



NEW ZEALAND  
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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEW

Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*. Second edition. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. 221 pp-, numerous illustrations. Aus. \$25.00

Readers anticipating an update in the state of post-processual theory will be disappointed by Hodder's second edition of *Reading the Past*. A quick comparison with the first edition (1986) reveals that the second edition is virtually the same, with the exception of a few deletions and approximately 15 pages of new text. Significant additions include a three page discussion of critical hermeneutics, and a brief discussion of how alternative interpretations can be evaluated. The remaining additions are minor, and do little to clarify Hodder's position.

According to Hodder, post-processual theory is effective because it uses inductive methods to recognize contextual associations and contrasts in the archaeological record. Identifying patterns allows post-processual archaeologists to critically understand specific historical meanings of material culture. Throughout the book, Hodder stresses that material culture is not simply a direct reflection of human behaviour, but is meaningfully constituted within a historical context. Once meanings have been defined, many facets of prehistoric and historic societies can be reconstructed. He suggests that our interpretations of the past should emphasize individuals actively transforming the historical structures that influenced their behaviour. Hodder divides *Reading the Past* into nine chapters.

The first is an introduction to the primary components of post-processualism, and the impact it will have on future archaeological research. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are critiques of past theoretical perspectives. In each of these chapters, Hodder simplifies variation and complexity within theoretical perspectives, preferring instead to create generalizations which he summarily critiques. In Chapter 2, Hodder groups a diverse range of perspectives under the rubric of a materialist systems approach. He suggests that these are functional in nature, and depict individuals as easily mystified, passive recipients of normative ideologies. Chapter 3 critiques the structural analysis of design elements. Hodder insists that archaeologists should not merely delineate patterns in pottery decoration, but that they should consider the symbolic meanings of material culture that influence social processes. Hodder's discussion of marxist perspectives in Chapter 4 is a little more sympathetic. He shows how contradictions between the interests of social groups, and contradictions between the forces of production and the relations of production, can lead to transformations in social structure. Included in this chapter is an interesting discussion of Bourdieu and Gidden's contributions to praxis theory.

Chapter 5 discusses the role that historical method and theory should play in archaeological research. Drawing on Collingwood, Hodder suggests that archaeologists should define the "inside" of events by determining the intentions and concepts that motivated subjective actors. To achieve this, archaeologists should consider all available contextual data to re-enact past thought through analogously informed knowledge. Hodder suggests that various "inside" interpretations of the past can be evaluated by their internal coherence and their correspondence to the data. At a later stage in the book, Hodder also suggests that different interpretations can be evaluated by how well they incorporate our wider theoretical knowledge of social processes. Hodder's methods for evaluating alternatives differ little from the common sense procedures performed by most archaeologists.

In Chapter 6 Hodder presents a detailed discussion of his ethnographic work among the Ilchamus of Baringo. Despite his intention to show how different interest groups negotiate social process through the social and conceptual context of material culture, Hodder's interpretation presents the historical growth of women's power as somewhat inevitable. He fails to consider the alternative strategies available to men, and why they did not do more to maintain their power.

Chapter 7 presents a methodology for determining the social meanings of material culture. Meaning is assigned on the basis of its contextual relationships. An artifact's context is the totality of similarities and differences along four dimensions of variation. Hodder suggests that artifacts associated along either the temporal or spatial dimensions of variation are more likely to have related meanings. These two dimensions of variation are repetitively combined in Hodder's third dimension, the depositional unit. Hodder's fourth dimension of variation is the "typological dimension", which he suggests is dependent upon how artifact types are defined by archaeologists. Patterns in the similarities and differences of these four dimensions permit archaeologists to engage in a dialectical process of assigning and questioning meaning. Again, Hodder's procedures seem fairly commonplace.

The final two chapters of the book summarize the major themes of post-processual archaeology. Hodder suggests that unlike other theories, post-processual perspectives recognize a fundamental need to reconstruct the diverse subjective meanings held by individuals who are set within historical structures. Post-processual studies also recognize that archaeologists subjectively construct interpretations of the past, and that these interpretations can be used in contemporary power struggles. Hodder discusses the alternative perspectives of indigenous, feminist, and working class archaeology.

Some of Hodder's insights are extremely valuable. Archaeologists have long neglected the role of individuals in creating meaningfully constituted material culture. His discussion of praxis theory and transformations of social structure outlines useful heuristic devices. Weak aspects of the book include the

proposed methodology for assigning meaning to material culture and the evaluation of alternative interpretations. Regrettably, the reality of these processes are not as simple or straightforward as Hodder suggests. Hodder also has a tendency to write in a polemic style which often unfairly depicts alternative perspectives. Instead of developing one or two well reasoned case studies, Hodder occasionally presents several simplified examples. Hodder's failure to synthesize the state of post-processual theory up until when the book was published in 1991 is a significant omission. From 1986 until 1991 there has been considerable development in the field. References to this material in the current edition are superficial, and Hodder has done little to incorporate recent work by other post-processualists and researchers using related perspectives. Ideally, Hodder would have taken this opportunity to address some recent criticisms of the earlier edition of the book, and post-processualism in general.

While some of Hodder's original suggestions in the 1986 edition are essential for archaeologists interpreting the past, one is left wondering why the second edition of this classic book lacks a current summary of post-processualism. Despite the dated nature of some of the material, the book still deserves to be widely read and debated.

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