

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white spiral design on the left side of a dark blue banner.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **Theory Can Be Fun, or How We Learn from the Past in 14 Easy Chapters**

**Review by Thomas F. Brunton**

*Archaeological Theory in a Nutshell*

by Adrian Praetzellis

Left Coast Press, 2015

This book is easy to read, practical and funny.

This book is about archaeological theory and post-modernism.

Aren't the above sentences contradictory? Not necessarily, and the author of *Death by Theory* (2011) once again sets out to entertain us with the aim of demystifying archaeological theory. He does it because he thinks one of the goals of archaeology is to “democratize the past.” I think he succeeds in his aim and prepares us to attain the goal.

Is the book perfect? No, its brevity by its nature leaves things out. He oversimplifies and generalizes in the early chapters (he admits it) but he makes up for some of it later.

In Chapter 1, he discusses the problems with theory books including TLDR (Too Long Didn't Read), which doesn't describe this book – most chapters are about ten pages long. This, the longest chapter, includes discussion of how archaeology works and the history of archaeological theory. The rest of the book is brief and organized.

Each of the remaining chapters starts out with a “What is \_\_\_\_\_?” and then an example. The overview often seems too brief but the examples are usually very helpful in illustrating how the theory has been

applied archaeologically. There is a 'sum up,' 'Questions to Discuss' and 'Things to Read' at the end of each chapter.

- The 'sum up' often has some interesting insight into the discussion.
- There are too many Questions to Discuss at the end of several chapters for class room use and they are not numbered. In general they are more thought provoking than 'prove you read the assignment.'
- Things to Read includes important stuff but there may be too many to be useful to beginners.

There is a glossary, which is perhaps the most useful part of the book. And TWO indexes. So it seems like a text book, but doesn't read like one. It could be used in an undergraduate course, but it can also be read by graduate students, the educated public and out-of-touch academics.

Chapter 2 covers neoevolutionism with a good discussion of teleology. He leaves out any discussion of Darwinian Archaeology – genes and memes as in Shennan (2002)

Chapters 3 and 4 are on Marxist and Critical Theory which I think go together. Praetzellis simplifies Marx in the beginning but deals better with his example of the Ludlow Massacre; just as Marx provides a thicker description in the 18th Brumaire (1852) than he does in his more theoretical works.

Chapter 5 Postcolonialism is where the book really starts to shine – giving an intelligible voice to the 'post ...' theorists. And archaeology is able to give a voice to the subaltern. Chapters 6 and 7 give voices to other neglected groups. The chapter on feminist archaeology gives a quick overview of feminism, perhaps too quick. He leaves out some of the depth as well as the disagreement and controversy. The example for this section is *What This Axl Means* by Specter (1993). Praetzellis says it is great archaeology but many archaeologists don't see it that way, like the reaction to Ruth Tringham's house story (1991). The sum up is better. It includes the "add women and stir" metaphor and ends with a discussion of agency

Just as feminists don't just dig up women, Queer Theory is not digging up homosexuals. According to Praetzellis, it is a way for archaeologists to think way outside the box, making the familiar strange and the strange normal.

Chapters 8 and 9 cover Structuralism and its descendants Agency, Structure and Structuration. He defends structuralism despite its faults (Deetz was a mentor) and provides a simplified version of the agency and structure theories. But where is Bourdieu and Practice Theory?

Chapter 10 Transgressive Archaeologies and Chapter 11 Archaeological Biography are both ways of communicating archaeology outside the normal academic mode. He made up these categories and they go along with Queer Theory and feminist story telling. It is a different way of telling the story of the past, just as science is a way of telling the most likely story (Feder 1999).

Chapter 12 Phenomenology and Chapter 13 Materiality discuss different ways of trying to understand what it felt like back then. Praetzellis comes up with the great metaphor that phenomenology is like method acting.

Chapter 14 The Next Big Thing, or Where Do We Go From Here? Not the death of theory or some new paradigm shift because the creation myths of Binford and then Hodder are just that, myths. Most archaeologists were not doing either one, partly because most in the US are CRM (contract) archaeologist.

He thinks to the future will be a more practical use of theory, no overt theory or pick and choose what theory or viewpoint fits. For the consumer this might mean more readable and people oriented texts.

Chapter 15 is what he calls a 'Postmodern Phrasebook.' It is an archeology theory glossary – potentially the most used part of the book. Although a few words, like reify and praxis, were in the text but not in the glossary.

Conclusions.

This book led me to a new understanding of some things I thought I understood and it cleared up some misconceptions. But it left out some things I think are important. I had more complaints about the sections I knew more about and was more satisfied with the sections I was unfamiliar with. I assume that readers with different interests than mine would discover the same phenomenon.

Praetzell is clearly sympathetic to many of the fringe or post-modern theories, but that may be why he writes so well about them. Often people can't explain theories that they don't agree with, or understand very well. My notes had the repeating phrase – thought provoking.

Demystifying and democratizing? Yes as in plain, easy to understand language.

### References Cited

Deetz, James F.

1996. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. Anchor Books, New York.

Feder, Kenneth.

1999. *Frauds, Myths and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, 3rd edn. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

Marx, Karl

2008 [1852]. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Rockville, MD: Wildside Press. Also available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

Praetzell, Adrian

2011. *Death by Theory: A Tale of Mystery and Archaeological Theory*. AltaMira Press, Lanham, Massachusetts

Shennen, Steven

2002. *Genes, Memes and Human History: Darwinian Archaeology and Cultural Evolution*. Thames & Hudson.

Spector, Janet

1993. *What This Aul Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul.

Tringham, Ruth

1991. Households with Faces: the Challenge of Gender in Prehistoric Architectural Remains. In Joan Gero and Margaret (Eds.) *Engendering Archaeology: Women in Prehistory* (pp. 93–131). Basil

Blackwell, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*Thomas F. Brunton* has done fieldwork in the US, England, Denmark and Sweden. He has been an adjunct and a shovel bum. He currently lives in Sweden where he has been volunteering for the Bjäre Härads Hembygdsförening, and also being a student again at Akademi Båstad. His research interests include the interactions of ethnicity and gender, the origins and maintenance of inequality, the archaeology of work and the landscape.



© 2015 Thomas F. Brunton