Abstract
Invited Session: Philosophy of the Humanities and the Social Sciences

Scaffolding and Bootstrapping: How Archaeological Evidence Bites Back
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A passion for things has taken hold in the social sciences and humanities in the form of an enthusiasm for the capacity of material evidence to bear witness to dimensions of social, cultural life that are largely inaccessible to conventional archival and ‘reactive’ methodologies (face-to-face, experimental, and survey research). As Daston puts it in Things that Talk (2008: 15), the “bony materiality” of physical traces of human action sustains a certain epistemic optimism; they can be a uniquely candid source of insight about what actually happened. But at the same time, Daston reports considerable ambivalence about their status as evidence; they are notoriously enigmatic, “speaking” only when we animate them through interpretation or projection. Methodological questions about how material traces can be effectively used as evidence figure prominently in these contexts. As Werrett puts it, historians of science have a “relatively limited disciplinary repertoire” for working with the material culture of science; they tend to proceed by “reading about things rather than engaging with them directly” (2015: 346).

It is primarily archaeologists who have taken up these challenges and built a repertoire of research strategies specifically designed to mobilize the evidence of social, cultural lives that survives in material things. To make sense of how physical traces and material culture can constrain interpretation despite being thoroughly a construct, I consider three strategies by which archaeologists elicit new evidence from old data. Two involve quite literal extraction of new data from old: secondary retrieval and practices of recontextualizing material evidence in ways that generate novel insights, sometimes displacing focal questions and challenging fundamental assumptions about the subject of inquiry. The third is a matter of experimental modeling that moves decisively beyond what Currie refers to as “gap compensation” strategies (2014: 194). In analyzing these cases I renew and extend an argument for recognizing that the action in the historical sciences is typically off-stage. Although game-changing discoveries of new trace evidence makes for headline news, it is the painstaking, uncertain practice of building the scaffolding necessary to identify and interpret material traces as evidence that’s responsible for major break-throughs in these fields.