

INTERPRETIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

A READER

Edited by
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Leicester University Press
London and New York

DISCOURSES OF IDENTITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PAST*

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The uniqueness and unity of European history must be dismantled . . . If our cultural consciousness has become objectified in a particular historical, genre (cf., Sahlins 1985: 52) that is *linearised and continuous*, analysis reveals the *non-synchronicity and discontinuity* of social experience.

(Hastrup 1992: 2; my emphasis)

The mode of European cultural consciousness explored by Hastrup is integral to dominant discourses of cultural identity in Europe, whether they be European, national or ethnic. Typically group identities are represented as unified, monolithic wholes, with linear and continuous histories which in turn are used in the legitimisation of claims to political autonomy and territory within the prevailing ideological climate of ethnic nationalism (see Chapman *et al.* 1989; Danforth 1993; Just 1989; Shore 1993). Thus, whilst competing interpretations of the past arise in the context of political disputes, they tend to share a common mode of representation; a mode which is not restricted to ethnic and national groups, but also extends to supra-national entities. For instance, despite the emphasis on the co-existence of supra-national, national and regional cultural identities, the symbolic terrain on which the New Europe is being actively produced, 'is precisely that upon which the nation-state has traditionally been constructed' (Shore 1993: 791). That is the 'New Europe' is being constructed as a unified entity with a unilinear continuous history (see Shore, chapter 6 [in the original volume]).

Archaeology has undoubtedly played a central role in the construction of such identities, and the details of particular liaisons between archaeology and nationalism have been the subject of a number of recent studies (e.g., Kristiansen 1993; Kohl 1993; Olsen 1986; Ucko 1995). In this essay I take a more abstract approach and examine the common discourses of identity¹ which have characterised myths of origin and historical continuity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is always a tension between past and present in archaeological interpretation; between

*First published in P. Graves-Brown, S. Jones and C. Gamble (eds) (1996), *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities*, London: Routledge, pp. 1–24.

the past meanings and processes which we wish to reconstruct from the material remains, and the meanings which we wish these remains to reveal to us in the present. This tension is nowhere greater than in accounts of past cultural groups. The critical role of the past in the assertion and legitimation of group identities often leads to a problematic slippage between contemporary concepts of group identity and the mapping of past groups in archaeology. Here, I explore the way in which contemporary, historically-contingent concepts of culture and identity shape our understanding of the past (see also Diaz-Andreu, chapter 3; Hides, chapter 2 [both in the original volume]), and I suggest that we need to adopt a radically different theoretical framework for the analysis of cultural identity in the past. Such a theoretical framework must accommodate the fluid and contextual nature of cultural identity and facilitate the exploration of alternative associations of identity, history and place.

Peoples and cultures

Archaeology, like anthropology, has tended to deal with ‘wholes’; a concern epitomised in the identification of past peoples and cultures, which continues to provide a basic conceptual framework for archaeological analysis today. Throughout the history of archaeology, from its antiquarian origins onwards, the material record has been attributed to particular past peoples (see Daniel 1978 [1950]; Trigger 1989b). However, it was with the development of the culture history paradigm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a systematic framework for the classification of cultures in space and time was established. Despite the diverse histories of archaeology in different regions and countries, culture history has provided the dominant framework for archaeological analysis throughout most of the world during the twentieth century (see contributions in Ucko 1995). Processual and post-processual archaeologies have rejected culture historical interpretation as an end product in itself. Yet even these archaeological ‘schools’ are still largely dependent upon material evidence which has been described and classified on the basis of an essentially culture historical epistemology (see Jones 1994: 19–20 and 1996).

One of the main assumptions underlying the culture-historical approach is that bounded uniform cultural entities correlate with particular peoples, ethnic groups, tribes and/or races. Thus, Kossinna, one of the pioneers of culture history, asserted that ‘in all periods, sharply delineated archaeological culture areas coincide with clearly recognisable peoples or tribes’ (cited in Malina and Vasicek 1990: 63).² This assumption is based on a normative conceptualisation of culture: that within a given group cultural practices and beliefs tend to conform to prescriptive ideational norms or rules of behaviour. It is assumed that culture is made up of a set of shared ideas or beliefs, which are maintained by regular interaction within the group, and the transmission of shared cultural norms to subsequent generations through the process of socialisation, which, it is assumed, results in a continuous cultural tradition. Childe was explicit about this process, arguing that ‘Generation after generation has followed society’s prescription and produced and reproduced in thousands of instances the socially approved standard type. An archaeological type is just that’ (Childe 1956a: 8).

Within such a theoretical framework the transmission of cultural traits/ideas is generally assumed to be a function of the degree of interaction between individuals

or groups. A high degree of homogeneity in material culture is regarded as the product of regular contact and interaction (e.g. Gifford 1960: 341–2), whereas discontinuities in the distribution of material culture are assumed to be the result of social and/or physical distance. Gradual change is attributed to internal drift in the prescribed cultural norms of a particular group, whereas more rapid change is explained in terms of external influences, such as diffusion resulting from culture contact, or ‘the succession of one cultural group by another as a result of migration and conquest. Distributional changes [in diagnostic types] should reflect displacements of population, the expansions, migrations, colonisations or conquests with which literary history is familiar’ (Childe 1956a: 135).

It has been argued (Trigger 1978: 86) that the widespread adoption of the culture-historical approach in archaeology was a product of the need to establish a system for classifying the spatial and temporal variation in material culture which became evident in the nineteenth century. However, such an argument implies that discrete monolithic cultures constitute a natural and universal mode of socio-cultural differentiation waiting to be discovered by the discipline of archaeology. Certainly spatial and temporal variation in human ways of life is an unequivocal fact which is manifested in the archaeological record, but it can be argued that the particular classificatory framework developed in archaeology in order to describe and explain such variation was based on historically contingent assumptions about the nature of cultural diversity. That rather than ‘*discovering* a general form of universal difference’ archaeologists, along with other social scientists, invented it (Fardon 1987: 176, my emphasis).

The expectations of boundedness, homogeneity and continuity which have been built into ideas concerning culture since the nineteenth century are related to nationalism and the emergence of the nation-state (see Diaz-Andreu, chapter 3 [in the original volume]; Handler 1988: 7–8; Spencer 1990: 283; Wolf 1982: 397). As Handler points out:

nationalist ideologies and social scientific inquiry [including that of archaeology] developed in the same historical context that of the post-Renaissance European world – and . . . the two have reacted upon one another from their beginnings.
(Handler 1988: 8)

Nations are considered, in the words of Handler, to be ‘individuated beings’; endowed with the reality of natural things, they are assumed to be bounded, continuous, and precisely distinguishable from other analogous entities (Handler 1988: 6, 15). The idea of culture is intricately enmeshed with nationalist discourse; it is culture which distinguishes between nations and which constitutes the content of national identity. Moreover, ‘culture symbolises individuated existence: the assertion of cultural particularity is another way of proclaiming the existence of a unique collectivity’ (Handler 1988: 39). The representation of culture in nationalist discourses is strikingly mirrored in the pre-suppositions which have dominated traditional concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘society’ in academic theory and practice. Such categories have been traditionally seen as well integrated, bounded, continuous entities, which occupy exclusive spatio-temporal positions and which are assumed to be the normal and healthy units of social life (see Clifford 1988; Handler 1988).

The concept of an archaeological culture represents a particular variant of this formula. As discussed above, bounded material culture complexes are assumed to be the material manifestation of past peoples, who shared a set of prescriptive learned norms of behaviour. Archaeological cultures came to be regarded as organic individuated entities, the prehistorian's substitute for the individual agents which make up the historian's repertoire: 'prehistory can recognise peoples and marshal them on the stage to take the place of the personal actors who form the historian's troupe' (Childe 1940: 2; see also Piggott 1965: 7). Moreover, as in the case of contemporary claims concerning the relationship between nations and cultures, the relationship between archaeological cultures and past peoples is based on teleological reasoning in that culture is both representative of, and constitutive of, the nation or people concerned. As Handler points out:

The almost *a priori* belief in the existence of the culture follows inevitably from the belief that a particular human group . . . exists. The existence of the group is in turn predicated on the existence of a particular culture.

(Handler 1988: 39)

Through the concept of an archaeological culture the past is reconstructed in terms of the distribution of homogeneous cultures whose history unfolds in a coherent linear narrative measured in terms of objectified events, such as contacts, migrations and conquests, with intervals of homogeneous, empty time in between them.³ Furthermore, the understanding of culture which is embodied by the notion of an archaeological culture enables history, place and people to be tied together in the exclusive and monolithic fashion common to contemporary representations of ethnic, national and European identity. Yet recent anthropological research (see Fardon 1987: 176; Handler 1988: 291) suggests that the relationship between culture and peoplehood is not so straightforward, and that the idea that ethnic and national groups are fixed, homogeneous, bounded entities extending deep into the past is a modern classificatory invention.⁴ On the contrary it has been shown that ethnic and national identities are fluid, dynamic and contested.

Ethnicity and culture

During the 1960s and early 1970s there was a shift in the analysis of cultural differentiation in the context of critiques of existing social scientific concepts.⁵ This shift was marked by the proliferation of research into ethnicity, and the use of 'ethnic group' in place of 'tribe' and 'race'. However, it was not merely a terminological sleight of hand, it also represented important changes in the orientation of research and theories of cultural differentiation (see Cohen 1978; Jones 1994). Increasing emphasis was placed on the self-identifications of the social actors concerned, the processes involved in the construction of group boundaries, and the inter-relationships between socio-cultural groups. Such approaches contrast sharply with the traditional holistic analysis of supposedly discrete, organic entities.

As early as 1947 Francis had argued that the ethnic group constitutes a community based primarily on a shared subjective 'we-feeling' and that 'we cannot define the ethnic group as a plurality pattern which is characterised by a distinct language, culture, territory, religion and so on' (1947: 397). A number of other authors adopted a similar

argument (e.g., Moerman 1965; Shibutani and Kwan 1965: 40; Wallerstein 1960: 131). Yet the real turning point in the definition of ethnic groups seems to have followed Barth's (1969) reiteration of the subjective aspects of ethnic identity within a programmatic theoretical framework (Cohen 1978). He argued that ethnic groups cannot be defined by the cultural similarities and differences enumerated by the analyst, but rather on the basis of 'categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves' (Barth 1969: 10). In many instances ethnic groups may possess social and cultural commonalities across boundaries and exhibit considerable variation within the group. Yet in the process of social interaction both real and assumed cultural differences are articulated in the maintenance of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). Ethnographic research has confirmed that ethnicity involves subjective processes of classification, and in much of the recent literature it has been regarded as a consciousness of real or assumed cultural difference *vis à vis* others; a 'we'-'they' opposition (e.g., Chapman *et al.* 1989; Cohen 1978; Ringer and Lawless 1989; Shennan 1989).

This emphasis on the formation and persistence of subjective ethnic categories in the context of embracing social systems also contributed to a concern with the economic and political dimensions of ethnicity. Ethnic identity, it is argued, is 'instrumental' in that it provides a group with the boundary maintenance and organisational dimensions necessary in order to maintain, and compete for, a particular socio-economic niche (e.g., Barth 1969; Cohen 1974). In this sense ethnic groups are a product of differential socio-structural and/or environmental conditions. Moreover, it is argued that ethnicity is manipulated and mobilised, on an individual and group level, in the pursuit of economic and political interests (e.g., Barth 1969; Patterson 1975). For instance, some of the hoe-agricultural Fur of the Sudan have adopted the lifestyle and identity of the nomadic cattle Arabs, the Baggara (see Barth 1969: 25-6; Haaland 1969); a shift in identity which can be explained by the limited opportunities for capital investment in the village economy of the Fur, in contrast to the opportunities presented by the Baggara economy.

Broadly speaking, instrumentalist approaches dominated research on ethnicity in the 1970s and 1980s. The recent literature on ethnicity has further illustrated the dynamic nature of ethnicity, not only historically (see contributions in Tonkin *et al.* 1989), but also in different social contexts according to the interests and positions of the actors (e.g. Cohen 1978; Wallman 1977).

The recognition that ethnic groups are fluid self-defining systems which are embedded in economic and political relations, represents an important contribution to our understanding of the maintenance and transformation of ethnicity. Most significantly in terms of this discussion, such an approach to ethnicity reveals a critical break between culture and ethnicity. Whilst it is still assumed that there is some relation between ethnicity and culture, it is generally accepted that there is rarely a straightforward correlation between cultural similarities and differences and ethnic boundaries. Hence, recent theories of ethnicity mark a significant departure from the notion of ethnic groups as culture-bearing units; a notion which, as discussed above, is central to nationalist discourses as well as traditional social scientific theory. However, whilst ethnographic research supports a distinction between culture and ethnicity, the precise nature of the relationship between ethnicity and culture has been a neglected area of research. Instrumentalists tend to focus on the organisational

aspects of ethnicity and take the cultural differences on which ethnicity is based for granted. Culture is reduced to an epiphenomenal and arbitrary set of symbols (Eriksen 1992: 30) manipulated in the pursuit of changing individual and/or group interests (Bentley 1987: 26, 48; Eriksen 1992: 44).

Towards a practice theory of ethnicity

One important problem which subjective instrumental approaches to ethnicity fail to resolve is the relationship between agents' perceptions of ethnicity, and the cultural contexts and social relations in which they are embedded. Such a question can be addressed by drawing on theories of practice that are concerned with the general relationship between the conditions of social life and agents' subjective constructions of social reality. For instance, Bourdieu (1977) argues that social actors possess durable, often subliminal, dispositions towards certain perceptions and practices (such as those relating to the sexual division of labour, morality, tastes and so on) which he calls '*habitus*'. Such dispositions, which are inculcated into an individual's sense of self at an early age (Bourdieu 1977: 78–93), are generated by the conditions constituting a particular social environment, such as, modes of production or access to certain resources (Bourdieu 1977: 77–8). However, the practices engendered by such conditions are not constituted by the mechanistic enactment of a system of normative rules which exist outside of individual history (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Rather, structural orientations exist in the form of the embodied knowledge and dispositions of social actors, but these structures depend for their existence on the practices and representations of social actors, which lead to their reproduction or transformation. As Postone *et al.* (1993: 4) point out, the orientations of the *habitus*, 'are at once "structuring structures" and "structured structures"; they shape and are shaped by social practice'.

The concept of the *habitus* can be used to articulate the way in which subjective ethnic classifications are grounded in the social conditions and cultural practices characterising particular social domains. Ethnicity is not a passive reflection of the cultural similarities and differences in which people are socialised, as traditional normative approaches assume. Nor is ethnicity, as some instrumental approaches imply, produced entirely in the process of social interaction, whereby epiphenomenal cultural symbols are manipulated in the pursuit of economic and political interests. Rather, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, it can be argued that the subjective construction of ethnic identity in the context of social interaction is grounded in the shared subliminal dispositions of the *habitus* which shape, and are shaped, by commonalities of practice. As Bentley puts it: '[a] shared *habitus* engenders feelings of identification among people similarly endowed. Those feelings are consciously appropriated and given form through existing symbolic resources' (Bentley 1987: 173).

Moreover, these 'symbolic resources' are not essentially arbitrary. The cultural practices and beliefs which become objectified as symbols of ethnicity are derived from, and resonate with, the habitual practices and experiences of the agents involved, as well as reflect the instrumental contingencies of a particular situation. As Eriksen argues, symbols of ethnicity:

are intrinsically linked with experienced, practical worlds containing specific, relevant meanings which on the one hand contribute to shaping interaction,

and on the other hand limit the number of options in the production of ethnic signs.

(Eriksen 1992: 45)

Yet within this theoretical approach the *habitus* and ethnicity are not directly congruent, thereby constituting a similar position to the traditional equation of culture and ethnicity. There is a break between the structured dispositions constituting the *habitus* as a whole, and the objectified representation of cultural *difference* involved in the production and reproduction of ethnicity. Shared habitual dispositions provide the basis for the recognition of commonalities of sentiment and interest, and the basis for the perception and communication of cultural affinities and differences which ethnicity entails. However, social interaction between actors of differing cultural traditions engenders a reflexive mode of perception contributing to a break with forms of knowledge which, in other contexts, constitute subliminal, taken for granted modes of behaviour. Such exposure of the arbitrariness of cultural practices, which had hitherto been taken as self-evident and natural, permits and requires a change 'in the level of discourse, so as to rationalise and systematise' the representation of those cultural practices, and, more generally, the representation of the cultural tradition itself (Bourdieu 1977: 233). It is at such a discursive level that ethnic categories are produced, reproduced and transformed through the systematic communication of cultural difference with relation to the cultural practices of particular 'ethnic others'.⁶

This process can be further elaborated by reference to a specific example, that of the construction of Tswana ethnicity in the context of European colonialism (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 235–63). In the process of interaction and communication between the Tswana and evangelist missionaries, both groups began to recognise distinctions between them; 'to objectify their world in relation to a novel other, thereby inventing for themselves a self-conscious coherence and distinctness – even while they accommodated to the new relationship which enclosed them' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 245). This objectification is not a fabrication; an entirely instrumental construction. Tswana ethnicity is based on the perception of commonalities of practice and experience in *Setswana* (Tswana ways) in opposition to *Sekgoa* (European ways). Yet the form which Tswana self-consciousness takes in this context is different from the cultural identities which prevailed in pre-colonial times when they were divided into political communities based on totemic affiliations. In both pre- and post-colonial times the construction of identity involves the marking of contrast – the opposition of selves and others – but colonialism provided a new context in which Tswana tradition was objectified as a coherent body of knowledge and practice uniting the Tswana people.

Thus, the objectification of cultural difference involves the dialectical opposition of different cultural traditions. The particular forms which such oppositions take is a product of the intersection of people's *habitus* with the social conditions constituting any particular context. These conditions include the prevailing power relations, and the relative distribution of the material and symbolic means necessary for the imposition of dominant regimes of ethnic categorisation. For instance, in many colonial contexts ethnic or 'tribal' categories were imposed by colonial regimes (see Colson 1968; Fried 1968), or were a product of large-scale urban migration

and associated social and cultural dislocation (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Hence, the extent to which ethnicity is embedded in pre-existing cultural realities represented by a shared *habitus* is highly variable. The extent of contiguity depends upon the cultural transformations brought about by the processes of interaction and the nature of the power relations between the interacting 'groups' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 56). In some instances, for example as in colonial situations, minority ethnic groups may be composed of people of diverse origins, and 'the substance of their identities, as contrived from both within and outside, is inevitably a *bricolage* fashioned in the very historical processes which underwrite their subordination' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 57). However, even when ethnicity is as much a product of the historical relations of inequality between 'groups' as it is a reflection of pre-existing cultural realities, the reproduction of these emergent forms of cultural difference will, over time, lead to their internalisation as part of the structured dispositions of the *habitus*.

Thus, manifestations of ethnicity are the product of an ongoing process involving multiple objectifications of cultural difference and the internalisation of those differences within the shared dispositions of the *habitus*. Such processes will lead to fluctuations in the correspondence between constructions of a particular ethnic identity, in terms of objectified cultural difference, and the overall cultural practices and historical experience of the people involved. Furthermore, the expression of cultural difference depends upon the particular cultural practices and historical experience activated in any given social context, as well as broader idioms of cultural difference. Consequently the cultural content of ethnicity may vary substantively and qualitatively in different contexts, as may the importance of ethnicity in general (see Eriksen 1991 and 1992).

On the basis of this theoretical approach it can be argued that there is unlikely to be a one-to-one relationship between expressions of a particular ethnic identity and the entire range of cultural practices and social conditions associated with that particular 'group'. Yet this is not because culture is an epiphenomenal resource which is consciously and deliberately manipulated in the pursuit of individual and group interests. Whilst ethnicity always involves active processes of performance and interpretation in the objectification of cultural difference, it is still constituted in the context of specific cultural practices and historical experiences which provide the basis for the perception of similarity and difference.

From a 'bird's eye view' the construction of ethnicity is likely to be manifested as multiple overlapping boundaries constituted by representations of cultural difference, which are at once transient, but also subject to reproduction and transformation in the ongoing processes of social life. Such a view of ethnicity undermines conventional methodological approaches which telescope various spatially and temporally distinct representations of ethnicity onto a single plane for the purposes of analysis and attempt to force the resulting incongruities and contradictions into an abstract conceptualisation of the ethnic group as a discrete, internally homogeneous entity characterised by continuity of tradition. The theoretical approach developed here suggests that such a methodological and conceptual framework obliterates the reality of the dynamic and creative processes involved in the reproduction and transformation of ethnicity.

A reconsideration of archaeological approaches to ethnicity

The traditional assumption that a one-to-one relationship exists between the sum of the cultural similarities and differences and the ethnic group has recently been criticised in archaeology (e.g., Hodder 1982b; Shennan 1989), as in other disciplines. It has also been argued that ethnic groups are not the product of social and physical isolation, but rather a consciousness of difference reproduced in the context of ongoing social interaction. Consequently archaeologists cannot continue to regard variation in the archaeological record as a passive measure of physical/social distance between groups (see Hodder 1982b). Nor can they assume that close contact between groups or the incorporation of one group by another will lead to gradual and uniform acculturation. However, it is necessary to make more wide-reaching changes to our analytical frameworks in order to analyse the construction of ethnicity in the past. In particular, there is a need to discard classificatory and interpretive frameworks based upon the presumed existence of bounded socio-cultural units; frameworks which are still fundamental to much archaeological theory and practice (and see Conkey 1990: 12).

Ethnicity must be distinguished from mere spatial continuity and discontinuity in that it refers to self-conscious identification with a particular group of people (Shennan 1989: 19). I have argued that ethnicity involves the objectification of cultural difference *vis à vis* others in the context of social interaction. Such objectifications are based upon the perception of commonalities of practice and experience, as well as the conditions prevailing in particular social and historical contexts. A variety of scenarios may arise. At one extreme there may be a high degree of homology between the structuring principles of the *habitus* and the signification of ethnicity in both material and non-material culture (as in Hodder's (1982b) study of the Baringo District). Whereas at the other end of the spectrum there may be a dislocation of such homologous relationships to the extent that the generation and expression of a common ethnic identity incorporates a bricolage of different cultural traditions characterised by heterogeneous structuring principles in many social domains (see Rowlands 1982: 164 for a similar argument).

Yet whatever the degree of homology between the *habitus* and ethnicity, it must be emphasised that archaeologists may not be able to find a reflection of past 'ethnic entities' in the material record (see also Miller 1985a: 202 with relation to caste). It is possible to question the very existence of bounded, homogeneous ethnic entities except at an abstract conceptual level. As Bourdieu (1977) has pointed out, such conceptual categories are based on the methodological reification or objectification of transient cultural practices taking place in different spatial and temporal contexts, and the 'group' exists only in the context of interpretation where it justifies and explains past practices and modes of interaction, and structures future practices.

In contrast, the praxis of ethnicity results in multiple transient realisations of ethnic difference in particular contexts. These realisations of ethnicity are both structured and structuring, involving, in many instances, the repeated production and consumption of distinctive styles of material culture. Yet they are a product of the intersection of the perceptual and practical dispositions of social agents and the interests and oppositions engendered in a particular social context, rather than abstract categories of difference.

Hence, configurations of ethnicity, and consequently the styles of material culture

involved in the signification and structuring of ethnic relations, may vary in different social contexts and with relation to different forms and scales of social interaction. From an archaeological point of view the likely result is a complex pattern of overlapping material culture distributions relating to the repeated realisation and transformation of ethnicity in different social contexts, rather than discrete monolithic cultural entities. Patterns in the production and consumption of material culture involved in the communication of the 'same' ethnic identity may vary qualitatively as well as quantitatively in different contexts. Furthermore, items of material culture which are widely distributed and used in a variety of social and historical contexts may be curated and consumed in different ways and become implicated in the generation and signification of a variety of expressions of ethnicity.

The analysis of these contextual realisations of ethnicity, and ultimately the manifestation of ethnicity in the past, is not beyond the possibilities of archaeological interpretation. The systematisation and rationalisation of distinctive cultural styles in the process of the recognition, expression, and negotiation of ethnic identity are likely to result in discontinuous, non-random distributions of material culture of the type suggested by Hodder (1982b) and Wiessner (1983). However, in order to analyse such patterns in archaeological material it will be necessary to adopt a radically different framework for both classification and interpretation.

Most archaeological classification is ultimately based on the assumption that stylistic groupings are co-extensive with normative historical entities. Two particular principles are central: (i) that change in material culture is a gradual, regular process which occurs in a uniform manner throughout a spatially homogeneous area; (ii) that the prime cause of variation in design is the date of manufacture. Such an approach to classification presupposes a normative view of culture and produces what is essentially an illusion of bounded uniform cultural entities. Artefacts are extrapolated from their contexts of deposition, grouped together into predetermined classes of material and classified, spatially and temporally, according to the principles noted above. Such an approach obscures the kind of information which is of interest in the analysis of ethnicity (and arguably past cultural processes in general).

Ethnicity, amongst other factors, may disrupt regular spatio-temporal stylistic groupings, resulting in boundaries which are discontinuous in place and time. Yet in order to analyse such patterns it is necessary to consider artefact assemblages within a contextual framework, and to date assemblages, where possible, on the basis of independent methods and stratigraphy. Such an approach to the basic classification of material culture will enable the analysis of variation in the deposition and use of material culture in different social domains. Any distinctive non-random distributions of particular styles and forms of material culture in different contexts which emerge from such an analysis may plausibly relate to the expression of ethnicity. Yet a variety of factors may be involved in producing such variation, and it will be necessary to employ independent contextual evidence in the interpretation of ethnicity, as the significance of material culture in terms of ethnicity is culturally and historically specific (Hodder 1982d; Shennan 1989: 21; Wiessner 1989: 58).

Thus, a broad understanding of past cultural contexts derived from a variety of sources and classes of data is a necessary part of any analysis of ethnicity in archaeology. As ethnicity is a product of the intersection of the *habitus* with the conditions

prevailing in any particular social and historical context, it will be important to have a broad understanding of such conditions, including the distribution of material and symbolic power. An adequate knowledge of past social organisation will also be important, as ethnicity is both a transient construct of repeated acts of interaction and communication, and an aspect of social organisation which becomes institutionalised to different degrees, and in different forms, in different societies.

Moreover, an historical approach will be particularly important given the role of historical context in the generation and expression of ethnicity. A diachronic framework may enable archaeologists to pick up shifts in the expression of ethnicity, and those dimensions of material culture which signify it, over time. Such shifts may involve greater or lesser fixity and institutionalisation of expressions of ethnic difference, and changes in the use of particular aspects of material culture in the signification of ethnicity. In short, the use of a diachronic contextual framework may reveal something about the contexts in which ethnicity is generated, reproduced and transformed; to examine 'the mobilisation of group as process' (Conkey 1990: 13).

Conclusions: discourses of history and place in the construction of ethnicity

Ultimately, in the state-its conception of the nation, state and nation become one, an 'imagined community' that ignores the various nations/identities/histories it may include. To maintain this conception of the nation-state it is necessary constantly to stress the existence of only one possible cultural model, one history, one language, one social project.

(Devalle 1992: 20)

In this essay I have argued that the very concepts used in the archaeological identification of past peoples are historically contingent (see also Diaz-Andreu, chapter 3; Hides, chapter 2 [both in original volume]). The concept of 'a culture' which has been embraced in archaeological epistemology, and its conflation with ethnicity, is the product of a particular ideology of cultural differentiation which emerged in the context of post-Enlightenment European nationalism. Cultures are considered to be bounded, continuous, unified entities, that bear witness to the existence of the nations which are their bearers. This conceptualisation of culture contributes to the assertion of a congruency between territorial contiguity and ethnic unity across an historical stage – a mosaic of discrete spatially and temporally bounded, monolithic entities. Such a conflation of social scientific and political ideological concepts serves to hinder the analysis of the real nature of the processes involved in the construction of ethnic and national identity (Llobera 1989: 248). Instead, the unfortunate implication is that social scientists (including anthropologists and archaeologists) may have developed paradigms 'to explain that which they have themselves created' (Bond and Gilliam 1994: 13; see also Handler 1988).

In some spheres of archaeology, culture history, and its equation of cultures with peoples, has been rejected (for a review see Jones 1994; Shennan 1989). However, a normative concept of culture still underlies much of archaeological description and classification (see Jones 1994), and ethnic groups are still considered to be bounded continuous, if dynamic, entities. The presupposition that an exclusive congruence exists

between ethnic unity, territory and history remains intact, although more elastic (e.g., see Blackmore *et al.* 1979; Kimes *et al.* 1982). Drawing upon recent research, I have argued that ethnicity is a dynamic, contested phenomenon, which is manifested in different ways in different contexts, with relation to different forms and scales of interaction. Moreover, the representations of cultural difference involved in the articulation of ethnicity are transient, although subject to reproduction and transformation in the ongoing processes of social life. Such an approach to ethnicity challenges the assumption that bounded, homogeneous ethnic or cultural entities constitute the natural units of socio-cultural differentiation. Furthermore, it explodes the exclusive association of ethnic entities with a single, discrete, territory and history. From an archaeological perspective the material manifestation of ethnicity, amongst other factors, may disrupt regular spatio-temporal stylistic patterning, resulting in an untidy and overlapping web of stylistic boundaries in different classes of material culture and in different contexts; boundaries which may be discontinuous in space and time.

My aim has been to suggest alternative ways of conceptualising the relationship between history, place, and identity in archaeological theory and practice. Returning to the representation of European identities the argument presented here inevitably represents a threat to certain understandings of European, national and ethnic identity. As Boyarin points out in his analysis of Israeli nationhood:

It seems almost gratuitous to state that my point is not to dismantle the state of Israel. But if the Israeli state, once established, is implicitly understood by its own elites as a static reality dependent on functional equilibrium, then a threat to any of its parts (including its self-generated history) is a threat to its very existence. Related to the equilibrium model is the image of the nation as an integral collective.

(Boyarin 1992: 118)

It is necessary to challenge such static functional conceptions of cultural groups (whether they be ethnic, national or Europe-wide), and their self-generated histories, in order to explore the possibility of a plurality of histories and identities.

Ethnicity is not constituted by the historical legacy of a primordial, essentialist identity; rather, the formation and transformation of ethnicity is contingent upon particular historical structures which impinge themselves on human experience and condition social action. As Devalle (1992: 18) points out, ethnicity is an historical process, as 'time provides the necessary ground on which ethnic styles are maintained (recreated) and collective identities formulated' providing such identities with substance and legitimation. However,

Being firmly grounded in the concrete history of a particular social reality, an ethnic style cannot be simply understood as the immutable and intangible 'essence' of a given people, or as a fixed sociological idealised type.

(Devalle 1992: 19)

Archaeologists have tended to utilise such immutable 'essentialised' (Conkey 1990: 113) categories of ethnicity, leading to the projection of a modern classificatory framework onto all of human history. Instead, we need to develop theoretical frameworks that allow us to explore the ways in which ethnicity is manifested in

particular historical contexts, and to explore multiple associations between kinds of identity and notions of time and place. Frameworks which will facilitate analysis of the multiple, twisted and discontinuous histories of the 'New Europe', rather than attempt to impose a linear, continuous and homogeneous past.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Andrew Crosby, Clive Gamble, Paul Graves-Brown, Claire Jowitt, Tony Kushner, Yvonne Marshall, Stephan Shennan, Cris Shore, Julian Thomas and Peter Ucko for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Of course any errors or deficiencies remain my own.

NOTES

- 1 The term discourse is being used here to refer to a clustering of ideas, an ideological configuration, which structures knowledge and experience in a particular domain, in this case in the construction of group identity.
- 2 Further expressions of this basic principle can be found in Childe (1929: v–vi and 1956a: 2), Hawkes (1940: 1) and Piggott (1958: 88).
- 3 This kind of temporal framework is what Fabian (1983: 23) identifies as 'typological time'.
- 4 The argument, that the representation of human groups as the bearers of bounded, monolithic cultures is a product of post-Enlightenment discourses of identity (in particular those associated with nationalism), is clearly supported by studies of cultural identity in the context of European colonialism (e.g., see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Fardon 1987). However, I do not support the related theory that ethnicity is an entirely modern phenomena. Instead I suggest that different forms of ethnicity are produced in different socio-historical contexts, and the nationalist conflation of political and cultural units (and the associated concept of culture as homogeneous, bounded and spatially contiguous) cannot be assumed to be a universal form of socio-cultural organisation. In fact, there are many examples to the contrary today (see Eriksen 1993), as there are in Medieval Europe (see Greengrass 1991) and other areas of the world prior to European colonisation (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).
- 5 Throughout the first half of the twentieth century a number of anthropologists expressed concern about both abstract and pragmatic definitions of the 'cultural' or 'tribal' entities which constituted the objects of their research (for example, see Fortes 1969). By the 1950s and 1960s critiques of the concept of tribe had emerged challenging the traditional assumption that social, cultural and political boundaries are commensurate with the boundaries of the tribe (for example, Leach 1954). Others indicated the pejorative connotations of the concept of tribe and suggested that the category, as well as its socio-cultural referents, were constructs of colonial regimes (for example, Colson 1968, Fried 1968). Sociologists also became increasingly aware of problems with the conceptual frameworks which dominated their discipline. In particular the presupposition that continuous cultural contact would lead to acculturation and homogenisation was challenged by the persistence of cultural difference and ethnic self-consciousness amongst minority groups. It is important to note that these critiques were connected in a plurality of ways with processes of colonisation and decolonisation in the 'third' world, as well as the increasing political salience of minority voices in 'western' countries.
- 6 If this argument is extended to national identity it contradicts Foster's suggestion that national culture and identity is 'doxic' in nature (1991: 240). In fact, Foster's own discussion of the contested and negotiated nature of many national identities and culture suggests that his use of Bourdieu's concept of 'doxa' is inappropriate, as does Eriksen's (1992: 3) analysis of Mauritian and Trinidadian nationhood, in which he states that in these two cases nationhood belongs to 'the sphere of opinion, not to that of doxa'.