

10 years

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FORUM:

CHATTING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

With the tenth anniversary of the journal we wanted to take a deep breath and look into the future.

This forum consists of short pieces from colleagues around the world that discuss general and specific issues regarding public archaeology in the coming years. We asked for an open format, trying to grasp a fresher approach than the one usual academic writing permits.

As with other forums in the journal, we will keep it open from now on in case any of you want to participate too. It is a good occasion to debate the current and coming role of public archaeology and we hope this selection of papers helps to foster it.

We originally invited 50 people to participate. However, these difficult times made it difficult for some to do so. Nevertheless, we have a good set of contributions that will be of interest to you all.

Enjoy it (and participate if you feel you have something else to say).



Laugh now,
but one day
we'll be
in charge.

BONESY

**FORUM: Chatting about the future of public archaeology
TOWARD A DECOLONIAL AND DENATIONALIZED PUBLIC
ARCHAEOLOGY**

Rafael GREENBERG

It has been more than a decade since I completed my own participation in a public archaeology project at Rogem Gannim, in West Jerusalem (Natasha Dudinski, "The Past on our Doorstep," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef3fPcrB11c>); since then, in the role of an archaeological activist and advocate, I have observed the progress of public archaeology in Israel and abroad and participated in the local and global dialogue (Clark and Horning 2019), without initiating new fieldwork. This brief note, though looking toward the future as requested by the editors, is therefore retrospective in origin, rather than being a missive from the front lines.

It has become increasingly clear to me that 'public archaeology', however defined, has no intrinsic moral advantage: it can only be as good as its political and institutional contexts – and the motivations of its practitioners – allow. There are inspiring projects of public engagement built on principles of mutual education, on bottom-up organization, on a commitment to equality and to human dignity, and a responsibility toward non-human partners. Such projects can empower silenced and marginalized communities; they can preserve and inscribe places, events and things in the collective memory that power-holders might wish to erase and to forget. But alongside such projects – and sometimes even coopting and corrupting them – are communal, corporate or governmental efforts to enlist various publics to serve, naturalize or disguise the political, economic or cultural interests of powerful and dominant institutions. I have suggested 'digwashing' as a general term for the conduct of archaeological and anthropological research as a prelude to, and post-facto justification for, destructive development by governments, corporations, and local actors (as demonstrated in the most recent Rio Tinto scandal). Institutionalized public

archaeology is often a special – and effective – form of digwashing: if ‘the community’ (however defined), ‘minorities’ or ‘youth’ are involved in an excavation – it must be a good thing. In Israel, the bulk of public archaeology events and excavations are sponsored by the governmental Israel Antiquities Authority. These might range from seemingly innocuous ‘open days’ at salvage excavations or ancient cooking workshops to mass recruitment for nationalist tourist projects, but in each and every case they serve to shore up conservative national values, since these are the safest and in fact the only values that may be espoused by government employees. Perhaps the most conservative of all these values is that which sees archaeology as *the* way – rather than *a* way – to investigate the material past, and which therefore places the archaeologist – the Expert – at the apex of the pyramid, and the laborers at its base.

It has, by now, become fairly common knowledge that traditional archaeology carries with it “imperial durabilities” (Stoler 2016) – modes of perception, interpretation and practice that are infused with capitalist and colonialist assumptions. These modes are everywhere evident: in its epistemology, in the structures of fieldwork, in the way the past is cordoned off from the present and treated as a resource that must be mapped, curated, extracted from the public domain and exploited for the benefit of hegemonic groups. Broadly speaking, there is a teleology in archaeology that vindicates the current order of things, whether it is the superiority of technology or the essential existence of nations and, most recently, of genetically distinct ‘populations’.

Archaeologists across the globe have tasked themselves with escaping this burden through decolonization of the discipline. This can mean different things – or at least different priorities – in different places, such as diversifying the ranks of practicing archaeologists as demanded by antiracist activists in different parts of the world or incorporating indigenous points of view in fieldwork, in management of sites and in curation of artifacts across the Americas and in Australia. In the West Asian and East Mediterranean regions, in which traditional archaeology is most strongly embedded, colonial habits and structures have been absorbed in all modern nations, as well as in the Euro-American metropole, making decolonization (and denationalization) both a local and global task. While this should be led by archaeologists in academia, who usually enjoy greater

job security than other practitioners and whose speech is more often protected, the highly conservative nature of government-funded universities in Israel and across the region make curriculum change and reordering of research priorities highly unlikely for the immediate future.

Nonetheless, public archaeological projects – which public universities often cannot help but support – might offer an avenue to decolonization. This, I would like to suggest, may best be achieved by adopting and promoting projects in contemporary archaeology that defamiliarize what appears to be the natural order of things and promote dissensus (González-Ruibal 2019). In the context of Israel/Palestine, projects in the archaeology of the contemporary era that examine and record, for example, the physical effects of prolonged conflict (depopulation and erasure of Palestinian villages and neighborhoods; construction of walls, fences and barriers; the materials of surveillance and crowd control); the Europeanization of the Israeli settler landscape; the materiality and lived experience of socialist, statist and neoliberal housing and development ideologies; or the spaces of incarceration and segregation of migrants or ‘illegal’ laborers, are positioned to integrate public participation in its most emancipatory sense. This due to several salient qualities:

1. They are a good avenue to leveling the playing field between institutions and communities, as they are governed by few regulations, require readily available recovery and recording techniques (in contrast to increasingly technologized excavations in distant and often inaccessible locations) and can be carried out on limited budgets.
2. Dealing, as they do, with immediately recognizable materials and objects, they defuse the mystification of the past and democratize access and interpretation.
3. They record contemporary archaeological landscapes that may often be ephemeral and enjoy few, if any, legal protections, thus contributing to the archive and to collective memory.
4. They contribute original, unexpected perspectives to matters of vital contemporary relevance, potentially undermining commonplace or stereotyped perceptions engendered in social and political echo chambers.

Since it addresses contentious, still-smoldering conflicts rather than mythologized pasts and abolishes modernist definitions of the proper mandate of archaeology (with their premodern cutoff dates, such as the year 1700 in Israel), Public Contemporary Archaeology will, almost by definition, subvert institutional cooptation intended to further nationalist or residual colonialist agendas. Once the success and independence of such projects has been established in academia, however, and to avoid them being only a temporary 'hack' of a fundamentally conservative system, Contemporary Archaeology will have to be introduced into the standard archaeological curriculum and research structure, at the expense of outmoded epistemologies. Once that happens, archaeologists working with local communities can work their way back in time, to premodern and ancient periods, never losing sight of their responsibility to democratization of the archaeological process and to local, rather than state, communities and institutions.

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