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Is Narrative Necessary?

Abstract:

How important is traditional narrative structure (stories with an explicit beginning, middle and end) for archaeologists? To answer this question fully would demand attention to human and historical ontologies and archaeological epistemologies, as well as analysis of the kinds of pasts archaeologists prefer to present. In their favour it is here argued that historical narratives are generally complex (for example, in comparison with those preferred by practitioners of the hard sciences, who typically find reductionism the most powerful methodological tool). Narratives may even in some way map onto natural and common structures of human experience. But they also perhaps have a particular affinity to archaeological practices, with the chronological sequence of narrative reflecting in reverse order the process of actual or metaphorical excavation, and hence mimicking the reconstruction of a past told as cause and effect. Narratives can also offer a sense of coherence, resolution and closure, which may encourage a kind of intellectual conservatism. So too may socio-political pressures to conform with existing dominant narratives within the profession. However, despite the potential pitfalls of too strong an adherence to narrative form, and the values of alternative modes of presentation such as non-narrative evocation, it is suggested that narrative should remain an important style of archaeological explanation, albeit with a commitment to open-endedness and an awareness of the possibilities of life beyond narrative.

Keywords: archaeology; narration; phenomenology; explanation; representation; narrative functions; socio-politics

Ist Erzählen notwendig?

Zusammenfassung:

Welche Rolle spielen Erzählungen – also Texte mit einem expliziten Anfang, Mittelteil und Ende – für Archäologen? Diese Frage umfassend zu beantworten würde voraussetzen, die Aufmerksamkeit einerseits auf menschliche und historische Seinslehren und andererseits auf archäologische Erkenntnistheorien zu richten. Archäologisches und historisches Erzählen hat im Gegensatz zur Praxis der Naturwissenschaften in der Regel eine komplexe Struktur. Es mag sogar auf bestimmte Weise auf natürlichen und allgemeinen Strukturen menschlicher Erfahrung gründen. Darüber hinaus weist es eine besondere Affinität zur archäologischen Praxis auf, und zwar insofern als die zeitliche Abfolge innerhalb der Erzählung in umgekehrter Reihenfolge dem Prozess der Ausgrabung (im realen wie im übertragenen Sinne) entspricht. Narrative können den Eindruck von Kohärenz und

Geschlossenheit vermitteln, was wiederum eine Art von intellektuellem Konservatismus befördern könnte. So kann sich soziopolitischer Druck den vorherrschenden Narrativen innerhalb des Faches anpassen. Doch trotz dieser Gefahren einer zu starken Hinwendung zur narrativen Form ist das Erzählen weiterhin ein wichtiger Aspekt archäologischer Deutung, allerdings mit einer Verpflichtung zu einem offenen Ende und einem Bewusstsein der Möglichkeiten des Lebens jenseits des Narrativen.

Schlüsselwörter: Archäologie; Erzählen; Phänomenologie; Deutung; Darstellung; Erzählfunktionen; Gesellschaftspolitik

Introduction

This paper examines the nature and roles of narratives within archaeology and more broadly the historical disciplines. What kinds of opportunities and limitations does the narrative form present, what kinds of roles might it play, and how does it work? By contrast, the paper also briefly examines the question posed by philosopher David Carr towards the end of his book on the phenomenology of narrative structures, *Time, Narrative and History*. But while he asks whether narratives are a necessary part of the human condition and tentatively suggests not, here I rather concentrate on whether and how non-narrative forms might work in archaeology. Do we need history in a narrative sense to provide a temporal perspective? And if not, what are the implications for our discipline and our writing practices?

Starting from here …

The importance of language and its relations to the experienced and the physical world has received renewed attention in archaeology, as well as in other subjects, over recent decades. In some ways this can be seen as a reflection of a new loss of innocence. Even in empirically-based disciplines and those with a strong reliance on scientific methods, it is realised, rhetoric – the way that discourses are structured, presented and understood in various media – makes a difference to the nature, persuasiveness and acceptability of arguments and facts. For the historical disciplines, in addition to what might be considered a particularly modernist emphasis on content (Ankersmit 1989), style, structure and format are now considered to matter and to merit serious disciplinary attention. There is a further complication: in a more literate, technologically-diverse, educated and often more historically interested age, there are many more kinds of possible stories, media, genres, discourses and dialogues, including those on the internet, for example (Joyce 2002). There are also many possible audiences for archaeological compositions. These typically now go well beyond the academic peers and students who might once have been considered the primary target of disciplinary publications, and include professional archaeologists, research sponsors, various sectors of the public, policy makers, sections of the media and so forth. In response to this proliferation of material and messages archaeologists and others have increasingly turned

to analysis of the kinds of discourses and rhetorics used in and about the discipline, and in the field of ›heritage‹ more generally. More specifically, the idea of ›narrative‹ has also itself become a reflexive term, as archaeologists increasingly consider from the outset what their findings might mean for existing explanations (or stories), and what kinds of narrative frameworks their work might fit into.[1] There is also literature in the fields of museum studies and heritage, for example, which overlaps with these concerns (e. g. Alkon 2004; Brett 1990; Buciek et al. 2006; Roberts 1997) and which discusses the kinds of historical narratives presented in exhibitions, or official literature.

However, to my mind, despite all this attention, broader questions about narrative form and archaeology in particular remain. So the kinds of questions I have found myself asking include: Is ›narrative‹ a meaningful category? What exactly does narrative do? What does narrative imply? And for whom? What are the alternatives? What do *they* imply? And hence, to paraphrase Carr's question, do we need narrative at all?

Defining narrative

Because sometimes in English, at least, ›narrative‹ is used loosely to mean ›any written description‹, I want to be clear about what I am discussing here. I shall be using the word ›narrative‹ to mean a form of story which has an explicit beginning, middle and end, and is thus almost always sequentially and chronologically ordered. Although this narrative form can occur in different media, here I shall generally mean written narratives, rather than film or other images, or the spoken word. In line with many other theorists of narrative, I shall also assume that narratives involve characters or subjects, which may change, to which things happen or who cause things to happen. While in fiction or some history these may typically be individuals, in archaeology (and history) these may be groups or collectivities, materials or things (as in object biographies), or even abstractions: medieval women, LBK households, the environment, assemblages, landscapes, northern Germany. Or these may sometimes be considered as the ›object‹ of the narrative – the complex historical referent which is described, constructed and perhaps explained by the narrative as a whole; what the philosopher Fred Ankersmit (1983) calls the ›narrative substance‹. Narratives thus encompass individual, or a series of events or occurrences (say, the Thirty Years War, or the adoption of farming), and also processes (say, changes in class relations, or climatic shifts). But these elements of narrative are inter-related and sometimes inter-changeable. For example, depending on what temporal scale one is using, ›colonization‹ may be an event or a process. Thus an event can be a process, and a narrative may include several characters; a character or characters may be the ›object‹ of a narrative; often and typically narratives can be broken down into sub-narratives; and they may imply other narratives, processes or characters and so on. Narratives can thus, intentionally or not, be extremely complex entities. They can also incorporate reversals, flashbacks, asides, diversions, supplementary narratives and so forth, and refer of course to other entities, including narratives, outside themselves, whether through inter-textuality or otherwise. The final term that is

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1   e. g. Ballard 2003; Bender et al. 2007; Bowler 1991; Haslam 2006; Joyce 2002; Landau 1991; Moser 1998; Smiles/Moser 2005; Pluciennik 1999; Praetzellis/Praetzellis 1998; Terrell 1990.

also commonly used is that of ›plot‹ or ›emplotment‹. That is, there is something that purports to unify a narrative so that it is not ›just‹ a sequential description of events (›This … then this … then this …‹), but has coherence. Unity can though be given or implied through focus on a character or subject, or other processes of selection from the universe of possible referents.

Typically, for archaeological and historical (and generally for non-fictional) narratives, thematic unity will be given by an explicit or strongly-implied authorial focus, intent or explanation: ›This is what I think was happening to this entity, how and why‹, but plots can also be ›brought‹ to narratives from outside – by the reader, for example. This is part of what Hayden White (1987, 43) means when he says that readers recognise the form of the narrative such as the idea of the hero overcoming adversity – it falls into a pattern, a configuration, that they are familiar with; and what David Carr refers to as ›prethematic history‹, by which he means that we are used to understanding (and indeed ›being in‹) stories. There are cultural and social expectations: just as we ›know‹ how a piece of eighteenth century music ought to resolve itself harmonically at the end, so there are expectations about how an archaeological or historical narrative might finish (for example, recapitulation; a summary and conclusion; or lessons for the future; or indeed be left open-ended: ›only time will tell what changes await cities in the future …‹ or ›If only we had more data …‹).

However, I have also argued previously that even highly formal logical notations can be considered as if they were highly-condensed narratives. One example I gave was the chemical equation:

$$Na + Cl = NaCl$$
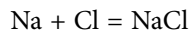
We can note that we ›know‹ how to read it in various ways, including from left to right, and that left to right also represents the direction of time, that this is a process, that ›Na‹ and ›Cl‹ is shorthand for atoms, which act as narrative characters, that the ›plot‹ is given by the ›+‹ [when combined with] and ›=‹ [produces], that the lack of a space between the second ›Na‹ and ›Cl‹ refers to a resolution in the form of a new substance. Of course, this example is characterised by great simplification, but that is also its strength. There is an entire lack of explicit ›context‹, though much cultural and intellectual context is brought to it by proficient readers; but it is also an extremely accurate and precise form of narrative description of a plot or process. One could of course unpack such a narrative to reveal many different layers of ›understanding‹ or assumption e. g. about elements, atomic weights, the periodic table, the nature and direction of chemical reactions, and conditions (›Under normal conditions‹ or ›All things being equal, then …‹). This kind of narrative explanation is not in fact rare in archaeology, and much archaeological science is of this kind, although it may be typically hedged around with more uncertainty, recognizing the difficulties of sampling and the dangers of extrapolation – consider pollen diagrams, or geomorphological sections, or petrographic analyses, which present the informed reader with a story and a sequential and/or spatial narrative in mixtures of text, pictures, graphs and numbers.

But obviously, typical archaeological and historical narratives are much more complex than the simple equation given above, and this is where the arguments about

narrative as explanation typically surfaced within history some decades ago: the ›characters‹ (agents, characters, entities, subjects, groups) are usually much more woolly, their boundaries vague, and also dynamic, subject to transformation, and historical, as are the plots (causes, processes, events, relationships between the entities), and above all ›situated‹ – they not only appear and are understood differently, but *are* different depending on where they are ›viewed‹ from, and when and how – whether by participants, onlookers, rememberers, outsiders, narrators, historians or archaeologists.

Is there then anything in common? Is there any use in considering narratives as a meaningful category at all if they can be so various in form, content and in what they represent and how they are understood?

Narrative and Carr's continuity theory

One of the books that first interested me in the issue of narrative was the Canadian philosopher David Carr's book *Time, Narrative and History* (1986). He is a proponent of the so-called continuity theory of narrative, that is, that narrative form (something with beginning, middle and end) is inherent to human experience.

He draws very much on phenomenology: in the first part of the book exploring how Husserl dealt with ideas such as experiencing and understanding a tune or melody, or a physical action such as throwing a ball. These experiences and actions, he argues, necessarily include projecting into the future and predicting (what would constitute melodic resolution and complete a tune, or finish or complete a physical action or project): what is called ›protention‹. Experience also encompasses present perception and sensations. But it also typically requires awareness of preceding events or actions (past notes, prior actions which form the conditions for present and future ones), or ›retention‹. So in our lives we often ›hold‹ all three moments – past, present and prospective future – in mind when experiencing something or intending or performing something, and of course we can also reflect on matters and describe or explain people, happenings or projects in narrative form. Thus Carr suggests that narrative, and the form and idea of narrative and of storytelling is a natural and normal part of human experience. He then argues that this kind of temporal structure of both experience and thought is also replicated in communities and groups and *their* understandings and group histories. That is, people collectively as well as individually understand and experience their roles, projects and identities within and as part of narrative structures. The final part of his argument is that for written histories too the narrative form is typically reflective of these underlying structures. Written history (or archaeology) therefore bears a close relationship to ›real‹ pasts, however mistaken or partial specific examples may be.

This continuity theory has been criticised. There are those philosophers of history such as Fred Ankersmit or historians such as Hayden White, for example, who suggest that narrative form is rather something imposed on, or constructed out of elements of the natural state of chaos, or at least that we can never know any ›real‹ state of things. The argument is that we can only ever ›know‹ the world under particular descriptions; these descriptions are culturally derived and influenced; and thus the narrative form in which much history and archaeology is produced is rather the selection and shaping of

perceived events, fashioned from what may well be random underlying chaos or at least merely contingent occurrences. At the extreme, written history is ›merely‹ another language game with no necessary connection to what is in fact an incomprehensible ›reality‹ or ›truth‹, though this clearly has major and worrying political and moral implications. Thus we construct narratives as we do rather because they are familiar and fulfil required roles (see below). This view of narrative form as wholly constructed is sometimes called the discontinuity thesis – that there is no necessary correlation between the ›real‹ world and what actually happens or happened, and representations of that world, such as those found in texts in history and archaeology. Although clearly important, for this paper I don't think we need necessarily worry about which is the better approach, but we might like to note one criticism by the ›constructivists‹. That is, even if Carr is right, and the narrative form frequently occurs in and is a structure of human experience, that doesn't necessarily mean that archaeologists and historians should be trying to align their texts with, or mimic or reproduce such narrative structures. For one thing, archaeologists and historians might be writing about something other than individuals or groups: the topic or ›subject‹ of their stories might be something which does not or might not participate directly in ›narrative experience‹, even if Carr is generally correct. So, as Carroll (1988) wrote in a review of Carr's book:

> »even if Carr can argue that narrative is a real element in the experience [of historical agents – individuals or groups] he will not have shown that the narratives historians tell about these agents are not artificial impositions … Insofar as historians are not committed to retelling the ›real‹ narratives of historical agents, Carr has left unanswered the question of what reality the historian's narrative represents«.
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> (Carroll 1988, 305)

This criticism hints that narrative might not be a necessary form. But Carr also explicitly considers the possibility that narrative might NOT be part of the natural human condition. As Carr puts it:

> »Does narrative belong to the nature of social existence as such?«
>
> (Carr 1986, 179)

Carr is concerned with two issues here. The first is the claim *via* ethnography as well as history that other societies and other cultures may have different concepts of time: most frequently cited are those societies with apparently cyclical rather than linear concepts of history (these are often in fact related rather to ideas concerning cosmology, though frequently reported as a concept of cyclical ›time‹). In this view the linear, time-dependent narrative form of history becomes part of the modern, western, Enlightenment, colonial and industrial project along with ›progress‹ and social evolution for example (e. g. Fabian 1983; MacFarlane 2010) or even the broader Judaeo-Christian historical and theological framework (Eliade 1991; Pagden 1986, 119–145). Carr is concerned about this and the solution of separating ›life-experiences‹ felt and understood in narrative form, from apparently contradictory cyclical ›interpretations‹ of that experience.

>It suggests too sharp a contrast between the structure of experience and the structure of thought. Are we to suppose that these non-Western conceptions are totally without effect on the way people view themselves and their every-day actions and experiences? Or … that they are not expressions of a way of experiencing the world and acting in it?«

(Carr 1986, 180)

In fact, we might note that he makes too much of the apparent opposition: as many have pointed out we all experience both natural and humanly-produced linear time (stories, projects, individual life histories, birth and death) and repetitive or cyclical rhythms (those associated with routine, and daily, seasonal, annual and generational cycles). We are happy enough to use, mimic, manage, relate or transform both ›types‹ of time as appropriate.

This issue was considered at length by the anthropologist Alfred Gell in his book *The Anthropology of Time*. He also noted that there are many ways of producing histories, which may apparently invoke different concepts of time. However, he argues that the experiential and phenomenological aspects of time (the linearity of ›before and after‹, events in sequence, awareness of something changing) as well as what he prefers to call periodicity (repetition of similar events) rather than ›cyclicity‹, are common to humankind. While there is certainly cultural variation, in relation to time and history it occurs rather in collective and societal »representations of what characteristically goes on in the temporal world« (Gell 1992, 36). For example, discussing one particular group, the Kédang, who have been characterized in the ethnographic literature as possessing a distinctly cyclical notion of time, he suggests that

>The relevant distinction does not lie between different ›concepts of time‹, but different conceptions of the world and its workings. The Kédang do not believe that the world changes much or in very important ways, by contrast to ourselves, who are perhaps inclined to believe that the world changes constantly and in ways that matter a great deal«.

(Gell 1992, 36)

That is, they emphasise the periodic aspects of experience rather than the novel and original. For Gell, it is these characteristic ways of representing the way things are – the way the world ›works‹ – which enable us to speak of different types and philosophies of history. Following Gell then, we do not have to insist upon contradictory or incommensurate concepts of time, but rather a range of representations of temporalities, processes and past, present and future events. Many of these representations can co-exist, depending on context, interest and experience, within the same individual, as well as the communities of which they are part, let alone across time, space and different cultures. Judgements about what exactly comprises meaningful repetition, periodicity, sequence, duration, tempo and scale may be applied variably and selectively to different categories of historical entities, forming a complex matrix of possibilities. It seems possible then that an indigenous version of, say, Kédang history might well not be cast in narrative form or depend upon the twists and turns of plot leading to a resolution – an answer of kinds – which is typical of our histories and archaeologies. So to come

back to the question posed in the title, this would in fact suggest that at least as a presentational form, narratives are certainly *not* necessary for everyone, at every time and for every purpose. There is a much stronger argument, though, that the narrative form is somehow at least partly constitutive of human experience, and necessary to human agency as the structure of action and intention (see also Fell 1992, 375–377; Carroll 1988, 306; Kearney 2006, 478–480).

Of course, no-one, not even Carr, has suggested that narratives are the *only* form of historical representation, even if they may be a dominant one, and perhaps especially for archaeology: chronology and especially sequential chronology seems to be an obvious and logical way of organising much of our subject matter. Time, age and date matter crucially to most archaeologists, because it is one of the major ways (along with categories of material, and space) that we commonly order our often dispersed, fragmented and partial materials. We usually want to say something about process, change, sequence and cause and effect, and of course that kind of viewpoint and explanation also often works most logically and effectively when described step-by-step or phase-by-phase. Thus narrative form is particularly important for archaeologists, among other reasons because of our typical concerns with long time spans; sequential recovery; and because chronology mirrors many of our methods and techniques and is a ›natural‹ (that is, practical) as well as conceptual way of organising our materials. At the same time methodologically and in the field we are interested in difference and change and (for example) recognising stratigraphic boundaries; or in more synthetic works in spatial or typological boundaries. We thus have an immediate interest in ›cause and effect‹ as a way of distinguishing and relating many different kinds and categories of traces, at a variety of scales and across classes of evidence; and the structure of ›cause and effect‹ reasoning has an affinity with the narrative form. Note though that the artificiality or constructedness of the narrative form is neatly displayed here in that we, as archaeologists, typically reverse the order of encounter to tell the story. That is, in history we generally do not and cannot (in contrast to some experimental science, say) try to isolate causal agents and attempt to produce or predict effects; rather we describe and delineate effects and try to suggest or ›retrodict‹ plausible antecedents and conditions – potential causes of the current state of affairs. We finish our tales in the past or present.

What narratives do

Archaeological and historical narratives can be considered as performing various functions. They selectively (re)describe the past, using contemporary traces from that past as evidence – as elements in the (re)construction of a supposedly or possibly real portion of the past. That is, they attempt to be plausible descriptions or representations of parts of the past. ›Parts‹ of the past because no-one can offer a total, all-encompassing view of all possible circumstances and viewpoints, even past participants. We might also ask: plausible to whom? Narratives considered as stories have intended audiences. This might vary from oneself (e. g. as a form of psychotherapy or simply reaffirming self-identity), to specific groups, or necessarily unknown ›future readers‹. Narratives also have narrators, of course, and being known as the author may be personally and

professionally important. Composing or telling a narrative is an action, a project which thus has intended consequences but which may also have unintended results. Narratives also undergo use or re-use by other people in different contexts. They may instruct, but also provoke, stimulate, entertain or bore. As material or virtual objects they also participate in various economies from the financial to the moral, by conferring status, for example. Narratives which produce strongly shared senses of identities – which are popular and resonate with a broad section of the public, or are widely distributed or told by others – may also become instrumental in excluding others: we are all aware of archaeology's role in this regard. Equally, archaeologists can also be quite good at telling deliberately inclusive stories about places, people, communities or humankind more generally, and this has become seen as an important part of community or public archaeologies (e. g. Marshall 2002; Merriman 2004). But because narratives (like any representation) are always selections from actual and possible pasts, they always necessarily include omissions from those pasts. No narratives can therefore possibly satisfactorily and inclusively represent pasts: politically and ethically archaeological and historical representation is highly problematic (Tarlow 2001). This is also why narratives, like any other interpretations, go out of fashion: circumstances, preferred styles and viewpoints change, the nature of hindsight changes, the elements (traces) from which narratives are constructed change, and the situations and perspectives of the narrators and the audiences change. The authors of narratives do though try to offer a reasonably integrated view (even if we know it is always partial), in which various of the elements come together to make some kind of sense or satisfaction. Often this will be in the explicit form of an explanation (when these elements, under these circumstances, came together, it produced these effects, and this is why we discover now the traces that we do). Narratives may allow people to apprehend, to make sense of disparate elements that they previously could not – even if not offering a complete ›picture‹ or resolution – and bring into focus or introduce new elements or new combinations of elements. There may be an aesthetic sense of comprehending a whole, or of resolution, or there may be the comfort of repetition and familiarity, as when we relax into a narrative genre, trope or even cliche. These various functions (especially those of explanation *versus* aesthetic recognition) have been widely argued about in relation to the philosophy of history. Archaeologists have perhaps been less explicitly concerned with the function of ›their‹ narratives in relation to their narrators and their intended and actual audiences.

Clearly there is a wide variety of archaeological narratives, from site reports, object biographies, regional, period and material culture syntheses, museum exhibitions and other ›cultural histories‹, as well as those related to methods and theories, and for audiences including other academics, students, people within the discipline more broadly, the interested public, or mixtures of all of these.

Not all archaeological texts are cast in strictly narrative form, of course, though many, perhaps most are. One suspects that this is sometimes because of laziness or familiarity – it is easier to organise material chronologically, or chronologically within themes. But of course there is also the feeling that this surely mirrors our sense of how the world works and worked: from cause to effect, from before to after, working with the grain of history: after all, people in the past also had to work with what was given as a result of prior histories. This, presumably, and apart from convention, is why we

typically write up site reports from earliest to latest, and not the other way round, even though the latter would normally be the order of discovery. It is surely a compelling reason. But is there anything else about the narrative form that makes it so attractive?

Narrative dangers and the role of coherence

Surely what narratives offer is, above all else, a form of coherence. This is why, of course, narratives may be used as a device in, say, psychotherapy and other forms of psychiatric rehabilitation: helping individuals to produce (self-)narratives or life-narratives is often seen as a useful way of (re)integrating people whose sense of self is fractured, dispersed, insecure and uncertain. For good or bad, narratives can also have this effect on the larger scale for communities, groups or nations. Learning, understanding, believing or experiencing oneself as part of the same and indeed continuing story is a powerful way of producing a shared identity – this is the way in which nationalist, ethnic and other group or community histories work, for example. Although one can conceive of other shared projects or actions which produce a sense of common identity (the experience of being in a crowd, for example), feeling part of a shared narrative-group with a past, present and future reality is perhaps the most usual way in which collective identities are produced (Carr notes that political rhetoric often starts the story in the middle of the narrative: ›we‹ are here, now, in this moment of danger; but we have this common past; if we take this action ›we‹ will continue successfully into the future!).

The sense of narrative coherence comes from a feeling of completion – that all the bits ›fit‹. Clearly there is a danger here that narratives then become aestheticized – surely we have all been sometimes tempted to look for, find and construct symmetry in our arguments and explanations: we force the elements, the traces into neat patterns. Consciously or subconsciously, we may discard or downplay the awkward and the non-conforming. Who hasn't been tempted aesthetically, logically, by the binary symmetry of structuralist analyses, even if we all know that it is very rare indeed for any archaeological evidence to be so neatly and equally marshalled? Surely this is one of the satisfactions alluded to by mathematicians when they find a proof ›beautiful‹ and ›elegant‹? In a similar way archaeologists and historians may be tempted by the desire to tie up many if not all of the loose ends – to explain everything and offer a complete resolution and explanation. This I think can be a particular problem for those inclined towards more scientifically-conventional forms of explanation. Thus those used to presenting material or experimental results in a framework of hypothesis A and hypothesis B, may assume by some kind of logic of the excluded middle that in socio-cultural explanations too, if A is wrong then B must be the correct answer. For example, this has long been evidenced in the approach of geneticists and their archaeological followers towards the narrative of the transition to farming in Eurasia: was it colonization or was it adoption? On the continental scale neither (or both) is, I believe, the more accurate, but much messier answer, but the very way that geneticists frame their questions leads them necessarily towards one particular kind of answer, explanation and narrative. Similar tensions often arise when a culture or mindset used to dealing in ›yes or

no‹ approaches encounters one whose practitioners prefer complex and indeterminate models of the world.

So narrative explanations which propose a resolution and completeness; the aesthetic desire for symmetry and neatness; the desire for movement towards a ›solution‹; the wish for a total answer in a logical sense – all these are factors which can encourage narrative forms of explanations and particular types of narrative, even when they are are extraneous to the actual content of the narrative: the elements, the characters and the objects. The form of the narrative can become attractive as an end in itself. This is not quite the same argument as that of White's tropes of emplotment – I find it too self-consciously literary. But I do believe that the ›fatal attraction‹ of narrative can be the lure of the familiar, of which one of the most tempting and obvious has been social evolution and especially ›progress‹ in one form or another.

It can also be intellectually tempting to authors to make their narratives align with those already in existence – not because of Carr's continuity thesis, but rather because this feels like contributing towards the wider project. It is comforting, often, to realise that one is reinforcing the disciplinary view, and thus becoming part of a pre-existing community; this is also one of the stories we tell not necessarily about, but among and to ourselves. Indeed, it is often implicitly required that narratives will generally align with the ›conventional wisdom‹ in order to become a member of the group in the first place, as an academic rite of passage. This is disciplinary group consensus which may well, of course, be regionally or linguistically bounded, or by archaeological period or theme. Often, too, we will tell stories about our own histories as archaeologists, as preambles to our own contributory narratives; those histories that start with (typically) father figures – thus reference to Gordon Childe would be a favourite origin point for the English discussing the mesolithic-neolithic transition. So the authors of narratives are often directly or indirectly addressing their own peer group and validating their own identity, as a member of a particular community of scholars. Paradigm shift – a marked change in the nature of the narratives told – is said to come when the ›weight‹ of evidence – the traces – or the ›weight‹ of alternative narratives becomes too great. But those ›weights‹ are in fact also composed of pressures towards conformity which are produced by a variety of disciplinary statuses, and external social and political dynamics. Shifts are not necessarily a rational response to changes in the ›evidence‹ – those archaeological traces which are usually so very fragile to bear the interpretations we place upon them, and which are fragmentary and uncertain enough to participate in many different possible tales. Not that this uncertainty is necessarily welcome elsewhere: other authors and audiences (commissioning editors in commercial publishing, journalists, television producers, readers and viewers) may be more receptive to the familiar than the radical, in response to their own constraints and pressures to conform. Certainly the range of tropes used in television programmes tends to be depressingly restricted (the archaeologist as detective, scientist, discoverer, lone maverick against a hostile establishment; *cf.* Roberts 1997 for film). So one might argue that within archaeology and other contexts too, the narrative form, for various reasons, has a tendency to be conservative.

Andrew Davies, in his book *Historics*, would go further. Drawing on Nietzsche (*cf.* Ankersmit 1989, 137–138), he argues that the present world is far too historicized, by

which he means that when everything has become historic or heritage, we are surrounded by pastiche and reproduction, everyone hunts for historical authenticity, so that

> »For the public, history … comes at it 24/7 in news bulletins, in the press, in fashion, on TV in films, docu-dramas, and documentaries … novels, biographies and erudite monographs … through local history associations, the National Trust, English Heritage, family outings, living museums, local and national ›sites of memory‹ and rituals of commemoration … the bicentenary of the death of Immanuel Kant, the 15th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the 65th anniversary of D-Day«.

> (Davies 2006, 4)

But once history

> »dominates the public mind: its hold over the social imagination is total. [History] is a ›mass activity‹. However, once ›historical‹, and ›traditional‹, ›period‹ and ›heritage‹ are applied to anything … by anyone, ›history‹ itself means specifically nothing«.

> (Davies 2006, 2)

The sense of his argument is that such a focus on the past in fact acts more to close down political and emancipatory possibilities, and in that sense we would be better ditching archaeology and history, and rather concentrating on present injustices, and possibilities for a better future. One need not agree wholly to at least wonder where the radical or even the simply different might reside within historiography, and whether narrative, or at least the dominance of expected, repeated and conformist narratives, might be part of the problem. These kinds of arguments again suggest that we should think very carefully about the political effects of the narrative form, and so finally I want to consider what non-narrative possibilities might provide.

Non-narrative ›archaeologies‹

Are there other ways to construct histories? What difference would it make if there were no formal archaeological narratives? The continuity thesis argues that one of the ways in which narrative works is because it somehow reflects the temporal structure of our experience. So any non-narratives or anti-narratives either have to work against this view, or perform functions other than or in addition to those discussed above.

It is logically difficult if not impossible to produce satisfactory historical *explanations* which don't refer to cause and effect, and which thus either are, or imply, narrative in some form or other. The status of narrative as explanation has of course been much discussed (in the English-speaking world, at least, initially as a reaction against the positivism of Hempel (1965 [1942]); e. g. Dray 1957; Danto 1965; and see Carr 2008). One might note that narratives can quite easily comprehend ideas of contingency and even choice on the part of agents (whether individuals, collectives, Latourian hybrids or

whatever characters we may choose), in ways which are difficult or must be couched in terms of statistical probabilities for those inclined to more scientific or evolutionary models of culture change, for example. Narrative can at least give the illusion of bringing us closer to the ›inside‹ of histories and a sense of engagement, than the detached outside view of more determinist descriptions and models. Typically of course, as noted earlier, as archaeologists involved in original research, intellectually and practically we in fact work ›backwards‹: we describe or note some effect, and speculate about the possible cause or causes. This is one of the attractions of narrative with its beginning, middle and end: it promises to set things right and in their ›proper‹ order according to which we understand the world as given, as in fact the result of causes. One could though offer incomplete narratives: those without beginning, or those without end or resolution. Arguably this is in fact often how we understand ourselves and our various communities – as in the middle of stories with uncertain futures and endings. This is potentially an interesting way of disrupting the certainty and security of narratives, as is that of recognising, often, the futility of searching for origins: for example others have written of how the insistence upon identifying clear beginnings for stories involving human evolution, such as the search for the first modern humans have distorted our understanding of the archaeological record in both academic and public spheres (e. g. Conkey 1991; Stoczkowski 2002).

More commonly, in genres other than academic writing, such as fiction or cinema, people have long tried to give a different (but also ›realistic‹) impression of the world as experienced: with flashback and memory, for example, which disrupts the even and uni-directional flow of time; or the modernist ›stream of consciousness‹ which tried to reflect the continuous stream of sense impressions which assail us, and suggest that the world as experienced is basically incoherent, often chaotic, and that intentions and actions, causes and effects, are often apparent, there are unintended consequences, life is contingent, most life projects fail or are not completed. One can certainly make a good argument that this contingency and messiness plays a large part in many peoples' lives. In archaeological terms it might also be more honest and accurate to represent the traces of the past in this way, and in part also the events affecting past people's experiences: why should we necessarily expect coherence to have characterised their lives? In fact, it is also perfectly plausible to suggest that much history could be better seen as a mixture of failed projects, contradictory beliefs held simultaneously or at least expressed and acted upon contextually, intentions that are sometimes acted upon and sometimes not, sometimes work and sometimes not, unexpected circumstances and so forth. This is arguably also what happens at the larger scale, with classes, groups, communities and societies, which is why prediction of future socio-cultural dynamics so often fails: we are much better at writing with hindsight! Once we ›know‹ at least the broad parameters for outcomes (the Romans did arrive; farming did eventually spread across Europe) then it is much easier to focus questions: why was colonization successful here and not here? Rather than the open-ended: ›what would happen if …‹.

So in our writing we could try harder to reflect or portray chaos or contingency – though such texts might be more difficult to read. One could go back to chronicle: (this, then this, then this …) but this is unsatisfying even if accurate description, and still involves selection. But what the best non-narrative histories can do is to offer

analytical cross-sections of particular places at particular times, thematic evocations (though usually they will imply narratives or contain explicit or implied sub-narratives, histories, biographies). Perhaps this is the best way of providing a productive contrast with the norm of narratives: more or less synchronous analysis and evocation, which can still be rich, detailed and complex and offer us a different and perhaps differently-positioned viewpoint from the typical third-person, distanced descriptive narrative we are used to. This is certainly not to call for more imagined or speculative prehistories or archaeologies: the worst of these simply reproduce half-digested ethnographies and place them in the past as a new form of exoticism: Papua New Guinea becomes transplanted to neolithic Europe. The kinds of models I am thinking of are not drawn from fiction nor ethnographies, but rather from social historians – intensely evidence-based, densely referenced, but perhaps trying to give a better sense of the texture and complexity of the particular conditions for the people, times and places under consideration. This might provoke re-imaginings of relationships between (evidential) elements from different points of view. This kind of approach is, of course, difficult for archaeologists and especially prehistoric archaeologists when we have little sense of genuinely past voices and positions, and is probably best done at small scale initially: one can imagine parts of some site- or landscape-based archaeologies working like this, for example, with a series of sequential evocations rather than explicit narrative explanations. One can think of the ›time-slice‹ of people, project and object biographies which is implied in the sense of an archaeological phase, for example. The juxtapositioning of such phases, which need not overlap entirely, might be a way of producing senses of successive but contingent histories to counteract linear determinisms. However, this also raises political and ethical questions about the choice of form. Can a non-narrative evocation of the past be sufficiently rigorous and robust, for example, to contain the breadth and weight of evidence and interpretation typically associated with a responsible presentation of the past? Nothing about the form surely precludes stringent analysis and use of much empirical and other evidence. As Tarlow (2001) and others have argued, what might be generally accepted as an ethical way to proceed is not to police acceptable archaeologies or histories, nor to allow others to do so, but rather to proceed in a reasonably transparent, fair and balanced way. Our ethical duty should not be to pretend that we don't have sympathies or biases, but to be open about our premises, and not to deliberately falsify or omit. Of course once material is in the public domain then one has no control over its use, and it moves into other peoples' moral universes, though one might have an authorial or professional duty to comment on (ab)uses.

… and provisionally ending here

Narrative as a form of presentation and explanation is an important constituent of archaeology and history, but we are arguably too comfortable with it. Narrative can be, at best, an excellently rich means of explanation which counterbalances some of the perhaps methodologically necessary reductionism found in much scientific culture, and especially within explicitly hypothesis testing approaches. The sheer complexity of good narratives, and the fact that not all questions need to be answered or resolved, and that

›characters‹ may exist before and continue beyond the confines of the chosen textual vehicle, are all attractive features of narrative form and construction. At the same time narrative can offer some semblance of wholeness and a point of entry for many different audiences (sociocultural dynamics are often much more interesting when in historical narrative form, than, say, historical sociology written as systems theory, or cultural change as Darwinian evolution). To many of us in the contemporary world narratives may be more convincing when explicitly not closed or resolved, and when there are loose threads and contradictory currents. At the same time we should consider the best kinds of thematic social history as providing a useful alternative model.

In the light of all the above, is narrative necessary to archaeological presentation and explanation? Even if not strictly logically so, the selective ordering and consequent explanatory power of much well-constructed narrative suggests that conceptually, it is. And both philosophically and logically, what might be called the ›weak continuity‹ thesis is attractive. Narrative is not the only way of representing the past, but surely for many parts of the past it would be perverse to present it in deliberately non-narrative form. There are, though, other routes to be explored.

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