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Interview with Bjørnar Olsen (University of Tromsø)

Douglass W. BAILEY*

Bjørnar Olsen graduated in Archaeology (in 1984) at the University of Tromsø where he is Professor of Archaeology. Professor Olsen has published widely on theoretical archaeology, material culture studies, Norwegian prehistory, the culture history of the Sámi, and Museology. Bjørnar has held visiting professorships at Cambridge, Stanford, and University College London.

DWB: How is a material culture approach to an artefact different from a traditional typological or functional one?

BO: Well, this has changed considerably since the 1980s and today we see a number of material culture approaches. Initially it was very much about elucidating that the artifact also was a sign conveying a meaning or a message. The design of an arrow or pot was not just a matter of practical function, it also said something about the producer/user or which group he belonged to. The artifact was used actively in social communication; it was, to paraphrase Ian Hodder, a symbol in action (I. Hodder 1982). Later, material culture studies become very much concerned with the concept of embodiment – that due to the fragile and abstract nature of our human existence there was a kind of immanent need to externalize or objectify it in something solid and concrete. Through these processes of embodiment, abstract and ambiguous phenomena such as identity, selfhood, social relations, gender, etc, were thought to become imbued in matter. They created a kind of “material imprint” of society from which social and ideological conditions later could be read or inferred.

Another approach, inspired by scholars such as Alfred Gell (A. Gell 1988) and Bruno Latour (B. Latour 2000), took a more radical position by claiming that things were not just means for human projects and ambitions: things also had agency and the capacity to act. Society was not an exclusive gathering of humans only but a hybrid collective containing both human and non-human actors. Without the latter, society would not be possible. Thus, instead of anchoring all social phenomena in human intentionality or action, one started to ask what role things played in enabling these phenomena. For example, how could our current societies be possible without cell phones, electricity, computers, roads, pipelines, gas reserves, airline systems, banks, university campuses, custom points, maps, cities, etc, ? I think few would disagree that we depends on things; to reduce society to humans only, produces a very biased and even false representation of our existence.

Seen in an archaeological or historical perspective this approach moreover implies that it was only by increasingly mobilizing things that humanity could come to experience “episodes” of history such as the advent of farming, urbanization, state formations, industrialization and post-industrialization. The features we associate with historical change and the attributes we ascribe to development and progress were all made possible by humans increasingly becoming more entangled and “assemblaged” with non-humans. I sympathize with this latter approach and in my opinion the important thing-lesson entailed in this story is that these other entities do not just sit in silence waiting to be embodied with socially constituted meanings. Landscapes and things possess their own unique qualities and competences which they bring to our cohabitation with them. Throughout history, the properties of soil and water, bone and stone, bronze and iron, have been swapped with the properties of humans. This approach also involves a care and concern with the artefact itself, a concern which is shared with both traditional typological and functional approaches. These approaches also took the thing, its immanent material qualities, seriously, and did not try to conjure it

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into something else (sign, text, symbol, etc). In this sense, and somewhat paradoxically, we may say that material culture studies have returned to the thing, to the artefact.

DWB: By material culture studies, are you talking about the study of big monuments, hillforts, and important objects such as golden grave goods or classical sculpture? If these types of things are not the subject of study, then why not? What would be the advantage of studying the more mundane objects of everyday life?

BO: There is some ambiguity here. In British archaeology those who have been writing much about theoretical approaches to material culture (Chris Tilley, Julian Thomas, John Barrett, Andrew Jones, Richard Bradley, *inter alia*.) have almost exclusively focused on grand monuments (such as megaliths, enclosures) and on quite spectacular rock art. To me this emphasis on the conspicuous is quite strange, since many of these authors at the same time claim to be applying phenomenological theory, an approach born out of an engagement with our everyday experiences and ordinary objects. However, material culture studies in anthropology have been much more concerned with the ordinary and mundane objects that we normally engage with in our everyday life.

A good archaeological example is the now classic work of James Deetz, pertinently entitled *In Small Things Forgotten* (1977). The advantages of studying these more mundane things are to me quite obvious. First, they relate to the lives of the majority of people, of ordinary people, as Deetz's study so beautifully demonstrates. Second, they constitute the bulk of what we encounter both in nearly all excavations and in our everyday lives. In other words, they are far more numerous and representative of past and present life worlds. Third, these common and ordinary artefacts also reveal aspects of these life worlds that we rarely encounter in conventional historical narratives which normally are concerned with big events, political structures and powerful persons. Mundane things were part of everyday life, they are witnesses about this life, including the dull, the stigmatized and less successful, which normally are neglected or not talked about. There is a reason that these silent witnesses play such an important role in all crime investigations. Finally, I think that the nature of things, their ownness (what has been called the "thingness of the thing") is easier to grasp in the less conspicuous, ordinary and far more common objects.

DWB: Will you work through an example of the material culture approach in either the contemporary world or from a historic or prehistoric context?

BO: For this purpose let us again return to James Deetz's fabulous book, *In Small Things Forgotten*. In great detail Deetz explores a number of remarkable changes that took place in the colonies along the northeast coast of USA from the second half of the 18th century onwards. He also showed that there was a clear tendency in these changes: the communal, the common, and the heterogeneous were losing ground to the individual and ordered. This was seen in burial practices, architecture, furniture, ceramics and eating habits. For instance, the old habit of sharing pots and tools while eating was replaced by individual plates and cutlery and by individual chairs for people to sit on around the dinner table. Large, communal burial grounds were replaced by small, individual family graveyards. Houses became increasingly symmetrically organized and divided into separate rooms, separating public from private spaces. Bunks were replaced by beds. Clothes became increasingly differentiated as people acquired personal effects, chamber pots, musical instruments, books, etc.

Deetz saw this as an *idea* of order, individuality and privacy being carved out and embodied in solid materials. In other words, he thought that a mental concept of individuality and order existed prior to and consequently was the cause of all these changes in material culture. I think that this emphasis on prior (or grounding) changes in the mental template is problematic and that such idealism becomes far less important than the "how to". How could a subject-centered society emerge? How could a new order become effective and stable? How many different types of actors were gathered and what things were mobilized in creating this new order? Instead of any central hero subjects - man, world view, mind - we should envisage a brigade of actors: plates, forks, gravestones, humans, garbage pits, houses, food, chamber pots, law books, musical instruments all acting together. In each settlement these entities joined forces, acting as what Michael Schiffer called "compound interactors" (M. Schiffer 1999). While material culture in Deetz's scheme act as a faithful

means that constantly respond to changes in human thinking and intentionality, I think it played a far more creative and grounding role. The new thing-regime made new bodily practices necessary, it prescribed new programs of action, and over time it stabilized a new social order. Just think of it, how could "privacy" be something concrete and enacted without some kind of spatial and material enclosure? Privacy was not exactly a hot issue when everybody was living in the same room sharing all facilities. Any mental conception of the individual and the private may as well be seen as the outcome of the new material and spatial configurations rather than as their cause. Such conceptions would anyway have been "airy as clouds" (to borrow a phrase from French philosopher Michel Serres) without the collaboration of material actors, creating innumerable networks also ranging far beyond each local community. Thus, and not without a certain irony, the individual was made possible by the collective work of a brigade of material actors.

DWB: You have recently published a book about an abandoned Soviet era mining town at Pyramiden. What was this project about? What was the intention? What was the result?

BO: Pyramiden ("the Pyramid") was one of originally three Soviet mining towns in the high arctic archipelago of Norwegian Svalbard, situated at 79°N. Rapid development during the 1960s and 1970s had transformed Pyramiden into a modern town hosting 1100 inhabitants and equipped with most urban facilities. This development also imbued it with all familiar signatures of *sovietness*: concrete architecture, iron installations and socialist iconology. Likewise, the spatial outline of the town was rigid and ordered - all buildings were arranged symmetrically along a central axis that completely ignored local topography. The mining town survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, but not for long. In 1998 the Russian arctic mining company decided to end its activity in Pyramiden, Svalbard (79°N). A remarkably abrupt abandonment left behind a site devoid of humans but still filled with all stuff that constitutes a modern city. Today the ghost town of Pyramiden survives as a petrified image of Soviet ambitions in the high arctic.

I travelled to Pyramiden in 2006 together with archaeologist Hein Bjerck and art photographer Elin Andreassen in order to carry out what may be termed an archaeology of the contemporary past (E. Andreassen *et alii* 2010). The aims of our research were twofold. The first was to explore the significance of things as a source to see how people lived and coped in Pyramiden. Written accounts are abundant, of course, but narrowly concerned with production rates, cargo and shipment details, geo-morphological data, logistic challenges, etc. Beyond political rhetoric hardly anything is said about everyday life and social struggles. Our fieldwork, however, revealed a wealth of material memories that testify to a far more diverse and contested Pyramiden.

One crucial aspect was the astonishing contrast between the creativeness, individuality, and political irony that characterized the refurbishment and home decor of the workers' apartments and the disciplined Soviet utterances and iconology dominating the materiality of public spaces and official living. The imagery of the apartments represents a kind of inversed expression of official living and ideology. Despite their spatial uniformity, no two of them look alike. Creative use of wallpaper, floor coverings and paint made each apartment unique and individual. Flowers, potted plants, self-produced furniture, and bookshelves added to this creation of difference. Wall decorations were dominated by images from cigarette boxes, beer bottle labels, pin-ups and air cargo package tape, glamour pictures, and advertisements for capitalist consumer goods. In our book we argue that the semantic of this opposition is mixed, reflecting both strategies of political and ideological resistance, but also individual skills and the need to create something personal - a home - in a potentially alienating materiality. Embedded in these utterances are also dreams and wish images, reflecting utopias very distinct from those grounding the town's rigid public physiognomy.

The second aim of our research was to explore the post-human biography of Pyramiden and the way it provokes reflections on heritage and cultural values. How does a site like Pyramiden, a decaying Soviet industrial ruin fit into conceptions of heritage and the current political economy of the past? What are we to do with this embarrassing, rusting and crumbling ghost town situated in the midst of pristine Arctic nature - Europe's last authentic wilderness? In the dominant conception of heritage and ruins they are *old*, they have an "age value" which is crucial to their legal and cultural-historical appreciation. Judged by this criterion, Pyramiden becomes ambiguous, even anachronistic; a site out of place - and out of time.

Why bother then? Why is Pyramiden important? Apart from being a unique source to the lives of those Russian and Ukrainians who lived there, the unpolished and undisciplined ruin may teach us some alternative thing lessons. It confronts our customized habit of dealing with things as goods, as neat and tamed domesticated possessions. Pyramiden takes us beyond consumption; the material is allowed to be itself. Things appear neither as frames nor backgrounds, but at centre stage: their textures, their smells, their utter silence are foregrounded. In Pyramiden the *ownness* of things is hard to ignore. A final point, if you read our book you will see that photography was crucial to our approach and that images outnumber text. This is not to make it 'richly illustrated' but to allow things to speak through their own associative appearances. Thus, rather than disseminating our research in compliance with formats and genres of ordinary scientific prose where imagery only holds a secondary value, we chose this more experimental format. Challenging the traditional hierarchy of text over images, this book is also an attempt to negotiate some of the limitations set by traditional scholarship and to create reflection by transcending boundaries between research and art.

DWB: If a student just starting to study archaeology could only read five books (or articles), what would they be and why?

BO: After all that is said above I cannot avoid selecting *In Small Things Forgotten*. Despite my criticism of Deetz, this is a fantastic book, beautifully illustrated with his own drawings and lucidly and poetically written. A novel student should know something about the disciplinary past, and although I am not a big fan of the socio-political approach Bruce Trigger takes in *A History of Archaeological Thought* (B. Trigger 1986) I have no better recommendations. However, after reading this I presume the student is exhausted and will need to be cheered up a little bit, so my next choice is a paper by another great American archaeologist, Kent Flannery. His amusing piece *The Golden Marshalltown* (K. Flannery 1982) narrates an encounter on a flight from San Diego to Detroit involving the author and three fictive characters that represent different positions in American archaeology: The Old Timer (who believed in culture and culture history), The Born-Again Philosopher (who had failed radically as a field archaeologist but when all seemed darkest he discovered philosophy of science and was born again: "no more dust, no more heat...."), and the Child of the Seventies (who had no other characteristics than blind ambitions and simple goals: to get famous and well paid). Today, the paper may seem a little bit dated to the student but I would encourage her to identify some kindred characters in current archaeology.

I now realise that my choices are very biased towards North American scene and will try to level this out by my last two selections. I am probably breaking all rules but my next choice is actually a paper by myself, *Metropolises and Satellites in Archaeology: on Power and Asymmetry in Global Archaeological Discourse* (B. Olsen 1991). It contains some theoretical rubbish that the student should skip but it addresses a very important issue: how archaeology written in non-English languages and conducted outside Britain and the US is marginalised and almost instantly considered less important or interesting than the archaeology produced there. My final choice introduces the student to the archaeology of the contemporary past and is written by one of the best archaeologists currently around, Alfredo González-Ruibal. The student may find his paper *Time to Destroy: An archaeology of Supermodernity* (A. González-Ruibal 2008) (and the following discussion) a little bit dense, but making her way through it she will probably have learnt more than from most other papers she will ever encounter.

DWB: If you were stranded on a desert island and could take with you only three things, what would they be? If you had to take the complete works of one author, who would it be?

BO: Difficult, difficult. Provided that my basic needs are fulfilled, and that there will be enough stuff around to build a shelter, the first I can think of is an unlimited quantity of red wine from Ridge Vineyards (consisting of nice mix of their Monte Bello signature cabernet and their best zinfandels). However, thinking about the storage conditions I may fall back on Russian Vodka or Icelandic Brennivín. The second thing I will bring is my Taylor guitar. I haven't practiced much the last 20 years but the solitude on the island, the melancholy of the dark, long nights, and the wine (or the vodka) will probably help a successful rehearsal. The third thing I would bring was my Marshalltown trowel. Being an archaeologist stranded on a desert island I would of course try to find evidence for any previous human occupation here. Finding such traces would probably help me feel less lonely – at

least until I started pondering why they vanished. The complete works of one author? Well, then the choice would be the works of Norwegian novelist and Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun. A fantastic writer. His novels would also help recall the memories of my beloved northern Norway. Will I ever be rescued?

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