019 Environmental Archaeology, Progress and Challenges, Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.1

Johnson, M. 2010 *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, London: Wiley.

Kavanagh, K.E. and Bates, M.R. 2019 Semantics of the Sea — Stories and Science alo the Celtic Seaboard, Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.8

Kristiansen, K. 2017 'The nature of archaeological knowledge and its ontological turns' *Norwegian Archaeological Review* **50(2)**, 120-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00293652.2017.1372802

Law, M. 2019 Beyond Extractive Practice: Bioarchaeology, Geoarchaeology and Humar Palaeoecology for the People, Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53

Lodwick, L. 2019 Agendas for Archaeobotany in the 21st Century: data, dissemination and new directions, Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.7

O'Connor, T. 2001 'Whose dichotomy is it anyway?' in U. Albarella (ed) *Environmental Archaeology: Meaning and Purpose*, Dordrecht: Kluwer. 39-41. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9652-7_4

O'Connor, T. 2019 Pinned Down in the Trenches? Revisiting environmental archaeology Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.5

Pearson, E. 2019 Commercial Environmental Archaeology: are we back in the dark ag or is environmental archaeology a potential agent of change?, Internet Archaeology 5

https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.4

Ramirez, K.S., Berhe, A.A., Burt, J., Gil-Romera, G., Johnson, R.F., Kiltz, A.M., Lacher McGlynn, T, Nielsen, K.J., Schmidt, R. Simonis, J.L., terHorst, C.P. and Tuff, K. 2018 'T future of ecology is collaborative, inclusive and deconstructs biases', *Nature Ecology a Evolution* **2**. https://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41559-017-0445-7

Richer, S., Stump, D. and Marchant, R. 2019 Archaeology has no Relevance, Internet Archaeology 53. https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.53.2

Richer, S. and Gearey, B.R. 2017 'The Medicine Tree: unsettling palaeoecological perceptions of past environments and human activity', *The Journal of Social Archaeolc* **17**, 239-62. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605317731013

Richer, S. and Gearey, B.R. 2018 'From Rackham to REVEALS: reflections on palaeoecological approaches to woodland and trees', *Environmental Archaeology: The Journal of Human Palaeoecology* **23(3)**, 286-97. https://doi.org/10.1080/14614103.2017.1283765

Russell, N. 2011 *Social Zooarchaeology: Humans and Animals in Prehistory*, Cambridg Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139019712

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1987 *Social Theory and Archaeology*, London: Wiley.

Internet Archaeology is an open access journal. Except where otherwise noted, content from this work may be used under the terms c the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 (CC BY) Unported licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that attribution to the author(s), the title of the work, the Internet Archaeology journal and the relevant URL/DOI a given.

Terms and Conditions | Legal Statements | Privacy Policy | Cookies Policy | Citing IA

Internet Archaeology content is preserved for the long term with the Archaeology Data Service. Help sustain and support open access publication by donating to our Open Access Archaeology Fund.