

EDITOR'S CORNER

Over the last year, I have noticed that many of our letters to authors have included the same refrain—you have not considered or evaluated your conclusions in the context of alternative explanations. Is there another explanation that accounts for the data equally well or better? To what extent were alternatives considered?

Once I noticed the recurrent pattern, I tried to determine the cause and whether my evaluation was fair. Could it be that my observations were the result of some theoretical bias or outmoded thinking on my part? My analysis of the situation leads me to suspect that the lack of consideration of alternative explanations is, to a great degree, a byproduct of the postprocessual or postmodernist stance. From a postmodern perspective, all interpretations are fair and all are equally valuable—one picks and chooses based on the context and the observer, not necessarily on the idea that one explanation is “better” than another. Although I can appreciate the position, I am not sure I entirely agree in this context.

Many archaeologists have spent many pages discussing the impacts of postprocessual archaeology. In addition to many positive contributions, authors have bemoaned the lack of rigor, the lack of appreciation for data, and the idea that no interpretation can be elevated over another. What I had not realized was the degree to which the literature has directly and indirectly reflected this perspective. Even when archaeologists do not see themselves as postprocessualists, a discussion of alternative explanations has become rare in their writings. The attitude seems to be that such a discussion is unnecessary and a waste of space that could be devoted to data or other matters. I am suggesting that, without realizing it and without making a conscious decision, many in archaeology have indirectly or inadvertently adopted the postprocessual perspective of not needing to justify an explanation because, by definition, any explanation is valid. The literature today does not tend to adhere consistently or commonly to the practice of considering alternatives.

I find myself quite troubled by this turn of events. I welcome the celebration of alternative views of the past, and I readily and happily agree that there can be more than one acceptable or “good” interpretation for any particular event or data set. What I can't accept, however, is that in a particular context, with a particular perspective, with specific assumptions, and with a specific set of data, every interpretation is equally valid. If this were really the case, there would be little point in writing articles or in presenting any interpretation. Something in an approach or in the data leads a researcher to make a conclusion or evaluation. That quality may be the data, the theory, or what has been done before. Whatever the reason, any scholar ought to be able to explain why he or she selected an explanation or conclusion from the many (potentially infinite) explanations that are available. To my mind, this is not a theoretical debate. Simply, if you are going to present an argument or a conclusion in print, you owe the reader the courtesy of outlining how you got there and why you selected that conclusion. What was your rationale and how did you decide between alternatives? Did it not occur to you that there were alternatives? If not, what are the implications of this lack of concern for variability and difference?

As I indicated in earlier editorials, it is not my intention to have the pages of *American Antiquity*

represent my theoretical perspectives and beliefs. I am perfectly happy to have multiple voices in the journal (and think that it is critical that we do), but I expect those voices to defend their conclusions and how and why they made them. A request to consider alternative explanations is not a theoretical attack—it's simply a call to logically outline and defend the views you hold so dear.

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