

Andrew Gardner

Lecturer in Roman Archaeology
Cardiff University

Review of:

Thomas, J. 2004. *Archaeology and Modernity*. London: Routledge. xii+275 pages; 10 line figures, 20 b&w photographs. ISBN 0415271576. Paperback £19.99.

While the connections between archaeology as a discipline and various aspects of 'the modern condition' have been increasingly discussed in a range of contexts, this book represents the most ambitious and wide-ranging attempt so far to document, contextualise and transcend these connections. Although it falls somewhat short of the latter aim, as much for rhetorical as for substantial reasons, it can nonetheless be recommended without hesitation as a stimulating book which all archaeologists should read. Thomas has succeeded in explaining with great clarity a considerable variety of complex ideas, and has deftly interwoven examples of archaeological discourses into his studies of Descartes, Bacon, Kant and other exemplars of modern thinking. There are many new insights into the nature of the archaeological mentality and eloquent critiques of specific approaches varying from middle-range theory to contextual archaeology. There is also an appealing attempt to articulate a 'counter-modern' alternative, grounded firmly in the Heideggerian philosophy, which Thomas has advocated in previous works (esp. 1996). In this, however, the book's single major flaw becomes most apparent: its ambivalence toward the nature of modernity. The reality of the condition upon which the book is centred slips into and out of our grasp, and one might be left wondering whether Thomas has actually fallen into some of the pitfalls he has exposed in the work of others, or whether he is merely caught out by the rhetorical conventions of critique. Either way, there is a sense of imbalance to the book, which compromises its programme for a new kind of archaeology.

The book comprises 10 chapters, each of which (as noted in the preface) is somewhat self-contained. Nonetheless, the overlapping elements between each chapter effectively build up over the course of the book, so that certain key themes such as subjectivity and ethics are developed in several stages. The first two chapters are perhaps more historical in emphasis than the others, being primarily concerned with charting the main trends in the development of modern thought and also of archaeology. These acknowledge the classical roots of several modern ideas, though perhaps more could be made of what this means for the definition of the term 'modern', and also explore aspects of counter-modern thought, including romanticism. It is here that we get most discussion of the complexities of 'modernity' as an idea, but some important questions remain unresolved. Foremost among these is the problem of how modern thinking can have achieved hegemony while at the same time remaining radically unfulfilled and grossly mis-representative of the nature of human life – as many people have indeed realised throughout the 'modern' age. These are the first hints of problems to emerge more clearly later in the book.

The bulk of the chapters address several of the 'big ideas' of modernity. Those on 'Method' and on 'History and Nature', provide excellent discussions on the impact of certain key ideas about knowledge, culture and change upon archaeology in its earliest days. The work of Descartes and of Bacon in particular is clearly explained, and there are incisive critiques of aspects of 'New Archaeology' and of 'origins' research. Similarly, the chapter on the theme of 'Nation-States' addresses what is perhaps one of the more well-worn themes in recent debates over the politics of archaeology, but in a more thorough-going fashion. The chapter on 'Humanism' contributes to the ongoing critique of naïve uses of agency theory in archaeology (*cf.* Gardner 2004). Valid points are made here about the connections between the idea of the individual and modern thought, but again in a foreshadowing of later problems, it may be that Thomas rejects humanism rather harshly if at the same time he wishes to salvage a viable approach to the diversity of human life. He champions a relational view of agency which is certainly not a new idea within western thought (Macmurray 1957, 1961; Mead 1934; Todorov 2001), and perhaps exaggerates the incomprehensibility of some other modes of being which are known from anthropological work (*esp.* Strathern 1988). This is an instance where a more open sensitivity to the diverse realities of life in the modern world, rather than a rhetorical insistence on the hegemony of reified 'modern' discourses, might allow for a more fruitful discussion of the potential range of 'human' life-worlds for which Thomas advocates we search.

Chapter 7 deals with the metaphors of depths and surfaces that have permeated archaeology and other disciplines within modern academia. This is another stimulating chapter, which highlights in particular the influence of archaeology (as an idea) upon other fields, such as Freudian psychology. Here again, though, we confront some uncomfortable issues, which Thomas does not really address, and which recur in the following chapter 'Mind, Perception and Knowledge'. As before, there is a rhetorical rejection of the dominance claims of modern science with an absolutely valid contextualisation of the development of medicine (p. 153), but without a more honest appraisal of how it is that such a practice has nonetheless achieved what is elsewhere described as 'unquestionable progress' (p. 46). The aspects of reality that medicine may successfully comprehend are thus marginalised because of the author's desire to portray modernity as an impoverished world-view, rather than simply a partial one. This actually makes it harder to understand. Chapters 8 and 9 are concerned with the subjects of mind and matter, and as well as developing an excellent critique of cognitive archaeology, start to put real flesh on the bones of Thomas' alternative ontology of human-ness. The only clear weakness in this seems to be a prioritisation of language, which neglects the material aspects of socialisation (*cf.* Williams and Costall 2000). The final chapter, 'Towards a counter-modern archaeology', presents a summary of all that precedes it and highlights important themes for an alternative programme, including a dialogic ethics, and ways of putting them into practice.

There are good suggestions in this concluding chapter, which reflect the book's worth as a critical account of archaeology on the threshold of the 21st century. However, at the same time, the title of this chapter encapsulates the problem, which Thomas never quite overcomes in this book. To talk of something as 'counter-modern' at once reifies

the 'modern' and repeats its mistakes – or at least, those features which have been defined as mistakes in other parts of the book. There are several points in the text where Thomas refers to ideas which have bucked the trend of modernity, not least where he champions those particularly associated with Heidegger. Yet we are left with no clear understanding of how this has happened, because at the same time modernity is represented as all-powerful and all-pervasive, especially in archaeology. Equally, modernity is frequently characterised as nihilistic, alienating and generally unpleasant, but these seem to be hollow platitudes when the ways in which people are not really – or at least not wholly – 'modern' are treated as a separate programme for the future (or the property of an idealised past) rather than an aspect of what even people working in global corporations experience (*cf.* Adam 1994). The reality of 'the modern condition' – how it has come to be, how it has been successful, and what relationship it bears to human life – remains problematic because Thomas seeks to put too much distance between his views and the ideas of those he is criticising. The effect is to repeat the imbalances of many of the latter.

There are a number of examples of this to be found in the book's final chapter, all pre-figured in earlier parts of the book. One has to do with the nature of human-ness, already referred to. While calling for investigations of the diversity of 'being human', Thomas does not confront the question this begs of the word 'human'. There is a clear account of how 'what it is to be human' is understood in this book, but it is not admitted as a universal model. Yet it is hard to see what else it can be, since Thomas is still primarily interested in "other human beings who now no longer exist" (p. 238). Secondly, this rejection of universals goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of an ethics of rights based on similarity in favour of an ethics of responsibility based on difference. The author's assertion that the former has not always protected people from discrimination and even execution is incontestable, but it is all too easy to see how a focus only on difference might equally be distorted. Surely a balance of both is necessary. Equally, there is a consistent rejection of 'scientific' knowledge throughout this book as impoverished and secondary to the world as disclosed to immersed human beings. This seems to seriously underestimate the role that a detached attitude to the world can play in human learning, and in dealing with problematic situations (Mead 1934: 355-356) where meaning is not already established in the way that Thomas suggests.

In each of these three examples, what seems to be happening is a rhetorical rejection of one idea – associated with a reified modernity – in favour of its opposite. Yet this is precisely one of the follies of modernity identified so clearly in many parts of the book. Indeed, it is an approach which is at odds with other elements of Thomas' perspective, but which are typically presented as short qualifications to critiques rather than celebrated as diagnostic of the complexity of human life. In the last chapter of this book, Thomas advocates a dialogic world-view. I have a great deal of sympathy with such a view, but if it is to be carried forward it must be based on balance – on accepting difference and similarity, or particularity and generalisation. The ingredients for such an approach are certainly to be found in this book, but their impact is lessened by the fracturing of the narrative along lines structured, ironically, by the discourses of modernity. If 'the modern condition' is only one element in the stories of the lives of

people in the West since the Renaissance – and an even smaller element in the stories of humanity – then surely a ‘counter-modern’ approach is equally partial and abstracted. The rejection of modern ideas and values in this volume is more rhetorical than substantial, but it does undermine its success in promoting a balanced archaeology which can accept both its ‘modern’ heritage and those parts of its practice that ‘have never been modern’ (Latour 1993). Nonetheless, Julian Thomas should be congratulated for writing the kind of book which will inspire people to think hard about their subject, will stimulate dialogue, and will move the debate on archaeology’s nature and goals forward a long way.

References

- Adam, B. 1994. Perceptions of Time, in Ingold, T. (ed.) *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*. London: Routledge, 503-526.
- Gardner, A. (ed.) 2004. *Agency Uncovered: Archaeological Perspectives on Social Agency, Power and Being Human*. London: UCL Press.
- Latour, B. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Macmurray, J. 1957. *The Self as Agent* (Volume I of *The Form of the Personal*). London: Faber and Faber.
- Macmurray, J. 1961. *Persons in Relation* (Volume II of *The Form of the Personal*). London: Faber and Faber.
- Mead, G. H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society, from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strathern, M. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thomas, J. 1996. *Time, Culture and Identity: An Interpretative Archaeology*. London: Routledge.
- Todorov, T. 2001 [1995]. *Life in Common: An Essay in General Anthropology*. (transl. Golsen, K.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Williams, E. and Costall, A. 2000. Taking Things More Seriously: Psychological Theories of Autism and the Material-Social Divide, in Graves-Brown, P. M. (ed.) *Material, Materiality and Modern Culture*. London: Routledge, 97-111.