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# Reflections on Metaarchaeology

Clifford T. Brown

## 1 Introduction

The peripatetic itinerary of Lester Embree's long career has taken him to some of the less frequented corners of the academy and to some even more isolated locales beyond the ramparts. He is widely known for his contributions to several branches of phenomenology, but some of his colleagues in philosophy may be but vaguely aware that he has investigated and written extensively on philosophy in archaeology. In this chapter, I take the reader to this less-frequented quarter of Lester's philosophizing.

I know Professor Embree as a colleague at Florida Atlantic University where he is William F. Dietrich Eminent Scholar in Philosophy. I also know him through his contributions to archaeological theory. Since at least 1978, Embree has conducted significant research into archaeological thought and practice. I am a practicing archaeologist, and therefore the comments that follow reflect my background and not that of a professional philosopher. I cannot comment on the philosophical significance of his archaeological writings. Nevertheless, I do not fear contradiction when I assert that Embree's contribution to archaeological philosophy is pioneering, original, and highly distinctive. I will defend this proposition below.

I divide Embree's work on archaeology into two categories: (1) original philosophical work on archaeology and archaeological thought and (2) empirical study of the history and evolution of archaeological theory. I will discuss these two topics in that order in the following pages.

## 2 Embree's Philosophy of Archaeology

It is, naturally enough, difficult to divide Embree's work on archaeology into neat categories because articles on empirical topics inevitably contain comments that reflect more purely philosophical views or at least implicitly reflect his attitude to

C.T. Brown (✉)

Department of Anthropology, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton FL 33431, USA  
e-mail: [ctbrown@fau.edu](mailto:ctbrown@fau.edu)

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thought. Nevertheless, the emphasis in most of his contributions is sufficiently clear to make possible an unambiguous typology. One of my graduate professors once joked that when an archaeologist does not know what to do, he creates a typology. The observation is close enough to the truth to be uncomfortable. Still, under this branch of the taxonomy, I include two sets of Embree's contributions. The first has to do with the place of archaeology within the sciences and the second concerns the nature of archaeological reasoning. Both groups of writings forcefully and unambiguously indicate his position as a phenomenologist.

## 2.1 *The Place of Archaeology*

Embree has published several articles in which he has presented an original view of the position of archaeology within the sciences. He has argued that archaeology is the most basic of all the sciences. He first presented this view in an article in *Antiquity*, a major British archaeological journal (Embree 1987). He begins by classifying archaeology as a historical science because its overriding concern is with how "certain matters change and stay the same over the course of time" (Embree 1987:75). He argues that it is the most basic of the historical sciences because (1) it investigates far more societies (because it studies prehistoric and non-literate societies) than the other historical sciences; (2) it examines all the social strata in those societies; and (3) it explores far longer periods of time than other historical sciences (ibid: 76). He goes on to argue that the historical sciences have priority over the "communal" social sciences (sociology, economics, geography, political science, etc.), which in turn take precedence over the psychological sciences that focus on the individual. He then asserts that the human sciences are more fundamental than the natural or "hard" sciences because all objects are originally cultural and therefore must be stripped of their cultural meaning before a natural science can be constituted (ibid.: 76-77).

First a science must begin with objects that include value and use in correlation with human life, even if it chooses then for some reason to disregard those cultural characteristics. Remembering where one begins may help one avoid false senses of objectivity that are actually no more than subtle forms of one's own culture. When archaeologists seek to reconstruct the functions of artefacts that are thus cultural objects in past cultural worlds, this is especially critical ....

Objects of all sorts are then originally cultural, and cultural objects, human communities among them, are the subject matter of the human sciences. If a special operation of somehow disregarding cultural characteristics is necessary to constitute natural objects and thus to establish the natural sciences, then the human sciences have in this way priority over the natural sciences. (1987: 77)

To summarize, then,

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to the synchronically focused social sciences, and that it is prior to the psychological sciences, which deal with individuals abstractly, and hence is the most fundamental among the cultural sciences. Adding this to the classical position in Continental Philosophy whereby the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) are considered prior to the natural sciences and the derivativeness also of the formal sciences (mathematics, logic, grammar) from sciences including content in their subject matter, [Embree] concludes that archaeology is the most basic of the positive sciences. (Embree 1992a: 37).

Embree briefly reiterates this argument in various forms in other essays (e.g., 1989a: 72-73; 1997: 153).

In the 1987 essay, Embree remarks that the complexity of archaeology contrasts with the relatively simplicity of the natural sciences. Therefore, rather than judge archaeology to be a "soft" science in comparison to the so-called "hard" sciences, one might speak of the "simple" versus the "complex" sciences.

Embree's view of the priority of the sciences contrasts dramatically with the traditional view of the positivists or logical empiricists: "the study of matter in motion is foundational to all other knowledge, and for this reason physics is the most basic science" (Watson 1992: 255). Perhaps this contrast is to be expected between a phenomenologist in the Continental tradition and empiricists in the Anglo-American tradition.

I wish I could say that this article had a profound impact on archaeology, but if it has, I have not observed it. I cannot claim that archaeologists have felt constrained from citing the article by their natural modesty, but I do suspect that their strongly felt sense of inferiority has rendered them incapable of believing its conclusions. Our training, at least in the United States, based as it is on the logical empiricist model of scientific inquiry, has instilled in us the belief that archaeology is the squishiest of the soft sciences: not only do we study those hopelessly ineffable and unpredictable humans, but we do it with the lowest quality data. Our data, literally, are garbage. Archaeological theory, particularly in North America, has been so imbued with positivism and empiricism, indeed even a rather pointed physics envy, that Embree's analysis strikes us as impossible. We cannot believe that Archaeology is the Queen of the Sciences. It is a shame, really, this neurosis of ours, because Embree's argument is certainly convenient for us, and it is no less valid than any other taxonomic analysis merely for being unpopular.

## 2.2 Archaeological Thought

A second contribution Embree has made to the philosophy of archaeology is his analysis of archaeological cognition. Different elements of this analysis are presented in essays such as "Phenomenology of a Change in Archaeological Observation" (1992b), "Phenomenological Excavation of Archaeological Cognition or How to Hunt Mammoth" (1994), and "A Gurwitschean Model for Explaining Culture or How to Use an Atlatl" (1997). The article on archaeological cognition

provides as excellent example of Embree's reasoning of his pioneering contribution of phenomenological analysis in archaeology.

He begins by sketching an outline of Paleoindian (that is, Upper Paleolithic) mammoth hunting on the high plains of western North America (1994: 377–387). He then proceeds to analyze phenomenologically the cognitive and epistemological basis of our understanding of the archaeological “record.” In his own words,

To investigate [archaeological cognition] in this way signifies to reflect upon it theoretically. When thus reflected upon, what most conspicuously appears is the difference between the process of cognizing and the object as cognized. This is a noetico-noematic correlation that will become clearer as the following reflectively produced descriptive sketch proceeds. (1994: 387)

The highest level of archaeological cognition is *knowledge*, which is composed of true propositions. Interestingly, he includes within *knowing* material that is known probabilistically, that is, with some degree of uncertainty. Most archaeological “knowledge” is to varying degrees uncertain – on our best days, we are still digging up very old garbage – so less than ideal and deterministic facts must be accounted for and explained (ibid.: 388).

If archaeological knowledge is composed of true propositions, we will wish to know, naturally, what makes archaeological propositions true. He asserts that “if the matters are as alleged in it, then proposition is true” (ibid.: 389). Significantly, the allegations of a proposition should include any implications. How are we to know if the allegations are to be believed?

In general and according to phenomenological epistemology, believing is justified by *Evidenz*. Since the English cognate of Husserl's key word too often designates in everyday and legal usage the matters that are evident rather than the process of “seeing” them ..., it seems preferable to speak of *evidencing* ....

Regarding the issue of how evidencing functions in cognition, we can consider a case of everyday perception. Our companion looking out the window says “The cat is stalking a bird.” That proposition is true for her because of the underlying believing in the cat, his behavior, and the bird is justified by her visual perceiving of that matter in the yard outside the window. We can look and see (or “evidence”) for ourselves, form an intersubjectivity with our partner, and make that truth objective or non-relative since it then refers to a matter that is justifiedly believed in intersubjectively. (ibid.: 390)

Archaeological evidencing is somewhat different than this example suggests, however. Embree regards it as a species of *representational awareness*, and specifically a type of indicational awareness in which the artifacts and other remains are the indications.

[O]n the awareness of an indication we become aware of that which it indicates .... The indications are the remains found in the present and perceived, e.g., the spear or atlatl points .... What is indicated is the hafting, the fore-shaft, the main shaft, the hunter, the game, the hunting techniques, butchering operations, solutions to the meat storage problems, the size and composition of the Paleoindian band, the rest of its diet, and much else. (ibid.: 391)



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which it indicates .... The point is, the spear or atlatl points to the hunt, the game, the hunt, the storage problems, the size of the site and much else. (ibid.: 391)

Therefore, “the representational awareness of the past lifeways is what justifies and believing in them and that is what makes the knowledge qua account about those lifeways true” (ibid.).

What is striking about this account of archaeological cognition is its apparent uniqueness. It is squarely in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Gurwitsch and thus is easily distinguished from the logical tradition of the empiricist philosophers of science. Nevertheless, it does not display a close kinship to the post-processualist currents in archaeology that claim descent from the same Continental tradition. Embree is hardly making radical claims for relativism or subjectivity. For example,

That archaeological knowledge changes does not imply that archaeology is not a science. And indeed not all parts of it change .... Archaeological cognition is based on what has been observed thus far, this ultimately depends on perceived remains, and there is a considerable openness to the future. Respect for data disciplines the entire endeavor. Archaeology is not science fiction. (Embree 1994:394)

It ought to be keenly interesting to archaeologists to note that phenomenological analysis of archaeological knowledge, performed by a formally trained, full-time, professional phenomenologist, does not lead to the same conclusions proffered by the various archaeologists who have been attracted to phenomenology as an alternative to processual archaeology. These latter-day archaeological phenomenologists have arrived at fairly extreme relativism and subjectivism.

Such approaches are based on the argument that the role of our discipline cannot be the accurate reconstruction of a “real” past whose material vestiges are left us in the form of the archaeological record. The past can only ever be re-created in the present and, as such, a critical understanding of contemporary experience is what should matter most. It has therefore been suggested that the primary role of archaeology should be to engage with social and political issues in the present, and that attempts to “know” the past are misguided and ultimately due to failure. Phenomenological approaches are a useful addition to literature that focuses on the construction of knowledge in the contemporary world as they both challenge objectivist models of space and encourage the archaeologist to engage critically with the ways in which experiences of place are created. Tilley (Tilley, 1994: 225), for example, argues that archaeological interpretation is carried out in and for the present. (Brück 2005:57–58; internal citations omitted)

This does not appear to be a philosophical attitude that Embree would find palatable, and yet it claims to be archaeological phenomenology. Admittedly, phenomenology is a broad and anastomosing stream of thought within philosophy, yet I am skeptical about the phenomenological validity of the claims made by the latter-day archaeological phenomenologists (that is, archaeologists who practice phenomenological analysis and interpretation of archaeological data) because their analyses and conclusions are so radically different from those of actual philosophers who apply phenomenology to archaeology, such as Embree and Patrik (1986\*\*\*). I would be very interested to know Embree’s opinion of the analyses and interpretations of the archaeological phenomenologists. It ought to be enlightening and entertaining.

In addition to phenomenology, the post-processualists (read "post-modernist") archaeologists have fervently embraced hermeneutics (e.g., Hodder 1991; Johnsen and Olsen 1992; Kosso 1991). Indeed, the most salient formulation of post-processualism is Ian Hodder's "interpretive archaeology," which is explicitly hermeneutic. Embree, however, explicitly rejects a hermeneutical approach to archaeological cognition.

One may be attracted to thinking that the archaeologist proceeds hermeneutically and in particular "reads" remains and is hence a text interpreter. Remains are not, however, texts because they were not expressed with communicative intent for readers to comprehend, they do not convey significations, they do not have syntax, and they do not refer .... Rather than say that archaeologists "read" remains, it is better to say that they become representationally aware of past lifeways on the basis of perceiving remains. (ibid.: 392-393)

It is interesting to find Embree rejecting this kind of approach as well. Embree's views on relativism and interpretation in archaeology therefore do appear to set him apart, not only from the logical empiricists but also from the post-processualists. His contribution, indeed, is distinctive.

### 3 Empirical Studies of American Theoretical Archaeology

As I write, it is 30 years since Embree began to investigate the evolution of archaeological theory, and in particular the current that he dubbed "American Theoretical Archaeology," which is better known as the "New Archaeology" or "Processual Archaeology." In two essays published in 1989, Embree reported on his initial efforts to study empirically the growth and development of the "New Archaeology" in the United States. The New Archaeology represented a major shift in archaeological philosophy of science and methodology that began around 1960. The New Archaeologists abandoned the traditional cultural-historical approach that emphasized descriptive chronologies of ancient societies. They focused instead on developing a nomological-deductive methodology for what they thought was a scientific approach to archaeology. The new approach emphasized hypothesis testing, quantitative methods, systems theory, cultural processes, and human ecology. Many of the New Archaeologists thought of these changes at the time as a Kuhnian scientific revolution, a full blown paradigm shift. Embree decided to study this phenomenon to understand the sociological, historical, and philosophical processes involved. "My interest is not what was happening at any given time, but in how aims, ideas, and methods stayed the same or changed .... Perhaps 'sociohistorical' is a good characterization of the research" (Embree 1989a:63, 69).

Embree started investigating the New Archaeology after it was fairly well-entrenched. He investigated the advent of American Theoretical Archaeology not only through reading its texts, but also by contacting the people involved (1989a). He sent them questionnaires and survey instruments, and he also interviewed many

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Embree's investigation is distinctive. It is not an example of the missionary approach of so many philosophers of science who preach to scientists about what their research is or how it should be conducted. His approach is more ethnographic and also more historical (1989a:70).

For most outsiders, philosophy of science is positivist philosophy of the natural sciences or philosophy of the social sciences that at least implicitly advocates that the social sciences ought to imitate the natural sciences and in any case seems chiefly to consist of applied logic. I proceed, however, from a phenomenological position. I consider the human sciences fundamental, and as should be clear, I subscribe to a history oriented approach. (1989a:72)

Interestingly, he philosophically justifies his investigation of archaeology in part because of its priority within the sciences, which I discussed above.

Embree's other essay from 1989 (1989b) is preliminary report on the initial results of his survey of American theoretical archaeologists. In it, he proposes a model of the internal structure of the field. Relying in part on the responses to several survey questionnaires, he distinguishes the history and philosophy of archaeology from a theoretical archaeology as most broadly understood. Within this understanding or signification of theoretical archaeology, he finds, on the one hand, metaarchaeology, and, on the other, a strict or proper meaning of the term theoretical archaeology that consists of substantive research on archaeological theories. Metaarchaeology in turn includes discussions of archaeological logic, archaeological epistemology, and archaeological metaphysics, in other words, "secondary, reflective, and non-substantive research of this sort" (1989b:35). The rubric of proper or strict theoretical archaeology subsumes both "empirical archaeology" (that is, data collection and analysis) and a narrow meaning of theoretical archaeology, consisting of the theorizing of specific archaeological models. In his parsing of American theoretical archaeology, Embree relied heavily on the responses to his questionnaires, which he quotes at length, providing a glimpse at the extremely interesting data set he has succeeded in accumulating.

I would be remiss if I did not explain here that Embree's contribution to archaeology remains unfinished. He plans a two-volume report on the results of his research into American Theoretical Archaeology based on his extensive reading of the archaeological literature, on the surveys alluded to earlier, and also on the extensive interviews with many of the principals involved in the development of the New Archaeology. The book will be called *The Rise of American Theoretical Archaeology*.

## 4 Conclusion

Embree's contribution to archaeology is pioneering, highly original, and distinctive. He was the first to bring phenomenological analysis to bear upon archaeological thought, and he did so in an interesting and original manner. The archaeologists who subsequently adopted a phenomenological approach to archaeological interpretation in the 1990s (e.g., Thomas 1993a, b, 1996; Tilley 1994) developed a philosophy very different from Embree's, almost unrecognizably different, despite claiming much the same intellectual lineage. Thus, Embree's contribution is strongly and clearly phenomenological and yet distinctive both from the logical empiricists and from the archaeological phenomenologists. I look forward to reading *The Rise of American Theoretical Archaeology*.

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