

Creating the Human Past: An Epistemology of Pleistocene Archaeology

Robert G. Bednarik

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The process of knowledge-making in archaeology's history is nothing if not complex, contested, and historically confounded. Questions of epistemology extend beyond archaeology's own identity. For over one hundred years, history and philosophy of science has worked to negotiate such intellectual space where philosophers have wrestled with epistemic questions of empiricism, constructivism, and rationalism; historians of science have grappled with the surrounding intellectual and academic contexts; and sociologists of science have worked to reconcile how authority, identity, and power negotiate changing epistemes within the sciences and science communities writ large. Archaeology shares many an intellectual phylogeny with many other disciplines (science and non-science alike) and to examine what it means to know and to create knowledge in archaeology requires an excavation of historical ideas. In short, to examine epistemology in archaeology—particularly through a historical theme—is a difficult exercise to undertake.

In *Creating the Human Past: An Epistemology of Pleistocene Archaeology*, Robert Bednarik boldly tackles what he argues are fundamental epistemic problems within the discipline of archaeology.¹ In bit of metaphoric reversal of uniformitarianism, *Creating the Human Past* would seem to argue that archaeology's past is the key to its present. In other words, problems of knowledge and tracing those problems helps parse archaeology's own historical and disciplinary identity. Bednarik's opening paragraph is practically a call to philosophical arms:

This book has been overdue for a least a century. Archaeology has operated for well over 150 years as a politically and ideologically influential discipline, but in all that time it has not been severely taken to task over its systematic mistakes, the haphazard way it forms its notion about the human past, or many other relevant aspects of its operation as an academic pursuit. It is essential, for its continued survival, and as a prelude to its inevitable renewal, to examine the epistemological foundation of archaeology, and to consider its development over time (Bednarik 2013: 1.)

On a very broad scale the book is organized as to examine the theoretical and practical issues of archaeology—specifically pertinent to Pleistocene archaeology—over the last two hundred years using episodic vignettes to cram the historical complexities of a then-forming discipline into

a mere 173 pages. *Creating the Human Past* draws heavily on the author's own field work and extensive publication record—illustrating intellectual problematiques through Bednarik's own expertise (for example, global rock art sites.) *Creating the Human Past*, however, dwells on a somewhat convenient reading of epistemological history—there is an air of inevitability about “mistakes” in archaeology due to faulty theoretical or practical premises of archaeologists. History, in *Creating the Human Past*, reads more like a hysteresis curve unfolding rather than a parsing of pluralistic academic traditions.

The real unpacking of Bednarik's work, however, lies in the intellectual space between history of science, philosophy of science, and his treatment of Pleistocene archaeology. In “Versions of Archaeology,” Bednarik begins the chapter with several statements about the nature of “science” and the specificity of different “types” of science and through *Creating the Human Past's* overview, the reader is left to conclude that: 1) non-archaeological branches of science have seamless epistemologies; and, 2) the process of creating knowledge in archaeology is a completely different enterprise than any other discipline. To the reader, this comes across as contradictory: Does philosophy of science have universal governing tenants that apply to all sciences or is every discipline epistemologically complex, and archaeology simply experiences its complexity differently than say, biology or chemistry? It is difficult to imagine the history of epistemology being non-contested in any other branch of science (for example, work in philosophy of biology shows great give and take [Ruse 2007]) and philosophers of science would be quick to point out that questions are not asked, answered, and that's it, *finis* in other sciences, but, rather, are still under constant negotiation within their disciplines.² Throw in Bednarik's claims about the epistemic nature of history (or History, capitalized, as constantly emphasized), and the reader is quick to appreciate that Bednarik's concerns strike an echo with philosopher Alison Wylie's observation:

When philosophers began (again) to attend to real science, they confronted a degree of complexity and diversity in scientific practice that has significantly undermined faith that the sciences embody a common method and form of rationality, or that they can be expected to produce domain-specific theories that will ultimately converge on a comprehensive unified system of knowledge (Wylie 2002: 10)

Here, we consider Wylie's reminder that relativism and constructivism run through other sciences just as they do in archaeology.

However, *Creating the Human Past* reads as a much less nuanced treatment of the history of knowledge-making claims than many other very detailed philosophical treatments of the discipline (e.g., Merrilee and Wesley Salmon's work in philosophy and archaeology [Salmon 1982; Salmon 1984] or Alison Wylie's critiques of epistemology [Wylie 2002.]) While its specific Pleistocene focus is unique, the real nuanced treatments of what creating knowledge can and ought to mean come from other intersections of philosophy of science and archaeology. For example:

What began as straightforwardly epistemic or methodological questions quickly led into more complex clusters of ideas. It became clear that what counts as an explanation, or as compelling evidence for or against explanatory claims, depends fundamentally on theoretical, metaphysical questions: on how the cultural subject is conceptualized (Wylie 2002: 13.)

Creating the Human Past allocates a great deal of space and effort into what are termed archaeology's "mistakes." There is space for the usual suspects (Piltdown Man and Glouzel) but the discussion moves beyond fraud to mistakes of preservation of sites and rock art locales, to what Bednarik terms "African Eve: a gene fetish." (The discussion of which contains a great Nietzsche reference.) However, the examples Bednarik selects comprise an incredibly wide-range of categories—everything from blatant forgery in the case of Piltdown to a theory ("African Eve") that could be described as having outlived its usefulness in the field and was replaced Kuhnian-like with an alternative interpretation of information. The reflexivity the chapter encourages is commendable, but the scope and direction feels ever-widening, unable to balance the "mistakes" of the discipline with what that means for how knowledge is created.

The "mistakes" of the discipline are juxtaposed with what are described as the discipline's "milestones." Eugene Dubois's discovery of *Pithecanthropus (Homo) erectus*; the Neander Valley finds; the discovery of the Taung Child; and the Early Modern era's discovery of Pleistocene art are but a few of the touchstones that Bednarik points toward as significant within Pleistocene archaeology. Tellingly, these examples are termed (by Bednarik) as "heretical" (a very historically value-laden term that is ill-defined.) More than only heretical, however, these examples are all heroic. They read as the building blocks of archaeology's own bildungsrom—dedicated men overcoming institutional and scientific odds championing a theory or find that here, in the twenty-first century we consider to be consistent with our own epistemological workings of the archaeological record. These goalposts of mistakes and milestones leave us curious if any epistemology or history happens in the

middle of what *Creating the Human Past* casts as history. (I'm sure there's a joke about middle rang theory just waiting to be made...)

Creating the Human Past: An Epistemology of Pleistocene Archaeology does beg a very particular question and certainly a question that would seem to underlie Bednarik's argument. What would it look like to practice "good epistemology" in archaeology? If, reading between Bednarik's lines, archaeology has been "doing it wrong" for 150 years, what would it look like to do it well? More transparency in data? A different negotiation and definition of expertise? A re-evaluation of who has a say in what counts as knowledge in the professional communities? Hypotheses? Statistical models? Tossing aside anything "wrong" from archaeology's long history?

In...final analysis, archaeology is a hobby that somehow got a little out of hand. It could revert to being just a hobby, or alternatively it could change direction and become a science. But there is nothing unusual or unique in this situation: it pertains to the other humanities as well (Bednarik 2013: 170.)

Shifting archaeology's definition between the sciences and humanities is a rather time-honored tradition within archaeological theory. But Bednarik's closing statement still leaves us wondering about this very process of creating knowledge. Whatever, then, we want to call archaeology is producing knowledge—making sense of that knowledge and process can and ought to be significant to the discipline.

ENDNOTES

¹As a technical side note, Bednarik uses "problem" relatively colloquially, rather than as a technical category such as in Lauden's *Progress and its Problems*. However, much of the meat within Bednarik's arguments could be argued to be rooted in Lauden's work (Lauden 1977) and Bednarik does have a few buried Lauden citations.

²One could, of course, raise the question whether this claim is most applicable for philosophers of that particular science or practioners "doing" that science.

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