

ARCHEOLOGY AS MEMORY PRACTICE AND THE ARCHEOLOGIZATION OF POLITICS

In recent years the discipline of archeology has increasingly come to realize the political contexts of dealing with the past. This has brought archeology into contact with the neighbouring disciplines of history, anthropology and political science which have a longer disciplinary tradition in dealing with the "politics of memory". Clearly enough, archaeology is itself a kind of memory practice. What does that mean for the discipline? And in what ways can politics influence archeological work - and vice versa?

The past in the present: types of memory practices

How a society remembers relates to its moral, symbolic and political reproduction as a society. Anthropologists often focused on how specific groups remember, relating social memory to ritual and myth history. However, there is a mythical character to all uses of history; historical knowledge is ultimately a kind of self-knowledge, and as such it cannot be completely disinterested and objective. Any kind of memory making, including that of professional historians and archeologists, is a social practice. To engage with the past means to analyse the construction of historical events in their relationship to the construction of a meaningful present.

Political claims over territory and identity are increasingly linked to contested memory: they are linked to the notions of the past created by ordinary people, by interest organizations, by journalists, by politicians, historians, and archeologists. The real difference in these memory practices, I argue, is not so much their "scientific" status but follows from the political power with which they are invested. The contemporary scene is furthermore characterised by a multitude of agents who seek to appropriate and defend memory for political purposes: state narratives are increasingly contested or supplemented by a growing number of "counter histories" from "below" (e.g. ethnic minority groups) and "above" (e.g. trans-national memory practices, including of course UNESCO's cultural heritage program).

Background

Due to clashes of ideologies and cultures, armed conflicts can lead to intolerance and intentional destruction of cultural heritage. Existing protection mechanisms tend to fail because governments are weakened and the core values that hold communities together are progressively eroded. There can also be a severe delay to operations not included under the umbrella of humanitarian aid because access to certain areas is restricted by military, security or law enforcement agencies. On the ground, a complex web of networks and initiatives is put into place and few cultural heritage professionals are adequately equipped to navigate within it. It is essential for everyone involved to understand how and when to intervene to protect endangered cultural heritage and work alongside ongoing humanitarian efforts.

Shifting political contexts: From colonialism to global identity politics?

Archeology has always been political. When the discipline developed throughout the 19th century it did so in the context of colonialism, and this shaped archaeology in practical, methodological and epistemological terms. The dominant schools of archaeology formed inside colonial powers and much of the empirical work was carried out in areas under direct and in-direct colonial control. The nexus between archaeology and nationalism was possibly even tighter and has been under much scrutiny in recent works that have heightened disciplinary reflexivity.

The importance of historical memory has only grown over the last 2 decades. The end of the Cold war brought sometimes "repressed" or "hidden memories" to the surface. The wars of ex-Yugoslavia heavily involved memory practices, and their political formulation. Globally, we see a continuous unfolding of identity politics, emanating from "overlooked" or formerly repressed minority groups with a claim to historical victimhood. The importance of particular identities and particular histories are growing in this global age.

Rather than indicating a post-colonial/post-national situation, I propose that archaeology today works in a triple political contextualization of international power politics, nationalism and local/global identity politics. Identity politics do pose new challenges to archaeology that must be confronted. Yet nationalist agendas are globally stronger than any time before; and international power politics and "new" wars such as the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq mean that many archeologists today work under conditions that in many ways resemble the colonial period. The fact that British

and American archeologists in Iraq work under an UN umbrella serves as no easy exit out of this debate. There is an urgent need for heightened disciplinary reflexivity and deeper understanding of contemporary international politics, especially as seen by local inhabitants of the invaded countries. Otherwise archeologists will keep paying lip service to the powers that may be.

The politicization of archaeology: five analytical levels

Archeological practice is currently politicized at five different "stages":

- 1) Pressure to open sites.
Today a growing number of groups are putting pressure on states to open sites for excavation which serve as proof of their victimhood. Archaeology is here politicized even when no excavations are actually opened. Example: Istrian exiles in Italy and their wish to open up WW II excavations in Croatia.
- 2) The choice of sites.
The choice of sites to excavate are often politically influenced. Example: ongoing excavations in Sri Lanka which tend to focus on Sinhalese (rather than Tamil) history, hence serving as legitimizing device for the Sinhalese ruling majority.
- 3) The transformation of the local environment during the excavations.
Example: ongoing Spanish Civil War excavations have re-ignited discussions over political historical memory.
- 4) Representation of findings in museums, books, conference presentations.
Example: Greek state-funded museum exhibitions of Macedonia that explicitly serve to bolster the link between ancient Macedonia and modern Greece.
- 5) Reception.
Archeological facts are received and interpreted in often political ways by interest groups and "ordinary people". Example: the political reception and interpretation of findings from the unearthing of WW II extermination sites in former Yugoslavia during the 1980s.

Archeologists cannot "control" these different "stages" (and most of what they do take place within stage 3, which is already well beyond their control). However, archeologists must make these analytical levels part of their disciplinary and ethical reflexivity.

Archeology in conflict: after, during, before

Most of the current debates over "archaeology in conflict" understandably focus on doing archaeology in political conflict zones. However, ethical-cum-theoretical questions also arise from doing archaeology in past conflict areas. Furthermore, much archeological research became a "contested object" long after it was carried out. There is archeology "before", "during" and "after" conflict. In the political disputes over territory in the 20th century, nationalists often made use of archeological "facts" from the 19th century. This indicates that "archaeology in conflict" does not relate to a subfield of the discipline, but to an essential dimension of what archeologists do - anytime, anywhere.

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