

ARCHAEOLOGY'S HUMANISM AND THE MATERIALITY OF THE BODY

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INTRODUCTION: HUMANISM

In this paper I intend to argue that throughout the modern era the dominant understanding of the body has been a humanist one, and that this remains influential within archaeology today. In particular, I will suggest that the issue of the human body is one that troubles and polarises the various approaches which are grouped under the term 'post-processual archaeology'. My assertion is that some interpretive archaeologies have been unable, or unwilling, to throw off the legacy of humanism, on the grounds that to do so is to do violence to the humanity of people in the past and the present.

Philosophical humanism is a view of the world which has involved the progressive replacement of Faith and God by Reason and Man [*sic*]. In other words, humanism replaced one set of certainties or moral universals with another. Renaissance humanism was grounded in the idea that we can become whatever we wish, and achieve whatever we desire, so long as we have a stable foundation (Carroll 1993: 25). This foundation was discovered in Man himself: a creature capable of exercising both reason and free will. Within this scheme of things, history is perceived in terms of the gradual freeing of human will, accompanied by the more perfect application of reason. For the Enlightenment, a rational society was to be achieved by the erasure of tradition and superstition, the encumbrances on the deployment of free will. René Descartes argued that a person who acted freely and in a fully rational way would be incapable of sin: reason would lead to the best of all possible outcomes. This view finds an echo in the political economy of Adam Smith, who suggested that the 'invisible hand' of unrestricted free trade would inevitably secure the best possible distribution of goods and wealth (Carroll 1993: 122).

However, a cosmic order which places Man at the centre of the universe requires that the character of humanity must be both fixed and knowable. Indeed, humanity has an *essence*, as a *rational animal*: a biological creature to which has been added a mind, a soul, and a particular self-understanding as a unique being (the *existentiell*) (Heidegger 1993:226). Seeing humanity as 'built in layers' forces a distinction between mind and body, with the thinking self prioritised over its material vehicle (Cottingham 1992:236). This conception of what it is to be human serves as a universal, and yet (as we shall see) it was established through a series of exclusions and repudiations. For Man to constitute a distinct entity, various forms of inhumanity needed to be cast out, and these have tended to proliferate through the modern era: blacks, Jews, perverts, the insane... These segregations of mind from body and human from inhuman can be seen as part of a more general process of intellectual hygiene, which was most marked in the scientific revolution, and which sought to establish the order of creation. Central to this conceptual 'purification' were the distinctions between the observing subject and the observed object, and between active culture and the passive nature upon which it operates (Jordanova 1989:21, Latour 1993:32).

The kind of human being that was celebrated by the humanist tradition was one which stood firmly on one side of each of these modernist oppositions: active rather than passive, rational rather than passionate, using the mind to transcend the body, achieving freedom by throwing off tradition. This sort of person is the rational individual, what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the 'unencumbered self', a self-contained centre of meaning and volition who operates in abstraction from social relations (MacIntyre 1981, Lloyd 1986: 217). It needs to be emphasised that this identity is a cultural construct, and is quite specific to western modernity. As well as being a free agent, the western individual is perceived as being a centre, a point from which acts and meanings emerge and from which relationships are built (Strathern 1988:269).

It is this model of the autonomous individual which forms the building block of the characteristic political philosophy of modernity, liberalism. Liberalism assumes a contract theory of society: human beings are in the first instance free and unrestricted agents, who then enter into relationships with others in order to promote their own interests. Relationships are only to be tolerated where they do not eclipse the freedom of the individual. It was with the formulation of liberalism that the humanist ideal of a society based upon Reason and Man crystallised (Mouffe 1993:12). However, as we have already seen, such a move required the fixing of a 'human nature' as an unquestionable first principle. The legal codes of the modern west, for instance, have generally been constructed as means of regulating the rational

behaviour of individuals (Bauman 1993:25). Indeed, there is a continuing desire to ground ethical codes on a set of fundamental human needs and rights. In this connection, Martha Nussbaum argues that these essential human characteristics can be identified by stripping away the layers of culturally specific attunements, leaving a kind of residuum (Nussbaum 1992:205–8). What this implies is that culture is always an addition, something extra which has been spread over the surface of an essence which exists prior to and outside of culture, language and signification.

Of course, the specificity and partiality of the western individual as a political subject has been devastatingly unmasked by recent feminist scholarship. For all of the denigrated categories of modernist thought are those which have been associated with women: passion, unreason, the domestic sphere, darkness, naturalness, physicality. The consequence has been the creation an image of a supposedly gender-neutral Everyman with which men can freely identify, but which effectively excludes women from legitimate involvement in the public sphere (Caverero 1996:191, Gatens 1996:50). The notion of the autonomous individual serves to present as universal the actions and perspectives of one kind of person. Of course, modernity and humanism have not been entirely negative phenomena. The late modern era with its scientific progress and liberal institutions has seen an unprecedented growth in material abundance, an improvement in standards of public health, and an expansion of political representation. The problem is that these have been bought at the cost of the sustained exclusion of those who least approximate to the humanist ideal: the autonomous (white, male, heterosexual) individual. Worse, because so many of the humanitarian enterprises of the past two centuries have been carried out from within the framework of humanism, it has tended to dictate the terms of any debate on human welfare.

ANTI-HUMANISM

Over the past century and more there has been a strong anti-humanist tradition in philosophy, which has gone hand-in-hand with the critique of modernity. Nietzsche, for instance, was immensely critical of triumphalist histories which portray the contemporary order as the outcome of a progressive development grounded in the civilising virtues. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (1969) Nietzsche sought to demonstrate that reason and ethical values were not innate human qualities which founded civilisation, but products of the historical process, which emerged as transformations of quite different sets of understandings. In explicitly attacking Sartre's humanism, Heidegger (1993) rejected the notion that humanity was an essential quality which could be added to an animal body.

Humanity could not be isolated as a spark locked within a person, but lay in the way in which humans allowed things to 'show themselves'. Putting a contemporary gloss on this, humanness is not an attribute of the phenotype, and is to be located *outside* of the person, in the social relationships and the processes of signification in which they are engaged, and which render the world intelligible. The tragedy of humankind is that they constantly misrecognise themselves as *things*, yet are dimly aware that the solid ground of their self-contained status as entities is missing. With the emergence of post-structuralism these critiques of humanism were elaborated and extended. Lacan reworked Freud's conception of the unconscious to show that the human subject was produced rather than fixed by innate drives: the prior existence of language and signification was required for the assumption of identity. Foucault argued that the modern western subject and its deepest hidden 'truth', sexuality had a history. Finally, Derrida 'de-centred the subject', or perhaps more properly investigated the processes by which subjects gain a centre (Deutscher 1997:44), showing how humans were created by systems of signification, rather than vice-versa.

These various approaches have tended to be critical of any attempt to place thought and language outside of the material world. For a start, there is no separate metaphysical space outside of the world for these phenomena to occupy. Thought is not locked away in a separate mental realm, issuing forth when 'applied' as action. Similarly, language does not merely describe things: it has effects, makes things happen, and renders material things intelligible (Butler 1997a:10). In a real sense, the material world is *articulated* by thought and language. In recent years similar arguments developed within feminist philosophy have yielded a radical reconceptualisation of the human body.

During the 1960s and 1970s, feminists made heuristic use of a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', where the former was the biological distinction between bodies, and the latter the cultural distinction between social roles. This proved useful in demonstrating the arbitrary character in specific regimes of gender inequality. However, it nevertheless reiterated the culture/nature and mind/body dichotomies, leaving the body as something outside of history, upon which a cultural superstructure might be built under differing contingent conditions (Bailey 1993:100, Gatens 1996:51). Yet this surrenders the status of unquestionable truth to biological and medical knowledge of the body. This knowledge has been created in particular historical and social conditions, and is as much a set of interpretations as any other account. 'Sex' is just as much a cultural construct as 'gender', yet it serves to reassure us that *our* understanding of bodily difference is the truth, that other interpretations are fantasies, and that the human body has really been the same throughout history (Nordbladh and Yates 1990:222, Deutscher 1997:27).

Humanism still dominates our understanding of the body and its sexing. The body is presented as having an *a priori* nature, which can be defined by medical science. Culture is stamped onto its surface as a secondary matter. However, we can argue that culture and language do not take up and invest a pre-existing body whose capacities and limits are already known. Instead, they reveal a body which is simply unintelligible prior to its signification. In a sense, a body outside of culture and language has no materiality. The crux of the matter is this: *as long as we accept that the body's nature is fixed in biology, and that the character of its materiality is unquestionable, we have no option but to maintain the mind/body dualism.*

This line of argument has proved troubling to some, since to concede that the body's materiality is *constructed* seems to imply that it becomes no body at all (Bordo 1990:145). However, no-one is really suggesting that human bodies are immaterial, or made of discourse. As we have seen, anti-humanist perspectives deny any opposition between language and materiality. Language and culture create our understanding of the body: they form the body, but this is not the same thing as bringing the body into existence (Butler 1997b:84). The point is that we can have no access to an understanding of the body which is not already an interpretation. We cannot know the thing-in-itself. It is only through the act of interpretation that we can gain a knowledge of the body at all. We do not first of all confront the material thing in its nakedness and then clothe it with meaning: it is revealed to us in its meaningfulness.

It is on this issue that Judith Butler's work has proved critical. Butler argues that western thought has construed materiality as irreducible: the ultimate and unquestionable given. In place of this, Butler suggests that materialisation is something which happens, rather than something which simply *is*. Materialisation is the process by which the world *reveals* itself to us in an intelligible form (Hull 1997:23). In the case of the human body, materialisation takes the form of a forcible reiteration of norms set within a heterosexual cultural matrix. Securing cultural intelligibility, avoiding the state of abjection, involves a constant gender performance which never achieves the closure of simply *being* male or female. The way in which the body becomes recognisable is both restricted and facilitated by discourse and power. In the absence of discourse and power there could be no human bodies, in the full sense (Butler 1993:1).

Crucially, the process by which the intelligibility of bodies is secured is lived, and is material. It is simply that the materiality of this embodiment would have no significance to human beings in abstraction from signification. None the less, Butler's argument that sex/gender is a performance on the body surface rather than a deep truth hidden inside the body has often been misconstrued as promising an 'end of gender' and an 'existence without limit' (Deutscher 1997:13). As Butler herself complains