

An Interview with Ian Hodder

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Introduction

Ian Hodder is Dunlevie Family Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology and was recently Co-Director of the Archaeology Center at Stanford University in California. He is the author of many books and articles that have been at the core of the development of archaeology and, especially, archaeological theory, since the early 1980s. Having taken his PhD from Cambridge University in 1975, Hodder was first a lecturer at Leeds University before taking a position at Cambridge where he taught until 1999, when he moved to Stanford. Excavations include work in the UK and abroad, including his current, long-term project at Çatalhöyük in Turkey. Professor Hodder is a Fellow of the British Academy and currently Chair of Stanford's Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology.

Douglass Bailey: You spent a long time in Cambridge and during that time archaeology at Cambridge developed a tremendous global reputation. This was especially the case in the 1980s with your own writing as well as that of a group of graduate students (e.g., the books by Michael Shanks and Chris Tilley). You left Cambridge which is a dedicated Archaeology department to go to Stanford which is a department of Cultural and Social Anthropology (a very good one, it is in the top ten in the US) but which has not been known in the past as a centre for archaeological research and teaching of similar renown as Cambridge. Is there a different context for you for working in the two different places? Can you say a few things about the heavily anthropological side of things in the US, where archaeology is one of four fields of anthropology (cultural/social anthropology, linguistics, biological anthropology)?

Ian Hodder: It is very different. One of the major differences is that Cambridge is much more closed and traditional and structured and hierarchical and much more constrained in many ways. This is one of the reasons why I left. But it is also the case that Cambridge has a long tradition of tolerating difference and radical thought. This was across disciplines but also within archaeology. I think of David Clarke in this sense in the late 60s and early 70s. So there is a Cambridge tradition of supporting eccentricity. What happened in the 80s must be seen in that context. It is also important to recognize links between archaeology and anthropology at that time; several of my students who came into the Cambridge Archaeology Department had early training in anthropology.

One way of seeing what happened at that time is in terms of archaeology trying to catch up with intellectual debates that were taking place (or had taken place) in social anthropology and in the other disciplines such as sociology as in the work of people like Anthony Giddens. So there was a broadening out, despite the walls that existed in Cambridge.

Stanford is a place where I hope we can create a similar sense of excitement. However, it is a completely different scene in terms of attracting students. Stanford is a private university; thus the number of students you attract depends on getting money to support them. Cambridge is more of a public institution where graduate students come with government funding. But the potential at Stanford is tremendous because you have interactions with Classics and other departments. I am now a chair of the Department of Social and Culture Anthropology at Stanford and, thus, it is a new context for me, a very productive one.

DWB: One thing that is similar about Stanford and Cambridge is that they are both mega-universities that attract high-level staff and students. In a similar way your current work at Çatalhöyük is a mega-site that attracts people of a similar caliber. Can we talk about the project there and your work? Many excavations of tells involve large-scale open excavations. You are

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doing something different at Çatalhöyük. How does what you are doing work? What are the goals of your work at the site?

IH: Yes, it is the type of site that attracts very able people and one of the joys for me is that it is very easy to attract a very capable team and, thus, the things that we have been doing are very high-quality and thoughtful. We are working slowly. We have been working since 1993 and have only completely excavated one house; James Mellaart excavated about one house a day and ended up with 250 houses in four excavation seasons. Excavation at Çatalhöyük is a hugely difficult process. What I thought we should be do is work at the small scale so that we could put the larger scale excavated by Mellaart in context. Having done some really small-scale, detailed, work, we are now going to work at a larger scale too, starting in 2003.

We are now planning to move on to groups of 20 or 30 houses and their inter-relationships. Doing that is an incredibly complex process; within every building there are up to 100 floors in each phase and there may be four or five phases in a single building. The walls have many minute layers of plastering. Even the middens are incredibly complicated, made up of very, very small lenses. I have never seen or dug a site that has such fine stratigraphy. The floors at other sites are 20–30 cm of hard lime-plaster; at Çatalhöyük our floors are one-or two microns thick and it is almost impossible to scrape off a floor level, to work at this detail. A lot of our work is microscopic. A lot of the work is done in the context of micro-morphology and microtechniques. Therefore, the fact that we have been working in a certain way is partly to do with the formation processes.

Çatalhöyük is a research project and it has been possible to have large groups of people working on it. In the end there is no real justification for taking a pickaxe and hacking through the levels. In fact, one swing of a mattock would go through 100 years of occupation. It is just very detailed stratigraphy and it is very difficult to justify going through it that quickly.

DB: Do you see the Çatalhöyük project with its specialists and goals as a laboratory within which are occurring a series of experiments? Is there a single goal in the end for interpretation? Or are there a series of revealed knowledges? Is it going to be a compact interpretation of a site or is it going to be some sort of organism with lots of tentacle coming out in all directions?

IH: I have my own research questions and research aims but I try not to impose them on the project. The project does have lots of tentacles and it is very dispersed; I don't know where the boundaries of it are. In such a context it is very difficult to say, "this is the research question" and "this is the research answer". What I am trying to do is encourage a whole bunch of research questions from different stake-holder groups and different perspectives.

DB: You have several different teams at Çatalhöyük; they are like little communities, each doing its own thing. There is a Polish team and one from University of California at Berkeley and in the past there has been a Greek team. Are they all given free reign to attack the problems in their own way, in whatever ways that they think are correct?

IH: There are certain limitations and things that they agree on when they start. The main thing is the need to share data. They also agree to use various basic forms for recording data. But given those basic guidelines, the idea of having these different teams is to create different windows onto the site. My idea was that if you look at the site from different perspectives, using different methods and with different assumptions, you will see a different Çatalhöyük. There are radically different ways that people see the site and I feel strongly that this is the correct way to do it. One sees this already from the current publications and it will be even clearer in the next set of publications.

One aim is public participation and dissemination of information. Another aim is documenting the documentation. This means that we have to get away from the idea that we are just documenting the past. The aim of all of the diary entries on the Çatalhöyük website is that in 100 years time

people will be able to look not only at the artifacts but also at our record and thus be able to understand what we were doing.

DB: At a more general level, do you feel that there is a coherent body of Hodder work, what, if you were an artist one might call the Hodder *oeuvre*? You have been criticized in the past as a fashion follower, as someone who picks up trendy bits of theory here and there and uses them for your career benefit. Structuralism is one example. Is there a Hodderism?

IH: While some artists have *oeuvres*, there are others who reject that idea and try to create a dissonance between their different sorts of outputs. I feel more attune to that sort of artist. I would try and resist pigeon-holing. There is this idea that one jumps on bandwagons because they are trendy; I think that that is how science works. I don't believe that any of us really work in a vacuum. When I became engaged in Structuralism, I was really excited by it. In the end I recognized that there were problems with it but I still think that it was important for archaeology to take part in the wider debates in the social sciences about structuralism. I'm not upset if people think that I am jumping on bandwagons. It is a necessary part of science to engage in contemporary debate.

DB: How would you answer a child who asked you to explain what an archaeologist does?

IH: The answer reveals part of the problem of archaeology today; archaeology is shifting. Even a short time ago, one would say archaeology is digging up the past and its material remains. Now you would have to say it was more about the relationship between the past and the present. This shift has meant that it is much more difficult to say exactly what an archaeologist is. One's role depends on what sort of constituency one finds oneself in. One of the really important things is that an archaeologist recognizes the particular constituency for the sake of which he or she works. The constituency is part of an archaeologist's job. Archaeologists should be trained to deal with the communities in which they work. The reality of daily life is that archaeologists spend most of their time dealing with people who are alive and in the present. Archaeologists need to recognize that their mode of enquiry is a rather aggressive insertion of techniques into people's relationships with their pasts. This intrusion is often violent and destructive. It raises a whole series of issues that are not raised by other social disciplines that deal with communities. So if a child asks me what does an archaeologist do, I would have to say that the archaeologist deals with people in their relationships to their pasts.

DB: Can you speak a bit about archaeologists going to dig on foreign countries, especially about westerners going to the East to study an Other in an exotic archaeological past? Why don't we find a Bulgarian team digging in the UK or a Polish team digging in the outskirts of Paris. Is there any guilt to be felt by western archaeologists when they go to other places? Or is it enough for an archaeologist to say, "it just is what I do" and "local people will get something from me anyway"?

IH: There is a clear pattern, though there are beginning to be shifts and one begins to see attempts to get the colonial 'other' to come and talk about monuments and the past in first world countries. I am thinking of Mike Parker Pearson who brought Ramilisonina from the Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie at the Université d'Antananarivo in Madagascar to interpret Stonehenge (see the 1998 article by Parker Pearson and Ramilisona in *Antiquity* volume 72: 308–325 and 855–856). That is an exciting thing and I support that and I would like to see that on a larger scale: bringing a whole series of people to come and interpret the colonizers' past. But the political structures of power make this very difficult. For archaeologists with very limited funding, as is the case for many archaeologists in other countries, it would be very difficult to carry out something like an excavation at Stonehenge.

One of the things that I am very angry about is that most of the funding bodies that finance excavations abroad have no requirements for applicants to consider the potential impact on local communities. I think that this is appalling. You just go in, get your data out and you don't even ask a question about the impact of your work on local communities. I think that at least that

should change and that people should be asked to have a proper plan for involving and helping the local communities.

DWB: How do you handle these problems at Çatalhöyük? Is there a Turkish team digging at Çatalhöyük?

IH: There is not a specific Turkish team although I am negotiating now to have one soon. In the past this has not been possible because of the historical specifics of the site. In the 1960s it became a very negative site with a background of scandals associated with it. Also the Turkish government has limited resources and it prefers to use its own archaeologists for the things that they need to do. They need more excavations. They don't want to use up people on an international project. They take what I think is a good decision.

At Çatalhöyük we have a sponsor who pays for Turkish students to go abroad to get specialist training. There are very few Turks who have specialist scientific archaeological training. I see it as one of our roles to help these people get this training and then to come back and train their own students.

The whole thing might appear very colonial. I often think, "how has what I have done at Çatalhöyük been different – for example, has the building of the dig-house differed from building some colonial outpost in the wilderness." It only differs for me in the sense that the motivation is different. I see myself as part of a global community. I don't see the possibility of separating the local from the global. The whole distinction is incorrect. I go to Çatalhöyük as part of a global community and I want to engage with all of the stake-holder groups. I don't, in anyway, see myself as having a dominant position.

DWB: Can we speak a little about archaeological interpretation? How should an archaeologist proceed in assessing an interpretation and explanation. Are there better and worse interpretations? Even if there might no be one single correct interpretation of a situation, are there perspectives that work better than others? How do we go about assessing what is good in interpretation and what is good explanation?

IH: The problem is in your question. We really need to ask what is good interpretation or explanation in whose terms? For whom? Your question makes it sound as if there is going to be an interpretation or explanation that is de-contextualised, one that just *is* the best interpretation. I don't except that. Some explanations are better for some groups of people. In some people's terms some explanations are better than others and we just have to accept that. In some discussions I find that I hit a wall over this. For example, if someone comes and tells me that a particular site is a landing pad for aliens, I hit a wall that I can't get over. It is a wall that makes further discussion impossible. However, on the other side of the wall there are people who are talking rationally (at least in their own terms). They are able to have discussions and they can work through it all. The example of the aliens is an extreme example but ultimately different people see the world in very different terms. While it is possible to have a discussion with them, you recognize that you are never going to persuade them that what they see as a good explanation is anything but that.

There are good examples of this at Çatalhöyük. We may have two sets of people looking at the same stratigraphic section and someone will say, "Can't you see, it is absolutely obvious that this is a fault line caused by an earthquake". And someone else will say, "That's nonsense, can't you see that the collapse of the building made the cracks in the stratigraphy". And so you get two highly able and highly intelligent people with their own backgrounds and their own perceptions looking at the same thing and they can't understand how the other person can't see it the way they see it. For each of them, their own interpretation is so clear. And so they hit a brick wall.

The process that we have gone through at Çatalhöyük is to try to have a dialogue through which we reach consensus. The results, the main published volumes, don't necessarily tell a story that I

agree with. I'm going to write my own book which is my own interpretation. As another example, we have had an artist and an archaeological scientist draw the same things. Thus, you get two people in a trench drawing the same thing; one from a scientific perspective in a very codified way and one from an artistic perspective. And both of these images will be in the published volume.

As a whole, the team has reached a consensus on a lot of issues. However, reaching consensus is a very difficult process. It is a highly complex process. In the end it comes down to social skills as much as scientific skills. You have to create a framework in which people are willing to listen. The different Çatalhöyük teams are writing different volumes and they look at Çatalhöyük differently. At higher level there is a certain consensus among the different teams. At Çatalhöyük there are different scales of community and we reach different levels of consensus. The danger is that the consensual discussion becomes hierarchical. A good example of this is the knowledge possessed by the local community. In order to include their voice at Çatalhöyük we have had to make a lot of effort, not only in translations but in terms of re-skilling archaeologists (to listen and to understand) as well as re-skilling the community (to have the knowledge and confidence to contribute to what we are doing). We need specialist help to do this and thus we have had several social anthropologists to do this. Their role is to facilitate the process of dialogue.

DWB: Usually foreign-led projects are short in duration, usually two or three years. Çatalhöyük is a longer project, 25 years. In terms of other Neolithic sites in Turkey or other sites to the east and west, what are the potential applications of what you are doing and the way that you are doing it?

IH: We all work in different sorts of contexts and you can't really transpose what we are doing at Çatalhöyük very easily. However, I do feel that the underlying thrust towards consensual dialogue and non-hierarchical procedures and, particularly, the responsibilities one has to different stakeholders, are ideas that can be used widely. Not only in archaeology abroad but also within archaeology in the UK and US. I am involved at the moment in projects and discussions about Cultural Resource Management in an attempt to see the various ways that it could change. There are major projects in Britain where people are trying a reflexive methodology.

A reflexive method is largely about positionality. Positionality means that the way that one looks at the world depends on where one is standing and it depends on what one thinks is going on in the past and the present. How you interpret the world depends on your position in the world. Reflexivity leads to attempts to understand how other people's positions affect what they do. It involves trying to understand science within the social construction of knowledge. It is about how I, in my position, need to work with local communities and other stakeholder groups and it is about how the local community needs to be involved in what I do. It is about how different positions in the Çatalhöyük project relate to each other. All of this is positionality. Another archaeological example of this is the new work at Heathrow Airport's Terminal 5 where John Barrett and others are trying to develop some parallel ideas such as to set aside time during excavation to sit down and interpret and to try to bring all of the various specialists in to these discussions.

So, I see what we are doing at Çatalhöyük as just part of the larger process, as reacting against the extreme codification and objectification that occurred during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This codification and routinisation of archaeology was linked to the idea that digging was something that anyone could do. There is a long history to this. In the early 20th and even the 19th centuries the digging was often done by convicts or the unemployed or, generally, the unskilled. There is a 100 or more year history in archaeology of people not really knowing what they were doing, so long as they filled in the forms or told the supervisors what they had found. At the moment there is a lot of unrest in the US among field-technicians, among the people who do the shovel work, because they feel that they are kept away from the interpretation. Archaeology is a very highly skilled process that requires not only that people know the pot types but that they know many scientific procedures. There is a lot of re-skilling that needs to be done so that the people who are digging know what micromorphology is, that they know what phytoliths are, but that they also know what the Nuer do in Africa. The idea that you do not need to be very skilled to dig creates

the idea that the collection of data is just a mindless, descriptive process. It isn't. Any archaeologist will tell you that digging is an extremely difficult process, even to follow a line of soil with your trowel, especially on a very complex site like Çatalhöyük.

DWB: So is the reflexive approach about explicitly recognizing the unease within oneself as one digs and accepting that it is a normal thing to say, "I am not sure about this or that"?

IH: Yes, that's it. It's to destabilize the moment of excavation. Other people have found this difficult. Early on in our work at Çatalhöyük there was a lot of negative reaction from some professional archaeologists but the problems have been largely resolved now.

DWB: If we could talk about your career for a moment, in the Hodder bibliography, are the works that you are most proud of, that did what you wanted they to do or that surprised you?

IH: The pieces that I think are interesting tend to get ignored and the stuff that I think is not particularly good gets picked up by people. I have never understood that process. The thing that I am most proud of is *Reading the Past* (1986). I wrote it quickly as a very personal, angry statement. There is another, new, revised version of it coming out soon (Hodder and Hutson 2003). I am pleased with it because I think that it has reached a very wide audience and because it was short and accessible. On the other hand, there are a whole series of articles that I liked but that got ignored. I wrote an article about the use of ash and hearths in Baringo in Kenya that I very much liked (Hodder 1987), but I don't think that I have ever seen a reference to it. I wrote an article in 1985 on Post-processual archaeology for *American Antiquity* which was just an appalling article from beginning to end and, of course, it gets referred to a lot.

One thing that I am sad about is the *Domestication of Europe* (Blackwell 1990). I still think that the domus idea is a good one and I think that it works. However, I needed someone to edit the book for me; I wrote it and published it and didn't really smooth out some of the rough edges in it. There are a lot of claims in it that are excessive and which are not justified. I think that I spoil the argument by going too far. I have written about my feelings over the *Domestication of Europe* and I am doing so again for a new collection of essays. But people don't really read these later comments; once something comes out it is very difficult to retract it.

DWB: There is a popular BBC radio programme that asks its interviewees what they would take with them if they were marooned on a desert island. If you were to be marooned and you could choose some reading or a luxury, what would they be?

IH: It is easier to suggest things that are non-archaeological, things that I would like to read more of and get absorbed in. I would like to take some of the great thinkers and writers of the last couple of hundred years, Marx, Weber. Or even Hobbes – writers that took on the big issues. I would like to take the French *Annales* school, writing about Medieval Europe. I find the detail and description very interesting to explore.

The way I relax is to play the piano. So taking a piano would be ideal for me, but no sheet music. When I sit down I just play. I improvise. I find it's a creative process and I like that. I can do that for hours.

I don't think that there is any archaeological thing that I would want to take. For me archaeology is not the central thing. There are other larger questions. Archaeology is just a tool to get at those larger questions. I can't imagine myself wanting to take a trowel. I would hate to take a corpus of pots for example. Typologising pots would be hell.

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