



very distinct. Other paintings in the immediate vicinity (also in red) include women with heavily emphasized steatopygia and steatomeria.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Mr and Mrs J Kotze for generous hospitality during our visit and to the many farmers that allowed us to roam their lands.

References

- Wilson, M. L., Van Rijssen, W. J. J., Jacobson L. & Noli, H. D. 1990. Comments on the indigenous artefacts from Oudepost I. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 45:122-124.
- Schrire, C. & Deacon, J. 1990. Reply to Wilson, Van Rijssen, Jacobson and Noli. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 45:124-125.

COMMENTS ON LEWIS-WILLIAMS'S "DOCUMENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: DILEMMAS IN ROCK ART RESEARCH"*

KARL W. BUTZER

*Departments of Geography and Anthropology
University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712, U S A*

* Received January 1991

Lewis-Williams's (1990) recent review of Harald Pager's *The rock paintings of the Upper Brandberg* unleashed a broadside of epistemological invective against sundry persons that seems intended to score points more than it does to identify dispassionately the real and continuing dilemmas that plague rock art research.

The confrontational style of Lewis-Williams's discourse appears to be modelled on that of the archaeological positivist of American archaeology, Lewis Binford. With very liberal borrowing from the same 'Austrian school', Lewis-Williams assembles an array of productive researchers much like a set of bowling pins and then hurls a perjorative epithet (empiricist!) at them like a ball. He begins by stressing the difference between empirical and empiricist (p. 126), then summarily characterizes empirical documentation as empiricist, to question the intellectual quality of a clutch of books. As his review progresses, scientific work becomes equivalent to scientism. In the process he also identifies a Cologne research programme that eventually becomes a 'Cologne School', of which, to my immense surprise, I am made an honorary member. Finally, his ammunition spent, Lewis-Williams seems to contradict himself by figuratively walking over his presumed corpses to say quite benignly that the (empirical) value of their works will be next to eternal.

Being at the intersection of archaeology and art history, rock art fits comfortably into neither realm because goals or methodologies differ and, perhaps more significantly, because positivistic and humanistic 'components' (which must somehow be integrated in rock

art study) are still difficult to harmonize in research in the social sciences. It is an ill-concealed fact that a strictly humanistic methodology is difficult, if not impossible, to devise if one seeks structured information rather than existential or experiential understanding. The moment that one or more 'questions' are formulated, phenomenologists open themselves up to the same criticism of pre-definition and influencing the outcome of their work, by channeling and structuring their understanding through an implicit or subconscious agenda, imposing its own set of biases.

Lewis-Williams repeatedly dissects the use of basic language much like an ideological commissar, searching for hidden meanings. Most social scientists have long been aware that value-free objectivity is a goal, as well as a challenge, that has yet to be met. For the time being, most of us remain constrained to use language that is loaded with multiple levels of meaning and (alternative) connotations, while our thought processes are distorted by innate neural structures and differential life experiences. There are no ready solutions to our shared shortcomings in either achieving objectivity or deep understanding. Let us therefore be civil in accepting this, in preference to impugning the mental skills or motivations of others.

I have not been drawn into this shooting gallery by choice. My contribution to Fock & Fock (1989) developed as an effort to encapsulate and synthesize Gerhard Fock's vision of his own research, as he lay dying and unable to do so himself. Having been very close to him, and having collaborated with him in the field, I put together the 'overview' as honestly (or might I risk using 'accurately?') as was possible, submitting it without my name. Hence the 'passive style'. Yet I am accused of 'dehistoricizing' scientific work (used in quotes), taking power to myself over the past [?], and of suggesting that "there can never be a secure link between what [I see] as an empirical, descriptive infrastructure and an interpretative or explanatory superstructure" (p. 127). I am taken

aback by my apparent heresy. Since I have been labelled as both a logical positivist and a hyperarticularist, by different archaeologists, I now feel uninhibited to add this uninformed outburst to my anecdotal collection. The truth is much simpler. Gerhard believed that early efforts in rock art had been badly compromised by premature or unwarranted 'interpretation' and he wished to leave his legacy as little tainted as possible by his own views, so that others could use it with as much effect as possible. In fact, the quotation Lewis-Williams cited is referenced to Whitney Davis's historical survey of African rock art (Davis n.d., with my apologies for citing unpublished work originally slated for publication in 1987). I presume Lewis-Williams's reaction can be explained by a suspicion that this might be a jab at him ("modes of interpretation are quite ephemeral"), but I profess my innocence.

Where I do take offence is when Lewis-Williams stirs up a fuss that some suggestive designations such as 'clutch of eggs', 'millipedes' or 'elephant in trap' were not placed in quotes in some of the captions or informal tables of Fock & Fock (1989). In view of Gerhard Fock's blindness and deafness in his last days, it should be no surprise that a few inconsistencies were overlooked by those concerned with bringing the work to completion.

If we are truly serious about confronting dilemmas, we must talk to each other, rather than shout past one another. Positivist archaeologists do understand that a rock picture is an 'image' as well as an artefact, but they are legitimately concerned with 'archaeological context' and surely need not apologize for being so. Such 'context', including those much maligned numbers, may indeed assist in tentatively defining the ritual use of space or the regional expression of identity-conscious groups (Butzer et al. 1979); that (and how) this might be done is

suggested by Deacon (1988). But we are not so naive as to be satisfied with context, and it is here that the post-processualist comes centre stage with his or her focus on 'meaning'. It could and should be a complementary relationship, wherein dialogue is nurtured (Butzer 1990). As Binford seems still not to realize, reductionism is neither productive nor intellectually commendable. Let us learn from the noisy New Archaeology 'debates' of c. 1970 that post-modern re-examination, even deconstruction, will again be more productive if we learn to listen.

References

- Butzer, K. W., Fock, G. J., Scott, L. & Stuckenrath, R. 1979. Dating and context of rock engravings in southern Africa. *Science* 203:1201-1214.
- Butzer, K. W. 1990. A human ecosystem framework for archaeology. In: Moran, E. F. (ed.) *The ecosystem approach in anthropology: from concept to practice*: 91-130. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Davis, W. 1990. The study of rock art in Africa. In: Robertshaw, P. T. (ed.) *A history of African archaeology*: 271-295. London: James Currey.
- Deacon, J. 1988. The power of a place in understanding southern San rock engravings. *World Archaeology* 20:129-140.
- Fock, G. J. & Fock, D. 1989. *Felsbilder in Südafrika. Teil III. Die Felsbilder im Oranje-Vaal Becken*. Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag.
- Lewis-Williams, J. D. 1990. Documentation, analysis and interpretation: dilemmas in rock art research. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 45:126-136.

DEBATING ROCK ART RESEARCH: A REPLY TO BUTZER

J. D. LEWIS-WILLIAMS

Rock Art Research Unit, Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand, 2050 Johannesburg

Four points that lie at the root of the differences between Butzer and me require dispassionate discussion:

1. the notion of 'context';
2. the relationship between what Butzer calls "positivistic and humanistic" approaches;
3. rock art research's supposed disciplinary ambivalence; and
4. 'objectivity'.

1. Butzer says that archaeologists are concerned with "archaeological context", but he does not respond to the points I made. 'Context', I repeat, is never given. Researchers select its components from a range of possible observations that may include climate, geology, vegetation, zoology and so forth. Because these components are selected and are not shown to be related to the art (at least not in the Amis volume), I call them a 'backdrop context' (cf. Butzer's [1982:4] use of 'environment'). I distinguish this sort of context from an 'informing context', the com-

ponents of which can be shown to have informed the art in some significant, definable way. As Butzer (1982:4) himself notes elsewhere, the Latin root *contextere* means 'to weave together'. The catch here (at least for empiricists) is that the informing context cannot be defined before the 'meaning' and social circumstances of the art have been uncovered.

Deacon (1988), whom Butzer cites as having shown how 'context' may "assist in tentatively defining the ritual use of space", would not have been able to write as she did if she did not already know about the ritual nature of the art: she was not using an empiricist's backdrop context; rather she was constructing an informing context after having found out a lot about the art. She did not refer to a whole set of irrelevant 'backdrop' factors. Her work in fact supports my, not Butzer's, position. Butzer also seems to imply, though this is not altogether clear, that numerical inventories are part of the 'context', as he understands the word, but they are in fact a reduction of the art itself, not the context. To refer to those inventories as "much maligned numbers" and to leave it at that ignores an essential issue that has been much debated in the literature. One should ask, "Just what *are* those numbers?", but unfortunately Butzer does not.

2. The use of quantitative techniques leads us to the theoretical issues of positivism, humanism, "scientific work" and related concepts to which Butzer refers. In the