

2008

The epistemology of Pleistocene archaeology

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Course Description

Of all the numerous branches of archaeology, which range from Pliocene hominin studies to modern industrial archaeology, from archaeometry to numismatics, Pleistocene archaeology is perhaps the one most susceptible to speculative hypotheses. Of all the millions of propositions ever made during the past couple of centuries about the human past of the Ice Ages, only a tiny fraction, less than ten per cent, can be expected to offer adequate veracity to be considered credible. This state of affairs compares unfavorably with most if not all other branches of learning. It is therefore desirable to explore the epistemology of Pleistocene archaeology: where do its knowledge claims originate, how do they arise, how are they promoted, how can their veracity be assessed objectively, and what are the systematic issues that explain their excessive failure rate? This course attempts to explore these issues by examining the anatomy of major blunders in the discipline, by considering the socio-political climate of the time in question, the personal factors involved, the treatment of dissident researchers, the nature of false constructs or whole paradigms, and the way valid hypotheses are eventually adopted and then often corrupted. This course also considers the systematic processes involved in the formation of false models, especially their lack of taphonomic and metamorphological sophistication, as well as the political dimensions of archaeology generally.

Course Outline

Any broadly based review of the epistemology of Pleistocene archaeology should begin with the presentation of the major historical episodes illustrating the discipline's notorious susceptibility to capricious theories, to erroneous acceptance or rejection, and to arrogant treatment of dissenters. The generic and largely inherent practical shortcomings of the discipline of archaeology are explored in the second lecture, which shows that its processes of knowledge acquisition are determined by a variety of biases. Indeed, there is not a single model of archaeology, an ideal and unencumbered search for the details of the human past; there are instead numerous archaeologies engaged in this quest. These differ from one world region to the next, are greatly dependent upon political orientations, and tend to yield correspondingly different notions about the human past. Another analytical method of reviewing the elusiveness of veracity in the discipline is by dissecting specific major blunders in Pleistocene archaeology, derived from its checkered history. One of the systematic biases, the neocolonialist aspects of archaeology, is singled out for special attention. The perhaps greatest specific shortcoming of archaeology, its inability or reluctance to engage with taphonomic logic, is also explored. It leads to the recognition that the discipline would be significantly strengthened if its traditional collection and use of data were replaced with the principles inherent in metamorphology. The series of lectures is completed with a summary of the problems Pleistocene archaeology faces.

Lecture No. 1. **Milestones of Pleistocene archaeology**

Lecture No. 2. **An analysis of archaeology**

Lecture No. 3. **Versions of archaeology**

Lecture No. 4. **Mistakes in Pleistocene archaeology**

Lecture No. 5. **The neocolonialism of archaeology**

Lecture No. 6. **Logic in archaeology**

Lecture No. 7. **A metamorphology of archaeology**

Lecture No. 8. **Contingencies in Pleistocene archaeology**