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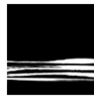

The future of archaeology lies in not taking
JAMES L. FLEXNER

James L. Flexner (Department of Archaeology, Sydney University, james.flexner@sydney.edu.au)

Archaeology increasingly frames itself in Australia and elsewhere in terms of Indigenous community collaboration and leadership, and even decolonisation. Yet there are certain concepts inherent to disciplinary theory and practice that are at odds with these formulations of what archaeology could or should be. Our institutional mandates as workers in institutions that derive from and support capitalist enterprise, which goes for consulting archaeology as well as government and academia, often put archaeologists in inherently compromised positions. By leveraging an anti-property and anti-profit approach to our work, we can reconcile some of these issues while offering a more credible and sincere approach to partnerships with communities of various definitions.

Brightening prospects, looming storm clouds

Anyone familiar with the history of archaeology will point to its origins as a colonialist and extractive endeavour, particularly where Europeans, usually of the wealthy and male variety, would travel abroad to ransack foreign lands in pursuit of "antiquities" and "curios" (e.g. Trigger 1989, 1996). Current practitioners would like to imagine that we live in more enlightened times, and certainly the worst excesses of antiquarian collecting are no longer part of the mainstream in our discipline (though see Byrne 2014). However there remain major contradictions and limitations in our ability to offer sincere and credible partnerships, particularly for those of us working with Indigenous communities either here in Australia or overseas.

Since the early 2000s, particularly following the publication of a landmark issue of *World Archaeology* on the topic (Marshall 2002), there has been a proliferation of community archaeologies. There is now an entire *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage* dedicated to the topic, which has published three issues per year since 2014. A flourishing of alternative archaeologies has proliferated in this sphere, some stemming directly from community archaeology and others developing in parallel. These include public archaeology (Moshenska 2017), activist archaeologies (Atalay et al. 2014), even punk and anarchist archaeologies (Borck and Sanger 2017; Flexner and Gonzalez-Tennant 2018; Morgan 2015; Richardson 2017). Increasingly archaeologists identify our work as part of a broader global "decolonising" initiative, with Australian Aboriginal archaeology leading the vanguard in many ways (Smith and Jackson 2006; Smith et al. 2019).

At the same time that attention to alternative and socially-engaged archaeologies has expanded, particularly in academic archaeology, there is growing skepticism over whether we have truly established the kinds of egalitarian relationships that community archaeology and its cognates seem to promise (Flexner 2021). For example, there is a concern that the rapid development of an orthodoxy around "community consultation" in the field has led to the creation of a "tick-box"

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exercise that eschews real relationship building and reciprocity (La Salle and Hutchings 2018). Worse still, the appearance of community involvement might be used to sidestep a legitimate critical or ethical examination of current practices (for an Australian example see Zorzin 2014).

Contract archaeology, or consulting archaeology as it is more typically known in Australia, is simultaneously the largest employer and source of fieldwork and data in the discipline and a site of multiple contestations and contradictions (e.g. Gnecco and Dias 2015; Hutchings and La Salle 2015). Interviews with practicing archaeologists, including in Australian contexts, have revealed an alarming disillusionment with the field, particularly among junior and precariously employed field technicians and subcontractors who form a substantive but unstable backbone in the archaeological labour force (e.g. Hamilakis 2015; Zorzin 2014, 2015). Australian archaeologists report a concerning increase in casualisation at the same time that the level of tertiary education required to work in the field is increasing (Mate and Ulm 2016, 2021). These patterns have been linked to deteriorating conditions in government regulation and economic uncertainty around the sustainability of archaeological and cultural heritage management more broadly. If nothing else, the existence of this situation justifies a serious re-examination of current standards and sincere exploration of alternative practices and frameworks.

Distant shores

In an environment where archaeologists working across academia, consulting, government, and museums are under immense pressure, many have ceased to imagine what the future will look like at all, focusing their energies on simply completing the tasks at hand and surviving in the present moment (Högberg et al. 2017). Many of us, however, feel a sense of frustration as well as distress at what the environment of extreme economic austerity combined with unrealistic pressures and expectations of professional productivity is doing to our colleagues and to our field of study. I think it is imperative that we at least try to consider alternative pathways that take us away from the current situation and into a better environment for both archaeologists and the communities we serve (e.g. Flexner 2020; Zorzin 2021).

What follows is not, I hope, to be taken as yet another academic missive reprimanding the consulting industry fired from the comfort of an ivory tower. Indeed, many of the problems that can be identified for consulting archaeology are equally relevant to academia (McNiven and Russell 2005). In both cases, the underlying problem lies in the institutional expectation and indeed mandate to extract information in order to produce commodities: reports and recommendations for developers in consulting; journal articles, books, and university courses in academia, all of which are made increasingly inaccessible to the broader public through one mechanism or another. Year upon year there is a tacit imperative to produce these commodities faster and more cheaply, based on the incorrect economic assumption that growth and progress are the same thing (see Kallis 2018; Victor 2015).

The impact of the growth mentality on archaeology more broadly, and particularly on consulting archaeology in New South Wales cannot be understated. Whether our income ultimately depends on developers or deans, the pressures to produce continually and at a high level are a recipe for burnout, mental health deterioration, and defection from the field, especially among otherwise bright and motivated junior colleagues. Worse, the speed at which "deliverables" are expected impacts on our ability as archaeologists to build equitable and legitimate social relationships with the communities that hold the biggest stake in the work we do. While it would be naïve to imagine this situation will change overnight or even within the next few years, I believe it is time to start "prefiguring" (see Borck 2018) the kinds of approaches to cultural heritage and community collaboration that we would want to see in a future version of archaeology in and

beyond NSW. Prefiguration is based on the idea that we can imagine a better world, and then introduce the patterns of thought and behaviour that would exist in the improved or even ideal setting while still living in the imperfect world we have.

For example, many archaeologists would like to work in an environment where relationships between archaeologists and Indigenous communities are more equal, and Indigenous people are given the authority to lead cultural heritage initiatives. The impetus for archaeology in such a situation would not follow a developer-led, developer-pays model (or for academics, a grant-led, ARC-pays model). Rather it would be based on an agenda that is set and managed by Indigenous people. Archaeology in this case is not classed as a "development" activity where ultimately the goal is to allow the construction or resource extraction activity to go ahead. Again, the academic equivalent exists where there is a "fast science" model that places people on the hamster wheel of grant-fieldwork-publication-further grant application. Rather in an ideal situation archaeology is embedded integrally within practices of respecting and promoting Indigenous heritage, while contributing to environmental sustainability and Caring for Country.

To an extent, some of this is already happening in Australian archaeology and has been for some time, in both academic (Smith et al. 2019) and consulting (Owen 2015) contexts, including consulting projects with scholarly outcomes (Bird and Rhoads 2020), among remote communities (Greer 2010) and in urban environments (Skitmore et al. 2019). This should be taken as encouragement. Archaeology as a field is responsive to current concerns, including the concerns of Indigenous people. However, we should not be too complacent in assuming that just because we embed community principles and even a degree of leadership that we have overcome very real and entrenched inequality in terms of access to knowledge and resources (Flexner 2021). If archaeology is going to be relevant to marginalised communities, it needs to be responsive to very real and immediate concerns including climate change, issues of nutrition and subsistence, control of land and resources, and intertwined educational and economic concerns (see Chirikure 2021; Thompson 2011).

Changing tack

Substantive changes in archaeological practice across consulting, academia, and government will require both conceptual and practical transformations in what we do and how we think about the objects of our study. Here I want to point to one example of each area: a theoretical concept that holds us back, namely "cultural property", and a practical limitation, the only partially realised potential of "community involvement". These are of course only preliminary suggestions in a much more complicated and long-term series of essential conversations both within archaeological circles, and among broader publics. Nonetheless, we have to start wherever we can make improvements in order to build momentum in those areas where the discipline should make progress.

The concept of cultural property has been built into the legislative and statutory conceptualisation of archaeological heritage both in Australia and internationally. Byrne (2014) substantially challenged the assumptions built into Western formulations of cultural heritage because they are out of step with Asian understandings of archaeological places and things. What the West conceptualises as inert matter representing an authentic material trace of past lives, Byrne's Asian interlocutors identify as valued for its inspirited nature or supernatural efficacy. This formulation should sound familiar to archaeologists working closely with Indigenous people in Australia and the Pacific, especially as the spiritual significance of archaeological places and artefacts forms the basis for value among these living cultures (Brown 2008, 2019; Flexner et al. 2018).

Carman (2005) offers a more radical approach, explicitly arguing against the notion of cultural

property as antithetical to an ethical and community-oriented archaeology, including within Western contexts. The property concept is seen as damaging to archaeology precisely because it rests within the coercive mechanisms of state power (and ultimately capital) to ensure that what could be a common heritage is controlled by a limited and arguably elitist selection of individuals and institutions. While the state arguably "protects" heritage by treating it as property to be managed, the management process transforms the "resource" into the intellectual property of researchers, and often the physical property of the developers who fund archaeological work.

To be clear, I am not suggesting "good" outcomes never result from these arrangements. There would be plenty of examples where consultancy projects engaged a community, carried out work of a high standard, and produced a collection subsequently housed in a museum or other repository where culturally significant artefacts can be accessed reasonably easily by appropriate publics. However, if the ultimate goal is to decolonise our discipline, we must consider other paradigms that underpin the ways we think about material culture. One alternative highlighted by Carman (2005: 41-44) is the notion of the gifting economy, in which value is derived not by accumulating things, but by our ability to forge relationships through mutual reciprocity.

What would a gifting archaeology look like? Some answers can be found when we take a different approach to the concept of community as it relates to archaeology. Archaeologists need to stop imagining and representing "community" as a singular, unified entity to be consulted in a process that clears the way for archaeological projects to go ahead. Instead, reciprocal relationships have to be built over decades or even generations. Archaeology in such a formulation could step away from the short-term, project and product-oriented approach that dominates practice in our discipline. Archaeological practitioners should consider shifting the timescales of our proposals to reorient activities towards caring for people, places, stories, and environment. These potentials can be realised if archaeological praxis includes an ethos of conviviality and care (Caraher 2019). Cultural heritage could be protected and managed in public trust, via the leadership of Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers, rather than from individual private contracts with developers or between academics and their universities and funding bodies.

We could position our work within a shared commons of knowledge, technical skills and expertise, which is removed from the growth-oriented mindset of employers under capitalism. Archaeology could shift away from an activity that often extracts objects, materials, and knowledge from their source communities without providing a substantive benefit in return, often clearing the way for extractive industry in the process. Ours could be one of the first "degrowth" industries (Flexner 2020; Zorzin 2021), that first slows and eventually reverses or moves away from the ecological and cultural catastrophes caused by five centuries of colonialism and capitalist "development."

Building a new archaeology in the shell of the old one

As noted above, this call for action should not be taken as naïve idealism, though utopian thinking has its place to fight back against ideological rigidity (see Mannheim 1936). Nor do I want anyone to imagine that this situation will be turned around overnight. Changing existing systems, habits, and institutions is not an easy proposition. The ideological construct of "capitalist realism" permeates societal discourses, insisting that capitalism is the only viable means of constructing a civilisation and therefore no alternatives are possible (Fisher 2009). Sixty millennia of Aboriginal occupation in the Australian continent show that alternatives to capitalist patterns of environmental management, political economy, and social life are both possible and, in many ways, desirable (Pascoe 2018). Archaeology's unique contribution to this situation is its focus on

material evidence including the landscapes and artefacts that are essential to developing an interdisciplinary, community-oriented, and holistic understanding of the Indigenous past and its relation to the present. One step in the process will be challenging and potentially discarding much of the unhelpful disciplinary received wisdom in archaeology. Original and sometimes radical concepts in theory and practice will need to be developed to work towards an archaeology that truly respects and honours our obligations to Indigenous partners, including those who increasingly join us as disciplinary colleagues (Menzies and Wilson 2020).

I am always inspired by the International Workers of the World's call to "build a new society in the shell of the old one." There are very real institutional restrictions complicating the degree to which we are empowered to work in contradiction to or outside our profession's expectations and obligations across government, consulting, and academia. On the other hand, archaeologists have a duty to push back against unfair and destructive political and economic arrangements in as many places and in as many ways as possible. It is essential that we build the capacity for collaborative archaeology to create opportunities for new things to grow, or to encourage existing spaces of resistance to reshape archaeological practice (Flexner 2018). This is especially the case where alternative approaches to archaeology can alleviate immediate suffering within existing systems. We have only a better archaeology to build to contribute to a better world in which all of us can live.

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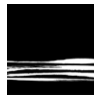

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