

# Archaeology's Struggle for Theoretical Independence in Anthropology

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## DESCRIPTION

Between 1900 and 1970, American archaeology was largely regarded as a secondary field within the broader discipline of anthropology. Archaeologists were often seen as mere practitioners of a specialized form of ethnography, confined to analyzing material remains rather than developing original theoretical contributions [1]. During this period, the discipline's engagement with anthropological theory was minimal and archaeology was predominantly used to validate ethnological models of cultural evolution. This limited theoretical engagement and the perception of archaeology as a subfield of ethnology had significant implications for the discipline's development and its relationship with anthropology [2].

One of the major reasons American archaeologists perceived themselves as secondary anthropologists was the belief that the archaeological record contributed little to anthropological understanding that was not already provided by ethnography [3]. Archaeological findings were seen as incomplete and lacking in the richness of ethnographic data, particularly due to the poor preservation of materials. The preservation issue was an important concern because, unlike the vibrant, living cultures studied by ethnologists, much of the archaeological record was fragmented, making it difficult to draw complete conclusions. The resulting archaeological data often lacked the nuance and depth provided by direct observation of contemporary cultures, which ethnologists were able to gather through fieldwork. This led to the perception that archaeology was not capable of producing the kind of theoretical insights that ethnology could [4].

Archaeologists at the time largely accepted this limited role. Ethnologists, who were the dominant force in American anthropology, regularly reminded archaeologists of their perceived inferiority [5]. Archaeologists were seen as technicians who gathered data without developing theoretical frameworks. In essence, archaeology was considered to serve anthropology by testing models derived from ethnology, rather than contributing new theories based on archaeological data itself. This dynamic reinforced the hierarchical position of archaeology within the field of anthropology and restricted its potential for theoretical development.

Despite these challenges, a few archaeologists in the 1950 began to argue that archaeology could contribute to anthropological theory. These scholars contended that archaeological evidence, particularly regarding ancient cultures, could provide valuable insights into the evolution of societies, challenging the ethnological models that were prevalent at the time. However, their arguments were largely ignored and their ideas did not gain significant traction. The current view within anthropology was that archaeology was still too dependent on ethnographic models to stand on its own as a theoretical discipline [6].

The situation began to shift in the 1960 with the rise of a new generation of archaeologists. These scholars, often associated with the processual school of thought, sought to establish archaeology as a distinct theoretical discipline. They argued that archaeology should not be confined to the role of testing ethnological models but should develop its own theoretical framework based on archaeological evidence [7]. These new archaeologists were influenced by the broader trends in anthropology, which were moving towards more scientific and quantitative approaches and they believed that archaeology could contribute to the understanding of cultural processes and human behavior through the study of material culture.

However, despite this shift in perspective, the 1970 saw a continuation of the main trend archaeologists used anthropological theory without developing novel theory grounded in archaeological data [8]. This was, in part, due to the lingering influence of the belief that archaeology was simply ancient ethnology. Archaeologists continued to rely on anthropological models to explain their findings, rather than creating new frameworks based on the archaeological record [9]. While some archaeologists experimented with different approaches and theoretical perspectives, the discipline as a whole remained largely subservient to ethnology and failed to fully embrace the potential of archaeological data to inform anthropological theory.

By the 1980, the situation began to change. The work of the processual archaeologists, who emphasized the importance of scientific methods and the use of generalizable theories, gained more prominence. The focus on material culture as a way to understand social structures, economies and political systems

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helped archaeologists establish a more independent identity within anthropology [10]. Nevertheless, the discipline continued to manage with its theoretical subordination to ethnology and it would take several more decades before archaeology fully asserted its theoretical autonomy.

The root cause of American archaeology's theoretical limitations between 1900 and 1970 can be traced to the deep-seated belief that archaeology was merely a form of ancient ethnology. This assumption, coupled with the idea that archaeologists must rely on anthropological theory to explain their findings, constrained the discipline's ability to develop original theoretical frameworks. The belief in archaeology's subordinate role within anthropology persisted well into the 1970, hindering the field's theoretical innovation.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the progression of American archaeology between 1900 and 1970 reflects a struggle for theoretical independence within the broader field of anthropology. The discipline's perceived lack of theoretical contributions during this period can be attributed to the dominance of ethnology and the belief that archaeology was merely a tool for validating ethnographic models. While efforts to establish archaeology as a distinct theoretical field began in the 1950 and gained momentum in the 1960, the discipline's reliance on anthropological theory persisted for decades. Only in the latter part of the 20th century did archaeology begin to carve out a more independent theoretical identity, one that was rooted in the analysis of material culture and the study of cultural processes through archaeological evidence. The legacy of this struggle highlights the importance of theoretical autonomy in advancing any scientific discipline.

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