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**Timothy Insoll, *Archaeology: The Conceptual Challenge*,  
Duckworth Debates in Archaeology, 2007. 144 pages, 1 photograph.  
ISBN 9780715634578, Paperback, £11.99.**

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This boldly written and personal book brings together a number of self-critical questions about the fundamentals of archaeological practice: what are the concepts by which the discipline is guided? Given the predominantly 'modern Western' character that this perspective entails, are archaeologists up to the challenge of understanding the past on its own terms – or are they merely 'reconstructing a past in our own image' (p. 9)?

Chapter 1 describes Insoll's own perspective, stating that the first hurdle to negotiate is to understand the way in which concepts are formed and discourses begun – i.e. through language use (p. 15). His tactic is to adopt the contrasting linguistic studies of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the cultural theorist Raymond Williams. This underpins the whole approach, and Insoll acknowledges a heavy debt to these 'two ends of the intellectual spectrum' (p. 19). On the one hand is the philosopher's relatively abstract notion of 'family resemblances' within the logic of language use, and on the other, the cultural critic's emphasis on the social and historical usage of words.

Insoll sees this 'mix and match' approach as vital to avoid becoming hamstrung either by the 'bewitching' nature of academic language, or by an overly empirical and descriptive attitude (p. 15-20). He subsequently calls for an approach similar to critical realism, which he equates with common sense, and in which a pragmatic attitude to theoretical debate is taken and 'grounded in the data' (p. 116-18). This is the key to the whole book.

Chapter 2 looks at the challenges brought with modern 'global and local' experiences, correctly pointing out that contemporary social geographies

impact strongly upon our understanding of cultures that probably had utterly different conceptions of time, distance, community and social identity. In Chapter 3 these themes of time, age and experience are examined further, whilst Chapter 4 examines the social impact of modern digital media, teaching methods and the modes of academic life and representation. Here Insoll warns again against drifting to one extreme of the academic spectrum or the other – either a narrow specialisation or a broad but shallow knowledge of the past. In Chapter 5 modern culture and the natural world are the focus, a discourse that inevitably involves assigning values to these very terms from a modern perspective: ‘can “western urban thought”... offer a window of understanding on human-nature interactions?’ (p. 98). These chapters are all sharply observed and cogently argued – rhetoric and terminology are resolutely kept to a minimum.

I found Chapter 3 especially stimulating, because it focuses on the challenges that have accompanied experimentation with techniques for linking past and present. This chapter suggests that interpretative techniques which emphasise materiality and the body offer a great deal but are hampered by modern preconceptions and assumptions. Insoll is particularly scathing about the way in which phenomenology is used to interpret ceremonial landscapes and communal monuments. Here he rightly criticises phenomenology for its ‘first-person perception’ and the expectation that it will provide the archaeologist with trouble-free authentic experiences of the distant past (p. 47-9). Insoll is correct to point out that although our biological equipment may be similar to that of prehistoric populations, perception and bodily experience are often culturally specific and socially conditioned. However, in this section of the book he does not suggest how similarities might be assessed, which effectively denies phenomenology a role to play in this process – a role which has not been neglected by its advocates (e.g. Tilley 1999).

Overall I feel that Insoll overstates phenomenology’s particular culpability in the expectation that the past will to some extent cohere and correspond to modern analyses. This is an expectation common to the social sciences. The counter argument is that the approach has not really overcome certain core

problems: 1) they necessarily privilege the subjective experience of the archaeologist; 2) they have a materialist focus and hence offer somewhat 'static' landscapes as a result; 3) they present problems for establishing wider cultural representations, because the objects (e.g. tombs) are the lens through which social space (e.g. a ceremonial landscape) is given cultural value by analysis; and 4) they remain somewhat unscientific and un-testable. However, these are criticisms which are not uncommon to archaeology. My impression is that Insoll exaggerates the 'simplicity' of the phenomenological approach, which has undergone renewal and expansion in the fifteen years since Tilley's (1994) foundational work (e.g. Hamilton and Whitehouse 2006; Tilley 1999). There is, for example, no discussion of the ideas of 'taskscape' or the 'dwelling perspective' which are derived from phenomenology (see Edmonds 1999; Ingold 2000). This tends to isolate phenomenological practices and to separate them from studies which employ a mixture of traditional and speculative techniques, such as Tilley's (1999) study of the role that metaphors play in linking meaning and artefact classifications cross-culturally.

Another example is the Tavolier-Gargano Prehistory Project (Hamilton and Whitehouse 2006) which combines phenomenological study with more traditional Site Catchment Analysis (SCA) at a Neolithic settlement enclosure in southern Italy. As the authors note, 'secular and domestic social space has rarely been considered from a phenomenological perspective' (Hamilton and Whitehouse 2006: 65). Their project used a combination of SCA and alternative data collection techniques, such as visual-, audible-, and olfactory-focused analysis, to understand the everyday experiences of the social environment. The following example is from a study of the landscape around the enclosure of Masseria Bongo, one area of which is ambiguously positioned in relation to the enclosure:

While a strictly economic perspective would not differentiate this area from other parts of the site territory considered suitable for crop-growing or pasture, we would suggest that it might in fact have been regarded as unsafe with respect to leaving children, crops, or animals unattended

(Hamilton and Whitehouse 2006: 44)

None of this comment detracts from Insoll's purpose in this book, which is to stimulate debate in the areas the author thinks are most in need of attention. Indeed, the main theme of this book is to question our conceptual assumptions and to highlight the influences of the present on the production of the past. Insoll enthusiastically calls for a broadening of our theoretical approaches, and although he concentrates upon how human beings' perceptions are largely socially conditioned, he acknowledges that these are not the only factors that act upon society. Materiality and the body are, of course, central component of the social practices and experiences by which culturally specific representations, symbols and metaphor are brought into social being. Many of the examples and references in the book are historical, or anthropological, and often come from popular publications. This helps the book's discursive and inclusive approach and Insoll's call for more interdisciplinary approaches to the past. This is a must read for students and researchers interested in current archaeological theory. It rewards repeated attention and will no doubt be widely read and debated.

### **Bibliography**

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