

Comment on MacDonald, Hung, and Crawford, 1995, 'Prehistory as propaganda'

Mark Pluciennik

Department of Archaeology, University of Wales

It may seem churlish to take issue with only a small part of MacDonald *et al.*'s recent paper after their unexceptionable attack on the hyperdiffusionist work of Elliot-Smith, Perry and Heyerdahl, and on the more recent work of Diop and his populist followers. Yet for one who was present at the seminar in which the ideas for this paper were aired, it was clear that the agenda informing the presentation was a plea for a return to 'archaeology as objective truth' as a way of overcoming perceived political bias. Post-processualism is once more raised as the bogeyman, and science as the saviour. In a confused series of assertions, MacDonald *et al.* attempt to equate the making of 'ethnic or racial links between the present and the past' with post-processual approaches (p. 8), and criticize 'strident connections between the past and the present' (*ibid.*), while seeing no contradiction in claiming a 'certain (ancestral) glory (which) is derived from the Scots' maintenance of their essentially indigenous lifestyle in the face of their aggressive southern neighbour' (*ibid.*). What price the "'scientific" high ground' (p. 7) here? While 'professional academics' (neatly excluding the rest of the archaeological community, one notes) should be 'safeguarding the past against political manipulation', they should also be 'value-committed' (pp. 8-9) by writing popular accounts: presumably, by seeing the (scientific) archaeological endeavour as uncontaminated by and somehow above the sordid political concerns of the rest of the world. We should keep to the true path by the use of uncontroversial and unassailable safe scientific methods, those which participate in the game of scientific truth on the 'even playing field of the observational sciences', such as 'physical anthropology and DNA analysis' (p. 8). Whom are they trying to convince? Even a cursory knowledge of the history of physical anthropology demonstrates that both the nature and meaning of repeatable, testable, indubitably 'scientific' measurements are also inextricably bound up with political considerations. The arguments currently taking place within the sociology of science are to do with the *degree* of the social construction of scientific facts, not whether they are or are not. As Binford put it ten years ago (1986: 460):

It was thought that the dedicated scientist could clear his (*sic*) mind of cultural bias and see reality 'objectively.' Anyone familiar with anthropology cannot accept such a position ... the task of science is not the objective approximation of 'truth' but just the opposite: the investigation of our culturally guided ignorance about reality.

Post-processualism is, unsurprisingly, many things to many people. But perhaps one common factor might be the demand for a self-critical awareness of archaeological practices and their implications. Another is the realization that archaeology itself is a practice in the present, performed, produced and promulgated in particular social, economic, cultural and political circumstances. As Shanks and Tilley provocatively claimed, the implication is that 'Archaeology, as cultural practice, is always a politics,

a morality' (1987: 212). Archaeological 'facts' always involve interpretation, and interpretation is always 'from' someone, somewhere - yet somehow MacDonald *et al.* would exclude prehistorians from this messy situation by claiming privileged access to scientific truths about the past. 'We are not so naive as to argue that a strictly objective study of the past can exist' (1995: 7), but MacDonald *et al.* apparently *are* naive enough to believe that the 'observational sciences' are immune from the 'slippery slope of ideology and the self-interest of racial, ethnic or gender groups' (*ibid.*: 8). The authors disapprovingly quote Diop for arguing that 'Intellectuals ought to study the past not for the pleasure they find in so doing but to derive lessons from it' (p.8), despite having devoted the preceding six and a half pages doing exactly that for the practice of archaeology.

The authors rightly condemn racist (ab)uses of archaeology (yet believe that DNA studies of genetic identity are immune from such dangers, being 'scientific' - try reading Sokal *et al.* 1993); admit that 'prehistory ... plays an essential part in the formation of world views' (p. 7) but dislike those making 'connections between the past and the present' (p. 8), and implicitly claim that there is only one true version of the past (that of 'professional academics', who are apparently free of the 'self-interest' displayed by other social groups), despite having shown how two of them (Elliot Smith and Perry), while comfortably established at UCL, promulgated hyperdiffusionist views with which the authors vehemently disagree because of their inherent racism. The instrumental successes of western science are clearly no guarantee of either eternal veracity, or of moral and political right by association.

The enemy is not post-processualism as the stalking horse for extreme relativism. Compare MacDonald *et al.*'s concern about the 'relativistic' views of Hodder opening the 'road wide for Fascism in archaeology' (p. 7) with what Hodder actually wrote in his self-confessed most 'relativistic' period (1986: 168-9):

... the potential results (of purely politically-motivated relativistic archaeologies) are disturbing. If the past has no integrity, and anyone's interpretation is as good as anyone else's, then archaeology is completely open to manipulation by governments, elites, interest groups, and fascist dictatorships. With the data described as totally subjective, the archaeologist would have no recourse to the data in objecting to 'misuses' of the past. ... however, I have argued that the data from the past do have a contextual reality in relation to theory.

As authors drawing on Critical Theory, Shanks and Tilley have *always* explicitly rejected the 'anything goes' relativism mistakenly attributed to them by MacDonald *et al.* (p. 7). Indeed, they criticize Hodder (1986) and others for precisely that stance: '(His) argument appears to come close to a disabling relativism' (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 192). 'We cannot afford the essential irrationality of subjectivism or relativism' (Shanks and Tilley 1992: 110). 'The material record does constrain what we can write in various ways' (Shanks and Tilley 1989: 4). Equally, Hodder has drawn away from his earlier perplexities with the related problems of pluralism and relativism: 'I would also now no longer support relativism and the rejection of science' (1995: 89). '(A) total commitment to relativism cannot be sustained by a discipline which seeks to retain a position of authority from which to speak and wield power' (*ibid.*: 170), which seems to be a succinct statement of the less confused parts of MacDonald *et al.*'s position. While there may be

philosophical and moral problems associated with the acceptance of multiple interpretations of the past, the saviour is not science (though one may also wish to use scientific arguments as a tool). Scientists, as much as other people, are responsible for their own actions and views and do not have a monopoly on either truth or ethics. But the way to oppose racism, ethnocentrism and genocide is to argue that they are morally and politically wrong, not merely to appeal to 'facts'. European settlers and their descendants decimated indigenous populations in the Americas and largely replaced them. That is a 'scientific', 'historical' and 'archaeological' fact. A Grafton Elliot-Smith of the future would certainly be 'scientifically' justified in claiming that particular part of the archaeological record as an example of hyperdiffusionism from the 'Old' World to the 'New', along with cultural or racial superiority. MacDonald *et al.* should have the courage of their own moral convictions: 'The political importance of the past is immense' (1995: 2): I am sure Shanks and Tilley and Hodder would agree with that statement. Archaeologists are among those producing and interpreting that past. That suggests to me that the acceptance of archaeology - in Europe and in Africa, by MacDonald *et al.* as well as the rest of us - as *necessarily* a political practice, with all its implications, might offer us some insights into our chosen field. Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, mentioned approvingly by MacDonald *et al.* - whatever the merits of its considerable scholarship - can also be seen as being produced in the context of the rise of Afro-American pride, confidence and 'ancestral glory', against a background of centuries of racism in the United States and elsewhere. It ill becomes Europeans or Americans, with their history of genocide, colonialism and imperialism to preach from a supposed high ground, once again with 'scientific facts' to back up their claim to moral and intellectual superiority. A little more humility in considering the legacy of past and present racism would help us understand that we too are (sometimes uncomfortably) situated authors.

References

- Binford, L.R. 1986. In pursuit of the future. In: Meltzer, D., Fowler, D. and Sabloff, J. (eds.), *American Archaeology Past and Future*: 459-479. Washington: Society for American Archaeology.
- Hodder, I. 1986. *Reading the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hodder, I. 1995. *Theory and Practice in Archaeology*. London: Routledge.
- Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1987. *Social Theory and Archaeology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1989. Archaeology into the 1990s. *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 22: 1-12.
- Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1992. *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (Second edition). London: Routledge.
- Sokal, R., Jacquez, G., Oden, N., DiGiovanni, D., Falsetti, A., McGee, E. and Thomson, B. 1993. Genetic relationships of European populations reflect their ethnohistorical affinities. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 91: 55-70.