Anth 461  Fall 2021
History of Archaeological Theory

Prof. Chris Fennell
Wednesdays, 3:00pm to 5:50pm,
Room 312, Davenport Hall

Overview: This course examines the prominent theories in archaeology from its inception to the present day and does so within the context of general developments in anthropological thought. The class provides a foundation for graduate students and a capstone for undergraduate majors emphasizing archaeology.

We examine the history of theoretical approaches within the context of (1) the specific place and time during which they emerged, (2) general developments in anthropology at large, and (3) influences of broader intellectual and social trends that influenced archaeological theories. We undertake a critical analysis of different approaches, including antiquarian, evolutionary, historical, neo-evolutionary, functional and processual, ecological, Marxism, structuralism, and post-processualism (including agency, gender, practice, and performance). We will also look at examples of archaeological research conducted within the framework of each paradigm. The ghosts of paradigms past and earlier theories still haunt the discipline. Many theories that current students may assume to be extinct are still living and driving archaeological research.

Requirements: Attendance of all classes is required. All students are expected to:
1. Read all the book chapters and articles for each class meeting.
2. Actively participate in the discussion of these readings.
3. Submit written notes on each of the assigned papers/chapters every week (see below).
4. Lead discussion of at least one weekly topic in the course.
5. Oral presentation of your term paper subject and lead discussion of two relevant papers.
6. Submit this term paper at the end of the semester.
Your weekly notes should include:
1. A brief explanation of the paradigm or theory of the week.
2. A summary of the main points of each assigned paper, and how each reflects the theoretical framework. These notes are meant to help you prepare for class by focusing your attention on the texts under discussion. Write this as a narrative essay in full sentences. Your critical evaluation and insights (not simply criticism and opinions without explanation) are essential for these summaries.
3. A brief closing synthesis with comparisons and contrasts among the week’s readings.
4. Notes should not exceed 1 page per article. They are graded as +, √, or -.

Term paper. Term paper topic proposals/abstracts (one paragraph, with references) are due by e-mail on October 20. I will provide feedback and guidance on the scope and content of your term paper, and references to relevant literature. Final paper is due at the end of the exam period in December.

Class Presentation of term paper (last two weeks). You will be responsible for:
1) organizing and presenting an oral discussion of your research project;
2) selecting and providing pdf file copies of two key papers on your term paper topic. I will upload these to Canvas one week before your presentation. Shorter papers are preferred.

Research Topics for Term Papers. Each student will select a major, enduring archaeological problem that has been investigated from many theoretical perspectives and critically examine insights that the different theoretical (not methodological) approaches have brought to this issue. Topics include the origins of agriculture, the meaning of rock art, the Middle to Upper Paleolithic transition, the Paleoindian to Archaic transition, the rise of state society in a particular area of the world, or the question of collapse of a culture (the Maya, Rapa Nui). The history of interpretations of major sites or archaeological cultural traditions is also an appropriate paper topic. Enduring questions include: what was Cahokia (or Teotihuacan, etc.) and why did it rise and fall? In cases where particular paradigms were employed (e.g. an agency perspective, General Systems Theory) the students are expected to augment their presentation by outlining a fruitful research strategy based on the missing theoretical perspective.
Grading: Your final grade will be based on the following criteria:
Preparation and class participation: 30%
Reading notes: 30%
Class presentation of research project: 10%
Term paper: 30%

Texts:
Archaeological Theory: An Introduction, by Matthew Johnson, third edition, 2020, Wiley Blackwell. This text is available at the University bookstores and can also be obtained from other vendors of your choosing.

Other required or suggested readings consist of articles or text excerpts that provide additional information related to the subjects we are covering. These articles will be available online in the course web page on Canvas.

Syllabus and Class Schedule will be posted soon.