

Social theory in archaeology

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This is an expanded draft, June 2023, of an essay intended for an encyclopaedia of archaeology.

Abstract

Social theory in archaeology is often summarized as different schools of thought (paradigms and isms) that aim to reconstruct past societies. They are usually associated with thought leaders in the discipline who advocate for and against the different schools of thought. Involved are questions of social ontology (asking — what is society and its components?), epistemology (asking — how might we come to know societies?), and modeling (capturing key aspects of social process as well as how to use archaeological evidence in reconstructing societies). In contrast, this essay avoids the description of schools of thought and, following a pragmatist line, treats social theory in archaeology as a key component of thoughtful practice, what archaeologists do, how they work. The components of practice such as opening brief, orientation, deliverable, frame, and project management are related to social theory. The concepts of social theory are argued to be a tool kit mobilized in archaeological practice. A section outlines some concepts of social theory, including society, culture, systems, networks, agency, power, identity, personhood, complexity.

Key points/objectives

- Orthodox accounts of social theory in archaeology focus upon abstract schools of thought and thought leaders. This oversimplifies complex debates and promotes an adversarial academic politics.
- Social theory is best treated in pragmatist terms as a key component of archaeological practice, what archaeologists do.
- In this approach, often associated with science studies, the concepts of social theory are a tool kit for constructing what may be offered as candidates for archaeological knowledge, among other things.

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