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Interview

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An Interview with Duncan Garrow: Talking about Practice Theory and Social Change

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Abstract

Archaeologists describe changes in the distant past, basing their analyses on fragmentary remains of practices, people and material worlds. In this interview, Duncan Garrow talks about different methods of interpreting change in the archaeological record, beginning with questions of chronology, periodisation, and the tension between linear accounts of time and more complex understandings of the past. Duncan reflects on what radiocarbon dating and other scientific methods make visible, and on the uncertainties and absences which are integral to archaeological work. In discussing these issues, we range across questions of scale, regularity, innovation and the relation between objects and practices. We talk about how archaeological periods illuminate and artificially constrain interpretations of change, how material remains relate to practices at different temporal resolutions, and why change is more readily identified than explained.

Keywords

archaeology; categorisation; chronology; materiality; periodisation

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Introduction

Inspired by the theme of the special section of this second issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on 'Practice Theory and Social Change', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three scholars working across different disciplines: Organisation Studies (Robert Chia, Professor of Management at the University of Glasgow), Archaeology (Duncan Garrow, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading) and Sociology and Biology (Megan Warin, Professor in the School of Society and Culture at the University of Adelaide). Together, the interviews provide insights into different ways of understanding change and into points of connection and difference across disciplinary and theoretical traditions.

We chose to speak with these scholars not because they are in any sense representative of the disciplines in which they work, but because of the ideas they develop and the approaches they take. The conversations that follow are revealing in their own right but also bring into view points of overlap and difference in theory and method, and in understandings of scale, comparison, and materiality.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Duncan Garrow about questions of chronology, periodisation, and material evidence and about how archaeologists describe processes of continuity and change over different temporal and spatial scales.

Duncan Garrow is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading. His research interests include long-term histories of deposition, burial practice and material culture, island archaeologies, and archaeological theory. Duncan originally worked in the commercial archaeology sector (at the Cambridge Archaeological Unit) from 1996 to 2002, when he left to undertake his PhD on Neolithic and Early Bronze Age pits in East Anglia. His co-authored books include *Technologies of Enchantment? Exploring Celtic Art 400 BC to AD 100* (2012), *Neolithic Stepping Stones* (2017), *Grave Goods: Objects and Death in Later Prehistoric Britain* (2022), and *The World of Stonehenge* (2022).

Elizabeth Shove: It's absolutely great to have an archaeologist with us. We're interested in taking a long view of change, and we're really grateful for the articles you shared with us. These articles: 'Odd Deposits and Average Practice. A Critical History of The Concept of Structured Deposition' (Garrow 2012) and 'Dating the Dead: a High-Resolution Radiocarbon Chronology of Burial Within an Early Bronze Age Barrow Cemetery at Over, Cambridgeshire' (Garrow et al. 2014) show how your work relates to debates in Archaeology, especially about change,

interpretation, and empirical work. The other two articles (Gosden 2005 and Griffiths et al. 2023) show how the concepts of materiality and time are entangled with epistemological debates and what this means for archaeological work. We don't plan to go through these contributions one by one, but we will use them to prompt a discussion of questions about change, materiality, and connected topics.

The idea that societies progress has been part of the history of Sociology and of

Archaeology as well. Today, the concept of progress is thought to be rather suspicious, but there's something about linearity and sequence that remains part of everyday thinking about the past. To start, could you tell us a bit more about the place of chronology in your discipline?

Duncan Garrow: Chronology is almost indistinguishable from Archaeology. One word that gets used instead of the term 'pre-history' is 'deep time', which is quite an interesting phrase. It refers to the depth of time, but it is also literal in that we might dig a hole and go deep (back) in time. Stratigraphy is a fundamental concept in archaeological understandings of chronology. It means that there are layers in the earth and, most of the time, the lower layers are later than the ones above.

This is relevant in that the beginnings of Archaeology are shared with, or perhaps to put it better, come on the coattails of the beginnings of Geology. The idea of stratigraphy, introduced at the turn of the 19th century, is common to both, but with archaeologists focusing on geological time periods in which humans were around. Some claim that Archaeology was crucial in creating a context in which Darwinian theories of evolution were accepted because it made it possible to see change geologically, with actual human remains and their tools.

But that's not the only model. Archaeology often draws on Anthropology and ethnography to step outside the mindset of linearity and evolution. Some archaeologists are aware that different conceptualisations of time existed in the past, that the linear perspective has a history of its own, and that we have somehow meshed those two things - a linear version of chronology and an awareness that we are working with our own understanding of time that might not be

applicable to the past - together. These are not necessarily incompatible positions, and I think they can co-exist.

Elizabeth Shove: But it's a funny mixture, isn't it? Between the utter realism of stratification and layering on the one hand and much more relativistic theories of time, including theories of time in the past, on the other.

Duncan Garrow: It is.

Elizabeth Shove: What are the consequences of this for thinking about change?

Duncan Garrow: One of the classic problems in archaeology is that of deciding whether things change because they evolve within a specific context or whether the source of change is external. For example, we can tell if a kind of pottery happens in one place and then it happens a bit later in another place. We can use absolute chronological dating to know how much later, but we still have to explain the process involved. How did the idea of making a pot in a certain way get transferred? Did change happen because people moved with their stuff, or for some other reason? We are still having this debate today, and it's very difficult to resolve - and maybe that's the point: it is a mixture - there's some kind of Brownian motion going on. I find that really interesting.

Manuel Baeriswyl

To go back a bit, as you said, archaeologists deal with material objects and remains. Radiocarbon dating has been important, but it is not the whole story. How did new methods of dating objects affect the ways in which archaeologists understand change?

Duncan Garrow: I wanted you to read Griffith et al.'s (2023) article because it makes an interesting point about categories, sequences and how they impact

interpretations of material remains. You can establish the date, the absolute chronology of things, through radiocarbon dating, and that's a 'scientific fact' (said with a smile). We can give a date range for something happening, but we haven't escaped the problem of understanding how cultures change, or what periods like the Old Stone Age, New Stone Age, Bronze Age or Iron Age really mean.

They argue that descriptions of periods like these often tap into a colonialist perspective, and into the view that societies make progress and get better over time. I think that politically most people would want to challenge that idea and say things are just different. In theory, you can use 'independent' dating to escape those time brackets, but in fact what happens is that people say: "We've got some pottery here that is definitely Neolithic". They might adjust the date ranges of the Neolithic but not question the concept of the Neolithic itself.

If we just insert calendar dates, we can get to a more nuanced understanding of change that isn't artificially divided into periods. After all, people living through the Neolithic (when you had farming and pottery for the first time) had no concept that they were in the Neolithic period themselves.

So, I think it's very helpful to be quite precise with temporality and because of Bayesian modelling² you can tighten the error margins of radiocarbon dates. This is quite significant. Within my career, for example, ideas about burial practices in Neolithic tombs have been completely overturned because, with radiocarbon dating, we could see that the tombs were not made over hundreds and hundreds of years, but over one or two generations at most. We literally didn't know

that when I did my Master's degree. It's very exciting to come up with new knowledge, and that informs your interpretation of the practices that were going on, so yes, I think chronologies can be really helpful.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Do you think you can step outside the inherited history and culture of these categorisations and just look at what happens?

Duncan Garrow: I think Archaeology is quite reliant on periods. For a long time, people have been saying: "Shouldn't we get rid of periods? They didn't mean anything in the past. Shouldn't we just understand change in and of itself?" The problem is that periods are quite useful. They are like boxes. If you have one box and then, later, another box, you can ask about the relation between them and how stuff (and ways of life) happened to move from one box to the other. Even if you are interested in the blurring that exists between those two boxes, it's useful to have them in place. If you artificially box things, you can understand processes of change; but if you're looking at a constantly fluid process, there's nothing to see, so periods provide a way to understand movement by artificially constraining it.

Elizabeth Shove: As well as organising things into boxes and periods, is it fair to say that archaeologists are basically dealing with materials rather than with the invisible practices on which objects depend?

Duncan Garrow: Yes and no. Pottery, for example, is a regular feature of all archaeological periods after the Neolithic, and whether you've got radiocarbon dates or not, you can see that there are new types of pottery, or styles, or new kinds of decoration. And you can see innovations in practice, like

² Bayesian modelling is a type of statistical modelling where everything unknown in a system, such as the parameters of the model, missing data, and predictions, is treated as a random variable and represented probabilistically instead of as fixed estimates. It offers a framework for refining beliefs using observational evidence to draw informed conclusions.

wheel-turned pottery, coming in during the late Iron Age and into the Roman period in Britain. So, in that sense, yes, you can see subtle changes of practice.

You can also see what people added in with the clay to make pottery. They might sometimes add bits of broken flint or shell or other bits of broken up pots, which is quite interesting when you think about the genealogy of an object.

Elizabeth Shove: Ok, but can you talk about changes in consumption, production, and demand when you've only got little bits of pottery to work with?

Duncan Garrow: You can get to production by looking at the sequence of what actually happened to make something, and you can get at consumption to some extent by mapping where certain types of pottery occur. And again, this becomes more meaningful once you get to the Roman period and industrialised manufacturing, because before that it's mostly on the local scale.

Elizabeth Shove: But you still don't quite know what these pots and things are being used for.

Duncan Garrow: No, not always. Sometimes you can extract fats from the object's surface and see what was cooked in the pots, but that's only if you're lucky.

Elizabeth Shove: Maybe you can find a bit of food and maybe you can't, but you know roughly what date this pot comes from, so how do you put these pieces together? You've got precision on the one hand and fuzzy supposition on the other.

Duncan Garrow: I know - I know what you mean. Some of this has to do with the resolution or scale at which you work. For example, archaeologists like graves, because

a grave is kind of a moment - it links a person to some objects, and because of that you can make assumptions about that person's identity. It is true you can get into trouble - was it their identity or was it an identity created by the people who were burying the dead and so on, but in cases like this you get people and objects that are directly related. A lot of the time, the resolutions are completely at the other end of the scale. There is a lot that you don't see, archaeologically, that's just invisible. So, you get the build-up of material over days, weeks, months, years, even decades and centuries, and you might not be able to pick it apart. But in some ways, this fuzziness is also a strength, in that you get an averaging out of what people did, so it's kind of more truthful in a way.

In addition to this build-up of material, you also get a literal accumulation of stuff, and you can see the accumulation of practices that produce that stuff. In some ways, that is more real than one practice that you spot in the moment. It's a complicated topic.

Manuel Baeriswyl: That's interesting - I think many scholars would relate to the problem that, in a way, a huge part of what they study - say, collaboration or organising - is only understandable through partial traces they find or create. We might all be wrestling with the same issue!

One of our questions was about what fragments of pottery tell us not about just daily life or production, but about how change comes about. In 'What Do Objects Want?', Gosden (2005) reminds us not to think about objects in isolation or neglect their influence on people: neighbouring objects are also important in understanding change in practices, but driven by material things.

Duncan Garrow: True. It is a really interesting paper because Gosden talks about

how objects constrain the potential for change. People got upset with that paper. I was working with Chris (Gosden) at the time, and I could never completely understand why they got so upset.

He was saying that once we've released them into the world, objects have power over us. He was drawing on anthropologies of innovation, and he argued that objects themselves have a role in the gradual drift of change over time. But again, it is complicated. He showed that when the Romans come in, you go from round to rectangular buildings, but as far as we can see them archaeologically, the practices within those buildings are very much the same. In that case, it looks as if people are doing things in the same way, but with different kinds of objects.

I like the idea of objects exerting power over people, independent of them. If you think of things being independent of people, you can think about the interaction between the two.

Manuel Baeriswyl: I go along with the idea that the material realm and the social realm are connected, but what then is the site of change?

Duncan Garrow: At the end of the day, we don't really understand why things change. We see all these things changing, you know, we see pottery styles and burial practices over the centuries changing, but there is never a really clear reason. Even something that you might think was obvious, like the introduction of metal, is quite confusing. You might say that something like copper was so useful, and so functional, that it allowed people to make their tools more efficiently. But it is still a really messy picture in that an individual's ability to use metal varies, and some of this variation might be about the ability to access this new material and display your importance or wealth or whatever.

Perhaps because we have such a long view, you come to the realisation that things just change. It's the compression of a long-term view into a blurry picture of a moment, or a series of moments, that's intriguing.

Elizabeth Shove: OK, so you don't go along with grand economic narratives of change, or with other such explanations: in your view, things just change!

Duncan Garrow: Yes.

Elizabeth Shove: On the other hand, you've talked about how material legacies influence, if not drive, the rolling frontier of what's going on. Are there other similar explanations coming from Archaeology?

Duncan Garrow: There always are people who would like a grand narrative. I think I'd say overall archaeologists favour nuanced, small-scale explanations, but it's not like I'm going to deny that the Roman Empire didn't have an influence on practice, whatever we call it, or whatever the Roman Empire was or is.

I remember a workshop where some people were arguing that the economy was independent of practices, and I couldn't believe that they were asking that. I was like, "How is that even possible?" In that sense, we do see practices as being absolutely central.

Elizabeth Shove: I'd like to change course a bit and talk about regularity and distinctions between the occasional and the normal. In 'Odd Deposits and Average Practice: A Critical History of The Concept of Structured Deposition' (Garrow 2012), you wrote about memory as a means of carrying change from one generation to the next, but within a lifetime you might also get very occasional or highly localised practices that have changed as well. Could you tell us a bit more about the

regular and the occasional, and what this distinction means for thinking about change?

Duncan Garrow: Quite often it can be hard to tell what's going on. What stands out in the archaeological record is the occasional stuff, for example, the burials in a community. But sometimes we can't tell. For example, we can see that there are layers, but we don't know how long any one set of practices lasted for. You might have three burials put on top of each other within a week, or maybe over a period of years, and you couldn't tell the difference, not even with great radiocarbon dating. In a way, it's quite nice because you can't worry too much about that. We have to learn to live with that uncertainty.

Elizabeth Shove: I like that sort of simplicity - there are some questions you just can't deal with, so you leave them out.

Duncan Garrow: Yes, for example, we just can't see the organic material, so we leave it out.

Manuel Baeriswyl: You mentioned that archaeologists are more interested in the nitty-gritty details of the object or the site. Does this make it difficult to identify gradual or revolutionary change?

Duncan Garrow: I always laugh at archaeologists who want to have the earliest 'something' in their period. And of course, every period has an earliest of some kind, because that's why it's a period. So yes, there is an interest in moments of revolutionary change, but you can often see the processes leading up to that as well. Of course, sometimes things do represent a radical change, for example, in the population at the beginning of the Neolithic period in Britain, but that's part of a more gradual pattern as well.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Connected to this, in their article, Griffiths and colleagues (2023), consider the notion of potential for change, and suggest that this is at odds with current archaeological practice. What do you think about this?

Duncan Garrow: We touched on this a little bit already. I think the problem is the tendency to put things in boxes. Griffiths et al. want to get rid of the boxes and consider the full potential of change without the evidence being slotted into one period or another. I think realistically, you need both approaches, and that having an open mind to different ways of thinking is always really helpful.

Elizabeth Shove: One other question about change has to do with the paths that weren't taken, and that you don't know about because they weren't taken. For me, the notion of potential carries with it a supposition that not all potential is realised and that there could be branches of a potential change that were cut off, or that there were some dead ends.

Duncan Garrow: That's a good question. I guess with relatively long-term burial practices or customs, it is not quite a dead end (!), more a blip, in that something that was happening very vibrantly then doesn't carry on. Or there might be periods when houses are built, for example in Neolithic Ireland, but then eventually stop. It is more that hot spots come and then go rather than there being a clear lineage that ends. That's my first reaction.

Elizabeth Shove: That's interesting because we know that practices disappear, and it would be odd if that hadn't also occurred in the past.

We need to finish soon, but before we end, I want to sneak in some questions about the

spatial aspect of change. So far, we haven't taken that into account, but any one location has its own history of practice, and that's not the same in other places. As you say, archaeologists investigate specific locations, sometimes in enormous detail. So where does place fit into the sequential narrative?

Duncan Garrow: That's a good question. In one sense, there's a spatially extensive mapping of change through place and chronology. In other words, you're seeing process by putting these two dimensions together. As I was saying earlier, you can see a pottery style moving across Europe or a way of burying someone or something like that. But at the same time, all archaeologists do in the first instance is look, in detail, at an excavation area that they've just opened up.

That is one of the beauties of archaeology. It was particularly clear to me when I was an archaeologist sent to investigate sites in advance of building developments. You weren't even choosing the place for archaeological reasons: you had to investigate it because some houses were going to be built there. So, you drop down this rectangle in this random field and find all these things that no one ever knew were there: Roman buildings, Saxon graveyards - it's always a remarkable process. Every time it's different because in that place, something different happened, and as you know, sequences never unfold in the same way everywhere. That's fascinating in itself. Sometimes you can trace continuity in the long term, but other times, it's not at all linked.

Elizabeth Shove: We've been talking about change in the archaeological record and along the way we have talked a little bit about change in archaeology itself, like the

introduction of radiocarbon dating or ancient DNA testing and so on. There are probably other ways in which theories have changed in archaeology over your working lifetime. You probably can't explain those changes any more than you can explain any others, but it would be good to know how ideas have evolved.

Duncan Garrow: I'd say open-mindedness – and a questioning of ideas of progress and improvement – that has been a big thing. It is good in that archaeologists are much more willing to talk about difference rather than comparative worth. Of course, there is still a lot of evolutionary thinking, and that's very hard to get away from, but people are challenging that. When you look at a site through time, you can see that things were different: they have not necessarily got better, and archaeology makes that clear. That is a positive thing to latch on to.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Finally, I was wondering about the relation between Archaeology and other disciplines. How has that changed?

Duncan Garrow: I think definitely the main thing is that there's been a scientific turn. There are many more scientific methodologies in use than there were when I started my career. Because some of these techniques are new and some of them have been refined, they have become part of the discourse, especially with ancient DNA. In a sense Archaeology is more interdisciplinary because there is more interaction with chemistry and biology, whereas before the connections were more theoretical - we'd have looked to Anthropology and to Sociology for ideas, through Bruno Latour³ or Alfred Gell⁴, for example. So yes, that's another change within the discipline.

³ Bruno Latour was a French Philosopher and Sociologist, very well known for his work on 'Actor-Network Theory'.

⁴ Alfred Gell was an influential British Social Anthropologist whose primary scholarship explored the intersections of art, language, symbolism, and ritual.

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