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WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT WHAT YOU BELIEVE: DISCUSSING SOCIAL THEORY IN SOUTHEASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Taken together, the papers published in this volume demonstrate that Southeastern archaeologists are theoretically eclectic, are borrowers and users of theory, are reflexive and collaborative, and are modest and unaggressive when discussing their theoretical inclinations. This paper clarifies the positive and negative outcomes of these characteristics and suggests ways to encourage the benefits while discouraging the drawbacks. I advocate being careful when combining theoretical paradigms, using technology to continue year-round informal communication, being more generous with stakeholder relationships and the methods used to build them, and giving ourselves more credit for the interesting theory building that we do.

The point of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference’s 2012 plenary session on archaeological theory held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was for each speaker to paint “a coherent portrait of the brand of social theory that informs [his or her] archaeological work” and put forward his or her “best understanding of how human sociality fundamentally works” (Knight, this volume). This article thus considers what the seven contributors’ submissions say about Southeastern archaeology as a whole by examining the similarities and differences between their viewpoints, relating those observations to my personal experience as a recent graduate student in the Southeast, and offering some suggestions about how I think we ought to proceed.

According to our presenters, Southeastern archaeologists are theoretically eclectic, they are primarily borrowers and users of theory, they are reflexive about their work and recognize the importance of collaboration, and for the most part, they are modest and unaggressive when discussing their theoretical inclinations. Each of these traits can be beneficial to the discipline as a whole; however, each also has its pitfalls. My goal here is to clarify the positive and negative outcomes of these characteristics and suggest ways to encourage their beneficial consequences while discouraging the more detrimental ones.

The first theme that comes across strongly in this set of papers is that Southeastern archaeologists are theoretically eclectic. For example, Sullivan observes that SEAC has members who focus on the complexities and nuances of European scholarship and others who rely primarily on American theory out of Michigan and Columbia. Likewise, Loren and Wesson (2010:40) identify an incredible diversity of approaches taken by Southeasternists, including representation, embodiment, identity, materiality, political economy, gender, hybridity, creolization, and collaborative archaeologies. Taking into account the literature published since their review in 2010, this list could be expanded significantly. The variety of citations used by the contributors to this volume certainly proves this point: when taken as a group, Southeastern archaeologists are a diverse lot. However, this set of papers also emphasizes the eclectic nature of individual theoretical stances within Southeastern archaeology. Here I use the term eclectic to suggest that within their own body of work, individual scholars do not rigidly follow a single theoretical paradigm or consistently apply a given set of assumptions to their study of the past; instead, they draw on multiple approaches to gain insight into their subject. Often, this involves applying different theories to different cases or applying aspects of more than one theory to understand the same case. Many contributors to this volume (e.g., Cobb, Levy, Sullivan, and White) remark that despite occasional allegiances to one side or the other of various theoretical debates that rage on in archaeology in general, most Southeasternists end up in what Cobb (this volume) calls the “squishy middle” (see also Peebles 1990, 2006). So is the eclectic nature of Southeasternists, both as a group and individually, a good thing?

Some of our contributors would argue yes; it allows one to take on the good of a theory and leave behind the bad—filling in the inevitable holes with good bits from other places. Moreover, it keeps one from ignoring potential explanations just because they do not fit within a specific theoretical viewpoint (see also Hegmon 2003). Others would join Knight (this volume)—and by extension Marvin Harris—in arguing no, suggesting this approach lacks coherence, can be intellectually lazy, and ignores important contradictions between schools of thought (see also Moss 2005; Patterson 2000). That said,
everyone seems to agree that combining theories in new and innovative ways is important; in fact, if we are careful about when and how we do it, combining is how we move forward (see also McGuire 1992:5–9). As Thompson pointed out in the spoken version of his paper, we need to think of theory mixing as we think about cooking; “uncritical use of disparate ideas sometimes works out, but more often than not, you are left with something that you might be able to eat, but would not be fit for a dinner party.” In other words, recipes are important because they limit a dish’s ingredients to things that taste good together (for a similar analogy, see McGuire 1992:9). Thompson’s formulation (this volume) of historical political ecology convincingly argues that historical ecology and political ecology are two ingredients that can be successfully mixed. He does not merely assert this, however, but carefully examines each ingredient before deciding to stir them together.

I would argue that recipes are equally important in guiding the techniques applied to specific ingredients and the timing of those ingredients’ combination. For example, Cobb’s approach (this volume) mixes a wide variety of ingredients but always makes sure that history is the dominant flavor. Likewise, Beck’s paper (this volume) provides an example of the importance of timing by suggesting that we use agency-based approaches when looking at microsociality and structural approaches when looking at macrosociality. These are both necessary ingredients when trying to understand sociality in general, but they must be applied in the right context.

The second theme in this set of papers is that Southeastern archaeologists are borrowers and users, rather than developers, of theory. Sullivan (this volume) suggests we “use theories as vehicles for understanding and interpreting the past rather than using the past as a vehicle for developing social theory.” Similarly, White (this volume) asserts that “instead of worrying about whether the evidence supports theory, we need to think about whether theory works in the context of the evidence.” In other words, Southeasternists treat theory as a tool to better understand our subject matter, not the other way around. However, Binford (1977) and others (e.g., Read and LeBlanc 1978; Saitta 1983; Schiffer 1981) have suggested the need for explicit theory building in archaeology. In constructing an argument for the importance of theory building, some authors have expressed concern that the “theory as a tool” method ignores the fact that archaeological practice is fraught with methods, taxonomies, and concepts that influence how we perceive the world (e.g., Johnson 2006; Leone 1978). These deep-seated assumptions affect what evidence we record, how we decide whether or not said evidence is significant in interpreting the past, and how we draw conclusions based on it.

In line with their conclusions, I believe that if we want to truly do theory well, we must not let our work stop at borrowing and using; we must also build these theories by expanding or adapting them to specific archaeological problems. Beck’s ideas borrow from the likes of Giddens, Sahlins, Sewell, and even fractal geometry, but the application of these ideas to the archaeological record truly develops theory. In singling out Southeasternists as borrowers of theory, we imply that other regions or disciplines regularly create theory out of thin air—but everyone begs, borrows, and steals in the process of doing something novel (in fact, this has been discussed in the archaeological literature more generally [e.g., Johnson 2006; Smith 2006:160]). I thus think we should give ourselves more credit in describing what we do. When we beg, borrow, and steal, we should admit it, and when we are doing something novel, we should not shy away from calling it theory.

In not backing away from creating new theory, it is important for Southeastern archaeologists to remember that this means relying heavily on and building on our data, not distancing ourselves from it (Brown 1994:73). As Sullivan (this volume) reminds us, archaeology’s major strength is empirical data, and I believe that characteristic moves it closer to, rather than farther away from the ability to develop and create valuable theory. Moreover, the sheer amount of archaeological data generated by the methodologically sophisticated and meticulous work of large, cultural history–driven research projects provides the Southeast with an unparalleled foundation on which to develop new theoretical traditions (Brown 1994:72–73; Loren and Wesson 2010:40–44). With so many complex and disembodied ideas floating around in the theoretical realm (see White [this volume] for some examples), it is the material nature of archaeological data that connects these ideas to something real and guides us in picking and choosing truly useful combinations or adaptations.

The fact that each contributor to this volume explicitly focuses on the origins of his or her ideas leads directly to my next theme: Southeastern archaeologists are reflexive. This is epitomized in the life-history approach that some contributors to this volume took in their papers (e.g., Cobb, Levy). The recognition that who you are, your academic genealogy, and your current projects all affect how you think about theory is resounding. This approach is laid out by Levy (this volume) when she describes the key tenets of doing archaeology as a feminist and by White (this volume) in
her discussion of archaeology as dominated by a Western, male bias. Importantly, Levy (this volume) demonstrates that such reflexivity does not always “lead to an over-emphasis on the personal quirks and desires of the researcher” but, if done well, has the potential to push us toward major advancements in archaeological understanding (such as the separation of complexity from hierarchy).

Thinking about doing everything (or even half of the things) suggested by the papers in this volume is daunting and the recognition that they must also be done well makes it seem nearly impossible. In recognizing this, I echo Levy’s statement (this volume) that doing good theory is hard and Southeastern archaeologists rely on collaboration to make it all possible. Without the exceptional level of collaboration shown by Southeasternists, the aforementioned eclecticism would be much more problematic. If you become an expert in a given theory and data set and your colleague becomes an expert in a different theory and different data set, a coauthored paper has the potential to expertly draw on two data sets through two theoretical lenses without displaying the intellectual laziness that might otherwise plague the conclusions. In each of the papers in this volume, the author refers us to the work of other SEAC archaeologists, often to papers coauthored between scholars at different institutions. The types of communication that take place at annual meetings are essential to this form of collaboration because they allow us to exchange ideas and seek connections in a more immediate and informal way.

I hope that by using the technology available to us, my generation of scholars may be able to build venues for this type of fruitful, informal exchange year round. De Koning (2013:395) studied the reasons anthropologists give for blogging; they include “self-realization, creativity and networking, sharing research experiences and outcomes, and commenting on current affairs.” Are these not many of the same reasons we enjoy and continue to attend professional conferences? In addition to the scholarly benefits of the dialogic format, blogging and other types of social media are important avenues for reaching the broader public (Price 2010; Sabloff 2011). Blogs such as Savage Minds, Zero Anthropology, Culture Matters, and Anthropology Report provide outlets for anthropological outreach, allowing scholars to use more accessible formats and writing styles to exchange ideas with individuals who are not often exposed to anthropological knowledge (De Koning 2013; Price 2010).

Though the movement toward social media has been strong within anthropology for well over a decade (De Koning 2013:394; Sabloff 2011:409), more recent years have seen an explosion of Facebook groups, blogs, and wikis dedicated to archaeological topics. Within the Southeast, Thompson (2013) recently unveiled a Facebook community titled Historical Ecology and Archaeology with the specific goal “to facilitate dialogues between people interested in historical and political ecology approaches to archaeological and ethnohistoric data.” Pauketat and Boszhardt (2009) and Wilson (2011) run similar groups on other research topics. The Society for Historical Archaeology (2011) runs a blog aimed at networking their membership by offering a location for posts about journal issues or edited volumes, conference planning, resources in public education, and current research. Davis’s (2012) Moundville Plaza Project and Wright’s (2011) Garden Creek Archaeological Project use blog formats to provide status updates, excavation photos, and preliminary analysis results, allowing interested individuals to not only read about archaeological findings but also actively interact with the archaeological process. Finally, the Florida Public Archaeology Network (2012) runs a blog that invites professional archaeologists and others to provide information of interest and importance to the general public.

Most directly related to my own work is a blog called SEAC Underground (http://seacunderground.wordpress.com/), which grew out of a symposium titled “Re-conceptualizing the Southeast from the Bottom Up: A Survey of New Theoretical Perspectives” at the 2011 annual meeting in Jacksonville, Florida. The symposium included only graduate students and was organized entirely using a Facebook page where we posted abstracts, solicited ideas for who to invite as discussants, and shared comments and papers relevant to our research. After the symposium was over, we polled our group to determine how to best keep the momentum going. A common request was for an online presence that would allow us to continue this level of communication and idea sharing. Since its inception, the blog has served primarily as a space for posting our thoughts and ideas about the theoretical issues we are currently grappling with, though it also has pages for working papers and invited comments. For me, this informal outlet has taken some of the pressure out of writing, opened my eyes to new sources, examples, and connections, and suggested places where I might collaborate with my colleagues on future presentations and publications.

My involvement with SEAC Underground has also opened my eyes to some of the challenges associated with keeping up this type of communication year round. Informal discussion and idea sharing are essential for developing publishable material, but they do not in and of themselves get us closer to satisfying the requirements of Ph.D. programs, nor do they get faculty members any closer to tenure (Price 2010; Sabloff 2011). Fieldwork, analysis, dissertation writing, publishing, conference presentations, job interviews,
mentoring, service, and teaching all present obstacles to
this type of collaboration, but I believe we need to make
it more of a priority. I have no doubt that creating more
numerous and accessible methods for collaboration
will be essential to advancing both theory and method
in archaeology. Moreover, I believe that the Southeast
is well suited to being at the forefront of this push.
SEAC is an incredibly collegial conference, and every
year its multitude of student events and overall welcom-
ing attitude opens the door to many individuals who
may otherwise shy away from academic conferences.
This general friendliness and openness to collaboration
between generations of scholars, further indicated by
my role as discussant for this set of papers, could lead to
the development of some amazing new ideas.

Perhaps even more important, SEAC’s emphasis on
collaboration does not end with the academic audience.
As has been acknowledged in the archaeological
literature more generally (e.g., Faigan 1984; McMan-
mon 1991; Watkins et al. 1995), many of the papers in
this volume emphasized the importance of collaboration
despite the usual channels. Levy (this volume) notes that “we have an obligation to talk face-to-face
with colleagues and community members who have
different goals,” and the contributors to this volume
recognize the importance of the opinions and priorities
of students, women, minorities, land and cultural
resource managers, taxpayers, the interested public,
avocationalists, collectors, and members of local and
descendent communities. As a group, Southeastern
archaeologists certainly recognize the significance of
these different perspectives, and many are trying to
incorporate them (Loren and Wesson 2010). The SEAC
Public Outreach Grant and Native Affairs Committee
symposia and panel discussions are evidence of this
recognition by the organization, and both programs
succeed in pushing individual SEAC members to also
commit energy toward expanding their networks of
collaboration. That said, we need to do more, and I
believe that this ought to be where we focus our effort
in the coming years.

Building such relationships is another area where the
Southeast is well positioned to lead the way, and as a
recent graduate student, I would like to identify two
places where we must improve if we are going to
continue to make progress. A number of SEAC
members have worked hard to successfully create
and maintain close relationships with members of local
and descendent communities (e.g., Brown 2012; Bur-
gess et al. 2011; Davis 2012; Leib 2011; Mahoney and
Labate 2011; Palmer et al. 2009; Spain and Isham 2011;
Townsend 2012; see also Loren and Wesson 2010:50–
51). However, these exploits rarely get discussed
outside of annual meeting venues (cf. Riggs 2002),
and they are seldom, if ever, included in widely cir-
culated summaries of American Indian–archaeologist
relations (e.g., Ferguson 1996; Watkins 2003). It would
do Southeastern archaeology well to publish, publicize,
and openly discuss the challenges faced and progress
made with regard to building, maintaining, and
effectively utilizing these relationships.

More importantly, we need to get better at including
more people in such networks. I recognize that many of
these relationships are hard fought and fragile, and that
drawing others into them may be a risk, but it is a risk
we must take in order to continue making headway. If
these networks do not get perpetuated, we risk losing
them or having to reinvent the wheel when we should
be spending our energies building, expanding, and
elaborating the networks themselves. Perhaps one way
to do this is to begin the difficult process of translating
more of these relationships from personal to profes-
sional. SEAC archaeologists are a very generous group
when it comes to sharing data, sources, and ideas, and
we need to be generous here too—with both the
relationships themselves and the strategies used to
develop them. Moreover, I strongly believe we need to
make this an explicit part of graduate education.

This brings me to my final theme: Southeastern
archaeologists are often modest and unaggressive when
discussing their theoretical inclinations. In the plenary
session of the fiftieth Southeastern Archaeological
Conference, Robert Dunnell (1990) suggested that the
Southeast played a prominent role in the professional-
ization of archaeology in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.
He further suggested that since that time, South-
easternists have been theoretically conservative if not
outright atheoretical (see also Brown 1994:71–72; Loren
and Wesson 2010:39). Dunnell was speaking about the
late 1980s, but some of the contributors to this volume
suggest that this is still the case. For example, White
(this volume) argues that archaeologists in the South-
est are just not doing theory. I would contend that we
are doing it, but many of us are modest and soft-spoken
about it. In hindsight, Dunnell (1990) was able to
identify the Southeast’s key role in the earlier period of
professionalization, but both he and Christopher
Peebles, another presenter in the earlier plenary
session, did not see the ideas of postprocessualism
coming through in the work of their late-1980s
contemporaries. Peebles (1990:23) stated that South-
easternists “have shown little inclination to indulge in
the rampant and fruitless forms of archaeological
relativism that are emerging at present.” But if you
look at what Southeastern archaeologists are doing
now, they have incorporated many of the ideas of the
1980s, and a review of the literature indicates that this
trend had certainly begun by 1988.

So why did no one see it then? Why do people still
refer to the Southeast as theoretically conservative? Of
course, we may not always be on the cutting edge, but I
argue that the Southeast’s reputation as theoretically
conservative stems from the fact that Southeastern archaeologists are, in general, modest and unaggressive in how they present their theoretical leanings, particularly in press (see also Brown 1994:72–73). There are, of course, exceptions to this characterization (e.g. Beck 2013; O’Brien and Lyman 2004; Pauketat 2001, 2004, 2007), but their contributions have not yet overcome the Southeast’s atheoretical reputation, nor its characteristic Southeastern hospitality (sensu Brown 1994:73). I believe this is because most scholars publishing about the Southeast are quiet leaders—not screaming and yelling that everyone else has it wrong and they have it all figured out (see Knight and Schnell 2004 for a particularly dramatic example of this tendency). As Levy (this volume) concludes, doing good science means that we will be wrong sometimes, but that should not stop us from pushing boundaries. Southeastern archaeologists do push boundaries, but they also tolerate ambiguity and express that in their writing. The picture painted by the 1988 session was very different than the picture presented in the 2012 session discussed here. Progress has certainly been made. That progress is not visible as mountains of theoretical tomes or fiery pleas to change everything; instead it is visible in the fact that today’s senior scholars disagree with and do different work than their predecessors did, and that today’s graduate students are pushing their advisors and one another to think about things in different ways. I had great quiet leaders during my time as a graduate student at UNC, committee members that made sure I was not only repeating what I had been taught but was also thinking up and pursuing new ideas. I know that most graduate students studying the Southeast feel the same way, and it would benefit us all if the regional specialty was given credit for the important theoretical advances championed by its members.

In order to make it clearer to the rest of the world that Southeasternists do theory, I have three basic suggestions. First, we cannot shy away from it; we must recognize when we are theory building and call it that. Second, we need to continue the trend toward publishing our work in more theoretically focused journals, such as Archaeological Dialogues, the Journal of Social Archaeology, the Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory, Anthropological Theory, and Current Anthropology. And finally, we must stop relying so heavily on the language of the past. Every person in this collection of papers either explicitly or implicitly claims to have moved past the processual/postprocessual divide and to have taken some good from both when developing their own theoretical outlook. But I think it would behoove us all to spend less time couching our ideas in processual-versus-postprocessual terms and instead to stick to explaining, in plain English, as Jim Knight suggested in his prompt to these authors, what we believe.

Notes

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