Against reactionary populism: towards a new public archaeology

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Keywords: social archaeology, cultural heritage, populism, neoliberalism, multiculturalism

Introduction

From Brazil to the United Kingdom, 2016 was a critical year in global politics. Heritage, ethics and the way that archaeologists relate to the public were and will all be affected, and it is time to reflect critically on the phenomenon of 'reactionary populism' and how it affects the practice and theory of archaeology. 'Reactionary populism' can be defined as a political form that is anti-liberal in terms of identity politics (e.g. multiculturalism, abortion rights, minority rights, religious freedom), but liberal in economic policies. It is characterised by nationalism, racism and anti-intellectualism, and as Judith Butler states in a recent interview, it wants "to restore an earlier state of society, driven by nostalgia or a perceived loss of privilege" (Soloveitchik 2016). Our intention here is to argue that the liberal, multi-vocal model of the social sciences and the humanities is no longer a viable option. Instead, we ask our colleagues to embrace an archaeology that is ready to intervene in wider public debates not limited to issues of heritage or of local relevance, is not afraid of defending its expert knowledge in the public arena, and is committed to reflective, critical teaching.

It can be argued that many social archaeologists (and cultural anthropologists) have promoted an agenda during the last decades that has left us politically and theoretically disempowered. By social archaeology we mean all archaeology that is concerned with the interface between the discipline and society, including community and indigenous archaeologies, and heritage studies (Merriman 2004; Smith & Wobst 2004; Smith 2006). In particular, critical heritage studies (Waterton & Smith 2010; Harrison 2013) have acquired a position of dominance in most research, exploring the relations between society and heritage. While we share the social aspirations of our colleagues, we part ways in our diagnosis of the situation and the proposed solutions. The foundational manifesto of the Association of the Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS n.d.) encourages members of the association to examine the relations of power that are at work in the production and management of heritage. The ACHS argues that heritage has been shaped by nationalism,

Debate

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 https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2017.227

imperialism, cultural elitism, racism, classism and the fetishising of expert knowledge, all of which has ignored a large part of the world's population. To reverse that situation, the ACHS encourages the participation of people and communities that, to date, have been excluded from the creation and management of heritage. But who are the 'people' and *in what* exactly are we inviting them to participate?

Are the people of archaeology 'the People'?

The approach proposed by mainstream public archaeology and critical heritage studies is unsatisfactory because, among other things, the People cannot be directly equated with those with whom archaeologists work. Who are the public? Who is indigenous? Who are the 'People'? These are questions that have only been superficially addressed. Archaeologists have too often contented themselves with simplified images of society. Communities have been equated with specific groups defined by gender, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation, and described almost invariably in positive terms (Brass 2017). This had led to dichotomies between authorised and official *vs* non-authorised and informal heritage, or top-down *vs* bottom-up initiatives (Smith 2006). Authorised, top-down archaeology and heritage are described as authoritarian and conservative, their opposite as spontaneous and democratic.

Archaeologists have been expected to be always aligned with 'the People', to understand their needs and advocate their cause (Atalay *et al.* 2014). This has often led to the assumption that every person, every community, can spontaneously reclaim their heritage. Gramsci, however, explained that in modern societies, hegemonic projects tend to be presented as bottom-up and result from social negotiation and consensus (Gramsci 2011). Thus, archaeologists have helped communities throughout the world to understand and generate their own linear views of time and to have a 'past'; they have taught them that their past belongs to them as heritage, that heritage is an intrinsically valuable part of their identity, and more recently, that the universality of heritage makes it a good tourist product.

In summary, archaeologists have invented the People that they need: a People that might challenge old-fashioned perspectives of heritage and archaeology, and may even refuse access to certain sites or reclaim certain things; but not a People lacking a notion of heritage, with no interest in the past. In a recent paper, Fowles (2016) criticised the neo-materialist turns as found, for instance, in object-oriented philosophy, actor-network-theory or generally 'flat ontologies', arguing that archaeologists have found the perfect subject in things: one that does not dissent, lacks a proper voice and complies with the archaeologist's longing to empower the disempowered. But Fowles overlooks the fact that at least some of the People—the homeless, descendants of African heritage, indigenous peoples, the working class, immigrants—are also perfect subjects because they closely match the ethical-political expectation of both liberals and Marxists. Many people, on the other hand, seem intent on disappointing archaeologists by behaving in the wrong way: being greedy, patriarchal, xenophobic or uninterested in the past.

At work here is an idealisation of community and heritage. Communities—the units into which the People are organised—are diverse, fragmented and complex. Some are progressive, some are not; some are cohesive, others are divided by internal conflicts.

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Archaeologists and heritage practitioners, however, have often transferred the qualities of the critical, enlightened subaltern (such as politicised indigenous groups or class-conscious working classes) onto every community with which they work and, in the last instance, to the People as a whole. Almost everything that is popular, bottom-up and local is thus celebrated.

This is what we term (following Ramón Grosfoguel 2008) 'epistemic populism'. What the People say is correct because it is they who say it. What makes a statement true is not the logical consistency of the statement, but who it is that utters it. Our argument here is that epistemic populism is not the solution to engaging with society. First, it misrepresents the complexity of the People, by being blind to every social group that does not concur with our progressive values. Second, the language of multivocality and multiculturalism reveals an uncanny alignment with what Nancy Fraser (2017) has called 'progressive neoliberalism' (that is, progressive politics reduced to political correctness). Our Latin American colleagues are well aware of this: multicultural archaeology goes hand in hand with capitalist endeavours and the interests of the nation-state (Shepherd & Haber 2011). Multicultural archaeology endorses a form of ethical cosmopolitanism that tolerates difference, promotes alternative symbols and their public representation, but that silences narratives and practices that escape the neoliberal logic (Gnecco 2015). A third problem is that multi-vocal and multicultural archaeologies exclude those who do not, or cannot, speak or be heard, simultaneously limiting emancipatory politics to the right to narrate (Spivak 1988; Žižek 2002: 547–48). Recent developments around the globe during the last few years have, however, shaken the certainties of epistemic populism and its alliance with multiculturalism.

Three lessons from the growth in reactionary populism

There are three main lessons that can be drawn from the advance of reactionary populism across the world. First, we have learnt that mere or more liberalism is insufficient to face this political phenomenon. Liberal archaeology has incorporated more and more people into the project of global liberalism, allowing them to participate in the production and consumption of cultural identities and heritage experiences. It has failed, however, to give these same subjects the *material* wealth that was promised: it has provided symbols but no jobs.

Archaeology emerged as a discipline of and for the bourgeoisie following the Industrial Revolution (Trigger 1989). More recently, social archaeologies and the heritage industry have flourished in the context of the multicultural, liberal democracies of the last three decades. We have, however, seen the transition from the *proletariat* to the *precariat*—a precariat, based on insecure employment and economic conditions, that is engulfing even the archaeological profession (McGuire 2008: 98–138; Cleary *et al.* 2014). What do we have to offer, as archaeologists, to the citizens of the decaying towns of the US Midwest? Or to the impoverished, racially segregated suburbs of European metropolises? What these marginalised communities think about archaeology and heritage has rarely been examined.

Right-wing populism is predicated upon fear of the 'Other' and preys on communities ravaged by economic crisis and social disarray. Liberal archaeology, suffused with epistemic

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populism, does not provide the political or intellectual weapons necessary to face the coalition of predatory capitalism and reactionary populism.

A further lesson to be learned from the current political climate is that archaeologists are perhaps not such fearsome agents of the current consensus as we thought, even if some of them have collaborated eagerly with it. In the commercial sector, some archaeologists wonder what will happen to cultural resource management (CRM) if neoliberal policies are applied? The USA may join Brazil, Peru, Greece or Spain, where pressure from lobbyists has drastically undercut the requirements for conducting cultural impact assessment. The material remains of the past, along with living traditions and the environment, can often be destroyed with little or no consultation in the pursuit of ever-growing profit. Despite some arguments (e.g. Hutchings & La Salle 2015), predatory capitalism does not need archaeologists, simply because it does not need legitimising narratives.

But perhaps the most important lesson is the recognition that there are other marginalised groups who are not self-assertive indigenous communities, liberal African-Americans, class-conscious industrial workers or the homeless interested in documenting their lives. The working class were supposed to be *our* People. Along with immigrants, indigenous and other groups, they were supposed to be the bottom-up producers of non-authorised heritage. But do we even know how much they care about heritage or archaeology? Something seems to have gone terribly wrong and we have not seen it coming.

It is not an issue of representation and storytelling that is at stake—the kind of issue that archaeologists like because they are good at it. It is political economy and a redefinition of class and identity. Social archaeologists and heritage students, alas, have little to offer in this situation. They may document the relentless suppression of various forms of alterity, and compensate this destructive process through the form of symbolic restitution that cultural heritage provides. But this will only satisfy the cultural needs of the liberal and educated middle classes. They may also help by transforming into heritage those economic sectors that will be shattered by the advance of unbridled capitalism: as we know, whenever an economic activity disappears, a museum is open in its place to showcase that same activity. But this will hardly appease those losers of global capitalism who opted for reactionary populism.

Three things we can do

We believe that archaeology has the opportunity to redefine its relationship with society. But this will only be possible if we dispose of epistemic populism. We need to face social reality as it is: complex, in that communities are extremely diverse and not always progressive. We cannot divide society into the bad (the elite), the good (the ordinary people and the scholars who work with them) and the ugly (scholars and professionals at the service of the powerful). Sometimes the poorest sections of society side with the elite. Eastern and Southern Europe, Africa and Latin America have a well-researched and repeated genealogy of communities that do not defend the 'right' ideas, instead supporting dictatorships and oligarchies, or engaging in ethnic and political cleansing. Perhaps for this reason some of us have never eagerly embraced critical heritage studies, and consider that

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the epistemic populism that is inherent in them can hardly address our problems. But rejecting it, of course, is not enough. We are not suggesting that we have to relapse into old-fashioned academic authoritarianism and treat people as if they were minors who have to be reprimanded. We have neither to "bow to populism nor retreat to a readerly position that is ultimately a refusal to engage" (Pluciennik 2015: 80). In our view, a socially committed archaeology can do three things:

First, *we need an archaeology that provokes the People*, instead of flattering them (Sloterdijk 2001); this means a discipline that tells things that are uncomfortable, that problematises and complicates narratives, histories and identities. We need an archaeology involved in historical explanation and not just lively storytelling or hyper-specific archaeometric analyses. Telling uncomfortable truths to those who are already convinced and ready to listen (our usual audiences) is not enough: we need to engage those who are on the antipodes of (even) liberal thinking. We must abandon our comfort zones and be ready to fight our battles. Provocation and community work may not make good partners, but then public archaeology should not be limited to community archaeology. Community engagement is still enormously important, but it is not enough. The public is bigger than the community. To serve the interests of the people as a whole (one of the meanings of 'public'), archaeologists have to perform critical public interventions that go beyond the local sphere and create social links and support collective action (McGuire 2008: 39–46) without reifying closed communities and identities. In that, historians, philosophers and sociologists provide good role models: they have often played a crucial public role without being attached to a specific community (Guldi & Armitage 2014). In fact, the effectiveness of their work lies precisely in their independence.

Second, *we need an archaeology that teaches*. We need a critical and transformative pedagogy that teaches about archaeology but also uses archaeology to teach (Bartoy 2012). This pedagogical archaeology—which learns in the process of educating—converses with social movements, communities and institutions, but is not necessarily attached to specific localities or groups. Education has lost prominence among social archaeologists and is absent from some manifestos (see various examples in Atalay *et al.* 2014). Collaboration with local communities, which is the current dominant model of our relationship with society, requires a symmetry between actors that is at odds with the very idea of teaching, which presupposes a teacher and a pupil—a provider and a receiver of knowledge. Admittedly, teaching by archaeologists is totally out of place in many non-Western (indigenous) contexts, where archaeologists have indeed more to learn than to teach. But it is sorely needed in many others.

Since the early 1980s, we have grown accustomed to deconstruct our truths, to criticise the Enlightenment, reason and modernity. Yet relativising objectivity and deconstructing disciplines are probably things that reactionary populists are ready to celebrate: in this they see further proof of our weakness and futility. We have to construct a new objectivity, even if we know that this is impossible to attain (Criado-Boado 2001). This new and critical objectivity should be at the base of our teaching. If we relinquish teaching, if we only encourage others, we will become more and more ineffective as social scientists: we may end up as mere facilitators, social media managers or entertainers, while others will do our work in our place. And we might not like it.

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We must teach not because we want everybody to see the world with the eyes of an archaeologist so as to further our own agendas (Holtorf 2007). We should not see the interests of archaeology perpetually in conflict with society at large. It is in the interest of society to understand and (often) preserve the traces of the past. That the meaning and relevance of the remains of the past are not immediately obvious makes teaching necessary in the first place. The idea, however, is not to convince people that heritage is universal and good and that everybody has it, as we have always done (both conservative practitioners and critical heritage researchers have done this: what changes is what is considered heritage).

Instead, we believe that archaeologists, as social scientists, have unique tools to understand the world critically. Against prejudice, racism and xenophobia, it is social critique that we more urgently need. We have too often relinquished epistemic authority, but it is not too late to regain it. Not the artificial authority of our academic positions, but the authority provided by knowledge, skill and experience that people tend to respect (Angelbeck & Grier 2012: 552). We will regain this authority not by waving our titles, but by reformulating the relationships and values that connect the discipline and the public. We cannot, therefore, simply rely on positivistic, scientific rhetoric. We need to build trust in the discipline and in our role as social agents (Alonso González 2016), producing knowledge that is not reducible to mere subjective practices (Criado-Boado 2001). Latour (2013) can be useful here, when he tackles the question of how to construct non-patronising authoritative scientific discourses in a context of public distrust. As with any other scientific discipline, the reinforcement of the epistemic authority of archaeology would require an "appeal to the institution of science, rather than science. It is a question of trust, not of certainty. Certainty is epistemological, the institution of science requires much more" (Latour 2013: 3). We will achieve the credibility, reputation and legitimacy that build trust by doing our best job as archaeologists, not by flattering the wider public.

We do not need to go against heritage; rather, we need *an archaeology that escapes the 'heritage crusade'*. Lowenthal (1996) developed this concept to illustrate the way in which heritage had shifted from being the preoccupation of cultured elites to become a major popular pursuit. Enlisting ourselves in this 'crusade' may require us to be prepared to be inventive to please audiences—a Spanish project, for example, has recently proposed placing Pokémon in museums and heritage sites as a way to attract the public (*El Mundo* 2016). Seeing heritage as a social construct has been a crucial move for critical heritage studies, but it leaves untouched the definition of heritage and the reasons why things, people and cultural processes need to be transformed into heritage. The gist of the heritage crusade under capitalism is value, which is simultaneously symbolic and economic. Cultural and economic aspects, however, are usually regarded as separate: the former fall into the realm of ethics, while the latter are naturalised as part of the normal state of affairs. Social archaeologists and critical heritage scholars normally manage cultural and ethical aspects, and criticise the commodification of heritage. In accepting the separation between economy and culture, however, they fall prey to a specifically Western capitalist paradox described by Gilles Dauvé (2009: 1–45) as "equality of rights alongside social inequality".

The heritage crusade has a lot to do with the increasing pressure of institutional mandates to make science 'useful'. This has been part of the general crisis in the humanities and their apparent lack of usability. This crisis only arrived after the natural sciences surrendered

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to state- and company-sponsored demands for usefulness, productivity and applicability, which were fulfilled through the alliance of science, technology and industry. Archaeology as a producer of knowledge about the past was not best placed to meet such demands. A practical solution, however, came with the recasting of the discipline as a producer of heritage. But as in the case of CRM, capital does not need archaeologists in order to promote heritage as a commodity. After all, archaeologists are not effective producers of economic value; others do this better than us. This is the reason for the economic crisis of commercial archaeology and its lack of capacity for creating new sustainable economic activities (Schlanger & Aitchison 2010). Instead, consider the economically successful (and invented) sites of Puma Punku in Bolivia, the Pyramids of Güimar in the Canary Islands or the historically themed resorts of South Africa (Hall & Bombardella 2005). As producers of economic value through heritage, archaeologists are largely irrelevant to global capitalism; as producers of symbolic value through multivocality and multiculturalism, archaeologists are politically harmless.

Thus, we need to start thinking not in terms of heritage, but in terms of overcoming the dichotomies between critical and applied heritage, or even to start thinking outside the notion of heritage altogether. This does not mean being anti-heritage, as if we were supporting its erasure and rejecting preservation policies or relinquishing the concept and its analytic potential from scholarly debate. Far from it. Two decades ago, Lowenthal (1996: 100) described (and criticised) the "anti-heritage animus" permeating much of the theoretical corpus of heritage studies. Similarly, Winter (2013) has recently criticised anti-heritage attitudes within critical heritage studies, reclaiming the positive aspects of heritage and the need to collaborate with CRM and non-academic heritage practitioners facing the risk of disciplinary isolation. But this ethical assertion (heritage *is or can be good*) does not help explain our current situation and the dilemmas and contradictions pervading the heritage concept itself. We are not naïve: avoiding a problem does not make the problem disappear. Similarly, eliminating heritage (physically or conceptually) changes nothing. Change requires a critical conceptual engagement with heritage that must be paralleled by a transformative practice that goes beyond it. This implies exploring ways in which history and memory can bypass the capitalist-modernist logic underpinning the conceptualisation and practice of heritage. This includes not only non-Western practices, but also folk traditions in the West that have been hitherto hijacked by reactionaries (Hamilakis 2011).

Released from the anxieties of practical usefulness, economic performance, immediate applicability and popular acceptance to which heritage management subjects us, we can reclaim archaeology as a critical form of knowledge production, capable of intervening in pressing social issues with an original insight (González-Ruibal 2013). Provocation, engagement and education, rather than flattery and collaboration, should become the new key concepts guiding our relationship with society, or at least with those sectors of society that have remained beyond our radar. To conclude, we have to make archaeology political again. This might place us in uncomfortable positions, but we must engage with reactionary populism face to face and tackle its underlying political, social and economic problems if we wish to stem its spread. Simultaneously, we must stop flirting with progressive neoliberalism and go beyond those issues of identity, ethics and narrative that have occupied

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the political imagination of archaeology for three decades. We need to go back to the roots of politics—radical dissent, conflict, inequality—and reconstruct archaeology as a public-engaged practice to make it a truly critical voice in the global stage.

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Received: 10 February 2017; Accepted: 12 May 2017; Revised: 20 June 2017

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