

# Archaeological Theory at the Edge(s)

Edited by Staša Babić and  
Monika Milosavljević



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## SELF-REFLEXIVE TURN TO ONTOLOGICAL DEBATES IN ARCHAEOLOGY\*

**Abstract:** The paper provides a short overview of the archaeological approaches closely related to the so-called “ontological turn.” It is argued that the alleged re-orientation of archaeological theory from epistemology to ontology, broadly referred to as the “ontological turn” strikingly mirrors the political, technological, and environmental issues and context of the contemporary world, and for that reason, its relevance in archaeological research of the past must be deeply, self-reflexively reconsidered.

**Keywords:** ontological turn, post-humanism, new materialism, post-anthropocentrism, archaeological theory, self-reflexivity.

### Introduction

Given the traditional definition of archaeology as the study of the human past using material remains and objects, archaeological finds have commonly been treated as (inanimate) expressions of human/cultural behavior, creativity, and perception, or “as extensions of (and consequently clues to) human thought pattern” (Kay and Haughton 2019, 15). The question of how to make this general theoretical statement operational and applicable in concrete case studies, or how to approach material remains to understand the human past, has been at the center of theoretical debates in archaeology for decades. Up to this moment, archaeological theory has mostly been occupied by the issue of archaeological epistemology.

Recently, however, some archaeologists have started advocating for the reorientation of archaeological theory from epistemology to ontology and have accordingly proposed new ontologically-oriented archaeologi-

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cal approaches. In short, they argue that earlier epistemological discussions rest on flawed metaphysical/ontological premises and should thus be abandoned as irrelevant. Common distinctions (dichotomies) we make between *thought* and *matter* (and other related distinctions such as between human [subject] and non-human [object], mind and body, culture and nature, spiritual and material, animate and inanimate, etc.), through which we (meaning modern science) have conceptualized the world/reality, are declared problematic because they do not fully describe reality as it is (and especially because they affirm anthropocentric perspective from which we approach the world/reality) (Witmore 2007, 549; Harris and Cipolla 2017, 29). As an alternative, some archaeologists have proposed new ontologically-oriented approaches, aimed at overcoming modern/Cartesian dualism<sup>1</sup> by replacing it with “an alternative metaphysical orthodoxy” (Alberti 2016, 163), widely referred to as flat (or relational) ontology.

In what follows I will critically reflect on this theoretical reorientation, broadly referred to as the “ontological turn,” to show how strikingly it mirrors the political, technological, and environmental issues and context of the contemporary world, and how, for that reason, its relevance in archaeological research of the past must be deeply, self-reflexively rethought.

Before that, a summary of the most important arguments for replacing the previous Cartesian dualistic (also called substantive) ontology with the new one(s) will be provided. As will be seen, these arguments, as articulated by archaeologists, are mostly based on metaphysical statements about reality on the one hand, while on the other, they refer to ethnographic data about non-Western cultures whose descriptions and understandings of reality, unlike the Cartesian conception, are non-dualistic. Thus, archaeology’s theoretical reorientation from epistemology to ontology is two-fold inspired by metaphysics and anthropology (Alberti 2016).

## Metaphysically-inspired “ontological turn”

The arguments for abandoning Cartesian dualism are commonly based on the metaphysical claim that the ontological distinction between thought and matter, which is the central assumption underlying the mod-

1 Cartesian dualism refers to France philosopher René Descartes’ (lat. Renatus des Cartes, 1596-1650) ontological dualism composing of two main substances: *res cogitans* (thinking substance or mind) and *res extensa* (extended matter or nature), with the first (mind) being ontologically superior to extended matter (nature). His dualistic ontology provided a base for the discussion on the best method for understanding what is true, i.e. scientific epistemology.

ern scientific worldview and its epistemology, is a form of false dualism that does not reflect reality as it is (Ribeiro 2019; Fernández-Götz et al. 2021).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, all other related ontological distinctions between human and non-human, mind and body, culture and nature, etc. are also problematic in the same way. This leads some archaeologists to suggest that humans, along with the rest of the world's non-human beings, things, and other entities, are not what we used to think they are, and should thus be re-conceptualized and redefined (e.g. Olsen 2012; Crellin and Harris 2021).

Thus, during the last few decades, a wide range of ideas offering an alternative to the old/modern conception of the human subject and his/her place within the world has been proposed under the umbrella term of post-humanistic perspective (post-humanism) (Fernández-Götz et al. 2021). Comparatively, a new materialistic perspective (neo-materialism) has been articulated to problematize the ontological status of materiality (Thomas 2015), although “the question of how to theorize inanimate materials is also central to post-humanist concerns” (Key and Haughton 2019, 12). The terms post-humanist and new materialist perspective are thus used almost interchangeably by archaeologists, and both imply that the distinction between people and things, underlying the whole conception of archaeological study, may not be valid anymore.

## Relational ontology

Post-humanism encompasses a diverse range of intellectual perspectives, of which some are mutually pretty inconsistent and may even be contradictory (Ribeiro 2019, 29; Kay and Haughton 2019, 13), but can all be said to have a common tendency to re-conceptualize the human being and his/her place within the world (Fernández-Götz et al. 2021). By reducing Western/European intellectual traditions to an understanding of the human being as a transcendental and ahistorical category, those committed to the post-humanist perspective rather see the human as inseparable from a very specific space-time entanglement consisting of many other things or entities (environmental conditions, animals, plants, materials, objects, technology, etc.), of which the human is just a part. Post-humanists argue that “human beings are one of many components that make up the world and that they cannot be understood apart from the wider relational assemblages, and specific historical processes, of which they are part” (Crellin and Harris 2021, 5). Accordingly, humans are de-

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2 For an extensive critique of the ways in which some archaeologists understand and use metaphysical assertions for their arguments see Ribeiro 2019.

rived from historically contingent interactions with other (non-human) things and entities, meaning that their ultimate condition is contextual and shifting in nature; in other words, non-transcendental. The same is true of inanimate things (as well as animals, plants, and other non-human beings) (Thomas 2015). They are also entangled in a network of all other things, among them humans, so they do not exist and thus cannot be understood without the relational matrix of historically contingent webs (Hodder 2012; 2016). This general theoretical position is most often referred to as a relational (or flat) ontology.

Largely inspired by scholars of diverse academic backgrounds such as Bruno Latour (1993, 2005), Karen Barad (2007), Manuel DeLanda (2006), Jane Bennett (2010), Levi Bryant (2011), Tim Ingold (2006; 2012), Dona Haraway (2004 [1985]; 2007), most notably Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), and many others, this vein of archaeology rejects Cartesian ontological dualism in favor of new models of relational or flat ontology, which depict a world where all entities (humans and non-humans) are mutually entangled in complex relational webs, such that none of them can be regarded as stable or bounded substances but rather as decentered phenomena constituted within an immanent state of flux and ongoing interactions (Kay and Haughton 2019, 7; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018, 8).

Given the relational matrix within which all phenomena, including both humans and non-humans, are constituted, the term flat ontology is used to denote that

“all entities are on the equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects. While indeed some objects might influence the collectives to which they belong to a greater extent than others, it doesn't follow from this that these objects are more real than others” (Levi Bryant 2010, 246).

In short, while the modern/Cartesian paradigm treated the human subject as ontologically privileged and asymmetrically positioned in relation to all other entities (other beings/things), the post-humanist/neo-materialistic perspective requires that all entities are treated as ontologically equal/symmetrical.

## Agency

For archaeologists, central to the argument that humans should not be treated as ontologically privileged in relation to other entities and beings is the recognition of the affective power of material things and, ac-

cordingly, non-human agency. In its most common version, the concept of non-human (or object-oriented) agency refers to the power of things and all other non-humans to influence and shape change. Assuming a new-materialistic perspective, directly inspired by Deleuze's concept of "affective matter," as well as other similar concepts such as "vital materiality" (Bennet 2010) and "vibrant matter" (DeLanda 2006), some archaeologists started to recognize

"the contribution that matter makes to its own becoming, how the properties and capacities of materials like clay are critical to the making of objects like pots, and how the capacities of non-humans like rivers come to shape the landscape and their interaction with humans and animals" (Crellin and Harris 2021, 2).

The attribution/recognition of non-human agency is not a novelty in archaeology or other related disciplines.<sup>3</sup> A few decades ago, material culture studies, which heavily relied on the concepts of "objectification" or "materialization" (Miller 1987), revealed and highlighted the active role of material objects in the constitution of individual and social identities as well as in maintaining almost all kinds of social relations (Tilley et. al. 2006). Based on this logic, "people make objects that then act back on the formation of the human subject" (Thomas 2015, 1289). For example, it can be shown how long-lasting artifact traditions (otherwise known as style) have conditioned people's lives in various ways, encouraging them to act in particular ways and "effectively placing obligations on them" (Gosden 2005: 208). Moreover, agency is not necessarily inherent in and directed by humans, as non-humans can also induce an event or change (Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018, 5,14).

Some ontologically-oriented archaeologists, however, take this notion of agency a step further and radicalize it, claiming that things are independent, autonomous actors (Hodder 2012; Olsen 2012), or even that they have the ontological status of persona (Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018, 6). Such radical interpretations of non-human agency within archaeology are predominantly inspired by Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology – a philosophical model that gives primacy to objects rather than relational networks within which objects (both human and non-human) evolve. Accordingly, "non-human objects have an essence and a reality of their own" and can mutually interact without being mediated by a human being (Harris and Cipolla 2017, 188).

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3 Recognition of non-human agency (also personhood) within anthropology can be traced back to the pioneering works of Irving A. Hallowell *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View* (1960).

Archaeologists who recognize/attribute agency in/to objects and thus equalize the ontological status of humans and non-humans differ in their formulations of “flat ontology,” ranging from those who believe that things and people are genuinely ontologically indistinct, and that “intentionality” and “reflexive consciousness” are thus potentially available to all beings and things (Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018, 6), to those who suggest an alternative concept to differentiate “agency” – closely linked to (human) intentionality, from “affect” – something more like “an affective force, which emerges relationally through interaction” (Key and Haughton 2019, 19; Crellin and Harris 2021, 3).

## Anthropologically-inspired “ontological turn”

Unlike the metaphysically-inspired ontological turn that aims to formulate the conceptual framework for articulating true ontology, the anthropologically-inspired reorientation (from epistemology) to ontology is rather motivated by some Western anthropologists’ readiness to engage in radical self-reflexive critique, and thereby “destabilize” and “decolonize” Cartesian ontological dualism on which the discipline (and Western science in general) is founded.

In anthropology, the ontological turn may be regarded as an extension and further development of the postcolonial, self-reflexive critique of the discipline’s involvement in the Western imperialist subjugation of indigenous cultures/Others (Fowles 2016; Simić 2020, 27–28). Starting from the argument that the Cartesian dichotomies of thought/matter, nature/culture, etc. have made “other people’s claim about reality and their ontological commitments appear trivial and wrong,” anthropologists (e.g. Viveiros de Castro [1998; 2014], Martin Holbraad [2012], Amiria Henare [2007], Sari Wastell) advocate for taking other people and their concepts “seriously” (Alberti 2016, 171). By this, they mean treating the concepts by which indigenous communities describe reality, particularly those that do not make sense to us (for example that stones can speak), as true and “constitutive of reality, and therefore of nature, itself” (Graeber 2015, 20). In other words, ethnographic descriptions of non-Western societies whose conceptions of reality are not necessarily dualistic (e.g. Viveiros de Castro’s Amerindian perspectivism), if taken seriously enough, have the potential to “destabilize” and “decolonize” our own (Western/Cartesian) ontological assumptions. Such a position obviously advocates for political justice and the rights of indigenous groups. At the same time, this “recursive” method, as Martin Holbraad calls it (2012, 46–47), is supposed to allow Western ontological dualism to be transformed in relation to indigenous one(s).

Another thing distinguishing the anthropological turn to ontology is the specific understanding of the term ontology itself (Alberti et al. 2011; Graeber 2015; Ribeiro 2019, 26). Unlike the metaphysically-inspired ontological turn that explicitly seeks a meta-ontology (which provides a more accurate understanding of reality), anthropology adopts a position where multiple different ontologies, and thus multiple different worlds/realities, exist (e.g. Henare et al. 2007, 6; see Tola and Santos 2020; Crellin and Harris 2021, 3). Accordingly, there is no one world/reality and different interpretations of it; rather, multi-reality (different ontologies) is possible. However, as others have already noticed, this position may easily slip into the old-fashioned concept of a culture whose meaning is, for this occasion, extended to include, alongside people, a whole variety of non-humans as well (Holbraad in Alberti et al. 2011, 902). Consequently, others may include not merely colonized people (or past people), as was commonly thought within postcolonial critique until recently, but also material things (animals, plants, environment, etc.) may be considered colonized Others as well, as some archaeologists have argued (e.g. Olsen 2003; see Harris and Cipolla 2017, 172; Fowles 2016).

Inspired by the radical self-reflexive critique within anthropology, archaeologists also started to consider “what we represent in our archaeological interpretations (i.e. a vision of the past) and how we can improve these through the elimination of Western assumptions” (Harris and Cipolla 2017, 173). Several solutions have been proposed, as we will see below.

## Ontologically-oriented archaeologies

Following the commitment to the above-mentioned metaphysical arguments for relational/flat ontology and ethnographic descriptions of non-Western societies whose conceptions of reality are not necessarily dualistic, several so-called post-humanistic/neo-materialistic approaches have emerged within archaeology: symmetrical archaeology, post-anthropocentric archaeology, archeology of ontological alterity, and other related post-humanistic/neo-materialistic approaches.

Inspired by the above-mentioned scholars, most notably Bruno Latour (1993, 2005) and Karen Barad (2007), who regard all phenomena as relational, with no a priori distinction to be made between socio/cultural and natural/biological relation symmetrical archaeology assumes that material things “should not be regarded as ontologically distinct (from humans), as detached and separated entities, a priori” (Witmore 2007, 546).<sup>4</sup> This general theoretical position, shared by all other ontologically-orient-

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4 The same premise of “human-thing entanglement” is elaborated by Ian Hodder in his proposal for an integrated archaeological theory (Hodder 2011; 2016)

ed approaches, has led proponents of the “principle of symmetry” (Bjørnar Olsen, Christopher Witmore, Michael Shanks, and Timothy Webmoor) to demand that archaeology be fundamentally re-conceptualized (Olsen et. al. 2012). Unlike the common, traditional conception of archaeology as the discipline that studies the human past using material remains, thus placing human beings at the center of universal history, symmetrical archaeology explores relational networks from which both human and non-human entities evolve. Accordingly, humanity is no longer the driving force of history, since material things, as well as other non-human entities (so-called *actants*), have the agency to induce change and make history.

Within the so-called *second wave of symmetrical archaeology*, some archaeologists expanded the argument for symmetrical archaeology even further in an attempt to demonstrate why material things must be taken more seriously by archaeologists (Olsen 2012, 20). In doing so, they adopted Graham Harman’s philosophical speculation on object-oriented ontology (OOO)<sup>5</sup> as an argument for archaeological remains to be studied in their own right and not just as facets of human culture (Olsen 2012; Olsen and Witmore 2015; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018, 14). Accordingly, they reject treating things as inanimate, passive matter, commonly explained in terms of people who make, perceive, and consume things (Olsen 2012, 24), and instead advocate for paying close attention to things themselves, particularly those of their elements/aspects that exist beyond the world of humans (e.g. Olsen and Witmore 2015; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014).

This upgraded version of symmetrical archaeology is also closely associated with the anthropological self-reflexive critique, which aims to “decolonize” Western/Cartesian dualism by opening it up to thinking through ontological concepts of others, humans as well as non-humans. With that goal in mind, Bjørnar Olsen, the most prominent figure in this version of symmetrical archaeology, claims that

“Archaeologists should unite in a defense of things, a defense of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and ‘othered’ by the imperialist social and humanist discourses” (2003, 100).

In other words, archaeologists are asked to perceive material things as colonized Others, and thus stop further “making up stories that subjugate ‘things’ to their relationships with people,” and instead engage with the

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5 As mentioned above, Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO) is a philosophical model that gives primacy to objects rather than the relational networks within which objects evolve. Object-oriented ontology demonstrate how objects always exceed their relations and withdraw in part from each other and from human beings.

“alterity of things” (i.e. their resistance to our intellectual schemes) more seriously (Thomas 2015, 1291).

Another ontologically-oriented approach – post-anthropocentric archaeology – differs from symmetrical archaeology in that it does not have an exclusive interest in things themselves, but rather aims to contribute to the “post-anthropocentric redefinition of the human being and its place within the world” (e.g. Crellin and Harris 2021: 1, 3). Rather than denying the importance of humans, post-anthropocentric archaeology, which Crellin and Harris advocate for, starts from radically different meta-ontological assumptions about the human species, which, as the authors believe, “provide a more accurate understanding of the historical becoming of ourselves and our worlds” (2021, 3). Specifically, they adopt Deleuze’s model of flat ontology as both the meta-ontological assumption (providing a more accurate understanding of the “becoming of” humanity) and the main argument for why archaeology must displace humanity from the center of archaeological study and its interpretation and establish post-anthropocentric archaeology.

According to its proponents, post-anthropocentric archaeology is “fundamentally” devoted “to social justice in the present, to political transformation and to a specific historically located understanding of the past” (Crellin and Harris 2021, 3). It is intended to be “a form of embedded and situated critique of Western-Cartesian thinking,” closely following Rosi Braidotti’s and Donna Haraway’s post-humanistic and feminist critique of the Cartesian perspective on humanism, which they believe “always privileges specific forms of humanity, and arranges human beings into a hierarchy with the white, able-bodied, Euro-American, heterosexual man firmly at the top” (Crellin and Harris 2021, 2–3).

Finally, a branch of ontologically-oriented archaeology that, for the purpose of this paper, is labeled *archaeology of radical (ontological) alterity* is also constituted as a kind of critique of Western/Cartesian dualism (and all other related concepts, such as anthropocentrism, representation, etc.). Analogous to anthropology, it attempts to think through ontological concepts and perspectives of Others (humans and non-humans) in order to diversify Western worldviews (Harris and Cipolla 2017, 180). In other words, it is conceived as a critical ontological approach with the ambition to theorize and practice archaeology based on indigenous concepts and theories, thereby allowing for radical ontological difference (alterity) to emerge (Alberti 2016, 172–174; Harrison-Buck and Hendon. 2018, 19).

For example, following Karen Barad’s post-humanistic position and Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) theory of radical alterity (Amerindian perspectivism), Yvonne Marshall and Ben Alberti (2014) carried out an analysis



of La Candelaria body-pots<sup>6</sup> to provide ontological alterity within which polymorphic pots are not representations of or symbols for either human or animal bodies, but rather actual bodies/single entities. By doing so, they aimed “to free potential alterity from the over-determination of representational thought” that was characteristic of Cartesian ontology, and thus “contribute to the anti-modernizing projects that defend a plurality of modes of being” (Alberti 2016, 172, 175).

## Self-reflexive turn to ontological debates in archaeology

As we have seen, the argument for re-orienting archaeological theory from epistemology to ontology (the ontological turn) comes from a variety of intellectual and academic backgrounds. Some of the key references and direct intellectual inspirations come from post-Kantian philosophers willing to depart from what they consider a strictly epistemic path taken by philosophy after Kant, and thereby revitalize the relevance of ontological questions within philosophy once more (Graeber 2015; Ribeiro 2019). On the other hand, archaeological reorientation to ontology is also inspired by radical self-reflexive critique articulated within anthropology, which aims to “decolonize” anthropological/Western academic discourse by opening it up to thinking through ontological concepts of others, both humans and non-humans (Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018, 5).

It is worth noting, however, that the ontological turn and the related post-humanist and new-materialist perspectives reflect a wider, not merely academic, context within which they are articulated. In terms of post-humanism, the wider context to which I refer may also be perceived as a kind of historically contingent entanglement or network within which both human (e.g. social, political) and non-human conditions/factors (e.g. technology, the environment) interact and affect each other.

For example, several scholars have already noted a striking concurrence of the post-humanistic perspective and the rapid growth of technology (notably of artificial intelligence [AI] and biotechnology) which are “in the course of diluting the boundaries between humans and non-humans in a way that we can still not fully comprehend” (Díaz de Liaño and Fernández-Götz 2020, 546). Many post-humanistic arguments revolve around theoretical reflections of cybernetic development and/or the augmentation of the human body (often referred to as “transhuman-

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6 Otherwise known as polymorphic (both human and animal shape) pottery, from northwest Argentina, 1st millennium A.D.

ism”). In this regard, Donna Haraway’s use of the concept of “cyborg,” which blurs human/machine boundaries in order to reject the rigid culture/nature distinction and displace the very idea of the human subject, is symptomatic. Her work *A Cyborg Manifesto* (2004 [1985]) initiated an ever-expanding range of debates centered on the physical qualities of being, paving the way for developing the argument that intelligence, and indeed consciousness, may not be exclusively human qualities, and that there is no strict demarcation between bodily experience and computer-based simulation (e.g. Kubes and Reinhardt 2022; see Key and Haughton 2019, 8).

Another important aspect of the current context within which the ontological turn has emerged is the rise in environmental challenges. Since the term *Anthropocene* was coined in 2000 to denote the most recent geological epoch in which humanity’s impact on the environment has resulted in an ecological crisis of global proportions (e.g. Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Crutzen 2006), scholars have started to take humans’ entanglement with other beings, things, and environments more seriously in order to find solutions to the ongoing environmental crisis. In this context, the anthropocentric exceptionalism inherent in Cartesian ontology has been identified as a major threat to the environment’s well-being and its future sustainability (e.g. Ferrando 2016; Benson 2019). Accordingly, the post-humanistic (post-anthropocentric) perspective is becoming increasingly important as the necessary ethical response to the long-term consequences of Cartesian anthropocentrism (Selsvold and Webb 2020, 109; Crellin and Harris 2021)

Finally, the broad intellectual background of the ontological turn in archaeology is predominately associated with the Western (particularly Anglo-American, Scandinavian, and French) academy<sup>7</sup>, reflecting the social and political issues of this part of the world. A closer look at what each of the purposed archaeological approaches has set out to achieve, reveals that they mostly aim to be politically engaged critiques of the Western/Cartesian intellectual tradition. They are commonly promoted as a “partner in the anti-modernizing projects that defend a plurality of modes of being” (Alberti 2016, 175). Comparatively, they provide an opportunity for the discipline to “challenge,” “diversify,” and “step out of” a Western mindset by embracing the alterity of past human and non-human perspectives (Harris and Cipolla 2017, 180; Kay and Haughton 2019, 19). It

7 A discussion on Hodder’s theory of entanglement (held in Berlin 2013), in which the commentators (Susan Pollock, Richard Bernbeck, Caroline Jauss, Johannes Greger, Constance von Rūden, and Stefan Schreiber) referred to different disciplinary traditions in continental/central Europe and Anglo-American academy is particularly instructive here (see Hodder 2016, 130, 137)

is frequently argued that these critiques are the most appropriate or even the only possible political tool for engaging with contemporary Western society's specific political and social issues.<sup>8</sup> This is most obvious in the ambition of post-anthropocentric archaeology to contribute to the transformation of “patriarchal, racist, homophobic, and anti-migrant structures in the present” (Crellin and Harris 2021: 1,3). In this version, the ontological turn seems perfectly in line with the demands of *cancel culture* – a political movement that has risen from the very specific colonial history and experience of the Western academy and wider Western society (which do not necessarily correspond with all other societal experiences, especially not with those from the past).

## Concluding remark

If the preceding attempt to contextualize the ongoing paradigm shift (the reorientation of archaeological theory from epistemology to ontology) within the wider intellectual, social-political, environmental, and technological backdrops of the present clarifies the degree to which it mirrors various present-day issues, I would like to suggest that the relevance of the proposed ontological approaches in archaeology needs to be deeply self-reflexively rethought. By this, I refer to the adoption of an epistemic perspective that makes archaeologists aware of the fact that they inevitably project their relationship with the present-day context and the related social/ideological values onto the object of their research i.e. the human past. Given this inevitable condition of knowledge production, as evidenced by numerous case studies from the history of the archaeological discipline, it is reasonable for contemporary archaeologists to take this condition more seriously and critically rethink attempts to establish ontologically-oriented archaeology. Admittedly, this only makes sense if the focus of archaeological research is the human past, given that some ontologically-oriented archaeologists claim that the past does not even exist. As such, it must also be re-conceptualized, alongside humans and things. However, any further discussion on such a radical statement made by some contemporary archaeologists goes beyond the scope of this paper.

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8 Although there is nothing unusual about an academy's desire to be politically engaged in order to find solutions to ongoing global or local issues, it is questionable, as many other scholars have already noticed, whether and to what extent the suggested ontological approaches “represent an intellectual and ethical perspective from which we can better deal with the political and environmental issues facing the world” (Fernandez-Götz 2021, 455; see Babić 2019; Díaz de Liaño and Fernández-Götz 2021, Van Dyke 2021; for anthropology see Bessire and Bond. 2014. Graeber 2015; Fowles 2016).

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Since archaeological interpretation is still based primarily upon “common sense” or “accumulated knowledge,” rather than theoretically grounded premises, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the topics raised in this volume. It represents an important contribution to the current debate on the role of archaeological theory in the interdisciplinary context of research into the origins of humanity and culture and shows the direction that contemporary archaeology should take.

Rajna Šošić-Klindžić

The collection *Archaeological Theory at the Edge(s)* is truly at the cutting edge of 21st-century archaeological theory. The authors cover the vast scope of the most relevant epistemological issues in current archaeology but mainly challenge the worn-out cliché of archaeology as a dusty, colonial-born, antiquarian hobby. On the contrary, they convince that archaeology is vitally and virtually necessary for everyone today. Contributions in this volume restore the faith in the value of archaeology as a humanistic discipline, but also as a critical social action, nowadays when the World is once again faced with “the sinister lights of perverted science” (to paraphrase Churchill).

Aleksandar Palavestra

