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Archaeology of Liberation vs. Political Archaeology: Rethinking the Past for a Just Future

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Abstract

Political archaeology and archaeology of liberation are two of several different aspects of the relationship between archaeology and politics. In this note, I will examine political archaeology from the aspect of its negative effects, and I will examine archaeology of liberation from the aspect of its positive effects, although each may have other benefits and harms. This means I do not intend to praise one and blame the other. Rather, I will express the most common methods that can strengthen the negative and positive aspects. For example, just as political archaeology has a negative aspect, it is possible that liberating archaeology may also show negative aspects in case of inaccuracy. Political archaeology, the intersection of politics and archaeological research, reveals how political motives can shape historical interpretations. By examining the subjective nature of historical understanding and how human perception influences our understanding of the past, we can recognize how archaeology can be manipulated by various individuals, including politicians, for political gain. Archaeology of liberation, a related field, offers a potential solution to the challenges posed by political archaeology. By centreing the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, archaeology of liberation can help to counter the biased narratives often perpetuated by political agendas. By working collaboratively with these communities, archaeologists can develop more inclusive and equitable interpretations of the past. By understanding both political archaeology and archaeology of liberation, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how archaeology can be used to both uphold and challenge power structures. Through a critical examination of political archaeology and a commitment to the principles of liberation archaeology, we can work towards a more just and equitable future.

Keywords: Archaeology of Liberation, Political Archaeology, Anti-Colonial, Indigenous, Marginalized Communities, Ethics.

Article Type: Review Article

Introduction

Political archaeology is the study of how archaeological research functions within and is influenced by political structures. It examines how archaeology, as a discipline, lends legitimacy, authority, and scientific autonomy to these structures in contemporary societies (Oestigaard 2002: 11). Moreover, political archaeology explores how archaeological findings can be used as tools of manipulation to shape societal attitudes and behaviours. This can be seen in the extreme nationalist ideology of the Nazis, which was influenced by the ideas of Gustav Kossinna and the concept of cultural diffusionism. The Nazis believed that Central European Germanic lands were the cradle of the earliest European civilizations, and they used archaeological evidence to support this claim and justify their racist policies (Ellis 2003).

Understanding the potential for misuse in political archaeology is crucial for ensuring responsible and ethical practices. Education in political archaeology and archaeology of liberation can equip researchers with the critical thinking skills necessary to identify and address these issues. By fostering a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between archaeology and politics, education can help prevent the misuse of archaeological evidence for harmful purposes. Through archaeology of liberation, it is possible to challenge the dominant narratives created through political archaeology, often wielded by those

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in power. By centreing the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, archaeology of liberation can help to create more inclusive and equitable interpretations of the past.

Archaeology, Nationalism, and the Manipulation of History

As stated, archaeology and politics are inextricably linked, influencing and shaping each other in profound ways. This discipline can be observed in various political phenomena, including ethnicity, federalism, separatism, and nationalism. Moreover, archaeology has often been employed to serve the political agendas of leaders and governments. The potential of archaeological knowledge to influence the understanding and interpretation of the past is undeniable. Archaeological data can provide politicians with valuable information to support their claims, legitimize their actions, and mobilize public sentiment. Many nationalist leaders have skilfuly exploited archaeological findings to evoke strong emotions of ethnicity, nationalism, and pride among their constituents, bypassing the need for rational argument and persuasion. Examples abound in the Middle East and North Africa, where leaders have frequently turned to archaeology to bolster their legitimacy and reinforce their nationalist narratives. Hosni Mubarak, the former president of Egypt, claimed descent from the Valley of the Kings, drawing on the rich archaeological heritage of ancient Egypt. Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq, sought to trace his ancestry to the Assyrian Empire through archaeological excavations at Khorsabad (Mortazavi *et al*. 2024: 5). Therefore, the role of archaeology in creating national pride for nations and governments is clear. Of course, this perspective of nationalist archaeology was not limited to Asian countries. Some developing European nations required a nationalist discourse between the World Wars (1918-1939). Thus, by manipulating archaeology along with intentional or unintentional misinterpretations and exaggerated results, the past could be documented for supporting governments based on desired goals (Young 2002: 29).

When examining the relationship between archaeology and nationalism in Central Europe, it becomes apparent that nationalism is considered a significant framework for understanding the past. The influence of politics on European archaeology becomes evident, particularly in light of the political developments of the 1990s and the transformation of certain countries into transnational states. In this context, European archaeology has moved closer to "pan-European" goals. However, as long as most European archaeologists work within institutions affiliated with national governments, such actions seem natural and normal, and some of them apply their theories within national boundaries (Pluciennik 1998: 816).

While political archaeology can be used in an emancipatory way, as evidenced by the Great Zimbabwe ruins inspiring anti-colonial struggles (Swanepoel 2009), it is often manipulated to serve political agendas. Leaders can carefully select and interpret archaeological evidence to shape public perception and political discourse, often with far-reaching consequences. These actions are often driven by self-interest and a desire to strengthen national identity. However, even when the intended outcome is positive, the interpretation and presentation of archaeological sites can still be influenced by political factors. Therefore, it remains crucial to critically examine the ways in which political archaeology is used, regardless of its stated intentions. While this article primarily focuses on the manipulative aspects of political archaeology, it is important to acknowledge that it can also be used as a tool for empowerment and social justice.

Responsibility vs. Irresponsibility: Ethical Considerations in Archaeological Practice Within Political Contexts

Archaeology, as a discipline, has witnessed a multitude of theoretical approaches over time. With the emergence of new perspectives, some archaeologists have dismissed earlier approaches as flawed or outdated. However, a closer examination often reveals that these "new" approaches may incorporate elements from their predecessors (Mortazavi 2010: 146). Political archaeology, in particular, highlights the potential for archaeological findings to be manipulated for political purposes. This can range from legitimizing power structures and reinforcing national identities to justifying political actions. While the discipline aims to provide objective insights into the past, it is crucial to recognize that these insights can be selectively interpreted or even fabricated to serve particular agendas.

To avoid contributing to the manipulation of archaeology, it is imperative to adopt a critical and ethical approach to your research. This involves maintaining objectivity, questioning narratives, acknowledging limitations, engaging with diverse voices, and communicating responsibly. While it's impossible to completely eliminate bias from archaeological research, acknowledging its existence and actively addressing potential sources of bias can help to mitigate its influence. By adopting these principles, you can contribute to a more ethical and responsible use of archaeology within political contexts.

The goal of archaeological research is not merely to collect and organise data but to gain a deeper understanding of the human past (Mortazavi 2010: 150). However, this understanding must be grounded in ethical principles and while complete objectivity is unattainable, archaeologists should strive to be transparent about their biases and how they might shape their interpretations. By maintaining objectivity and critical thinking, archaeologists can help ensure that their findings are used for the betterment of society and not for political gain.

Archaeology of Liberation: the Ethical Use of Archaeology in Political Contexts

As young scholars embarking on careers in archaeology, it is essential to be acutely aware of the potential for archaeological findings to be manipulated for political purposes. Throughout history, archaeology has been used to legitimize power structures, reinforce national identities, and justify political actions. While the discipline aims to provide objective insights into the past, it is crucial to recognize that these insights can be selectively interpreted or even fabricated to serve particular agendas.

To avoid contributing to the manipulation of archaeology, it is imperative to adopt a critical and ethical approach to your research. This involves maintaining objectivity, questioning narratives, acknowledging limitations, engaging with diverse voices, and communicating responsibly. By adopting these principles, you can contribute to a more ethical and responsible use of archaeology. Remember, the goal of archaeological research is to illuminate the past, not to serve political agendas. By maintaining objectivity and critical thinking, you can help ensure that archaeology remains a valuable tool for understanding our shared human history.

Matthew Johnson's analysis in Chapter 13 of "Archaeology, Politics and Culture" underscores the intricate relationship between archaeology and politics. He posits that archaeological interpretations are shaped by broader societal values and that different cultural groups engage with archaeological knowledge in unique ways. Furthermore, Johnson emphasizes the power dynamics inherent in archaeological practices and the importance of recognizing privilege and acknowledging the political nature of archaeological research. His case study of the African Burial Ground in New York City illustrates how archaeological practices can be influenced by political and cultural factors, and the necessity of collaboration with descendant communities for ethical and meaningful research (Johnson 2019: 246-249).

Magnus Fiskesjö's analysis of global repatriation and "universal" museums offers a solid foundation for understanding the complex issue of global repatriation and the evolving concept of "universal" museums (Fiskesjö 2010). However, it could be further enhanced by delving deeper into the historical context of "universal" museums, examining their role in cultural imperialism, analyzing the power dynamics involved in repatriation negotiations, considering the ethical implications of museum ownership, and exploring the potential impact of repatriation on cultural heritage preservation. By incorporating these additional elements, the analysis can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex issues surrounding global repatriation and the future of "universal" museums.

Larry J. Zimmerman observed that Processualism had become a major impediment to relationships with Indigenous people because it essentially dismissed Indigenous oral traditions and other versions of the past as untrue or limited. Moreover, Processualism's insistence on the strict adherence to a notion of objective and apolitical archaeology alienated Indigenous people by dehumanizing them and their ancestors. WAC's[1] approaches challenged Processualism in many ways, while still incorporating processual methods. While WAC cannot be solely credited for these shifts, the organization and its members have certainly

[1]World Archaeological Congress

served as a catalyst for change (Zimmerman 2006). By accepting that the past is multithreaded and multivocal, WAC has helped to liberate archaeology from entrenched understandings of what the past is. By working in partnership with those whose pasts are their own, WAC has helped to provide a different sort of archaeology—an archaeology of liberation—that is proving useful for the building and maintenance of communities.

Mehdi Mortazavi's analysis delves into the inherent uncertainty that pervades archaeological interpretations (Mortazavi 2018). He highlights the cognitive limitations that can lead to errors in reasoning and examines the philosophical debate between positivism and idealism. Mortazavi argues that a balanced approach, incorporating both observation and conceptualization, is essential for a comprehensive understanding of archaeological phenomena. Mortazavi further explores the specific challenges faced by Iranian archaeology, including the influence of Western concepts and the need for localization. He emphasizes the importance of understanding ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives in archaeological research. Mortazavi concludes that while absolute certainty may be elusive in archaeology, a combination of objectivity and subjectivity, coupled with a strong scientific foundation, can help researchers approach certainty more effectively.

By considering Johnson's insights (Johnson 2019) alongside Fiskesjö's analysis of global repatriation and "universal" museums (Fiskesjö 2010), Zimmerman's exploration of the transformative role of WAC in challenging Processualism and promoting collaboration with Indigenous communities (Zimmerman 2006), and Mortazavi's analysis of the influence of Western concepts and the need for localization in Iranian archaeology (Mortazavi 2018), we can further deepen our understanding of the ethical implications of archaeological research in political contexts. All three scholars emphasize the importance of a responsible approach to archaeology, one that avoids the manipulation of archaeological data for power legitimization and identity reinforcement. However, it's crucial to recognize that even well-intentioned efforts can inadvertently contribute to problematic outcomes.

As Jordan points out in his work on colonialism and other related papers, decolonizing the practice and theory of contemporary archaeology is a pressing need. Facilitating greater indigenous participation in the field is a crucial step towards this goal. While there has been progress, archaeological practitioners, particularly in Post-Columbian archaeology, remain overwhelmingly of European descent, highlighting the ongoing need for decolonization efforts (Jordan 2009a: 44). By acknowledging the political nature of archaeology and working towards a more inclusive and equitable practice, we can strive to use archaeological knowledge for the betterment of society and avoid perpetuating harmful power dynamics. Furthermore, Jordan's work (Jordan 2009b) aligns with the core principles of liberation archaeology, which centres Indigenous voices, challenges colonial narratives, and promotes Indigenous self-determination. His analysis of the Iroquois people's experiences demonstrates their agency in resisting colonial pressures and contributes to a more equitable understanding of the past. By challenging the dominant narrative of Europeanization and emphasizing the importance of local-level research, Jordan's work helps to decolonize archaeology and create a more just and equitable field.

By adopting these principles, archaeologists can contribute to a more ethical and responsible use of archaeology, ensuring that it serves as a tool for understanding and promoting social justice, rather than reinforcing oppressive power structures.

Conclusion

While both political archaeology and the archaeology of liberation intersect politics and archaeology, it's crucial to approach both fields with a critical lens. This note primarily focuses on political archaeology due to its heightened susceptibility to manipulation and unintended consequences. However, it's essential to acknowledge that even the archaeology of liberation can be influenced by these issues. By adopting a responsible and critical approach, archaeologists can contribute to a more ethical and responsible use of archaeology, ensuring it serves as a tool for understanding and promoting social justice rather than reinforcing oppressive power structures.

As it was discussed in the preceding sections, a dual categorization of the relationship between archaeology and politics can be proposed as follows, with negative and positive aspects:

1. Political Archaeology: Archaeology as a Tool for Ideology and Power (Negative Aspect)

•Ideological Tool: This approach utilizes archaeology as a tool to justify political ideologies, nationalism, and even racism. Political archaeologists may selectively use archaeological evidence to achieve their political goals.
•Historical Distortion: This approach can lead to the distortion of history and the creation of a single, dominant narrative of the past that may serve the interests of specific groups.
•Division: Political archaeology can exacerbate differences between social and ethnic groups, creating political tensions.

2. Archaeology of liberation: Archaeology as a Tool for Justice and Freedom (Positive Aspect)

•Challenging Dominant Narratives: his approach seeks to restore the voices of the silenced and the lesser-heard narratives in history. Liberation archaeologists strive to remove archaeology from the service of ruling powers and transform it into a tool for strengthening collective identities and combating discrimination.
•Social Justice: This approach seeks to create social justice and equality, striving to combat inequality and discrimination through archaeology.
•Understanding the Complexity of History: archaeology of liberation seeks to understand the complexity of history and avoid simplistic narratives.

Finally, by recognizing the potential pitfalls of political archaeology and embracing the principles of liberation archaeology, archaeologists can contribute to a more just and equitable use of their discipline.

Both political archaeology and archaeology of liberation challenge dominant narratives. However, the political archaeologist's perspective is often shaped by the biases of those in power, seeking to maintain the status quo. In contrast, the liberation archaeologist, free from preconceptions, aims to advocate for marginalized groups.

This highlights a crucial point: every archaeological interpretation is a product of its time, culture, and the archaeologist's personal experiences. To achieve a deeper and more just understanding of the past, we must first acknowledge these biases and strive to overcome them. Only then can we truly become agents of liberation, both in our archaeological work and in our broader social context.

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