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ON THE ROAD

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Time travel: a new perspective on the distant past

THIS PAPER DISCUSSES three ways in which the distant past matters to the present. Two perspectives are well known, but the third is emerging only now, in our age. I am referring to an evolutionary perspective, a political perspective and a time travel perspective. Any archaeologist or historian can count herself lucky to live in a time when the distant past gains new significance. This paper is a first attempt at describing my observations about the distant past in the present. For the purposes of this essay, I define “the distant past” as the past before the time that can be remembered by a living individual, *i.e.* earlier than approximately 80 years ago. Mostly, however, I will be focussing on pre-history. Geographically my argument is valid only for the post-industrial “Western” world in which certain cultural and economic conditions favour the three perspectives discussed over others.

Although these three perspectives are not mutually exclusive, I will be emphasising aspects in which they markedly differ. These can be subsumed under the following parameters:

- BEGINNING:** Each perspective presupposes a particular point in time which it takes as the starting point of the distant past. (This is not to be confused with the time in which each perspective first emerged.)
- FOCUS:** Certain key notions and concepts describe the specific focus of each of the three perspectives and their respective approaches to the past.
- DEMANDS:** Each perspective demands certain attitudes, skills or pre-understandings from both archaeologists and their audiences (*e.g.* students, readers, visitors ...).
- DYNAMIC:** All perspectives contain a particular kind of dynamic supplying one or more “driving” ideas that are central to it.
- KNOWLEDGE:** Finally, each perspective presupposes a particular importance of (academic) knowledge about the past.

The first perspective: Evolution

The evolutionary perspective on the past creates a long-term historical perspective that ultimately ranges from the beginning of the universe to the present day. As far as



FIGURE 1. Long-term human evolution according to the archaeological journal *Skalk*. Drawing by Jørgen Kraglund. Reproduced by permission of *Skalk* (copyright).

archaeologists are concerned, the periods studied stretch from the oldest human ancestors, living several million years ago, until the 20th century (and an archaeology of the 21st century is already emerging as well!). Ninety-nine per cent or more of the entire human past falls within the archaeol-



FIGURE 2. “Die Ötzis kommen! Höhlenmenschen wie Du und ich”, seen in a supermarket in Tübingen, Germany. Who is controlling representations of the past? Who is selling what to whom? Photo: Cornelius Holtorf 2004.

ogists’ remit, whereas historians and many other disciplines deal only with a very tiny proportion of human biological and cultural evolution at the very end of it. According to this perspective, the past matters to the present because it explains its origins, where we all come from, and how the present, in the long term, came to be the way it is. This is the traditional approach taught in schools and used by most academic textbooks: a developmental story of human history, chronologically organised and ultimately leading to our own time (Figure 1).

As already indicated, specific human evolution begins at the point where it separates from general primate evolution. The search for the “missing link”, *i.e.* the common ancestor of humans and apes, is one of the classic themes of human evolutionary research. Although it has become doubtful whether there was indeed any common ancestor of that kind, palaeoanthropologists have traced distant human ancestors many million years before the present.

The special focus of this approach is on chronology and historical context. Without reliable dates for archaeological finds and sites it is impossible to contextualise them at the right point in the process of human evolution. Once fixed in time and space, archaeological evidence gains meaning and significance from putting it into a specific historical context that emerges from all the relevant, available information already known. Accordingly, undatable and contextless finds are ultimately historically meaningless. The ubiquity of this perspective has led to an obsession in archaeology with dating. In some cases a project is taken to be complete as soon as satisfactory dates for all its finds have been established so that they can be put into a satisfying chronological sequence.

This approach demands of both archaeologists and their

audiences sometimes considerable pre-existing knowledge on the course of human history, deriving from the accumulated insights of past research. Without a rough idea of the overall sequence of cultural evolution it is impossible to appreciate the specific contribution a specific find has made to scholarship. That is the reason why archaeological education often aims at conveying so much factual knowledge about past periods. In addition, a sound methodological expertise is required in order to be able to sort good scholarship which produces valid insights from bad scholarship which does not. Very few non-archaeologists have this kind of knowledge and expertise.

The evolutionary dynamic is one of historical causes and effects. Why did things happen in the way they did? Studying questions about causal links in history have always been important in archaeology, especially with the advent of “processual” archaeology in the 1960s. Why do humans walk upright? What made the Neanderthals extinct? Why did people become farmers? How did the Indo-European languages spread over much of Europe? What lay behind the “urban revolution” and the beginnings of “civilisation”? What caused the collapse of the Roman Empire?

Although not everything in the human past may be knowable, anything knowable is in principle relevant to this approach. Indeed, the more we know about the human past, the better we are likely to understand any specific historical context and thus human evolution as a whole.

The second perspective: Politics

The second perspective focuses on the politics of the past, investigating representations and remains of the past as phenomena of different presents. Traces of the past can be interpreted in many different ways. Every account of the past mirrors existing norms and expectations of the present in which it was constructed. A political perspective scrutinises first and foremost the specific circumstances in which a certain view of the past gains currency in a particular present-day context. Whose interests are served if the past is remembered in this way rather than another? Who controls the representations of the past? Who is allowed and indeed expected to interpret past remains on everybody’s behalf? In recent decades, this approach has become very popular among academics as part of a growing interest in critical theory, but also as a consequence of an increasing interest in the history of research. Historical studies have been demonstrating to what extent changing perceptions of the past and its remains reflected the changing circumstances of those interpreting. By the same token, critical studies of the norms and rules that govern contemporary archaeological practice have led to insights about the politics of archaeology today (Figure 2).

If the past is defined and constructed differently in each present, the obvious starting point of this perspective is the first such context. In the case of prehistory, for example, that



FIGURE 3. A special Viking Age moment of our time, observed at Foteviken Viking Reserve. Photo: Cornelius Holtorf 2005.

was in the 1830s when Paul Tournal first used the term *pré-historique* in describing the finds he had made in the caves of southern France. Another early context was around the year 1851 when the Canadian scholar Daniel Wilson introduced the term *prehistoric* into English. It is pointless to ask about the meaning of prehistory or prehistoric finds for time periods before the 1830s when that concept did not in fact exist.

As no past can be independent of the present in which it is constructed, there is a special focus here on contemporary contexts. In order to improve our understanding of the past, it is mandatory to study the specific present from which it emerges. A key notion is critique. We need to ask why there was a need or desire to introduce the concept of prehistory in the mid 19th century and which functions it has been serving ever since then. Moreover, how we today understand the meaning of prehistory in the 19th century will not be the same as how it was understood twenty years ago or how it will be understood in twenty years from now.

What this approach demands of both archaeologists and their audiences is the ability to think critically and not take anything as self-evident. In other words, more important than knowledge is a specific attitude and a way of questioning knowledge. Through critical analysis it is possible to see through the way the past is constructed in each present and understand the underlying constraints and interests of the various stake-holders. This kind of critical assessment demands a high degree of intellectual rigour from audiences which cannot be taken for granted.

The dynamic underlying this approach is one of political means and purposes. The way people construct the past is the result of particular strategies adapted in the present. Pasts are promoted or adapted because they serve certain ends in the present. Nationalistic politicians aim to support their cause by choosing chauvinistic pasts. Visitors to amusement parks seek to maximise their enjoyment by preferring rides and attractions linked to historic themes that are easy to recognise, simple to grasp, and fun to experience.

According to this perspective, in theory anything that once happened in the past might be relevant to a given present. In practice however only certain aspects of the past are chosen as relevant at any given time. The question is thus not how much can be known about the past but what has been or is known about the past in which context, and why. There is a politics of knowledge.

The third perspective: Time travel

The third way in which the past gains meaning in the present has emerged only recently. Although people have long been imagining what life was like in different ages, in recent years an entire industry has developed around the notion of travelling to other places in time. Today, a growing number of people dream of alternative realities. They seek to realise such dreams by travelling to exciting holiday destinations linked with past worlds, by assuming alternative identities in life role play or in computer games, or by enjoy-

	EVOLUTION	POLITICS	TIME TRAVEL
BEGINNING	First humans	The distant past's earliest construction	Now!
FOCUS	Chronology Historical context	Contemporary context Critique	Experience Credibility
DEMANDS	Knowledge about human history	Critical thinking	Embodied engagement
DYNAMIC	Historical causes and effects	Political means and purposes	Imagining life now and then
KNOWLEDGE	Anything is relevant	Questioning what is known and why	Importance of what cannot be known

TABLE 1. Three perspectives on the distant past. A schematic overview.

ing the realities constructed in popular historical novels or TV docu-soaps such as the Swedish series *Riket* (Figure 3).

The experience of time travel is linked to our own lives and may begin on the first day of our holidays or at 8 p.m. on a particular television channel. We all live in the present but we are free to enter the past at any time! This perspective is neither about knowledge of human evolution nor about a critical analysis of our own age but about our imagination and embodied experience.

Key notions for the way in which the past becomes meaningful through time travel include credibility and experience. In this perspective, the past does not have to be genuine in the sense that it once “really” happened, but it needs to be credible as an authentic experience about a past that *might* have happened. For example, Jan Guillou’s bestselling novels about the adventures of *Arn* in the late 11th century AD are obviously to a large extent fictitious yet his readers are so impressed by their seeming historicity that they travel in large numbers to the Swedish sites where significant (fictitious) scenes in the novel are set. Credible pasts are largely reliant on trust. We trust pasts either when they correspond closely to the past we already know, *i.e.* our expectations, or when they are vetted by experts whom we trust (which is one reason why historical movies and documentaries tend to have scientific advisors).

Time travel does not demand a particular intellectual attitude towards either past or present but instead a readiness for an embodied engagement with different realities, involving both body and soul. Time travel is about imagining other worlds from the perspective of somebody actually living in that world, involving all the senses.

The dynamic of time travel lies in a constant oscillation between imagining life now and then. On the one hand, the time traveller never leaves the present and remains the person she is, with all the associated baggage in the form of world views, preconceptions, and personal life histories. On the other hand, the time traveller is leaving that present and enters another reality governed by different norms and open to all sorts of fantasies and behaviours that she may not be associated with in the present. Ironically, many time travellers ultimately seek to find themselves in the past.

Some of the most significant aspects of time travel are based on knowledge that is next to impossible ever to be (re-)gained in a scientific way. Sensual perceptions, bodily experiences, habitual behaviour, emotions, dreams and not

knowing what historically “came next” have been crucial to life in any period but archaeologists and others cannot easily reconstruct these dimensions from the evidence available today. It is hard to avoid imposing our own responses to these issues on other periods and thus constructing the past as an extension of the present. But arguably an extension of the present is precisely what many desire.

The three perspectives in competition

Each of the three ways in which the distant past matters to the present can claim for itself to be the most important perspective, subsuming the other two (Table 1).

EVOLUTION puts all parts of our present into a long-term historical perspective. Even POLITICS and TIME TRAVEL are ultimately the outcome of a long evolutionary trajectory. All perspectives towards the distant past must be understood within the respective historical and cultural contexts in which they first emerged and later continued to flourish. The politics of the past cannot be appreciated fully without knowledge about critical theory’s development in the 20th century and in particular its relation to fascist and nationalistic ideologies in Germany and elsewhere. Contemporary time travel is arguably a phenomenon arising from a widespread fascination with heritage typical for post-modernity. The associated heritage industry is undoubtedly linked to the post-industrial society, first arising during the final quarter of the 20th century and still developing today. By the same token, the evolutionary perspective itself can be contextualised. It emerged in its earliest forms during the 17th and 18th centuries within the intellectual frameworks of the Enlightenment, Romanticism and the beginnings of modern scientific thinking. Since the 19th century this perspective has remained fundamentally unchanged.

POLITICS applies as much to EVOLUTION and TIME TRAVEL as it does to any other way in which the past is given meaning today. Academic uses of the past are to be scrutinised in the same way as their purely commercial, ideological and other counterparts. In each case, it is imperative to ask about the political agendas and interests behind particular phenomena. The most important question always has to be: who benefits? Time travel can be seen in the context of the heritage industry and often has strong commercial overtones (it *sells*). Simultaneously, time travel allows

people to escape the present for a while, thus compensating for its deficiencies and, as a result, contributing to maintaining the political status quo rather than working towards change. Similarly, the evolutionary perspective has always been a strong pillar in the secular and scientific worldview of the modern world, at all times to a larger or lesser extent competing with religious worldviews. The political dimension of evolution recently came to the fore when a strong creationist lobby in America had some success in changing school curricula. Behind the debate on these changes lie fundamental political and ideological divisions in society. Finally, even the political perspective itself is political. It is no coincidence that many of its proponents are associated with the political Left. They are seeking to change not only our understanding of archaeology and other academic disciplines but ultimately even society as a whole.

TIME TRAVEL is even at the heart of EVOLUTION and POLITICS. Arguably the past cannot be understood in any way if it was not for some kind of possibility to imagine what life was like in another age. The evolutionary perspective is based on the understanding that scientific knowledge about past realities can be gained – however limited and incomplete it might be. However much scientists may emphasise the role of irrefutable facts and objective knowledge, they are at the same time likely to agree on the central role of the imagination in all sciences, including archaeology. Similarly, understandings of the past are politically and socially meaningless today if they do not invite and indeed provoke people to imagine what life was like then. The politics of the past is directly dependent on the power of reconstructions of the past to engage and move people. It is precisely the suggested feeling that “these people were like we are today” or that “we are not like those people at all” that makes the past so powerful in society.

In sum, all three perspectives are able to give meaning and significance to the distant past in the present. Each can explain the other two. They can be combined with each other. The choice is ours, but choose we must.

An emerging field of research

Since both the evolutionary and the political perspective are well established in archaeology I have decided not to make references to the abundant literature available. However, time travel is a relatively new subject and I will therefore give a short overview of some of the literature in this field, with a particular emphasis on texts in Swedish.

Time travel is sometimes discussed under the labels of “resurrectionism” and “living history” and has as such been acknowledged in the literature of various disciplines for some time. Good starting points for the existing academic appreciation of the phenomenon of living the past in the present are Jay Anderson’s early presentation of *Time Machines: The World of Living History* from 1984, the classic account of *The Past is a Foreign Country* by David

Lowenthal (1985), the first volume of Raphael Samuel’s account of present *Theatres of Memory* (1994) and an article by Mike Crang on the Magic Kingdom (1996).

Recently, some contemporary trends relating to the evidently existing fascination of experiencing the past have also been reviewed by archaeologists. Kristian Kristiansen (2001) argued that the future of presenting archaeological heritage does not lie in museums but in recreated historical realities and visitor centres at particularly significant sites in the landscape where visitors can experience past realities directly “where it happened”. Bodil Petersson’s study *Föreställningar om det förflutna* (2003) critically reviewed archaeological reconstructions and their attempt to recreate past realities. One long chapter is dedicated specifically to time travel. Petersson argues that in the Stone Age, travellers find harmony with nature, simple technology and social equality, whereas the Bronze Age holds social hierarchies, (fertility) rituals and some ecological thinking, the Iron Age appeals with home-made food, clothes and small-scale village life, the Viking Age offers seafaring, long-distance trade, and warfare but even world peace, and the Medieval period finally presents the visitor with markets and cultural festivals, clear social roles and knight tournaments.

The historian and journalist Åsa Linderborg (2005) discussed the existing fascination of contemporary people with the Middle Ages. She pointed out that more “Medieval” tournaments have taken place during the 1990s than during the entire Middle Ages. Her analysis of phenomena like *Riket*, Guillou’s *Arn* novels, and the annual *Medeltidsveckan* in Visby leads her to conclude that historical role play is popular because it gives people the chance to play being somebody else, sometimes inverting existing social hierarchies, although in reality they will only ever find their own present selves in the past. Linderborg refers to a particularly interesting study, by Lotten Gustafsson (2002). Gustafsson studied *Medeltidsveckan* with a particular interest in how the Medieval past, Medieval Visby and Medieval identities are constructed in the present. In conclusion, she argued that grand narratives about the Middle Ages are today being replaced by playful re-creations that are commercial but also firmly grounded in individual experiences and the deeply felt collective identities of the participants.

Erika Sandström (2005) also looked at the phenomenon of time travel in the present, focussing, in addition to *Medeltidsveckan*, on *Jamtli Historieland* in Östersund. Intriguingly, she found that visitors to both places revel in a happy, adventurous and romantic version of the Middle Ages, even though they know at the same time that the past reality was not like this at all but actually very tough and often unpleasant. People can thus choose to ignore their knowledge when they consume the past. They enjoy the experience of travelling, with others, into a past that they know never existed. In a critical analysis of history in contemporary TV the art historian Max Liljefors (2005) argued that the popularity of subjective experiences of the past can

be emphasised so much that effectively one's own "I" becomes the meaning of history.

Many of these and other issues have also been taken up in the anthology *Konsten att lära och viljan att uppleva* (Aronsson and Larsson 2002). Several contributions, by Erika Larsson (now Sandström), Peter Aronsson, Bodil Petersson, Per-Ola Jacobson and others, discuss various important aspects of the trend towards experiencing the past sensually and its relations to traditional history and the formation of historical consciousness. Larsson, for example, argues that there are three periods in particular to which people like to time-travel: the Stone Age, the Middle Ages, and the turn of the 20th century. However, she realises at the same time that today the past is less about what really happened at a given time and more about our own associations with particular periods. As several other authors discuss, this has profound consequences for the way history is to be taught in schools and museums. The past increasingly appears interesting to the extent that it is associated with exciting stories. Didactic forms must therefore be used in which histories can be told in imaginative and dramatic fashions that involve the audience in ways previously not known. Today the past needs to be experienced with all the senses if it is to be relevant to the present (see also Holtorf and Petersson 2006).

Conclusion

Some of us may have travelled to all the continents for conferences or research projects. But have we travelled into the past often enough? In the light of the contemporary phenomenon of time travel into the past, I am arguing that as archaeologists we need to continue studying this new way of appreciating the distant past in the present.

The distant past has perhaps never been more loved in any present than in ours. What is more, perhaps never have more people lived in the past than today. What could possibly please an archaeologist more than that? It is like a very special birthday present. Many happy returns, Lars!

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