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Public Archaeology beyond Commodities, Alienation and the Fourth Wall

Summary

Public archaeology provides us with the means and opportunity to critique the socio-political and epistemic foundations of archaeology. This paper explores an interconnected set of issues in public archaeology, focusing in particular on the historical archaeology of conflict. It outlines some proposals for a practice of public archaeology that transcends the everyday commoditization of archaeology and the resulting transactional nature of the relationship between archaeologists and the public. To do so it draws on the works of, amongst others, Guy Debord and the Situationist International.

Keywords: Public archaeology; conflict archaeology; memory; Situationism; commoditization; heritage.

„Public archaeology“ gibt uns Mittel und Möglichkeiten an die Hand, soziopolitische und epistemische Grundlagen der Archäologie kritisch zu hinterfragen. Diese Studie untersucht miteinander verflochtene Themen einer „public archaeology“ mit Fokus auf der historischen Konfliktarchäologie. Der Beitrag skizziert Vorschläge für eine Praxis der „public archaeology“, die über die alltägliche Kommerzialisierung der Archäologie und den daraus resultierenden Geschäftscharakter der Beziehung zwischen ArchäologInnen und der Öffentlichkeit hinaus führt. Die Studie baut unter anderem auf den Arbeiten von Guy Debord und der Situationistischen Internationale auf.

Keywords: Public archaeology; Konfliktarchäologie; Erinnerung; Situationismus; Kommerzialisierung; Kulturerbe.

This paper brings together several strands of my research into the nature and potential of contemporary public archaeology. It combines themes and theories derived from the archaeology of modern conflicts; leftist and specifically Situationist politics; and the history of archaeology within the wider history of public science. By mixing elements drawn from these fields I have tried to identify a potential for radical political and creative interventions within the practice of archaeology. As such, this paper falls firmly within the type of public archaeology research that Brian Fagan has derided, not unfairly, as “overloaded with eloquent calls to action couched in far-from-specific terms”¹ I am not arguing that this work is useless – far from it – but rather that I hope that it can serve as the stimulus for further thought, discussion and action.

There are several interconnected starting points for this analysis; questions that have arisen and, for various reasons, endured during my work in archaeology over the past fifteen years. From 2002–2006 I worked at the Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project,² an independent archaeological project funded by its participants and run on broadly democratic socialist principles of collective decision making. In this work I was involved in presenting the site to the public both through formal site open days, on informal site tours, and through other forms of communication and outreach. During this period I also began to work on projects relating to the archaeology of the Second World War in Europe, including some on sites located in London that attracted considerable numbers of visitors.³ These experiences forced me to consider one of the fundamental features of public archaeology, namely the widespread and intense popular fascination with watching archaeologists at work.⁴ This raised the following questions: why do members of the public enjoy looking at archaeological excavations in progress? What do they think that they are seeing, and how do they understand it? And finally, what role might they as an audience and their ‘gaze’ play in the creation of archaeological knowledge?

The second starting point is another aspect of my work on Second World War archaeology mentioned above. Excavations that focus on events that are both within living memory and (to a greater or lesser extent) historically contested present a number of ethical and practical problems to archaeologists.⁵ Alongside questions of trauma and the responsible collection of oral histories, there is a reasonable possibility that the excavation itself will become a contested space or *lieu de discorde*,⁶ with different and/or opposed groups attempting to use it to promote their partisan perspectives on the events in question. This hijacking can take the form of spontaneous protests and ostentatious performances of commemoration, or more subtle attempts to co-opt the narrative and

1 Fagan 2003, 3.

2 Faulkner 2000.

3 Moshenska 2010.

4 Moshenska 2013.

5 Moshenska 2008.

6 Dolf-Bonekämper 2002, 247.

findings of the archaeological project during or after the excavation. Even in places (such as London, the site of most of my work) where the history of the Second World War is relatively uncontested this has the potential to divide local communities along lines of class and ethnicity.⁷ This process is not uncommon within archaeology, and is by no means restricted to research focusing on recent or contested histories. It raises my second area of questions: what are the circumstances in which archaeological sites can be appropriated by different interest groups – both hegemonic and subaltern – as arenas for the promotion and contestation of different historical narratives?

The third and final starting point is drawn not from my fieldwork but from seminar discussions in heritage studies and public archaeology: specifically, the lazy, too-common and rather inane question used to set essays, exam papers and to begin seminars: “Who owns the past?”⁸ This question is so open that all meaning has fallen out of it, and can only be rendered even slightly interesting by deep and time-consuming preliminary analyses of the possible meanings of the concepts of ‘ownership’ and ‘the past’ (to which it could not unreasonably be replied: it depends what I mean by ‘meaning’). As John Carman has shown,⁹ the concepts of ownership and property are central to the understanding of archaeological heritage, but poor wording and long-winded abstractions distract from and discourage detailed analysis of real-world heritage issues. My third question is therefore: can anything of interest or value be salvaged from the vacuous phrase “who owns the past?”

A common and recurrent theme in my explorations of the first two of these issues within public archaeology has been to consider the intricacies and contextual problems of the ‘archaeological site’ or space of archaeological practice as a social, cultural, intellectual, scientific and economic space which creates the potential to generate interesting and unexpected outcomes. This thinking has led me to some practical experiments, the principal outcomes of which have included a better understanding of the archaeological site as a space of production and consumption and, beyond this, a glimpse of something still more interesting: the potential for interactions around archaeological sites to generate participatory, theatrical, carnivalesque spaces. In such circumstances there is occasionally the potential to create instances of diremption, of de-alienation, or radical combinations of, or connections between people, places and things: events or happenings that strike not only at the social relations around the workplace but at the rarely-questioned assumptions that lie at their foundations.

To explain and contextualize these generative points in time and space I have found it useful to draw comparisons with the notion of ‘constructed situations’ as defined by

7 Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000.

8 Selkirk 1997.

9 Carman 2005.

Guy Debord and the Situationist International in the 1950s.¹⁰ To understand the significance of this, we need to consider the issue of control, both of the site itself and of the narratives produced in and around it, and the implications and possibilities for the archaeologist of truly sharing or giving up this control. In exploring these questions I have tried to bear in mind Guy Debord's assertion that to challenge 'la société du spectacle' "individuals and communities have to create places and events suitable for the appropriation of their total history".¹¹

My understanding of archaeological sites as disorderly spaces where conflicts and encounters occur emerged in part from fieldwork that I undertook on a Second World War site in London in 2003. This was the excavation of a crashed British fighter aircraft in the street behind Victoria Station that took place over a long weekend and was broadcast live on television.¹² I was surprised by the number of local people who came to the site to watch the dig taking place for long periods of time, and by their interest and engagement with the material we uncovered. The most affecting element was the number of people for whom the excavation became a forum for reminiscing about the air crash we were studying and about the war and local history in general. Many of these elderly people were disconcerted by the description of the work as 'archaeological' with its popular implications of deep time, and some of them were a bit overwhelmed by the number of other passers-by and audience members who took an interest in the stories that were shared. Some were invited to tell their stories to the cameras, but others simply recounted anecdotes and narratives to their friends and to strangers. Working on the site throughout the day, I heard several of these stories repeated over and over, sometimes by different people. Some of these storytellers used the site and the fragmentary artefacts that we uncovered to illustrate their narratives. Several of them told me that they had never talked about their experiences before in such detail, or at all. Many of the other local residents and passers-by watching the dig and listening to the stories returned repeatedly over the course of the project to discuss the history of the site and to bring personal objects and heirlooms relating to the Second World War including fragments of airframe collected from the crash site. In all of these ways the excavation became a *lieu de mémoire*; a realm of memory in Pierre Nora's formulation of the term: something that stands as a representative of wider historical narratives, crystalizing popular discourse about the past and the representation of the past in the present.¹³ At the same time, many of the stories told around the excavation did not fit into what might be called traditionally nationalistic, glorifying narratives of warfare: a few were frankly horrifying, highlighting again the potential for a *lieu de mémoire* to become a *lieu de discorde*.¹⁴

10 Debord 1983; Marcus 2002; Moshenska 2006.

11 Debord 1983, 178.

12 Moshenska 2007.

13 Nora 1989.

14 Dolf-Bonekämper 2002.

Building on this and similar experiences in my fieldwork I have tried to develop an understanding of the mechanisms whereby an archaeological site becomes a site for the formulation, expression and contestation of small-scale, intersubjective memory narratives, and how one might decide to instigate and control (or attempt to control) these processes.¹⁵ Negative outcomes of my own work in conflict archaeology including co-option into conservative historical narratives in education and media have made me wary about the growth in recent years of archaeological projects on sites relating to episodes of violence and oppression within living memory. One problem is that in many cases work of this kind becomes a feel-good exercise for the researchers: an emotionally cathartic, politically fulfilling and personally meaningful exercise for the team, and certain members of the community with whom they choose to engage – most often the most vocal and eloquent ones. The lesson I have taken from this is that good intentions are not enough in the complex ethical environment of conflict archaeology.¹⁶ Researchers blinkered by insufficiently critical, Manichean views of the past and a failure to appreciate the complexities and nuances of historical consciousnesses often interfere clumsily and dangerously in already tense situations – and then leave.

The key conceptual and practical error that researchers make in these situations is based on a fundamental quandary in public participatory research: to what extent should the researcher maintain control over the nature and direction of the project, and to what extent should they attempt to devolve control to the community within which they are working? On the one hand, to give up control entirely and hand the reins to the local community would abrogate the archaeologist's legal, professional ethical and intellectual responsibilities. On the other hand, to keep too tight a rein on the project can restrict its evolution and growth into unexpected and important areas, making it boring and irrelevant. These questions of balance are perhaps best approached individually, with an open and utilitarian model of research ethics. There are other ways to work with the communities in which our research is embedded, but first we need to ask: what's in it for them?

This brings us back to the second of my key questions: why do people come and watch excavations taking place? What powers and epistemic significances does the eyewitness have? There are a number of factors here, from simple curiosity to the excitement of discovery, and perhaps a more morbid or uncanny dimension as with visitors to the sites of accidents and violent crimes. At the risk of massively over-interpreting a potentially simple phenomenon I think it is worth noting that archaeology is just about the only science that puts its most fundamental processes of knowledge creation so clearly and accessibly on show.¹⁷ If the history of modern scientific practice is one of grad-

15 Moshenska 2010.

16 Moshenska 2008.

17 Moshenska 2013.

ual withdrawal from the public sphere (as Schaffer and others have suggested)¹⁸ then archaeology is a notable exception that has remained where physics, chemistry and biology were located just a few hundred years ago: in the public eye, reliant to some extent on public assent and acknowledgement.

Archaeology as a public spectacle takes two forms: the viewing platforms found on some urban excavations allow spectatorship but no interaction with the archaeologists. As in traditional theatre, a virtual ‘fourth wall’ divides the performers and their audience, the producers of archaeological knowledge and spectacle and the consumers.¹⁹ In other cases, as at Mortimer Wheeler’s excavations in the 1930s, the public is encouraged to engage with and interrogate the fieldworkers, turning the performance of archaeology into a more experimental form of knowledge production: a Brechtian theatre of the past that tries to reach out and drag the viewer across the divide that separates them from the past beneath their feet.²⁰

This distinction between passive observation and active engagement is important. People want to look at archaeology and I want to know what they see. I think they see a process of knowledge creation: one that operates most commonly in a conventional producer-consumer relation, where the archaeologist creates knowledge that the viewer can only passively consume. Where the viewer can become part of the process of knowledge creation by their witnessing and acknowledging the work in front of their eyes, this division of producer and consumer begins to break down, calling into question our pre-conceptions about the places of knowledge creation and the nature of authority. If we accept that knowledge and truths are to some extent socially constructed then we need to consider the numerous real and potential ways in which public assent and meaningful engagement or collaboration can play a role in validating archaeological knowledge. This in turn brings into question the extent to which some elements of archaeological practice can be ‘owned’, bringing us back to the third of my opening questions: the useful meanings (if any) of the phrase “who owns the past?”

To approach this issue I first interrogated the concept of ‘public archaeology’ as I teach and, to some extent, practice it: as both a field of practice analogous to science communication, and as a field of disciplinary critique analogous to science studies, drawing on the sociology, history, philosophy and anthropology of archaeology. In a fit of reductionist Marxism on a long bus journey I reduced public archaeology still further, to “a practice of disciplinary critique focusing on the production and consumption of [...] archaeological ‘commodities’.”²¹ These commodities are archaeological capital: not only financial but cultural, social and intellectual capital. I identified categories of archaeological commodity including archaeological labor, materials, knowledge and experiences.

18 Pomata 2011; Schaffer 2005.

19 Moshenska 2009a.

20 Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011.

21 Moshenska 2009b.

It wasn't until my neat little formulation was all worked out that I realized that I had created a totalizing model that implicitly defined not only public archaeology but archaeology as a whole as 'the process of producing archaeological commodities'. Perhaps a step too far.

Having identified this apparently totalizing commoditization of archaeology combined with the ideas I mentioned earlier about the ownership and control of contested sites leads me to ask: are there any non-commodities left? Has the whole of archaeological heritage been subsumed into capitalist consumer society? Even the seemingly radical bits? Perhaps they have – after all, how many arguments for emancipatory and progressive archaeology have you read in over-priced journals and books produced by corporations such as Springer?

This capacity of consumer society to incorporate every dimension of our lives through work, leisure, media and social norms constitutes what Guy Debord called the Society of the Spectacle.²² The Situationist International of which Debord was a founding member defined the Spectacle as an all-encompassing, constructed, false view of the world that consumer capitalism has developed as a mechanism to survive, grow and reproduce itself. The full history of the Situationist International, its philosophies and feuds, its myths and its not inconsiderable pretensions to revolutionary action are beyond the scope of this paper, but certain elements are worthy of note. These include the revitalization of some of Marx's rather period-specific critiques of capitalism and their important but arguably incidental contributions to feminist theory in their focus on the commoditization of social relations and the oppressive formats of everyday life.²³

The Situationist critique of 'la société du spectacle' included a powerful analysis of the ability of consumer capitalism to resist, absorb, co-opt and commoditize all attempts to overthrow it or to construct alternatives. Rebellion becomes just another consumer commodity. The valuable contribution of the Situationists was to tackle the question of what could be constructed or brought into being outside the Spectacle – something that could not be commoditized, sold or passively consumed. The outcome of this study – and one that has considerable relevance to my questions posed earlier – is the concept of the constructed situation, which Debord defined as: "a moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary environment and a game of events".²⁴ The constructed situation is something artificial but also playful and free: a chaotic and carnivalesque event with a momentum of its own that by its temporary and contingent nature cannot be owned or commoditized. It cannot be consumed because by its participatory nature it precludes passive consumption. At the core of the

22 Debord 1983.

23 Ehrlich 1977.

24 Debord 2014, 68.

constructed situation are the notions of participation, performance and theatricality that I identified in the best of public archaeology.²⁵ According to Debord:

The construction of Situations begins on the other side of the modern collapse of the idea of the theatre. It is easy to see to what extent the very principle of the theatre – nonintervention – is attached to the alienation of the old world. Inversely, we see how the most valid of revolutionary cultural explorations have sought to break the spectator’s psychological identification with the hero, so as to incite this spectator into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionize his own life. The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructors. The role of the ‘public,’ if not passive at least a walk-on, must ever diminish, while the share of those who cannot be called actors but, in a new meaning of the term, ‘livers,’ will increase.²⁶

Where the Situationists saw artistic ‘happenings’ and revolutionary acts I see a possibility for a different kind of public archaeology.

At this point, having savaged the concepts of audience, public and ownership, I want to review the questions that I posed at the start of this paper in relation to the proposed new entity: the uncommodifiable moment or event in public archaeology. To create such an event requires a new understanding of the public’s roles as participant-audiences, based on a richer understanding of the epistemic power of eye-witnessing and the ability of audiences to generate meaning, particularly (but by no means exclusively) in the archaeology of the recent past. This connects closely with the second question examining the problem of the appropriation of archaeological sites for use as propaganda. Arguably one of the most interesting aspects of an uncommodifiable event in public archaeology is precisely its resistance to appropriation of this kind, and therefore its utter non-duration; any ‘durability,’ I’d argue, immediately offers the potential for appropriation and commodification. Finally, to return to the third and final question, we find that it can be flipped around, to ask “is there any aspect of the past (however defined) that cannot be owned?”²⁷

To think about these new questions it is interesting to reconsider the case study that I mentioned earlier of the excavation of an aircraft from a street in central London.²⁸ This media-driven project attracted an unexpectedly large audience at the site; local people watching, discussing and debating the work, the war, local history and their personal histories. The aircraft we were digging up had famously rammed a bomber that attempted to attack Buckingham Palace, and had subsequently crashed. The pilot sur-

25 Moshenska 2006.

26 Debord 2002, 47.

27 Gestrich 2011.

28 Moshenska 2007.

vived by parachuting out and was present at the excavation.²⁹ The television crew tried to interview some of the older local people and collect reminiscences. The site had become an arena of memory by accident as much as by design, and the crowd was drawn from a community with a strong sense of local identity and a widespread popular awareness of the event that we were investigating. This was a perfect-storm situation where neither the archaeologists, nor the media, nor the public audience definitively owned the narrative of the site or the event, but the television crew was broadcasting live, in unknowing obedience to one of Debord's specific suggestions for the construction of situations.³⁰

In a shocking exchange broadcast on television the interviewer asked an elderly local woman to recount the events of the air battle and the crash. In utter contrast to the triumphalist tone of the entire event she recalled that the bombing war had scarcely touched that area of London until that day, but that the local people had nevertheless come together in a mob and tried to murder the pilot of the German aircraft who had survived the crash. As this story unfolded and the woman refused to express contrition the interviewer visibly panicked and the broadcast shifted to another part of the site.³¹

In that moment the public dimension of the event had asserted itself. The ownership of the narrative had been publicly wrested away from the media's patriotic nostalgia and from us archaeologists with our flashy toys, and one spectator had asserted her place as a participant in the event. In that moment – and for that brief moment only – the event was outside ownership and control, an accidentally constructed situation that had occurred, and been witnessed and experienced by a number of people on the site including myself, as well as a considerable television audience nationwide.

To say that events such as this one can occur is not the same as to claim the capacity to make them happen. I can't write a recipe for turning archaeological excavations into diremptive environments or *lieux de discorde*. Ownership of a project and the commensurate responsibilities cannot be given up, but it can be spread as widely and evenly as possible through participation, planning and consultation so that as large a group of the participants as possible share control. On the Second World War sites that I work on this includes the now-elderly people whose memories form part of my dataset, whose stories form a part of the narrative and power structure of the event, and to whom the archaeology lends an authoritative forum.³² In these circumstances the role of the project leader comes to resemble that of a circus ringmaster keeping a semblance of control amidst chaos. The confidence necessary to maintain this process must be combined with a willingness to tear down the fourth wall of archaeology and invite the spectators to become participants and owners in a real and meaningful sense, as well as a firm conviction that the answer to the question 'who owns the past?' should be 'nobody'.

29 Holmes 1997.

30 Debord 2002, 48.

31 Banks-Smith 2004.

32 Moshenska 2007.

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