Through a Glass, Darkly: Clouded Perceptions of Feminist and Gender Archaeology

Yasmin Carter
University of Manitoba

“The latest outbreak – which bears a great resemblance to the good old days of New Archaeology (primarily a racket for the boys) – is gender archaeology which is actually feminist archaeology (a new racket for the girls). Yes folks, sisters are doing it for themselves... Hardly a month goes by without another conference of ‘gender archaeology’ being held somewhere by a host of female archaeologists (plus a few brave or trendy males who aspire to political correctness) Some of its aims are laudable, but the bandwagon shouldn’t be allowed to roll too far, as the New Archaeology did, before the Empress’s lack of clothes is pointed out by gleeful cynics.” - P. Bahn (1992:321)

This quote by Paul Bahn echoes the sentiments and confusion of archaeologists the world over, that is, that feminist archaeology and the archaeology of gender are the same movement. It also demonstrates three of the main issues faced by feminist archaeologists: sexism in the field (there are sure to be a number of female new-archaeologists who would take issue with Bahn’s first comment), the marginalisation of feminist theory, and, of course, the confusion as to differences between feminist archaeology and gender archaeology. The purpose of this paper is to clear up much of the confusion caused by the semantics of language and terminology, which have served to mask the true definitions of these archaeologies. To understand the intricate complexities between the two movements, an examination of the origins and history of both is required. A discussion of the development of feminism both outside and within archaeology will be discussed, as well as the subsequent development of an archaeology of gender. The future path for both of these archaeologies will be examined and suggested directions for the future will be given.

Definitions
Central to any discussion of feminist or gender archaeology is a definition of gender. In the division and structuring of modern human societies, there are a number of near-universal categories, notably: age, gender, class, and race (Scott 1997). Gender is usually defined as an individual’s self-identification and identification by others with a specific gender category on the basis of their culturally perceived sexual difference (Voss and Schmidt 2000). Gender and sex categories may coincide but this is not always the case. The problem with projecting these categories into the past is that they do not manifest universally throughout the world or across time (Scott 1997). In fact, social scientists agree that, given the cultural basis of gender, there is no limit to the number of possible genders in each society (Voss and Schmidt 2000).
The Feminist Movement
The history of the feminist movement outside of archaeology is closely tied to the development of both feminist and gendered archaeologies. The feminist movement is characterised by a political commitment to change existing power relations between men and women (Engelstad 2007). Feminist thought and scholarship, however, is generally accepted to have advanced in three waves. Although there is some disagreement regarding the exact breakdown of these stages, a general outline can be given (Gilchrist 1999).

Represented by the suffrage movements, between 1880 and 1920, the first wave saw women seek emancipation and greater rights in employment, education, and politics (Hooks 2000). The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960's and focussed on individual issues, particularly those of inequality in terms of sexuality, reproduction, and personal fulfilment. The most recent era of feminism is considered the third wave and has occurred over the last twenty years. Feminist scholars embraced elements of postmodernist theory and shifted their emphasis to more symbolic and cultural studies and differences in gendered experience (Hooks 2000).

The Path of Feminist Archaeology
The first wave of feminism was not entirely lost on archaeologists, with prominent women emerging in archaeology, such as Amelia Edwards and Margaret Mead in Britain and Hannah Rydh in Sweden, all notable for their concern both with the emancipation of their female contemporaries and the recognition of the role of women in prehistory (Gilchrist 1999). The strongest influence of feminist thought on archaeological theory, however, occurred during the latter part of the second wave, although it took at least a decade to gain momentum. In North America, cultural anthropologists led the way. During the 1970's and early 1980’s, while anthropologists published seminal works of feminist scholarship, archaeologists, for the most part, remained silent (Nelson 2002).

By the 1970’s, a small group of archaeologists had begun to theorise about the more active role that women had played in prehistory (Gilchrist 1999). In November 1979, a workshop on gender bias entitled 'Were They All Men?' was held at Utstein Kloster for Norwegian archaeologists. Due to financial difficulties, however, publication of the results in English took almost seven years, reducing its impact on the field (Bertelsen et al, 1986). The first paper to receive widespread attention was the seminal work of Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector, Archaeology and the Study of Gender (1984). It is interesting to note that the manuscript for this paper had been circulating for several years before finally being accepted for publication (Boyd 1997). The degree to which the article stimulated subsequent work is debated, as it was one of a few to appear in print before 1988, but it is generally accepted as the catalyst for future studies (Claassen 1992).
In their article, Conkey and Spector expressed dismay that the field was not taking advantage of the insights available from feminist studies. They argued that despite their claims of objectivity, archaeologists were perpetuating a ‘gender-mythology’ by uncritically employing gender stereotypes in their interpretations of the past and failing to consider historical variation and cultural diversity in gender relations. They describe this male-centred view as androcentrism, the belief that men are at the centre of society with women not involved at all or living in the margins of society (Johnson 1999). Although critics have suggested that feminist archaeology is simply swapping an androcentric bias for another gynocentric, or female-based one (Hodder 1997), feminist archaeologists argue that in order to restore the balance, a concentration must first be made on finding women. They also argue that by exclusively applying contemporary gender stereotypes, archaeologists were implying that patriarchal systems dominated in the past as they do now and are more a reflection of biological imperatives such as sex, aggression and strength, than they are the product of cultural influences. This is strongly tied to the universalist and essentialist narratives of second wave feminism, which were concerned with identifying the root causes of the oppression of women and, in particular, patriarchy as a theoretical framework (Arnold and Wicker 2001). Although the paper by Conkey and Spector uses ‘gender’ in its title, it encompasses many of the ideals of second wave feminism. At the time the paper was written, the focus was solely on women. As it was, in essence, the founding publication of feminist archaeology, its title is very much at the root of the current confusion regarding feminist versus gender terminology. Despite the promising beginning of the publication of the Conkey and Spector article in a prestigious American archaeological method and theory series, investigations into questions of feminism and the role of women proceeded more rapidly in Britain and Scandinavia (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 1998).

For several subsequent years, few other archaeological studies in North America used gender as an explicit analytical category (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 1998). Spector’s 1983 article on gender task differentiation among the Hidatsa provided one of the earliest case studies applying feminist archaeological theory. Momentum began to pick up again in 1987 with a session dedicated to gender at the Plains Conference and a symposium at the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting (Claassen 1992). 1988 was to be a turning point in feminist archaeological scholarship. The publication of Miller’s The Role of Gender in Pre-Columbian Art and Architecture (1988) was followed by an entire issue of the Archaeological Reviews from Cambridge, a student-run journal, dedicated to feminist theory. In April 1988, Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey brought together twelve anthropologists and archaeologists from North America, Britain, and Australia to discuss gender issues in archaeology at the Wedge Conference, a small gathering...
of only about twenty people (Claassen 1992).

In 1989, several of the Wedge participants repeated their papers at the Society for American Archaeology meetings in Atlanta, where there was also the first ever session looking at the history of women in North American archaeology (Claassen 1992). In keeping with the second wave focus, feminist scholars began to look into their own disciplines to examine the internal impact of androcentric bias and inequality, a theme that eventually would be taken up strongly by later feminist archaeologists (Claassen 1992). 1989 also saw the annual Chacmool Conference in Calgary, Canada focus on the archaeology of gender (Walde and Willows 1991). In 1991, Gero and Conkey published their landmark volume Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory, based on the papers presented at the Wedge Conference. At the same time, courses on the topic became more common in American universities (Claassen 1992).

Feminist and gender studies took quite a time to gain a foothold in archaeological theory, even though they had flourished as a subject of inquiry in many other disciplines in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The question of why this occurred has been widely discussed and debated (Engelstad 2007; Gilchrist 1999; Nelson 1997; Wylie 1992). Alison Wylie (1992) found that the archaeological scholarly-paradigm hindered a focus on gender because cultural factors are deemed to be less useful as evidence due to a perceived insufficiency of rigor. Diaz-Andreu (2005) suggests that the late acceptance of feminist issues was in large part due to the emphasis on macro-scale analyses and the reluctance of archaeologists to “reduce” objectivity.

The Early Work
As feminist theories developed so did feminist archaeology. Early work in the field was often in search of the ‘lost’ or ‘invisible’ women of the past and took an ‘add woman and stir’ approach. In order to rectify these losses, however, it was necessary to first identify the mechanisms by which biases were originally introduced into archaeological inquiry and interpretation (Wylie 1992). Within North American archaeology, the search for universals to explain the subordination of women prompted a radical critique of the traditional approaches to the gendered division of labour in specific historical contexts, particularly with regard to the role of reproduction and childrearing (e.g. Claassen and Joyce, 1997; Gero and Conkey, 1991; Kent, 1998; Wright 1996). Until this point, women’s labour roles had included inherent propositions, such as the idea that women gathered, cooked, potted, and wove but did not hunt or make tools (Nelson 1997).

Early case studies demonstrated the variability and flexibility of gender roles of labour (e.g. Javenpha and Brumbach 2006; Lee and DeVore 1968). This research also demonstrated that ‘women’s work,’ is shaped by the same range of factors as ‘men’s work’ from political and economic to ecological (Wright 1996). As well as elucidating the androcentric
biases of the discipline, early feminist contributors to archaeological theory examined the use of language in ingrained structural sexism, including the use of terms like, 'mankind' and 'stone-age' (Wright 1996). Some researchers argue that this emphasis on 'male' terms encourages androcentrism in the field and that what is needed is a new way of writing and presenting information and results (Johnson 1999). An excellent example of this new type of academic writing comes from Janet Spector's work at a Wahpeton Village. The resulting book and articles (Spector 1991) focused on an attempt to write an original and emotive report rather than the tradition dry detached version. The author began by examining her own experiences and biases. She used stories and first-hand accounts to describe the excavation, and then went on to use a fictionalised account to describe the life-history of a single artefact, an awl. Although an interesting and enjoyable way of presenting data, it has yet to be adopted by mainstream archaeology as an acceptable tone of academic discourse.

Although exceptions can, of course, be found, this type of feminist archaeology predominated in North American archaeology (Engelstad 2007). Feminist archaeology in Europe developed early on to a more 'gender-based' archaeological approach, with a focus less on gender roles and the division of labour and more generally on the symbolic and cultural manifestations of gender, marked by a greater concern for the individual (e.g. Moore and Scott 1997). These distinctions between North American and European traditions resulted from several factors, including the greater impact of second wave feminist theory on the American academy (Gilchrist 1999). If the development of gender archaeology can be seen to have occurred first in Europe, then its growing pains were felt strongly in North America. Out of and alongside feminist approaches grew true gender studies in archaeology (Scott 1997). In the late 1990's a transition occurred within feminist archaeology, as the focus of some researchers gradually moved away from 'invisible women' and 'women's work' to gender construction and variability in past societies (Voss and Schmidt 2000). The feminist archaeological movement had demonstrated that it was possible for transitions in gender relations to occur, even within a brief time-span. At the same time, anthropologists and historians were providing insights into the cultural components of gender and the way in which relations between men and women, division of labour, and attitudes towards biological sex and gender varied between cultures. This led some feminist archaeologists to seek a more explicit and inclusive way to study gender in the past (Voss and Schmidt 2000).

An Archaeology of Gender
Academic publications addressing the archaeology of gender currently number in the hundreds, with more added every year. It is therefore both impractical and unreasonable to expect theoretical and methodological homogeneity amongst all authors. However, a general outline of the history and main themes is possible.
Gender first appeared in the literature as a concept in the late 1960’s. It came out of the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis, and spread to the social sciences, reaching anthropology in the 1970’s (Engelstad 1991). Its early applications in archaeology found it incorrectly applied to feminist themes.

While feminist archaeology was heavily influenced by the second wave of feminism, gender archaeology can be seen to have grown out of the third wave, where the emphasis on addressing inequality was superseded by an imperative to understand gender difference between and among men and women (Gilchrist 1999). As a part of this, third wave theory rejects the idea of an essential character or experience that typifies a specific gender (Gilchrist 1999). The difference, upon which gender archaeology focuses, is a fluid concept and does not result from essential biology but from cultural experience and conditioning (Gilchrist 1999). Gender can change temporally and spatially across and through cultures. Some research has even suggested that gender, as we know it today, may not have existed in all cultures at all times (Conkey and Spector 1991).

By the end of the 1990’s, gender scholars were concerned with examining gender by interpolating factors such as age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity (e.g. Claassen and Joyce 1997; Gilchrist 1997; Lesick 1997). The overall gender of a person might contain a balance of many influences (Fowler 2004). Gender has come to be viewed as an aspect of identity, part of a complex assortment of networks varying between individuals and for individuals over time, as it intersects with other cultural practices and concepts such as class and race (Meskell 2001). One of the most significant achievements of gender archaeology is not only the recognition of gender constructs as part of a much larger process, but also the recognition of human agency (Scott 1997). As one of the fundamental identities and categories in the structure of a social group, gender is a vital factor to be considered when studying agency (Fowler 2004).

**Feminist or Gendered?**

A quick search of the archaeological literature based on titles would give the impression that the study of gender in archaeology has been going on for quite some time, but a closer look reveals that the ‘gender revolution’ has only just begun. Whilst the archaeology of gender can be seen to have developed out of feminist archaeology, they should not be seen as successive stages or a progression where one step is better or more important than the other. They are two separate schools of thought and theory with aims and ideals that may overlap at times but are essentially different. The greatest problems arise from confusion in terminology; ‘gender’ is used frequently and inaccurately in feminist studies. If we, as a field, do not revise our theoretical terminology, the resulting disorder will stifle the development of both movements.

Feminist archaeology has continued on separate from gender archaeology, but it is still possible to justify this divergent existence of feminist studies.
on the grounds that, as a discipline, we are a long way from redressing more than two centuries of androcentric bias and by leaving women out of such discourses for such a long period, intentionally or not, means that any attempt to 'put them back in' will involve much work, re-examination, and revision of accepted terminology, interpretations, and histories (Arnold and Wicker 2001).

Where to From Here?
In academic circles, debate rages over what the ultimate goal should be for the future of feminist and gender archaeologies. To date, both feminist and gender studies have tended to be marginalised in importance and viewed as an area of 'special' inquiry (Engelstad 2007). In some cases, this has been a product of choice, with women-only groups flourishing because they are thought to be more supportive (Wylie 1992). Some feel that they should be incorporated into the 'mainstream', with gender categories acting as an integral part of all archaeological research, from question design, excavation, and interpretation to the presentation of results in the academic and public discourse (Gilchrist 1991); whereas some other feminist-leaning gender scholars have discouraged integration with the establishment as they feel it would compromise the central tenets of feminism (Wylie 1992). Criticisms have been made that feminist scholars, on occasion, have shown loyalty so strong as to be exclusive and, although the need for solidarity is important, this exclusivity tends to exclude critique, even from within the field (Wright 1996).

Plurality
Perhaps the greatest path for the future for gender archaeology lies in the theoretical influence it has exerted within the discipline. Outside of these two movements, in the wider body of archaeological theory, their effect can be found in the proliferation of multi-faceted post-processual approaches (Engelstad 1991). Many new fields of archaeological thought grew out of the feminist and gender studies movement, including: the archaeology of identity (Diaz-Andreu 2005), masculinist theory (Knapp 1998), archaeology of age (Baxter 2005), studies of socialisation, learning and aptitude (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005), archaeology of sexuality and so-called queer archaeology (Schmidt and Voss 2000). Feminist and gender methodologies have also heavily informed other fields of inquiry, such as the archaeologies of household and landscape. Both archaeological and anthropological analyses have shown that the socially sanctioned use of land and space is often divided along gendered lines (Diaz-Andreu 2005).

A reaction against feminist archaeology that is consistent with the ideals of gender archaeology is the new masculinist perspective (Knapp 1998). Tied in with third wave feminism and its focus on difference, the concept of masculinity and what it means to be 'a man' is being re-examined. Masculinist theory challenges the common essentialist views of the male, which are as biased as the original views of women. For instance, there is the assumption that all males, in all societies are aggressive, competitive, or uninterested in raising children. Some
researchers suggest that the concept of masculinity is a multidimensional quality selectively adopted by men and occasionally women (Knapp 1998). In archaeology, this masculinist perspective is being used by some researchers to redress the perceived feminist focus of gender archaeology, which they suggest masks the actual contributions and life histories of both males and females in the past (Gilchrist 1999).

An awareness of the importance of studies of age and infirmity also resulted from gender archaeology (Moore and Scott 1997). In order to understand how gender relations operated in the past, particularly for women, whose primary function is often viewed as care-providers, research into those who needed care is fundamental (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005). Although archaeological studies of the elderly and disabled have not progressed as far as many would like, the recent development of a substantial discourse of the archaeology of childhood has become a vital component of archaeological theory (Baxter 1995; Finlay 1997; Derevenski 1997).

Archaeologies of childhood can inform gender studies in two main areas. Firstly, gender roles and boundaries can differ over time and with age, so the study of children and their experiences is highly informative. Secondly, studying socialisation — that is the study of how gender is ‘taught’ and ‘learned’ during childhood — is useful (Baxter 1995). Both of these areas will provide many insights for gender archaeologists in the future in a relationship that is bound to be reciprocal.

As much as these new archaeologies formed out of gender and feminist studies, they are still in the shadows, stunting their growth. Seeking to place women and gender at the forefront of archaeological thought only serves to further marginalise other groups (Hodder 1997).

‘Equal Emphasis’

However sensitive we are to gender issues, biases remain. They are an unavoidable and essential aspect of archaeological interpretation. As researchers, we need a perspective through which to view the archaeological record. What is needed is an acceptance of these individual biases and an adoption of a self-reflexive approach, where the researcher’s bias is reviewed and discussed as an integral part of the interpretation.

Feminist and gender studies are vital to archaeology. However, rather than focusing on their differences, I would argue that they are both the link in a chain to a wider theoretical perspective. A new movement is needed where the focus is placed on ‘equal-emphasis’, in order to move away from androcentric and gynocentric dichotomies to a practical and theoretical model which encompasses gender, sex, bodies, age, self-identity, aptitude, and talent, all of which are precepts of the basic divisions constructed, taught, and lived in human society.

Conclusion

Although gender and feminist archaeologies have very different
ideals, goals, and theories, the
confusion that surrounds the two is
closely linked to the terminology used
in early feminist archaeology
publications. Although at first glance
the two seem inextricably intertwined,
they can in fact be carefully drawn
apart and viewed as two separate
schools of thought. The archaeology of
gender looks at the archaeological
record to infer the role and life
histories of persons who are ascribed
these 'gender roles', usually on the
basis of biological characteristics that
are seen as significant by their culture.
Feminist archaeology, in contrast, is
unavoidably involved in political
questions of the life experiences of
women, both in the past and within
the discipline.

Given the recent developments in
feminist and gender archaeologies and
the degree of acceptance by the
mainstream of their goals and
theories, are comments like Paul
Bahn's (1992) outdated? Can it be said
that he has learned from these
developments? It seems not – in a
recent book (Bahn 2000), he stated:

"The explicit emphasis now being
placed on gender studies is therefore
welcome, not only for its attempt to
create a much greater awareness of
the need to extend gender equality
into all aspects of contemporary life,
including academia, but also for the
substantial contribution that it is
making to our understanding of how
ancient societies may have worked.
However, what is called 'Gender
Archaeology' is actually feminist
archaeology – sisters are doing it for
themselves.

The avowed aim is to focus on gender
(in the sense of social and cultural,
rather than biological distinctions
between the sexes) in the
archaeological record. But despite
assurances to the contrary it is clear
that the major aim is not so much to
reclaim women and men in non-sexist
ways in prehistory, as to make women
visible in the past. A perfectly laudable
aim, and one that is highly fashionable
at present... The very word 'gender',
therefore is in serious danger of being
hijacked, like the word 'gay' before it.”

It would seem that, as theoretical
movements, feminist and gender
archaeology have come a long way,
but there is still quite a way to go yet,
baby.

References

Arnold, B. and N.L. Wicker. 2001
Introduction. In Gender and the
Archaeology of Death, B. Arnold and
N.L. Wicker, eds. Alta Mira, Walnut
Creek, Calif. vii-xxi.

Bahn, P. 1992 Bores, Bluffers and
Wankas: Some Thoughts on
Archaeology and Humour.
Archaeological Review From

Bahn, P. 1996 Archaeology: a Very
Short Introduction. Oxford University
Press, Oxford.

Baxter, J.E. 2005 The Archaeology of Childhood: Children, Gender and Material Culture. Alta Mira, Walnut Creek, Calif.


Hooks, B. 2000 *Feminism is for Everybody*. South End Press, Cambridge, MA.


Lee, R.B. and I. DeVore, eds. 1968 *Man the Hunter*. Aldine, Chicago


Nelson, S.M. 1997 *Gender in Archaeology: Analyzing Power and Prestige*. Alta Mira, Walnut Creek, Calif.


