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Radical Archaeology as Dissent

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Radical — Departing markedly from the usual or customary; extreme; Favoring or effecting fundamental or revolutionary changes in current practices, conditions, or institutions.

Archaeology — The systematic recovery and study of material evidence, such as graves, buildings, tools, and pottery, remaining from past human life and culture.

Modern American Archaeology: A Brief Introduction to Government-Mandated, Taxpayer- Supported Social Science

In 1966 the United States congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). This federal mandate requires potential impacts to significant historic properties and archaeological sites must be considered during federal project planning and execution. As a result professional, academically trained archaeologists conduct intensive field investigations ahead of all new road construction; survey all gas pipeline right-of-ways; check ahead every dam or dike built by the Army Corps of Engineers and before any construction project in a National Park or National Forest can proceed.

A Cultural Resources Management (CRM) archaeological report prepared for compliance with NHPA will attempt to describe the adverse effects a project will have on “cultural resources” in the same way the related Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will address the potential impacts on “natural resources”. Literally hundreds of archaeological investigations are taking place simultaneously across the country all year round. Archaeologists will write copiously about the history and prehistory of each project area and every single artifact recovered is destined to be perpetually preserved in a curation facility.

Even though this social science research is directly paid for by taxpayers or ultimately absorbed into the costs charged consumers by the private industries required to contract for archaeological services, these reports rarely make it into the hands of the local public. Most people will never learn what the archaeologists had to say about the history of their community and the excuse most often cited for this lack of widespread public dissemination of research is cost.

Resource:

- a. resources. The total means available for economic and political development, such as mineral wealth, labor force, and armaments.
- b. resources. The total means available to a company for increasing production or profit, including plant, labor, and raw material; assets.
- c. Such means considered individually.

The codification of this idealistic federal mandate to preserve the past for the future and the subsequent rise of the cultural resource management “industry” has meant archaeology is no longer merely a scholarly pursuit, it is a business. Like the environment, the tangible cultural heritage of all the people who have ever lived in North America is now legally considered a commodity — a “resource” to be managed by bureaucratic agencies, exploited for gain and indiscriminately destroyed by development. A discussion is now emerging within the radical archaeology movement that attempts understand how this may be influencing the conduct, scholarly direction, research questions and class dimensions of contemporary archaeological research.

Radical Archaeology: Interpreting the Past as Relevant to the Future

The term stone age applies to that period in human prehistory when people accomplished all of the tasks they needed to accomplish in their daily lives using a stone/bone/wood tool technology. In this part of North America, the stone age lasted until Europeans made contact with Native Americans only a few hundred years ago. Now planes fly overhead, we drive to work in cars and return to our electrified homes at night to check our email on computers and watch satellite TV reports on cloning.

Human material culture, social organization and resource distribution has become so complicated in the last few centuries that scholars in any field of study would be hard pressed to make sense of the root causes or potential effects. But should this preclude the anthropologists/archaeologists who study these categorical constructions from trying? Especially when so many are beginning to realize that the science and technologies the emerging global society has so much faith in may actually be creating some big matter and substance problems for the planet and every living thing on it, including our own species.

So what do the archaeologists really think all these asphalt roads and gas pipelines we are helping to build all over the world are going to look like in 100, 200, 1000, 20,000 years? Petrochemicals are a finite resource after all — and what about all the cities with their requisite malls? airports? nuclear power generators? dams? etc.? It appears that most people operate under the mistaken impression that these things we are so busy making are going to be functioning “forever”, or at least a modified version of them will be. Archaeologists know that’s not likely to be true — they are forced to confront the enormity of this realization every day.

One thing archaeology demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt is that there is no such thing as “away” when one speaks about throwing things (like arrowheads; broken dishes; nails; glass; spent nuclear fuel; asphalt; refrigerators; autos; computers; diapers) away. The knowledge gained by doing archaeology provides some insight into what is probably going to be the fate of all these concrete, plastic, metal, toxic, complicated, real, material, empirical objects our modern material culture produces.

In the southern tier of New York, 12,000 years of continuous Native American occupation left the scant legacy of ephemeral hearth features, delicate spear points, broken pieces of pottery and graves which prehistoric archaeologists study. But what do we see here now, after only a couple of hundred years since European colonization and industrialization? . . . things like superfund sites, nuclear warheads, factory farms, denuded forests, poisoned rivers and dying industrial towns with already crumbling inner-cities. Archaeologists recognize how this alteration of matter our society engages in is unprecedented in terms of the scope of the distribution and essential durability of the composite materials modern technology is capable of creating. The new reality is that every generation of humans to come is going to have to deal with the social and environmental impacts of our complex modern material culture.

The Political Economy of American CRM – Who Do Archaeologists Work For and Why?

Under NHPA, corporately or privately owned and managed CRM firms staffed by professional archaeologists are hired by developers to conduct archaeological investigations ahead of construction projects. The project may be a gas pipeline, a new road, a housing development or a dike, but by looking for the sites and then digging them up, archaeologists are sending the inherently political message: “This development project is OK if we can do our work first”.

However, there may be a few hundred rural residents whose family homesteads are due to be razed because local politicians and the DOT have determined a road needs to be widened so throngs of sports fans can make their way to a local college football stadium at a higher rate of speed. Those folks in the way may disagree with such a value judgment. Valid concerns may also be raised by ecologists regarding the impacts the same project will have in terms of wetlands destruction, habitat loss for native animal and plant species and the effects of the added pollution on the local environment. These groups will be opposed to the development.

So whose interests/political agenda are the CRM archaeologists serving in a case like this? Who really benefits from these projects? What contemporary environmental and cultural impacts will they have? Does the development truly represent what is in the public's best long-term interests as far as we know? Do the archaeologists have a responsibility to consider these issues . . . to contradict a development project they consider unwise — or were they co-opted by the political forces whose funding they rely on as soon as the contract was signed?

Through their actions on behalf of the developers, CRM archaeologists are taking a very public pro-development political stance, even though it is possible to construct some very cogent arguments against unsustainable development using worldwide archaeological research as evidence. By focusing on certain issues addressed in modern archaeological theory like the effects of over-exploitation of resources surrounding human habitations; the outcomes of increasing social stratification; the consequences of proliferating complexity in material culture and resource distribution; the potential for conflicts as a result of scarcity; etc. . . . one can come to some very different conclusions about the wisdom of the pro-development agenda the dominant forces in western culture have deemed progressive and in the global society's best interest. Archaeologically derived knowledge of the past does provide a scientifically legitimate theoretical starting point for evaluating contemporary ideologies. But can alternative interpretations of the meaning of "progress" find expression in an atmosphere where even addressing such a proposition means a scholar would be biting hand that feeds him?

Archaeology and the Critique of Unsustainable Development

The interdependent relationship that has evolved between anthropology and development compromises the discipline's intellectual integrity and autonomy. By funding the majority of archaeological research conducted in the US, developers assure the content of scholar's work will never contradict the policies or conflict with the interests of those political and economic forces who are promoting the development. Is it intellectually honest or ethical for American Archaeology to be involved in condoning an unsustainable pro-development agenda, thereby helping certain ideological forces in western society to lead the "developing" world down this materially complicated path? Archaeologists/social scientists in the United States of America at the end of the millennium have accepted responsibility for engendering the epistemology used to interpret the past of our incredibly globally-influential society. Some would argue we therefore have an obligation to apply

ourselves and engage in a little prognostication about what our peculiar kind of political, technological, economic adaptation may mean to the future. In practice, federally mandated archaeology supports a political agenda some scholars may reasonably conclude is at best ill-considered, at worst socially destructive, but a critique of development can never be advanced under the current circumstances. Rather than acknowledging the intellectually compromising nature of this arrangement, most CRM archaeologists are content to view their primary role in society to be that of assisting their clients in jumping through regulatory hoops in exchange for money — becoming willing partners in the commodification of knowledge and the destruction of archaeological sites while enhancing their own careers by reporting on their “significant finds” for a limited audience of other archaeologists.

It is ironic that almost everyone in the field would freely admit that ideally it is the public’s interests which should be served by our national commitments to archaeology. Students trained in anthropology departments across the country (including here at SUNY Binghamton) acquire an in-depth and distinctive understanding of global prehistory, history and contemporary culture. Theoretically, this educational experience teaches them to speak about the world we all live in with a legitimacy few others can command. Philosophically profound and politically powerful research questions about the past and the future of the global society could be asked and possibly answered if anthropologists were as committed to participating as citizens in contemporary communicative action as they are in earning a comfortable living as reclusive intellectual elites. Studying the politics of the past should inspire anthropologists to contemplate and comment on the politics of what they are doing here now .

Archaeologists ultimately make a choice, as Temple University anthropology professor Tom Patterson said at a recent lecture on campus, to be “boosters of civilization, or critics of civilization”. Archaeologists could become very effective social critics of rampant technological change, corporate domination, hierarchical class systems and unsustainable development if they chose to interpret the “evidence” they study in a different light. The federal mandate that bestows the responsibility of interpreting the past for the public on the CRM archaeologists provides the discipline with a powerful rhetorical platform which could be used to foster debates about the present wisdom and potential consequences of unsustainable development. Unfortunately, such a debate is unlikely to be encouraged as long as the archaeologists are on the developer’s payroll.

Class Dimensions of Contemporary US Archaeology

Another outcome of this federal mandate and the subsequent rise of the CRM industry is that now the social science of archaeology has a “laborer class” numbering in the thousands. The nature of the business relationship between archaeology and development has had both disillusioning and economically detrimental effects on this growing underclass within the archaeological community.

The archaeologists who are typically hired on a per project basis to execute the fieldwork are expected to have a BA anthropology with training in archaeological field methods. These folks will find employment in the CRM industry soon after graduation, entering the workforce with the reasonable expectation of being able to make a living (and begin paying off their student loans and credit card bills) once they have completed their degree. The labor market is swamped with a new group of these young people every spring thanks to professors who encouragingly post job notices on anthro department bulletin boards.

But what these idealistic recent anthropology grads find once they are out in the field is a well-educated, apparently uncaring archaeological establishment that not only wants to deny them any professional status, undervalues their contribution to the research and views them as disposable employees — but also wants to pay them less than a McDonalds worker in Manhattan with no benefits!

Contracts for archaeological services are awarded through a competitive bidding process with the lowest bid usually receiving the contract. The professional archaeologists who comprise the CRM management class have found one of the most effective ways to keep bids low and increase their firm’s profit margin is to pay their workers lower wages than competitors. The result of this low-down approach has meant that wages for professional field archaeologists have stayed around the \$8.00 an hour range since the 1980’s (including here at the SUNY-Bing run CRM firm PAF — Public Archaeology Facility — which is one of the top 5 money generating institutions at the university and competes with private industry) CRM management salaries are typically \$26,000-\$45,000+ per year with benefits. The much larger class of field archaeologists will earn tops \$11,000-\$16,000 per year and never receive any benefits from their employers.

This lack of respect and under compensation for the labor of field archaeologists is endemic in the CRM industry and within the past 5 years a fledgling labor movement gained ground within the work force. The aim of the United Archaeological Field Technicians (UAFT) is to address the inequality and unionize archaeological field workers. Management’s response to the organization of the labor union was the formation of their own trade association — the American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA). These groups representing two very different classes within

the archaeological community continue to wage war against one another over wages. When officials from federal agencies became involved in the negotiations between management and labor in CRM archaeology, management vehemently argued the current state of affairs was fine by them.

The union found virtually no support for their initiatives within the archaeological establishment. Archaeology is a business, but it is also a social science and its practitioners are assumed to be well-versed in the history of class struggles and the relationship between economic security and personal autonomy. Why then would the professional archaeologists who manage CRM firms feel comfortable with the exploitation of fieldworkers? After all, it is the field archaeologists who lay the foundation on which all of the grand theories based on archaeological evidence are built. Their contribution is both essential and valuable. Their perspective is unique. Maybe this situation exists precisely because archaeology is a business now and, as happens in most businesses, the bottom line becomes more important to these archaeologists than nurturing the careers of their laborer class colleagues.

Field Archaeology is a Craft

As students we learn the theoretical underpinnings of archaeological thought and receive an introduction to the methods and goals of the discipline. However, once we get out in the field we soon find out that the knowledge, skills and abilities essential to conducting archaeological fieldwork must be learned through apprenticeship and mastered by the continuous application and situational modification of the techniques we have learned. Fieldwork merges theory and practice. The kind of expertise a “dirt” archaeologist develops can be compared to the kind of expertise the ethnographer in cultural anthropology cultivates. She understands how sustained exposure to the sights, sounds, smells, climate, physical setting, and material objects used by the living culture which is the object of study amplifies the level of insight achieved by the observer. The same is true of field archaeology. As we personally encounter on a daily basis the objects of interpretation — the artifacts and site environments, the communities as they are now and the evidence of what they were like thousands of years ago — the field archaeologist gains knowledge and perfects perception through practical experience of the real world. This is truly one of the most rewarding aspects of being a field archaeologist and it incites many of us to dissent.

Dissent

1. To differ in opinion or feeling; disagree.
2. To withhold assent or approval.

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