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EARLY PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, CONFIRMATION, AND AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL BRAINS

Daniel Tangri

INTRODUCTION

Fahnestock (1984:7) has argued that the importance of a critical historiography of archaeology lies in its ability to generate new insights into the problems and strengths of current theoretical positions with the discipline. This article is an attempt at such a historiography. The basic issues the article deals with are the existence of socio-political values in archaeological research and the relations of those values to hypothesis-testing. A number of archaeologists believe that sophisticated testing procedures allow them to limit, if not eliminate, socio-political values (see Binford and Sabloff 1982). At present, the most generally accepted testing procedure is that known as **confirmation** (see Salmon 1982; Smith 1977; Wylie 1985). This article will assess the strengths and flaws of confirmation in relation to socio-political values. It will also assess the strengths of another mode of hypothesis-testing, known as refutation (or Falsification). It will do this through a critical analysis of the research strategies of some physical anthropologists who devoted their time to the study of Australian Aboriginal brains.

Confirmation has no single specific meaning, but can be summarised as an attempt to compare hypotheses with archaeological data, in order to see which ones fit the data best. As formulated by Salmon (1982) and Smith (1977), confirmation incorporates the use of bayesian statistics. They argue that there are usually several hypotheses that could account for the same data. Several analogues can be applied to any archaeological situation. Hence, the problem is determining which analogue fits the data best. The way to do this is to calculate **prior probabilities** for all of the hypotheses. Prior probabilities refers to the likelihood than an hypothesis is correct (Salmon 1982:42). By ascertaining the probabilities, for all hypotheses, one can determine which hypothesis is most likely correct. Prior probabilities themselves are determined by ascertaining which analogue fits the data best. The analogue that is supported most by the data, and contradicted least, will be deemed the most probable.

It is not an issue here whether or not many or most archaeologists do test their hypotheses in this way. Rather, the issue is to test the prior probability model. The chief criticism of prior probabilities is that they may not serve to limit socio-political values in archaeology (as Salmon and Smith believe they should). Rather, they may facilitate the preservation of preferred hypotheses. The emphasis of confirmation is on the hypothesis that **fits** the data best. In this case, hypotheses that are partially contradicted by data may be deemed plausible. For example, an analogue that is supported on ten counts and contradicted on two will be deemed more plausible than hypotheses that are supported on fewer counts or contradicted on more. If this is the case, an hypothesis that is based on socio-political values may be preserved if it is generally supported by the data.

It is argued here that an hypothesis that is contradicted, however slightly, should not be deemed plausible. Rather the hypothesis should be modified or discarded according to the seriousness of the contradiction. In this sense, the use of refutation as an hypothesis-testing procedure is seen to be more preferrable than the use of confirmation, as refutation is based on such a strategy (see Murray and Walker 1988).

These general points will now be supported with a critical analysis of some physical anthropological work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

SOCIO-POLITICAL VALUES OF EARLY PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Some good general summaries of physical anthropology in this period can be found in Gould (1981), Hunt (1981), Jorion (1982) and Stepan (1982). Not all early physical anthropological research questions are relevant to this discussion. Instead, the research that was clearly based on socio-political values will be discussed. Physical anthropologists generally believed that human races differed in their intellectual and cultural characteristics and capabilities. Some races were believed to be, on the average, more intelligent than others. Intelligent races were thought to have evolved to a 'high' cultural level. A race's cultural level was measured Eurocentrically; European culture was argued to be the highest known form of culture, and non-European races were consequently of a lower status. Races that were fairly similar to the Europeans in certain forms of culture (such as religion, technology, economy, social institutions, arts and sciences) were thought to be slightly more lowly that the Europeans. The further a race's culture was removed from the European, the more lowly that culture was.

Low cultures were thought to represent more primitive (i.e. earlier) forms of humanity than the Europeans. For instance, Australian Aboriginal tools were compared with tools that had been found in European sites. Australian tools were generally believed to resemble European Middle or Upper Palaeolithic forms; consequently, the Australians were believed to be as primitive as the Europeans had been at that time. Other races, such as the Polynesians, were thought to resemble less primitive stages of European prehistory. At the pinnacle of this ladder of progress were the Europeans, who were thought to possess the most 'advanced' culture yet developed.

This discussion has been rather brief, and it has ignored the many streams of thought that existed in early physical anthropology. Those different streams are essentially irrelevant to this article; all physical anthropologists believed that the Australian Aborigines were inferior to the Europeans, in both intelligence and culture, and more

primitive than Europeans. The basic point is that physical anthropologists interpreted non-Europeans within the framework of their own socio-political values and beliefs. Consequently, physical anthropologists used socio-political values in their research. In the next section the way in which those values were incorporated into research, and the way in which hypotheses incorporating those values were tested, will be discussed.

THE STUDY OF BRAINS

Rather than study the entire gamut of early Australian physical anthropology, I shall limit my comments to the field of cerebral anatomy. Studies of Aboriginal brains were intimately linked to the socio-political values mentioned above. Physical anthropologists generally believed in the time period in question that races possessed a cultural level commensurate with their intellectual development. Low culture was correlated with low and primitive intelligence, and *vice versa*. They believe that one could objectively determine an individual's intelligence through the study of cranial and cerebral anatomy. People of low intelligence, for example, were popularly believed to have small, lightweight brains, whereas people of singular genius were thought to own large, heavy brains. Microcephalic Europeans would be idiots, whereas the large-brained French anatomist Cuvier was a genius on these criteria (see Gould 1981: 85-95). Physical anthropologists did more than try to determine individuals' intelligence. They studied samples of individuals of many races, and determined average racial intellectual levels. Hence, they ranked races according to their average intelligence. The Australians generally occupied the lowest end of the scale; the Europeans naturally claimed the highest. Therefore, the political values mentioned above were applied to brains. Races were judged on their anatomical traits to be superior or inferior to other races.

The first people to apply these values to the brains of Australian Aborigines were phrenologists. Phrenologists sought and found evidence that races could be ranked according to their intelligence, as determined by anatomical traits. They argued that human emotions and intellectual characters were localised in particular sections of the brain (see Sohier 1861:1). Consequently, they thought that races could be ranked according to their development in these sections, and hence in emotions and intellect (Erickson 1977; Temkin 1947). For instance, Negro foreheads were found to be very narrow - a trait supposedly related to their 'lack' of musical and mathematical talent (Stepan 1982:24).

These arguments were swiftly applied by phrenologists to Australian Aboriginal brains. Combe (1835:197-8) argued that Australian brains were 'distinguished by great deficiencies in the moral and intellectual organs', and Lowe (1841:355) argued that the organ of benevolence was very deficient in Australian brains. Bonwick (1870:134) cited studies by the Australian phrenologist Sohier, purported to have shown that Tasmanian brains exhibited a low intellectual development.

Phrenologists sold hundreds of thousands of books, and greatly influenced popular opinion from Mark Twain to the British Royal Family (Hunt 1981:342). They spread amongst those circles the view that the Australians were a lowly people, lacking in intelligence and morality (Reynolds 1974:50). In particular, they influenced physical anthropologists into believing that racial intelligence could be defined from marks in the brain, and that races could be ranked according to these cerebral marks (see Bieder 1986:74; the physical anthropologists Nott (1854:415-6. 434, 462) and Meigs (1857:212, n.15) paid allegiance to phrenology, while the phrenologist Combe

contributed a chapter to the major early American work on physical anthropology, Morton's (1839) *Crania Americana*.

Physical anthropologists who studied Australian brains all suscribed to the phrenologists' values. The brains of Australian Aborigines were studied by Duckworth (1907-8), Flashman (1903a, b.; 1908; 1916), Karplus (1902), Rolleston (1888), Shellshear (1937), and Woollard (1929). Elliot-Smith (1911) studied a Tasmanian brain. These scholars all looked for traits indicative of the inferiority of the Aborigines. Elliot-Smith, for instance, had defined a number of primitive characters in the parietal-occipital region of the brain in some pioneering studies (1904, a, b, c). He discovered a number of these characters in a Tasmanian brain (1911:444-5).

From the standpoint of the argument laid out at the beginning of this paper, the importance of the work of these physical anthropologists is the lesson it teaches us about confirmation. Several authors used assumptions and hypotheses that were based on the socio-political values discussed above. They used confirmation to preserve these values, and enshrine the doctrines from which those values were derived with scientific respectability. Three examples should suffice.

Rolleston (1888:32) looked for correlations between the anatomy of the cerebral hemispheres and 'the mental development of their owners'. He found a number of marks in an Australian brain that confirmed his belief that the Australians were intellectual primitives. The brain weighed less than those of Europeans, the convolutions of the frontal lobe were simpler, the cuneate lobule smaller and the parieto-occipital fissure larger than that of the average European brain (1888:33-4). Rolleston found that the Australian brain was more like the brains of a female San, European microcephalic idiots, and apes than the brains of Europeans in these regards. Hence, the Australian brain could be deemed 'primitive'.

However, Rolleston found that the Australian brain was not more 'primitive' (i.e. simian) than the European in some traits. In particular, the frontal lobe, which has long been thought to be a diagnostic marker of intelligence (by virtue of its postulated relation 'with higher facultues' - 1888:33), did not distinguish Australian from Europeans. However, this did not lead Rolleston to abandon his assumption that the Australian brain was more primitive than the European. He pointed out (1888:33) that the Australians were known to be primitive, because their culture was primitive. People with a high intelligence would have developed a more advanced culture that the Australians; hence, the Australians must be stupid. There were also more primitive traits than advanced in the Australian brain. Consequently, the advanced traits could be ignored as irrelevant.

This is classic confirmation. Prior premises (the cultural inferiority, and hence intellectual primitiveness of the Australians) served to develop research. When these premises were contradicted by data, the contradictory data were deemed irrelevant because more evidence existed in favour of the premises. This use of confirmation resembles prior probability in its reliance on weighing supportive and contradictory data, and choosing the most numerous. However, it also shows that premises and assumptions, which may be based on socio-political values, can be preserved by confirmation.

Another example is Duckworth's (1907-8) study of a sample of Australian brains. He discovered (1907-8:285) that five brains were simian in appearance; five were similar to the brains of adult Europeans; three resembled foetal European brains; three

resembled 'lowly' (by which he meant Negro) brains; and one was like the brain of a European microcephalic idiot. Like Rolleston, Duckworth chose to discount the data provided by the five 'European-like' brains. Twelve Australian brains resembled presumably primitive (and stupid) forms. Hence, the evidence in favour of Australian primitiveness outweighed the evidence against it. Therefore, Duckworth decided to retain his assumption that the Australian brains were those of primitive and idiotic people. Once again, the prior probability aspects of confirmation facilitated the preservation of an assumption based on socio-political values.

Finally, Woollard (1929), in trying to discover simian traits in Australian brains, found that some traits were less simian in the Australians than in the Europeans. For instance, the Australians were more primitive that the Europeans in their possession of a lunate sulcus (a furrow in the parieto-occipital region of the brain, see Elliot-Smith 1904a) and in the total brain weight and the weight of the hemispheres (Woollard 1929:214, 222-3). However, they were 'much the same' as the Europeans in relative brain magnitudes and the proportion of grey matter per hemisphere (Woollard 1929:220-1). Although the data contradicted the assumption that the Australians were more primitive than the Europeans, he was still able to confirm this assumption (Woollard 1929:220). When the evidence of culture was added to the few simian marks in the four Australian brains that Woollard studied, the evidence in favour of the assumption outweighed the evidence against it. Once again, confirmation based on a form of prior probability could be used to ignore disconfirming data and preserve assumptions based on socio-political values.

These three examples show that confirmation can preserve hypotheses based on socio-political values. The assumptions that physical anthropologists used had far-reaching effects. Not only was their work reported in the press (Reynolds 1974), and influential in colonial policy (Goodwin 1964:399) but it influenced other academics. Psychologists, in particular, inherited some assumptions from physical anthropologists. In detail, they inherited the belief that the Australians were living primitives, blessed with only a modicum of intelligence (Chase and von Sturmer 1978:6-10). This inheritance can be observed in some psychologists' interpretations of mental phenomena. Some psychologists argued that the Australians' nomadic hunting and gathering way of life precluded them from developing rational thought, and limited them instead to a predominance of sensory perceptions (Cawte 1974:191-3; DeLomos 1969; Dewey 1902; Porteous 1917, 1933; Fry and Pulleine 1931:53; Rivers 1901:45; Spiller 1913). Some psychologists have criticised this explanation as a Lamarckian *post hoc* rationalisation (Dasen 1972; Klich and Davidson 1984:159), but it can still be found in some psychological work (for example, TenHouten 1985:143). Here, psychologists inherited a Eurocentric assumption from physical anthropology. This intellectual borrowing shows that the assumptions of archaeology and physical anthropology can have an influence outside the disciplines themselves.

Consequently, confirmation need not only be scientifically invalid; it may be dangerous. If this is the case, then archaeology needs a testing procedure which does allow assumptions based on socio-political values to lose their scientific validity. This raises the question of what that procedure is. For it is manifestly evident that the belief that Australian Aborigines are primitive has lost its scientific validity in physical anthropology since the earlier years of this century. How did this occur? It occurred, not through the graces of confirmation, but refutation.

Refutation can be defined as a procedure by which one tries to discover evidence that refutes hypotheses or models, rather than support them. An important distinction from

confirmation is that an hypothesis that has not been refuted is only deemed to be **corroborrated**. That is, it is not believed to be a realistic hypothesis, or in any way plausible; it has simply not yet been refuted. Refutation may operate in many ways. The chief way, though, is that data that contradict an hypothesis are not deemed to be implausible or irrelevant if not outweighing data that support an hypothesis. Rather, they are deemed to be crucial, they show that certain aspects of the hypothesis are refuted. Consequently, those aspects need modification, or the hypothesis needs to be abandoned.

That refutation does lead to the dismissal of hypotheses based on socio-political values can once again be shown by an examination of early physical anthropological studies of brains. Lewin (1937) tested the assumption that traits indicative of racial inferiority, stupidity and primitiveness exist in human brains. He used previously published data on a number of non-Europeans, including Australian Aborigines. He compared these data to data he gathered from an examination of 108 cerebral hemispheres of 'great people' (mostly Europeans, but including some Semites). He found that many of the most commonly-used marks of inferiority existed in as large a percentage of the population of 'great people' as in the populations of 'primitive' people. He chose, however, to accept the evidence of this data and abandoned the assumption that anatomical indications of inferiority existed in human brains, rather than reiterate his assumptions and explain the data away. Consequently, he was able to refute an assumption that was based on a series of Eurocentric value-judgements.

This perhaps shows that refutation may be a more useful method than confirmation, if archaeologists do not want to make their discipline the slave of politics (which some do). At least, it may allow archaeologists to diminish the scientific validity of socio-political values. Of course, this is no guarantee that those values will cease to exist, or that new hypotheses will not be equally socio-political. The belief that inferiority markers exist in human brains did not die with Lewin's work. New diagnostic markers of lowliness were defined, and some of them were discovered in Australian brains by Gates (1946:137-8). However, at least within the sciences of archaeology and physical anthropology, those values may lose their validity.

It remains to conclude with the work of Tobias. The new markers of inferiority that Gates discovered in Australian brains (see also Putnam 1967) were debunked by Tobias in 1970. He showed that none of these traits had been identified in secure population samples. His conclusion is worth quoting, as it emphasises my point about refutation.

> Science does not work by confirmation, but rather by testing of hypotheses and experiment, re-appraisal of premises and assumptions, use of data to modify or abandon old hypotheses (1970:22).

The point, then, is simply that refutation is a more useful procedure for dealing with value-judgements than confirmation. In this era in which the issues of politics and hypothesis-testing are greatly discussed, refutation provides a possible answer to claims that all archaeological hypotheses are untestable value-judgements (see especially Hodder 1984, Shanks and Tilley 1987). Political beliefs are extremely resilient, and will not be demolished by refutation. Quite recently, Hamlin (1975:497) argued that the brains of Australian Aborigines should yield information about the intellectual capabilities of primeval humans. However, within archaeology and physical anthropology, that assumption has lost validity through the virtues of

refutation. Therefore, refutation should allow archaeologists to diminish the scientific validity of hypotheses based on socio-political beliefs.

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Blacks' skeletons held by university

By WANDA JAMROZIK
Ethnic Affairs Reporter

The hunt for the remains of Tasmanian Aborigines intensified yesterday with the confirmation of an extensive collection of Aboriginal remains in storage at the University of Sydney.

The head of the university's Department of Anatomy, Professor Jonathon Stone, said the Shellshear Museum was established in 1958 and contained skulls and skeletons of Aborigines, Melanesians and Asians.

He denied that any Tasmanian Aboriginal remains were held in the collection, which is closed to all but "bona fide" scholars, one or two of whom are granted access for scientific study each year.

Joseph Laxton Shellshear was a physical anthropologist who died in the 1960s.

His 1936 lecture titled The Brain as an Index of Race, now

stored in the rare books section of the university's Fisher Library, reveals a passion for evolutionary hierarchies that might seem distasteful to modern academics.

"In the Australian aboriginal [sic]," Shellshear wrote, "taking a whole series of brains, we find that many primitive features occur more commonly than they do in the other races."

He went on to detail how he had collected "the endocranial casts of about 20 Australian skulls and about 40 of the Chinese".

The existence of the Shellshear Museum came to light after the secretary of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre in Hobart, Mr Jim Everett, received information from a Sydney academic.

"I don't think they should be able to hold any human remains without disclosing them," he said.

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre plans to write to the university and to the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Hand, in protest.

The Sydney Morning Herald
17 May 1989