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**Commentary:**

**Archaeology and politic**

The term "*politikos*" was coined in Greece to describe the act of administering the *polis*, or community of citizens, for the common good. Today the term "politic" is used for very different purposes. This paper analyzes three meanings of the use of "politic" in archaeology: the internal politics of academia<sup>1</sup>, the political implications of "modern world archaeology" and the concept of poverty<sup>2</sup>, the political and power relationships of archaeology in the social context<sup>3</sup>.

**The owners of the past and present**

Political issues within academia and between the latter and the outside world occur when it is necessary to establish property boundaries. In the case of archaeological disciplines the intellectual, economic, identity property and ownership of access and use of cultural heritages is a complex issue. The intellectual property in western culture receives credit from the concept of "Science", a subject that is interpreted as a neutral and independent force in the service of truth. Academics are appealing to science and to freedom of thought in order to isolate from the political and social context. Nevertheless, the invention of scientific facts is nothing more than an expression of Western culture. Science, far from being a neutral force, it is rather a strong expression of identity.

Economic ownership of the archaeological heritage is reflected in the legislation, and consequently in political structures - nations - which produce the legislation. The concept of nation is a product of Western culture, which defines the identity of people, so we can see that the property is associated with identity politic terms. In fact, when a nation does archaeological excavation in another nation, it immediately triggers the question of ownership of the finds. Then we often resort to intellectual property, and science is called an appeal as a supranational level.

Access to and use of cultural heritages is primarily economic, and reflects another typical element of Western culture and identity, which is the connection between property and economy. The three components of identity mentioned - science, national and supranational structure, economy - have been exported all over the world by Western culture, and it is time that they become aware, beyond any assessment in moral terms. In particular, the discipline of archaeology present itself to the world as the owner of the right interpretation of material remains of the past in the present, and then as a builder of knowledge. In these terms is properly identify archaeology as a hybrid practice related to the political problem of representation, which requires professional accreditation and can not avoid involvement in social space.

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<sup>1</sup> Shanks M., *Archaeology and politic*, A Companion to Archaeology, Bintliff at al., 2004, 490-508

<sup>2</sup> Orser C.E.Jr, *The Archaeologies of Recent History: Historical, Post-Medieval, and Modern World*, A Companion to Archaeology, Bintliff at al., 2004, 272-290

<sup>3</sup> Jansen M., *Archaeology and Indigenous Peoples: Attitudes Towards Power in Ancient Oaxaca*, A Companion to Archaeology, Bintliff at al., 2004, 235-252

Geurds A., *The Praxis of Participatory Archaeology in Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico, Grounding the Past*, 2007, 149-180

## Poverty, misery and sobriety

To say that you cannot avoid the political and social involvement does not mean accepting supine forms of subjectivism and cultural relativism. The archaeologist has a duty to understand the context surrounding his work and interact with the social, political and cultural as they arise. However, in my opinion, he has the right to act within the socio-political context, provided its actions are explicit, supported and methodologically distinct from ordinary archaeological procedures. There is a significant difference between the Marxist Archaeology, steeped in dogma and obscure assumptions<sup>4</sup>, and the Global Historical archaeology (or Modern World Archaeology) of Orser or the "calls for interest in humanity" by Timothy Insoll<sup>5</sup>.

A transdisciplinary approach to the past, for example, could be facilitated by consumer choice studies and their direct relationship to material culture, the main object of study of the archaeological discipline. Digging back into the basic concepts of Western identity, you may want to reflect on the meaning of terms such as poverty, misery and sobriety. The identity relationship of the *homo consumer* with the consumer goods is crucial. In terms of political participation, Western Man does not describe himself "citizen" anymore but "consumer"<sup>6</sup>. The contemporary concept of poverty is associated with a shortage of consumer goods. The poor are those who possess and consume little. According to Serge Latouche<sup>7</sup> the concept of poverty is related to the contemporary definition of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product of a nation) per capita, or the value of all goods and services produced by the economy in a given period of time in relation to the individual consumer. Latouche argues that the contemporary concept of happiness is associated with GDP per capita and material wealth, while the lack of consumer goods is associated with the concept of poverty. He argues that it is necessary to decolonize the imaginary of the GDP, i.e. the capitalist economy, to build a society of abundance frugal, also called sobriety. Thus we see that the association:

→ poverty → lack of material goods → *versus* → progress → happiness

is a concept of contemporary Western identity, which has a history and should not necessarily be applied in archaeological interpretation. Orser, citing Leone and Crosby, writes, "Often the poor are not poor in their own eyes, and may also be despised in the eyes of the rich." The CNMS (*Centro per il Nuovo Modello di Sviluppo*)<sup>8</sup> instead, defines the poverty as a condition of sober use of material goods, perceived by humans as "sober abundance". Moreover, it attaches to the word "misery" the connotation of deprivation, or the inability to provide for basic needs. Orser's research therefore, might be associated more with the concept of misery than poverty while the normal condition of poverty for most of the world population in the past could be viewed as a different relationship with the material culture.

These clarifications of terminology derived from the social sciences and politics could be of great help in the interpretation of archaeological practice, and avoiding erroneous subjectifications.

## The techniques of social research and the decolonization of archaeology

The export of archaeology in non-Western countries must radically redefine its practice. It is not enough to declare that we no longer belong to a colonialist culture or surrender to the naivety of "the involvement of the indigenous." Concepts such as "myth, primitive, civilized", of course, must be abandoned but we need to make a bigger effort. We must be careful to use concepts and definitions that our culture considers universal

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<sup>4</sup> i.e. Gonzalez Garcia, Between warriors and champion: warfare and social change in the later prehistory of the north-western Iberian peninsula, Oxford Journal of Archaeology 28(1) 59-76 2009

<sup>5</sup> Insoll T., The Conceptual Challenge, 2007, 123-124

<sup>6</sup> Grillo B., [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it)

<sup>7</sup> Latouche S., Survivre au développement. De la décolonisation de l'imaginaire économique à la construction d'une société alternative, 2004

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cnms.it/>

but are not universal. One example is the unfamiliarity of concepts like "philosophy" or "ethnicity" in the context of African culture<sup>9</sup>.

Archaeology exported as Western discipline, has moved an important step in the direction of political awareness and understanding with involvement of indigenous peoples. One can notice it by Maarten Jansen's and Alexander Geurd's project in Mesoamerica. Establish relations with local culture and reflect on the construction of histories and identities, which are derived from archaeological practice, is essential. Nevertheless, the real problem is internal to Western culture.

A culture that builds concepts as "fundamental human rights" and "social justice" is a culture that comes from the review of a colonialist and nationalist identity. Beyond what we believe is right, we must ask, for example, if the fundamental rights of man are universal. I mean, personally I "believe" in the fundamental rights, and I "think" I have the right to express them, but I am not legitimized to export its. The discipline of archaeology should provide to have better professional approach to the political and social realities. The political and social sciences flourish of *ad hoc* techniques, and operations such as Action Research, the Force Field Analysis, the Practice of Problem Solving<sup>10</sup>, the socio-political Processes of Empowerment<sup>11</sup> or the Participatory Action Research (PAR)<sup>12</sup>, should be managed by professional mediators, and not by the good sense of the director of the excavation.

In the case of the experiment of Participatory Archaeology of Dr. Geurds, attention should be conveyed to the research team and the social actors involved in the project.

The research team, consisting of researchers and six students, in my opinion has not received sufficient preparation "socio-political." First, the majority of participants did not know the local language. In a project like this, which provides social participation and integration with the local component, knowledge of language is nothing short of mandatory. Secondly, I think a professional mediator should prepare the group before departure. They did archaeological and cultural training in relation to the place of destination, but I fear that the group has not had the opportunity to reflect on their identity, assumptions and preconceptions about their conceptual location in the world.

Locally, believe that they should be at least two mediators, one for relations with the political authorities and the other for relations with the population. Social research is a profession in its own right, and requires time, expertise and tools. An example: the practice of PAR showed that in a context of "social injustice" social deprivation is generated by a system. In the words of Paulo Freire "There are no oppressed without the oppressors": concepts like this are very clear in the mind of a social researcher, but I doubt that they are in the mind of an archaeologist. The mapping of the social context, interactions between social actors, the evaluation of the project and its former (see Lewin and Freire again) should be made by an entity other than the archaeological community. This cannot be both subject and object of social research.

In conclusion, I hope this little work has focused on the ambiguity and multi-functionality of the term "politic" and it emphasize on conceptual and methodological problems arising from the conjunction of the discipline of archaeology with the practice of social sciences.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, 1990; *Branchements : anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> i.e. see the work of Kurt Lewin,

<sup>11</sup> see all the discipline of Community Psychology and social Psychology, i.e. Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., & Fisch, R. (1974). "Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution". New York: Norton; or the work of Studio Kappa a.p.s., Dr. Deflorian S. and Drs Leso C., <http://www.studiokappa.it>

<sup>12</sup> i.e. see the work of Paulo Freire, especially *Pedagogia do oprimido*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1970; and the work of Centro Paulo Freire, <http://www.paulofreire.org.br/asp/Index.asp>