

## Reply to Wickstead and Pluciennik

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We welcome this chance to reply to commentaries on our forum piece 'Prehistory as Propaganda' (*PIA* 6: 1-10). It was our intention that it would foster debate, and we are pleased to see that it has. On the whole, we find comparatively little to disagree with in the comments of Wickstead in comparison to those of Pluciennik. We would agree with Wickstead that it is time to leave behind 'confrontational rhetoric,' and that dichotomous 'objective' and 'relativistic' positions in archaeological theory are overstated. There is indeed room for a *rapprochement* in the Anglophone camps of processualism, post-processualism/anti-processualism, post-post-processualism and all of the grey or un-committed areas in between. Obviously the days of 'archaeology with a capital S' are long past, and so for that matter are the ripples caused by Shanks and Tilley's (1987a; 1987b) 'red and black' books now largely dissipated. At Çatal Höyük, Ian Hodder seems to have discovered practical archaeology anew, and we await his next theoretical orientation with interest. An unsettled mood of change is once more in the air (although some would deny it). We thus predict, with a hopeful optimism, that this change will take the form of a more enlightened archaeology: aware of its potential ideological manipulations and ethnocentrism, yet working within the parameters of scientific methodology, logical argumentation, and using consensus as a means to monitor the validity of interpretations.

We disagree with both Wickstead and Pluciennik, however, concerning some points of archaeological history. Speaking as one who was present at Cambridge at the end of the post-processual floruit (KCM), it is difficult to claim we (and others, *cf.* Kohl 1993) have exaggerated the relativistic positions of the post-processual writers. True, one can find many quotes in which Hodder, Shanks and Tilley eschew the doctrine of pure relativism. Similarly, there were many evenings in the South Lecture Room when one could hear these scholars, or their disciples, effortlessly changing their position from one which was shouted-down the previous week. As many theorists who have tried to debate with post-processualism over a period of time will know, to lock horns with a post-processualist is akin to boxing with a phantom. Wickstead and Pluciennik have regaled the readers with a few select quotes of the 'big three' in which they espoused the horrors of relativism. We will provide readers with a few more (Shanks and Tilley 1992:67):

We should concern ourselves not so much with the 'truth' or 'falsity' of statements. Rather we should ask: who are these statements relevant to and why? What kind of archaeology do they serve to produce? Truth is a practical matter not an absolute.

And (Shanks and Tilley 1987a: 205; emphasis in the original):

There is no possibility of a neutral and autonomous 'middle way'. The effect of archaeology in socio-political terms depends upon the place that it chooses to occupy within a wider socio-cultural field. A value-committed archaeology is

one rejecting any position which would suggest that research merely mirrors the past. Instead it insists that research forms part of a process in which the archaeologist *actively decides* upon one past rather than another.

And (Hodder 1986: 16-17):

I wish to examine the varied implications of the realization that there can be no 'testing' of theory against data, no independent measuring devices and no secure knowledge of the past. It seems to me that most archaeologists have shied away from these problems since at first sight they seem destructive: the whole fabric of archaeology as a scientific discipline, accepted since the early development of archaeology is threatened. I wish to argue that the problems need to be faced if archaeology is to remain a rigorous discipline and if archaeologists are to be socially responsible.

Like Hodder, most authors would aspire to the mantle of 'social responsibility'-but a responsibility to whose society? This, we feel, is a fundamental question demanded by any relativistic position. Are academics morally responsible to special interest groups, their own governments, the majority of people in their communities, the oppressed (of the moment), or to their colleagues? Or, are they instead responsible to the integrity of some underlying reality within the past?

This question is relevant to a great deal of Pluciennik's rather polemical response to 'Prehistory as Propaganda.' From his commentary it would seem that he lacks an appreciation for irony, and sometimes (willfully?) misreads our perspective, stretching the bounds of context for quotations excerpted to illustrate his points. His primary complaint is that we seem to have taken a 'moral' perspective on the interpretation of the past, whilst at the same time criticizing those who felt they were doing the same. The 'moral' perspective we took was an advocacy of the methodology of science. It would be tilting at windmills to claim that a 'scientific' approach is totally mechanistic or objective, and the advocacy of such a view was never the intention of the authors. Yet it is also absurd to view concepts such as 'logic', 'parsimony' or 'consensus' as moral or immoral, or 'value-laden'. Within the rhetoric of science, a proposition is entertained until contradictions become so numerous that consensus shifts. This process is repeated and, in theory at least, those operating under a scientific methodology come by process of elimination closer and closer to a 'zone of truth'. One must have the courage to accept that 'paradigm shifts' become necessary as counter examples multiply. If a 'socio-political' orientation is being consciously or unconsciously furthered within research through the manipulation of data, it should become apparent through this process, and through the complaints of the global (multi-cultural) archaeological consensus. The fundamental, and probably unbridgeable rhetorical gap between Pluciennik and ourselves, is that while we believe that scientific methodology is a tool which may be used to arrive at a less biased understanding of the past, he does not.

The rhetoric of Pluciennik is one of 'morality' and 'value commitment'. Unfortunately, the problem with morality is that it is relative. Most people, including tyrants, are 'moral' according to their own code of values. These codes of values are socially and culturally relative. An archaeology guided solely by 'morality', though beautiful in some aspects, would eventually become an untrammelled device for the legitimation of any

'morality' currently in power. 'Political Correctness' is one such 'morality' which is at work today in several Western societies. In the name of 'Political Correctness' American textbooks have already been altered. Perhaps such changes are 'good' or perhaps they are 'bad.' However what should concern historians and prehistorians is whether or not such changes are fabrications, exaggerations, obfuscations, or are indeed supported by the evidence at hand.

We must remember that it is entirely possible that the 'truth', or the closest that we can get to it, will not be 'morally' or politically desirable: technological advancements may have been slower in some areas of the world than in others, developments may have been indigenous to a region or imported from the outside, and so on. Prehistorians today may find themselves at odds with creationists, racial supremacists, and nationalists. By the conventional morality of the Western *present* it would be a good thing if all the cultures of the world could be shown to have advanced in lock-step and if inter-cultural variation was limited merely to artistic expression. By the conventional morality of the Western *past*, it was the duty of 'civilized' white Christian societies to spread their light to 'primitive' or 'regressive' cultural neighbours. Interestingly however, historical and prehistoric contradictions evidenced by scientific investigations ultimately helped to erode the old imperialistic 'morality' of the west. With this in mind, one should be reluctant to entirely surrender the logic of science in the present.

We attempted to impress upon readers of our previous article that most manipulations of the past usually involve claims to racial or national primacy in the development of 'civilization'. In most cases such supremacist claims can be shown to be in disagreement with our current corpus of evidence gathered from numerous excavations. However to our own (admittedly relative) moral senses, the root of the proliferation of racial theories is the value which Western culture places upon certain achievements (literacy, urbanism, pyrotechnology, etc.). Such values are, of course, both relative and infectious. We suggested that a more valid system of values might be one which places emphasis on the diversity of cultural adaptations evidenced in prehistory and in the world today. This argument was quite discrete from those made concerning the importance of a common set of 'scientific' standards for the justification of interpretations. One may make 'moral arguments' concerning what one values within archaeology without denying that all arguments made should conform to the known facts. In other words, one may be a scientist and still 'value-committed' at the same time. The subtlety of this point was apparently lost on Pluciennik.

Finally, it ill becomes Pluciennik to end his piece with a warning that we as Westerners have little right '[to preach from a supposed high ground, once again with "scientific facts" to back up [our] claim to moral and intellectual superiority,' when 'scientific facts' have been greatly responsible for dismantling the facade of Western 'moral and intellectual superiority'.

## References

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