The TAG Conference in Lampeter 1990
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Fornvänn 1991(86), s. 281-284
Ingår i: samla.raa.se
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The TAG conference of 1990 was held in December at one of the home grounds of British theoretical archaeology, Saint David’s University College in Lampeter, Wales. Having arrived at the scene of the action, one could soon feel that the taste of postprocessualism in Lampeter was as strong as the taste of chlorine in the local drinking water. As the college numbers among its ranks such people as Chris Tilley and Julian Thomas (also the organizers of the conference), this is of course hardly surprising.

As a manifestation of the locally predominant ideology, the college offers a one-year Master of Arts course in theoretical archaeology. The course program reads like the winning contribution of a “Summarizing Shanks & Tilley” competition. We can look at some lectures in the Core Course: “Positivism and Archaeology; Culture Process; Hermeneutics and Phenomenology; Realism and Marxist Philosophical Approaches; Critical Theory; Structuralism; Post-Structuralism and Discourse Theory; Historicism and Historical Idealism; Rationality and Relativism”. Or why not “Archaeology in the 1990s”? Anyway, an interesting and ambitious initiative—when will we see anything similar in Scandinavia?

Over to the conference. Postprocessualism was prevalent here as well, and more so, I think, than last year in Newcastle. But it is not hard to see that the theoretical outlook of the different sessions depended in large measure on the institutional affiliation of the session organizers. Clearly postprocessual were:

- Cultural identity, the past, and historical tradition (Lampeter/London),
- Production, consumption and identity in historical archaeology (Lampeter),
- Feminist theory and gender studies (Norfolk),
- Emotions in archaeology (Cambridge),
- Constructing landscape/constructing the subject (Lampeter) and
- Tradition (Cambridge/Lampeter).
- All quiet on the western front? Towards an historical sociology of German archaeology (Reading).

I found less pronounced or uniform postprocessual influence in:

- Classical archaeology (Newcastle),
- Archaeology in Ireland 1990: reading the Irish landscape (Sheffield),
- The social role of the urban archaeologist (Hereford/Worchester),
- Museums and archaeological interpretation (N. Mus. Scotland),
- Island archaeology (Jersey Museums Service/UMIST),
- Theoretical approaches to prehistoric landscapes (TAG Organizing Committee),
- Landscape archaeology as a social issue (Lampeter) and
- General session (TAG Organizing Committee).

Last, one session was of “scientific” mould,

- Using Geographical Information Systems in archaeological theory building (Tulane/Buffalo),

while in another “science” responded to the post-processual criticism inflicted upon it the year before in Newcastle:

- Science strikes back: After detailed analysis … (London).

In five out of seven of the, to my mind, most “radical” sessions, Lampeter and Cambridge were accordingly involved as organizers. The most “scientific” session was on the other hand organized by American archaeologists.
I will not attempt to account for each and every session in detail, but try to select some essentials and pieces I personally found interesting, primarily from the sessions I attended. The quotations below are from paper abstracts or the sessions themselves.

One of the key words this year was Landscape—or rather Space. A wide variety of aspects of this concept was debated, ranging from the more traditional chorological to the theoretical cognitive.

In the Geographical Informations Systems (GIS) session the participants discussed and demonstrated the potentialities of dealing with, and organizing vast numbers of geographical and archaeological data, run through a data base and displayed on computer maps, where different levels of information can be visually and mathematically correlated. An example of the use of the system is to try to predict site locations in a spatio-temporal framework from an analysis of soil types, vegetation, climatic factors, topographical details, drainage and so forth, naturally on the basis of known locations. The basic needs are an abundance of data and a fairly powerful computer (the Swedish Geological Map and the register of ancient monuments would for example provide a good starting point). In the data base one can experiment with different “scenarios” and see how differences in input change the overall picture. The primary basis of the method is obviously, as Eleazer D. Hunt said, systems theory and ecology. The challenge is to make the system “dynamic”, incorporating for example the time dimension. The analysis can, according to the speakers, result in an increased knowledge of the dynamics of culture and the processes of cultural change. The American speakers considered it to be a “reasonably objective method”—obviously one does not speak of absolute objectivity at TAG.

In the Architecture and Order session we turned from the macroscopic perspective to the microscopic. How do people use their daily environment (primarily buildings) in their self-definition? The session sought to combat the stereotyped dichotomy between the practical and the symbolic and show the dialectics of the concepts in real social activity, the materiality of symbolism, how a cosmology can be embedded in the human abode and so on. The “symbolic” does not merely “consist of those aspects for which no ‘practical’ explanation can be found”! Varied examples were taken from Bali, the Dogon of Mali, Neolithic Europe, Iron age Britain, Medieval church architecture and hunter-gatherers. The importance of the structured space for the conditioning of the subject was stressed; as Mike Parker-Pearson said: “We learn the syntax of space long before that of speech.” When we move through different parts of the structured social space our selves are changed, re-defined. Similar aspects of the interactions between people and their environment were discussed at the session on Constructing Landscape/Constructing the Subject, a joint venture of the Departments of Archaeology and Human Geography at Lampeter.

Another factor, active in the social construction and definition of the subject in the present consists in our knowledge of the past. The Cultural Identity … session examined this, how history is constructed and the individual socially defined through its medium. Perhaps nothing very new was said, and examples were taken from African and Melanesian ethnography and modern Western war memorials. For a Swedish participant it was highly amusing to find Chris Tilley using as a supreme illustration of the social construction of the deviant subject the Swedish governmental attitude towards alcoholics. Evidently Tilley also found it amusing.

Amusing. Amusement is an emotion. What about Emotions in Archaeology. Is that something to discuss seriously? Shouldn’t the “scientist” keep his/her supreme mind in the clear, rational air above the quagmire of emotion and subjectivity? No, some Cambridge PhD students luckily said in the spirit of a self-reflexive archaeology and organized this TAG session.

Humans are emotional creatures. We react to events in the world and the acts of our fellow men with emotion. Our emotions are as easy to eliminate as our shadow. We make our choices in life always to some degree on the
basis of emotions, intuitions. Ian Hodder for instance confessed that his commitment to postprocessual theory was much based on emotion, and I must say that the same is true of me. Emotions are perhaps through their “primitivity” the instrument in the individual which is most easily played in the ideological struggle, by political propaganda and indoctrination. Thus, emotions cannot be said to be irrelevant for “scientific” enquiry. Moreover, emotion—and even affect—is a part of the scientific environment: In his “fire-side style chat”, Hodder told us about his experiences, when lecturing at some places in USA, of part of the audience rising and leaving in protest. Human, all-too-human!

The speakers touched upon a wide variety of aspects of emotion in archaeology. Can we identify past emotion: past concepts of beauty, past grief, joy, humour? The question of humour is not the least interesting, since we know humour to be an active weapon in the social power-play, perhaps especially as a subversive weapon. Maybe past spectators laughed as much at some rock-carving scenes as we did at Bill Sillar’s dia-slides of comic strips? John Carman spoke of the role of intuitive understanding in archaeology, a subject which touches at the very heart of the epistemological process.

The speakers did not seek to give answers, but to open a discussion with the audience, as far as possible avoiding the traditional authoritative monologue type of lecture. The ensuing debate was long and rewarding, and if I miss something at TAG it is more such discussion sessions. I well understand the dilemma of many speakers and limited time, but still ... Anyway, this session was fresh, different and entertaining.

Then, “after detailed analysis”, Science struck back, responding to the criticism against scientism and so on from the year before in Newcastle. And the stroke was dealt with a cotton fist. Scientism was politely refuted all along the line and an increased dialogue required between archaeological scientists and others. The speakers seemed to agree that the search for general theories was stupid and that the subjective, the intentional, aspect ought to be incorporated in all scientific archaeological analysis.

They seemed rather hopeful that current archaeological theory could be successfully applied together with the latter. For example, Simon Butler proclaimed the relevance of postprocessualism in the field of pollen analysis, as “pollen analysis investigates the relationships between humans and their physical environment and such relationships contain social, meaningful and subjective aspects as much as economic, functional and objective ones”.

To summarize, we can add “the social subject” to “landscape” as the key words of the conference, and this social subject belongs to the context of contemporary archaeology as much as past contexts. Thus we find ourselves on firm postprocessual ground. In Lampeter the postprocessual school, mainly as we know it from the writings of Shanks & Tilley, was not contested, but held the field from beginning to end. There should be little doubt that theoretical archaeology during the next few years will be equivalent to postprocessual archaeology in Britain. This may be interesting enough, but on the other hand there was nothing directly new to be seen. The theories are there, established; now the energy is evidently directed mainly at integrating them into archaeological everyday practice and analysis, to engage in the not too easy task of applying them to the fragmentary prehistoric material. I suppose postprocessual theory is so complex that it will take some time before enough people know it well enough to want to move beyond it.

One can also discern a tendency of wanting to make an end of Archaeology. That is, of archaeology as a specific scientific enclosure. The term “material culture” gains prominence over “archaeology”.

“Material-culture studies constitute a nascently developing field of enquiry which systematically refuses to remain enmeshed within established disciplinary boundaries”, Chris Tilley says in his editor’s preface to Reading Material Culture (1990) (yes, “reading”, have we become de-radicalized?), Beyond “unnatural” disciplinary allegiances these studies ac-
cording to Tilley oppose the dichotomy theory-practice, the subject–object dualism which separates the investigator from the investigated and the “reifications of categories of analysis into separate spheres such as politics, economics, ideology . . .”

The same Chris Tilley in his lecture in the Cultural Identity session said that we should now be ready to enter the project of writing a “genealogy of the human subject”, of what it means to be human. That aim and that project does of course not let itself be confined behind any disciplinary bounds. Obviously archaeology is no longer archaeology—but were we ever convinced that it was? And will these new material-culture studies be fundamentally different from most archaeology as it is traditionally performed, with its use of historical and ethnographic analogies and so on, except from its more pronounced recognition of its own nature and a somewhat different vocabulary? Time will show, I suppose.

In the bus back to the train in Swansea, someone behind me said to his companion: “TAG is about making field archaeologists feel that there is something worth living for!” Yes, TAG is rather nice. So how come I was the only Swedish representative there?

Sammanfattning

1990 års TAG-konferens hölls i Saint David’s University College i Lampeter, Wales. Medan den föregående konferensen i Newcastle stundtals bjöd på animerade meningsutbyten mellan postprocessualister och andra, höll de förra i Lampeter fältet från början till slut.

Nyckelbegrepp inom konferensen var landskap (eller rum) och det sociala subjektet. Den enda traditionellt ”vetenskapliga” sessionen (organiserad av amerikanska arkeologer; i fem av de sju postprocessuellt starkast influerade sessionerna var Cambridge och Lampeter inblandade som organisatörer) visade exempel på hur GIS-program kan användas för databehandling av landskapsparametrar på makronivå utifrån en ekologisk och systemvetenskaplig bas. Andra sessioner behandlade såväl koro logiska aspekter som rummets betydelse och bruk för definitionen av individen: ”Vi lär oss rummets syntax före språkets.” Etnografiska och historiska exempel gavs som illustration. I sessionen om Arkitektur och ordning sökte man ur mikroperspektiv argumentera mot den ”stereotypa” dikotomin praktiskt-symboliskt och visa hur begreppen samverkar dialektiskt i social praxis, i interaktionen mellan rum (t. ex. bostaden) och individ.

Andra sessioner analyserade det sociala subjektets formande av bl.a. det förgångna, tradition och konsumtion – några portioner postprocessuell ”normalvetenskap”. Ett par sessioner såg på arkeologen som socialt subjekt, genom att exempelvis granska den tyska arkeologins teoretiska bas och känslornas roll inom arkeologin och arkeologen. Den sistnämnda sessionen var både givande och underhållande och var den enda (av dem som jag deltog i) där man sökte upphäva dikotomin talare–åhörare och en betydande del utgjordes av otvungen diskussion.

Som helhet var som sagt den postprocessuella dominansen i föredrag och kommentarer stark. Samtidigt såg jag inga tydliga ansatser till att gå vidare ur eller försöka omforma det redan uppyggda teoretiska rummet. Det sociala subjekt som läst sin Shanks & Tilley kunde uppleva det kändas trygghet i konferensens landskap.

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