

CREATING THE
HUMAN PAST:
AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF
PLEISTOCENE ARCHAEOLOGY

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1

INTRODUCTION

Preamble

This book has been overdue for at least a century. Archaeology has operated for well over 150 years as a politically and ideologically influential discipline, but in all that time it has not been severely taken to task over its systematic mistakes, the haphazard way it forms its notions about the human past, or many other relevant aspects of its operation as an academic pursuit. It is essential, for its continued survival, and as a prelude to its inevitable renewal, to examine the epistemological foundation of archaeology, and to consider its development over time.

Archaeology is usually defined as the study of the past through the *systematic recovery and analysis of 'material culture'* (e.g. in Paul Bahn's *Collins Dictionary of Archaeology*). Its primary aim is to *recover, describe and classify* material remains considered to be of archaeological relevance, and from this the form and behaviour of past societies are then deduced. In a superficial way this definition may sound convincing enough, but when we begin to look at it more closely, questions soon arise.

What does this term 'material culture', which we see so often used in archaeology, actually mean? It is clear that it refers to kinds of objects archaeologists recover from excavations or observe elsewhere in the landscape, which refer in some way to past cultures. But are these cultural remains *representative* of the societies who produced or used them? Of course not, most cultural material of the past left no trace at all, for example song, dance, mime, language, mythology and so on. Where material traces of cultures actually did survive, they are in most cases mere shadows of what may have existed once. There are very few exceptions to this rule, such as stone implements, which have a comparatively high rate of survival. This is particularly relevant when we consider the Pleistocene period (the Ice Ages), which accounts for most of human history, and which can be assumed to have been subjected to much more taphonomic distortion than the Holocene, i.e. the last 10,500 years.

The conjunction of the words 'analysis' and 'to classify' as used in the above definition of archaeology calls itself for analysis. Most of this classification is quite subjective, because most collections of entities (e.g. artefacts, structures) do not present us with apparently solid bases for categorisation: they offer us no periodic tables of elements; they do not even consist of species. Most

taxonomies, even in science (including in biology), are in a state of flux, being contingent upon historical developments in the discipline concerned. In the sciences they do have one redeeming feature, however: they are falsifiable, they can be tested through processes of refutation. This is not the case with the interpretations archaeology can offer us, where non-inductive experiments are not possible. So it must be stated quite categorically that the classifications archaeology produces should be considered *arbitrary constructs of specialists*. Perhaps they are valid, perhaps *some* of them are — or perhaps *none*. We cannot readily test taxonomic propositions in archaeology.

Even less can we ‘analyse’ them. In scientific usage, ‘analysis’ refers to a separation of an entity into its components, and to a rigorous examination of its constituent elements. But as an eminent South African archaeologist, Professor Lewis-Williams (1993), has pointed out, these ‘elements’ archaeologists might perceive in remains of ‘material culture’ are creations of the researchers themselves. In reviewing the destructive activity of the discipline, Australian archaeologist David Frankel (1993) has defined the work of his peers as being similar to that of the sculptor. The individual archaeologist ‘finds’ interpretation just like the sculptor ‘discovers’ a statue in a block of marble. In both cases, the interpretations are products of creativity, and naturally they will differ between practitioners. Moreover, these ‘egofacts’, as Uruguayan archaeologist Mario Consens (2006) calls them, should be expected to differ according to the historical context in which they are offered for our consideration. The practitioner does not exist in a cultural vacuum at any one juncture in history, and even less in an academically neutral state. On the contrary, there are many currents that determine what interpretations are preferred in shaping what British archaeologist Paul Bahn (1990) has called the ‘accepted fiction’ archaeologists favour at any given time. Foremost among them are the powerful dogmas this discipline has developed. To then ‘analyse’ these taxonomies of archaeology’s consensus models tells us about how devout archaeologists perceive aspects of the physical world, about the preoccupations of archaeologists, and about their contingent prejudices. It cannot possibly tell us anything *reliable* about the human past. Certainly, some of archaeology’s interpretations are likely to be valid, perhaps even many of them, but without the facility of testing them we cannot expect ever to know which ones, or what proportion of them, we can trust.

A scientific analysis of archaeology’s favoured model of the past, as well as of its nomenclatures, at any one point in history is therefore capable of telling us a great deal about the discipline itself, its academic and heuristic dynamics, its politics, its evolution through history (Habermas 1979). It does not, however, tell us anything about the subject of archaeology, the peoples of the distant past, with any semblance of scientific rigour. In a general sense, archaeology is an academic pursuit whose role it is to create for contemporary societies the modern myths about the distant human past. Because it avails itself of a great variety of scientific procedures in this quest, many of its

interpretations are likely to be ‘true’, or at least partially valid. The importation of falsifiable propositions from scientific disciplines does not, however, automatically confer a scientific status on archaeology itself. The conditions for this would be considerably more demanding. Other human pursuits, such as industry or technology, also import scientific knowledge claims, but that does not make them sciences.

To illustrate one of the differences between archaeology and scientific pursuits, let us consider the following example. There are a number of disciplines that deal with events and phenomena of the past (for instance geology, palaeontology, sedimentology). Some of these, when they are conducted within certain rules, are scientific, others are not, even though they may be based on perhaps perfectly ‘sound’ practices. Consider the similarities and differences between astronomy and archaeology. Both deal with the past; no astronomer has ever observed an event or phenomenon of the present (for the sake of the argument, we shall ignore here the question of linear versus non-linear time). He or she can only witness the *past* in cosmic space, because cosmic present is only rendered accessible to us by *becoming* cosmic past. Some of the astronomical events we observe occurred some minutes before certain of their effects become detectable to us, others took place many millions of years ago. But despite the similarity of dealing with events and phenomena of the past, there are significant differences between astronomy and archaeology. The astronomer can make predictions about the trajectories of all sorts of variables and then test them; the archaeologist cannot. The astronomer uses universals from physics in explaining observations (e.g. spectral shift, properties of chemical elements, nuclear reactions), whereas those cited by the archaeologist refer to ethnographic analogy, deductive uniformitarianism or similarities in the products of modern experimentation (e.g. microwear on implements). Many of these explanations may be valid, perhaps even most of them. This is not the issue; the issue is that there is no mechanism available to us to test them.

These considerations, one would assume, might prompt archaeology to be open-minded, receptive to criticism and to alternative paradigms. Many individual practitioners certainly are, but the discipline as a whole is, as we shall see later in this book, hostile to challenges of its dogmas. In my experience its intransigence is not greatly different from that found in other belief systems, such as religions. The actual merits of an argument or of the evidence in question are of little concern once archaeological debates become imbued by ethnocentrism, nationalism, jingoism, academic sectarianism, or by a desire to preserve a status quo, to crush academic dissent, or to preclude interlopers from other disciplines from swaying archaeological thought. When we consider that these tendencies happen to coincide with the non-refutable character of many, if not most, archaeological interpretations, it becomes apparent that such a combination would tend to restrict the discipline’s ability to exercise self-criticism. It must be expected to lead to a

‘sluggish’ discipline, one that discourages innovativeness and resents scrutiny of its dogmas. It is likely to regard meddling ‘outsiders’ or epistemological ‘renegades’ with suspicion or respond with hostility, particularly when these seem to challenge the established authorities in the discipline. In such an academic climate, models most likely to flourish will be those that are most compatible with mainstream ideology and are least refutable. This creates an unhealthy epistemological climate for the discipline, favouring non-scientific directions and academic partisanship. The historical implications of this will be illustrated in this book with a number of cases studies.

Academic practices have a tendency to trap researchers in their own creations even at the best of times, because they encourage selective acquisition of confirming ‘evidence’ and specious defence of favoured models. In academia, there are no points to be scored for falsifying one’s own theories, or for readily conceding that someone else had falsified them. The competitive academic system that has evolved, especially in the Western world, encourages the individual implicitly to defend her or his hypothesis at all cost. Being shown to be wrong or admitting to being wrong is regarded as weakening one’s professional standing. Academic rewards are restricted to those who prevail, the verbally facile, the unyielding — and those who are careful enough to couch their claims in non-refutable terms. All of this runs counter to scientific ideals, it is rather more reminiscent of religious fundamentalism. The true scientist lacks all certainty, just as the mark of the real scholar is a profound form of academic humility: he (or she) does not know whether he is right, he does not even expect to ever find out. True science acknowledges that humans have no access to ‘objective reality’. So there are no absolutes in human knowledge, which is in a constant state of flux, based as it is on the rather modest intellectual and cognitive means our evolution has equipped us with.

As one of the ‘social sciences’ (almost an oxymoron, as the ability of an organism to study itself objectively at the unsophisticated level these disciplines operate must be questioned; Bednarik 2011), archaeology is subject to certain obvious limitations. By its very nature, theory has to abstract features, attributes, factors, etc. from their pragmatic context, and relate these elements by abstract laws or rules. This strategy works in the ‘hard sciences’, but in the ‘social sciences’, where what counts as the facts in a given situation depends on contextual interpretation, the attempt to decontextualise the elements over which theory ranges can only result in approximate predictions. The social ‘sciences’ cannot at the best of times achieve the definitive predictive success that underlies the disciplines of hard science, nor can consilience be found with them. The obvious solution for the social ‘sciences’ is to treat the background skills used in everyday contextual interpretation as a formalisable *belief system*, and thus integrate contextual interpretation into their theory. Moreover, even among the ‘social sciences’, archaeology is incompatible with the rest of them, because the methods of data gathering available to those

others are simply not there to archaeology. The societies in question do not exist, and over 99% of them have left no explanatory records whatsoever.

Another factor to be considered in evaluating archaeology is that it is a fundamentally destructive pursuit: its principal tool of enquiry, which dominates its methodology, is excavation. The British pioneer archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler compared excavation of soil-like sediments for the purpose of finding selected types of material remains in them to reading a book whose pages become blank as soon as they have been read the first time. This simile can be extended further. There should be no doubt that even the most accomplished archaeologist would only be able to ‘read’ a very few of the words in this book before the text disappears. The types of information he or she looks for would be only a small sample in the vast spectrum of possibilities, and this sample would be determined by the knowledge, preoccupations and skill available to the excavator, among other factors. He or she would only look for evidence of certain types, and not for other types. In practice, the excavator’s priorities will be conditioned by such factors as available analytical technology, research project design, the time and labour available, the available funding, academic conditioning of researcher and referees, and a variety of others — but most importantly, by the limitations of knowledge of the excavator. The actual excavation will in most cases not even be done by the experienced project director. Most archaeological excavation is in fact done by students, volunteers and paid labourers.

Not only is all excavation destructive, there are other, less obvious factors involved. For instance, Egyptologist John Romer has documented examples of recklessness in contemporary research. In the Valley of the Kings, at Thebes, he has shown that archaeological work has been destructive in unexpected ways. The numerous tombs there are hewn into limestone that rests on a hygroscopic shale facies. By opening the tombs and excavating them on a large scale, increased evaporation of moisture from the shale has led to shrinkage and geophysical adjustment, which caused stress fractures in the limestone, and rampant damage of the tomb walls and roofs. The tombs are now themselves crumbling because the natural equilibrium has been disturbed by many decades of archaeological activity. When requested to make provision for proper conservation treatment in their projects, Egyptologists point out that they have no experience in structural conservation measures; that these are costly and that research sponsors cannot afford to underwrite the substantial costs of preserving structures *in situ*. Yet these structures had previously been preserved perfectly for millennia. It has been argued that the looting by ‘professionals’, which was begun in Egypt in the early nineteenth century, is still going on there, now under the guise of archaeology. Egyptology has long ceased to produce new knowledge of great importance; it has become a routine industry. Practitioners are more concerned, some say, about preserving Pharaonic culture in more obscure tomes, in writing their papers and theses and in climbing the academic ladder of the discipline, than

in preserving this heritage for future generations.

This is of course just an example of a much deeper malaise. There are many ways in which archaeology endangers and destroys archaeological resources. Rock art, for instance, has on countless occasions been recorded by destructive methods, or has been destroyed, or allowed to be destroyed, by the very same archaeologists who were placed in charge of its protection. There are examples of this from throughout the world, ranging from the sawing off of whole panels, from Karelia to Australia, to the use of inappropriate contact recording methods. Archaeology has looted and stolen millions of items of ‘material culture’ from their native regions, ranging from the Elgin marbles Britain stole from Greece to the human body parts scavenged from graves in Tasmania, to Priam’s golden hoard from Troy, smuggled out of Turkey, held in Berlin and seized by the Red Army (Simpson 1997). Napoleon looted much of Europe and North Africa to prove France the Roman Empire’s rightful heir. Nationalistic chauvinism underpins the rapine of objects like the Rosetta Stone, ‘honourably acquired by the fortune of war’ and now held by the British Museum (consider, for instance, its refusal to return the remains of *Proconsul africanus* to Kenya). Archaeology sheds crocodile tears over the looting of archaeological resources by the suppliers of the illicit antiquities trade, while ignoring that these materials only became commodities through the promotion of archaeology (Elia 1996). There are indeed numerous facets to just the issue of equating heritage with identity. On the one hand, heritage is proclaimed to be the legacy of all humanity; on the other it is the hostage of nationalism. It stands to reason that archaeology, with its penchant for public support, needs to be examined critically.

It needs to be emphasised from the outset that many archaeologists fully recognise weaknesses of archaeology, and have often looked for ways of alleviating them. A recent example is the ‘Campaign for Sensible Archaeology’ (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=123023784380067>) which raises three principal criticisms: that the language of archaeology is “unpleasantly obtuse and dense”; “the disregard of factual evidence in favour of opinions and speculation”; and “deliberately stretching the boundaries of what is considered suitable for archaeological study, particularly projects investigating material from the very recent past and even into the present”. The second and third concerns will be addressed repeatedly throughout this volume.

Generic problems

Rather than belabouring specific problems such as those canvassed above I wish to focus on the field’s generic quandaries. Archaeology as a discipline possesses no autonomous universal theory. Its theoretical underpinnings are a potpourri of theories and scraps of theories, imported, often in corrupted form, from other disciplines. Uniformitarianism has served geology and other fields well, so a particular brand of it, modulated by selective ethnographic

analogy, provides the discipline's de facto universal theory. It facilitates the view of past human societies as mechanistic entities, in the same determinist way one would study other organisms. But humans have always been 'intelligent' organisms with highly complex cultural imperatives, throughout their history, and one must question the adequacy of this approach. Human responses were no doubt always influenced by cultural choices, by decisions that bore little or no resemblance to the action-response models prescribed by determinism. There is no allowance for individual initiative in processual archaeology (see Chapter 2), in fact this form of theory effectively reduces its subjects to organisms of predictable behaviour patterns that played out their roles in 'prehistory' in the same uniformitarian way sand grains being washed down a slope behave entirely as one could predict.

A major misunderstanding about archaeology is the belief that there exists some homogeneous entity called 'world archaeology'. This is a myth. The concept of archaeology has quite different meanings in different parts of the world, and these may be determined by political, ethnic, cultural and religious preoccupations of societies. In the U.S.A., archaeology is a sub-discipline of anthropology, whereas in many other world regions it is an autonomous discipline, a collection of quite diverse concerns ranging from numismatics to Pliocene hominoid evolution. As archaeologists Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (2000: 13) observe, "Most of the recognised 'regional traditions' of archaeological research are in fact *national* traditions which have developed within the framework of specific nation-states". The politically determined diverse spheres of interest seem to be held together particularly by the method of excavation. But this is not a technique of investigation exclusive to archaeology; it is shared with many other disciplines, such as palaeontology, sedimentology, palynology and geology. In various schools of archaeology, the term 'prehistory' is preferred, which only serves to illustrate the ethnocentrism of this discipline. Based historically on antiquarianism and the pursuit of ethnic and religious origins, this form of archaeology ignores that the term 'prehistory' is likely to be offensive to more than 90% of all humans and human societies that ever existed. The term is itself unscientific, because the implied proposition concerning the significance of written records (that they are more reliable than oral records) is unfalsifiable. The introduction of writing does have huge scientific consequences, particularly in the neurosciences (Bednarik 2012), but these are totally different from the simplistic understanding the use of the term 'prehistoric' implies.

In addition to archaeology's lack of falsifiability, which bars it from scientific status, there are other reasons precluding such a position. Among them are the controversies over the curatorial ambitions characterising the discipline. It often seeks control of access to data, objects, sites and so forth, which has led to confrontations particularly with indigenous peoples (e.g. over the possession of skeletal remains or particular artefacts, or over the dissemination of certain restricted knowledge). This raises the issue of

archaeology's political roles. The discipline arose largely from the need to underpin the emerging nation-states in the 19th century, imbuing them with early histories and origins myths. Since then the states have gained complete control of the discipline — training and licensing all archaeologists and employing nearly all. This means that in a country such as Australia, where most archaeology refers to the history of the indigenes, the state exercises control over all archaeological sites, finds and data. Bearing in mind that the militarily defeated or colonised autochthons have no reason to like or to recognise the states that usurped their sovereignty, this is then a case of adding insult to injury. Politically they object to the archaeology of the occupying power as just another form of colonialism, cognitive colonialism, and there have been heated battles between local indigenes and archaeologists in various parts of the recently colonised world.

Much ink has been spilt over the political roles of archaeology, and yet there are many professional archaeologists who still reject that archaeology has a political role. But all over the world, it is archaeologists who manage the remains and monuments of the defeated, marginalised and superseded cultures for the victorious states whose servants they are. It is the archaeologist who decides whether there was a previous Hindu or Jewish temple at the site where a mosque now stands (a decision likely to involve much bloodshed), and it is the archaeologist who decides by what means the victims of this or that mass grave met their end. Throughout the history of the discipline, archaeologists have created fictitious grandiose pasts for nation states, most especially in dictatorships. Examples can be cited from all over the world, but most especially from Europe. Just as the archaeologists of the former Soviet Union were obliged to serve their political masters, many of the fierce nationalist movements in modern Russia are led by archaeologists and historians. As the historian E. J. Hobsbawm (1992: 3) stated, “historians are to nationalism what poppy growers in Pakistan are to heroin addicts; we supply the essential raw material for the market”. To which the archaeologists Kohl and Fawcett (2000: 13) added, “rather than just the producers of raw materials, historians and archaeologists may occasionally resemble more the pushers of these mind-bending substances on urban streets, if not the mob capos running all stages of the sordid operation”. The political uses made of archaeology's “findings have facilitated ethnic clashes and cleansing, bigotry and nationalism far more often than they have promoted social justice” (*ibid.*). Such comments are perhaps primarily intended to refer to the involvement of archaeologists in the USSR, Nazi Germany, Salazar's Portugal, Franco's Spain, to the Balkan countries and their archaeologically supported rampant nationalism, as well as that of the Caucasus region or the Near East or apartheid South Africa, among others — but even in the most ‘democratic’ countries, archaeology can have sinister overtones. For instance most Australian archaeologists would scoff at the suggestion that they have political roles, but they do. One of countless examples illustrating

the point is the plight of the rock art precinct of the Dampier Archipelago, on the continent's northwestern coast. It is regarded as the world's largest concentration of petroglyphs, and its destruction by industry since the 1960s has been greatly facilitated by archaeologists, particularly since about 1980 when archaeologists began supervising the controlled destruction of countless rock art sites. So much so that when I launched a major campaign to save this incredible monument I found, to my amazement, almost no support of it among Australian archaeologists. Their argument, no doubt, was that they should not be seen as politically active, when in fact they were more concerned about what would happen to their lucrative consultancy contracts with the immensely powerful corporate interests operating at the site. Many similar examples can be cited from throughout the world.

The notion of idealism and the political neutrality of archaeology derives very little support from reality. Archaeologist Neil Asher Silberman (2000), in a paper entitled 'Promised lands and chosen peoples: the politics and poetics of archaeological narrative', speaks of "the archaeologist with a thousand faces", and especially the "Archaeologist as Hero" (the John Cullinane and Indiana Jones figures we are well familiar with). Bruce Trigger (1984, 1989), yet another archaeologist, divides archaeologies into nationalist, colonialist and imperialist, to which Silberman adds two more categories, touristic archaeology and an 'archaeology of protest'. Archaeologists who refuse to accept that their discipline is politically active have apparently never given any thought to the matter.

Another aspect of their discipline needing attention is its vexatious relationship with religion, which we will return to later. The most obvious manifestation of this is Biblical Archaeology, a field where religious preoccupations are frequently so intertwined with the pretence of an academic pursuit that its value to learning is hardly self-evident. However, there are many less obvious correlations with religion. It is not at all surprising that many of the greatest 'prehistorians' were men of the cloth, particularly for the century after Darwin's *Origin of the species* in 1859. Once the Church realised the threat of evolutionist ideology it sought to inform itself through encouraging the pursuit of archaeology by its priests. This had the added benefit of watering down the more strident strains of fervency in the discipline. Many aspects of it soon reflected a mild theocracy, for instance the way Palaeolithic cave art 'sanctuaries' (note the terminology used) were validated resembled the way religious shrines were (Freeman 1994). Still today we have a Biblical terminology to define supposedly secular archaeological concepts, such as the 'African Eve' or 'African Adam', or the 'Garden of Eden'. Still today archaeology operates on the basis of confirmation (seeking to confirm that which is already assumed to be true), the framework that sustains religions but which is the very opposite of refutation, the way of science. And still today devout archaeologists are apprehensive of science, fearing its methodology and occasionally attacking its practitioners when they turn their attention to

archaeology. Indeed, recently an archaeologist, universally agreed to be one of the finest America has produced, published a paper entitled “On science bashing: a bashful archaeologist speaks out”, in which the founder of what has come to be called the New Archaeology said:

“Humanists [in archaeology] are committed to the defense of their chosen identity. Their methods are vacuous and their attempts at learning pathetic. When challenged, their only recourse is to *ad hominem* argument. Those who do not share their privileged knowledge are to be understood as defective persons, persons blinded to the truth, or persons who deny the truth in order to pursue dubious social goals.” (Binford 2000–2001: 334)

Humanist archaeology’s fear of science seems entirely irrational, because practically all archaeological progress nowadays is provided by the sciences, especially physics, chemistry and the earth sciences. Thus on the one hand, scientific data and propositions are eagerly imported from the sciences, but on the other hand the methodology of science is categorically rejected in favour of the discipline’s de-facto universal theory of latent uniformitarianism and ethnographic analogy. To cushion archaeology from the ‘harshness’ of science, a field called archaeometry has been created some decades ago. It seems to be intended as a kind of hybrid discipline, but, having attended many such conferences, it seems to me more like a refuge, a patch of neutral turf where the two philosophically incompatible sides meet ritually.

Another generic problem with archaeology concerns matters that I am a little reluctant to raise, because I know from experience that overzealous archaeologists tend to become agitated when I do. But in the interest of explaining generic problems with the discipline I have to find a way of conveying this here, and do so as gently as possible. Some archaeologists are exceptionally well informed and competent, but many have surprisingly low standards of archaeological knowledge. At least in part this is related to the fragmentation of the discipline into regional and usually national ‘schools’, and the lack of effective dialogue between these. The Anglo-American school, for instance, seems to assume that everything of any consequence has been published in English. Not only has more than 80% of all archaeological knowledge never been made available in that language, much of what has been published has appeared in exotic, unknown journals or volumes. So here the problem is one of academic parochialism. By contrast, I have never met a Russian archaeologist who is not fully fluent in at least two languages, but most seem to manage several. Between them, the scholars at a major Russian archaeology department can probably read most languages archaeological material has appeared in. Much the same applies in many other parts of the world. This tends to yield a bland conformist version of the discipline that is unaware of its limitations. To illustrate with an example: the knowledge that *Homo erectus* managed to colonise island Wallacea has been available for

almost five decades, but had not been published in English until recently. Much the same applies to most of the information concerning early art beginnings, and numerous other special fields or methods (examples will crop up later in this volume). The problem with such a profound lack of archaeological knowledge at many Anglophone university departments is of course that it limits the information available to their students, it encourages more parochialism in the next generation, and it renders the constructs of the human past promoted by these institutions hopelessly skewed.

I apologise to any scholar who feels offended by my bluntness, but this is an important point to make here. This book is a sincere attempt to address legitimate concerns; it is hopefully free of gratuitous critique, and it is intended to communicate, to facilitate improvement of the discipline. A somewhat dismal picture of archaeology would emerge if this attempt to deconstruct it were to lead to the view that the discipline is incapable of learning from its mistakes in the way it has historically treated dissident scholars (see Chapter 4).

When archaeology turns feral

Most archaeologists of the world work, directly or indirectly (as consultants), for the state, and their discipline is an institution of the state. Yet from the perspective of the people of long-gone cultures, these states usurp their histories. There are very few states in the world today whose sovereignty was not acquired through war, conquest, genocide, violent colonialism or atrocious suppression of previous societies. Just as all Histories is inevitably written by the winners, most pre-Histories deal with the losers, the societies supplanted or extinguished. The study of these ‘loser societies’ by the state that represents the usurping ‘winners’ will always be a political process. If it is conducted by agents of today’s state it is a re-writing of history by our contemporary governments. Some archaeologists will scoff at this truism, which already indicates how biased their judgment is, and how inadequately they are qualified to objectively and sensitively interpret the history of previous peoples. Other archaeologists do accept its validity, but argue that some forms of archaeology do make an effort to overcome the fact that their practitioners serve political masters.

While no doubt correct, it is also true that both archaeological and anthropological research have been used to support the hegemony of imperialist powers, as well as the subjection of indigenous peoples. The discipline was formed during the 19th century in response to nationalistic needs, as already mentioned. The inherent ambiguity of all archaeological data lends itself ideally to the hegemonic interpretation of the past in terms of current political concerns. Any careful study of the history of archaeology during the last two centuries will reveal that archaeological ‘interpretations’ and even priorities merely reflect contingent politics of the time in question.

Enlightened archaeologists have suggested that since archaeological interpretation is a form of political discourse it should be subject to the same standards of public accountability as other forms of expression (e.g. Silberman 2000: 250).

The political dimension is not limited to archaeology, it has also been encountered in a variety of contexts in anthropology. Social scientists, especially psychologists and anthropologists, have for many decades been engaged in such areas as interrogation techniques, counter-insurgency policies, methods of torture and intelligence gathering, and other areas of partisan use of the social and behavioural sciences (cf. Escobar 1991: 659; Price 2000, 2005; Houtman 2006, 2007; McNamara 2007). For instance, there has been much debate about the recruitment of anthropologists as spies, e.g. by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States (CIA). The Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP) or the Intelligence Community Scholars Program (ICSP) provide other examples of pathological anthropology in the United States, while corresponding programs in Canada or Australia are perhaps more secretive or more subtle. In the U.S.A., jobs for anthropologists to work for the CIA have been openly advertised through such bodies as the American Anthropological Association. Such academics are required to provide briefings “directly to senior policy-makers and military commands”. Covert researchers are encouraged to attend academic conferences, where they must “show a high tolerance for ambiguity” — whatever that might mean. Such anthropologists will also have a high tolerance for the CIA’s long history of torture, terrorism and covert support for anti-democratic movements anywhere in the world. The incursion of the CIA into the discipline of anthropology is well illustrated by the removal, in 1990, of prohibitions against covert research in the AAA’s *Principles of Professional Responsibility*, its code of ethics.

The concept of a ‘pathological archaeology’, on the other hand, has not been much discussed so far (but see Bednarik 2006, 2007, 2008). Since the time Australian indigenes gained a political voice, after it was decreed by referendum in 1967 that they be counted as people (removing Section 127 of the constitution), and their prior settlement of the continent was legally acknowledged in 1992, they have often expressed their opposition to archaeological and anthropological practices. Even in recent years, archaeology professors still fought Aborigines in the courts over custodianship of archaeological materials. Skeletal remains arrive in Australia every year from museums abroad, having been supplied by the grave robbers of earlier times. Some Australian archaeologists still exist in the delusional state of believing that they represent science and therefore have inalienable academic rights that should have precedence over indigenous rights. But we have already seen that archaeology as currently practiced by the state is not a science; it is a political pursuit of interpreting the human past from a biased perspective. Moreover, science has no custodial demands and it has no agenda of academic exclusion — as state archaeology certainly does.

The purest expression of a pathological archaeology, however, is the participation of archaeologists in the deliberate, systematic and needless destruction of archaeological monuments, such as rock art sites or stone arrangements in remote regions (Dyson 1997; Arcà et al. 2001; Bustamente 2006; Bednarik 2007). For instance, many millions of dollars have been paid to archaeologists at Dampier Archipelago, Western Australia, to facilitate the perverse destruction of the world's largest concentration of rock art. The objections of the owners of the monument, the local indigenes, were ignored in this. No use was made of the protective legislation of Western Australia concerning the rock art, and when the responsible public authorities were challenged by concerned outsiders to exercise their responsibilities, they failed to do so. The underlying issue is succinctly expressed by the late Vine Deloria, a First Nations leader in the U.S.A.: "Western civilization, unfortunately, does not link knowledge and morality but rather, it connects knowledge and power and makes them equivalent."

The unsatisfactory state of the discipline

Another summary view of archaeology was bluntly expressed by an influential Australian writer, Frank Campbell (2006):

"Archaeologists dig up their own future. And there's the rub: their careers depend on what they find, how important their finds and how others interpret them. Careers are at stake. There are very few decent jobs. There's a nasty hierarchy to negotiate. ... Archaeologists dig up someone else's past, which means nothing but trouble. ... From Wales to Australia to Jordan, the present molests the past for its own nefarious purposes. ... If careerism and nationalism were all archaeologists had to worry about, they'd be laughing and drinking instead of just drinking. The tragedy is that archaeology has promised a grand narrative but can deliver only conjecture. The archaeologist has no clothes."

If this were a preview of the direction into which public perception might be developing, it would not augur well for the discipline's future. In contrast to other fields of academia, archaeology produces nothing of economic value (unless the production of TV films is considered to be of economic value). It therefore depends much on the public's favour, or indeed, its benevolence. If society at large were to discover that the greatest threat to cultural heritage does not come from tourists, looters or amateur archaeologists, but from professional practitioners, it might well become inclined to withdraw its patronage from public archaeology. In recent years much effort to enthuse the public's interest in archaeology has become evident, especially through a variety of television programs, ranging from hard documentary to reality shows and imaginative interpretation. An excellent vehicle of public education,

such programs tend to portray archaeology in the most positive terms, and I have been involved in the production of many of them. However, much of this rapport with an admiring public depends on maintaining the image of the archaeologist as the intrepid truth-seeker, a font of archaeological wisdom, a fine ‘scientist’ working for the betterment of humanity, consumed by a magnificent obsession for discovery and caring for little else.

Of course there are individual archaeologists who would fit this bill, or at least satisfy some of these points; but the full picture is rather different. Archaeology today is primarily about careers, and as Campbell notes succinctly, careers are built on results. Personal ambitions override sound research designs, and a complex interplay of negative factors, including a “nasty hierarchy”, determines direction. A preliminary epistemological analysis of archaeology, i.e. an examination of how it acquires and interprets its claims of knowledge, suggests several areas of concern. First, its interpretations are generally not testable, hence it cannot be regarded as a scientific pursuit. Second, it is historically prone to mistakes, perhaps more so than any other discipline or academic pursuit (as we will soon see). Third, its paradigm is determined by consensus or majority decision, which is guided very much by prestige and academic weight (the ‘silverback phenomenon’: assertive alpha males determine dominant models). Fourth, it does not take kindly to being corrected; in fact it treats dissenters badly. And it is particularly repressive, even callous, when the dissent comes from scholars who are not recognised as professional members of the discipline. An example is the *Valetta Convention* in Europe, which seeks to outlaw amateur archaeology on the pretence that it is damaging to archaeological monuments, when in fact dependent archaeologists (those working for the state) may be the principal threat to archaeological resources, in the form of pathological practitioners.

Other dimensions of the discipline are its various ambiguities. For instance, it both supports and opposes the aspirations of indigenous peoples relating to cultural heritage. It creates taxonomies or systems of material evidence, but there is no evidence that these are valid reflections of reality. It makes extensive use of the sciences and seems to have aspirations of becoming a science, yet it maintains a non-scientific epistemology by rejecting principles of falsifiability. Archaeology values its material evidence and jealously guards it, yet it is also the most effective destroyer of this evidence. In fact it destroys nearly all evidence — not intentionally, one might say, but because it lacks the methods and understanding it has yet to gain (e.g. sediments are always destroyed by excavation, and more than 99% of the information available from them is discarded in the process; or by excavating bones and placing them in a collection, the destruction of their DNA is greatly accelerated; Pruvost et al. 2007); and there are countless similar effects, many of which we cannot as yet understand. The most important technique of archaeology is excavation, resulting in the creation of recordings supposedly depicting the stratigraphy of the sediments, and yet there is no facility to test the

suppositions made by the recording researcher; the strata no longer exist. In the final analysis, archaeology cannot even be described as a discipline. The only discipline it exercises is consensus, and if we removed from it every area of research that effectively belongs to another discipline or field (geomatics, statistics, sedimentology, nuclear physics or rock art science, to name just a few), archaeology turns out to consist of very little autonomous knowledge; in fact excavation technique is its only major disciplinary asset.

The points raised here are only preliminary, there are more fundamental, epistemologically debilitating factors to consider. They will emerge in due course as we begin to examine the various philosophical or theoretical models that have dominated archaeology, and that have determined the direction of the discipline historically. This is the task of the next chapter.

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