NEW PATHS FOR THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY?

¿Nuevos caminos para el futuro de la arqueología pública?

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ABSTRACT   Writing about the future when the present keeps changing at a dramatic pace can be complicated. Public archaeology is based upon a simple (non)definition that offers infinite possibilities for its development. However, there are a series of themes and practices that have now become standardised and require reexamination. Still, we can continue building new paths, and this paper will try to offer some brief notes on those I consider most pressing.

    Key words: Public Archaeology, Future, Society, Economy, Politics.

RESUMEN   Hablar de futuro cuando el presente sigue sucediendo a un ritmo vertiginoso puede resultar complicado. La arqueología pública se sustenta sobre una (in)definición sencilla que abre infinidad de posibilidades para su desarrollo. Sin embargo, hay una serie de temáticas y prácticas que se han normativizado y requieren un poco más de reflexión. Sobre ellas, podemos seguir construyendo nuevos caminos y este artículo tratará de ofrecer algunos breves apuntes sobre los que considero más acuciantes.

    Palabras clave: Arqueología pública, Futuro, Sociedad, Economía, Política.

INTRODUCTION

Reading about public archaeology is easier now than it was a decade ago. Not necessarily because its message has become more commonplace, but mainly because of the number of works available. While this is undoubtedly a positive development, there is still need to reflect on the topic and its future. This paper will discuss some ideas on the future of public archaeology, building on a metaphor introduced by Neil Ascherson in the first volume of the *Public Archaeology* journal. There, Ascherson

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(2000) described public archaeology as "new territories" for professionals to explore within the limits of archaeological practice.

I will argue here that this exploration cannot stop, and though settling in certain territories, we need to expand the critical perspective of public archaeology, which then allows us better fulfil the social role we sometimes overlook. I will first return to the definition of public archaeology, before evaluating its current situation in very general terms. I will finally propose three lines of work based on the popular image of archaeology and implicit learning, economy and conflict —under the umbrella of critical theory and the constant need of critique— that is geared towards the creation of a better society.

THE OLD NEW TERRITORIES

Although we usually link the origins of the term 'public archaeology' to the Charles McGimsey's classic *Public Archeology* (1972), I have always preferred Ascherson's description in the first volume the journal of the same name:

> *Public Archaeology is all the New Territories, lying into the periphery of direct research into the remains of material culture, into which the tribe has driven its herds in recent years. Some of these are actually Old Territories, a return to familiar pastures (like the origins of mind or community, or the relevance of prehistory to the 'forge of nations'), in which archaeologists used to roam when the climate was warmer and mistier. All of them are about the problems which arise when archaeology moves into the real world of economic conflict and political struggle. In other words, they are about ethics* (Ascherson, 2000:2).

But let us put this in context. Since the 1970s, the definition of public archaeology has been broad, perhaps too broad. In some way, McGimsey's call to action kickstarted a trend in American public archaeology, directly linked to public participation and cultural resources management, that the 'European turn' of the late 1980s made more theoretical and political (McManamon, 2000a, 2000b; Holtorf, 2000).

From this, we can identify two schools and several topics briefly outlined by Tim Schadla-Hall (1999). For two decades since it was conceived, public archaeology had no consistent basis. The first proper reflection on the conceptual fundamentals of public archaeology did not occur until much later (Matsuda, 2004), with several volumes of a new devoted journal and a book in the street (see *Public Archaeology*; Merriman, 2004).

There is a lack of a proper critical historiography of public archaeology, in terms of an in-depth analysis of all the publications from its early years, and the context within which they were written. I tried to sketch an outline in my doctoral thesis (Almansa, 2017), but it only addressed some general trends that can be summed up in the debate between public and community archaeology.

To me, community archaeology has a very clear and simple definition (Marshall, 2002). Therefore, if we are talking about direct participation —or even control— in

a traditional archaeological project, there are a set of practices that are quite well-established (Moshenska and Dhanjal, 2011).

But public archaeology goes beyond that, because we can consider community archaeology to be within the scope of public archaeology. Maybe this is where the confusion lies. As the most represented side of public archaeology, working with communities started to be understood as the whole, simplifying the concept in a *dangerous* way —that even the Wikipedia page merged both terms, used community archaeology as the main entry, with a line of clarification stuck at the top of the article.

I say *dangerous* because taking the part for the whole omits the most interesting and helpful aspects of public archaeology. Wikipedia is used as an example because it is the reflection of the collective thinking, and how minute public archaeology still remains within it. After all, not even McGimsey understood participation in this way:

> *…by emphasising this need for total involvement I would not want anyone to gain the impression that I am suggesting that everybody should grab a shovel and go out and dig. Involvement has many facets, an each individual has an obligation to determine how he best can contribute and how his actions will affect the total picture* (McGimsey, 1972:7).

This brings us back to Ascherson, and the creation and development of public archaeology. For the past 40 years, certain themes have become natural in our practice, those that I like to call the *old new territories*, which configure our current understanding of the discipline. Although the definition is still broad, I have tried elsewhere to summarise the spirit of the term:

> *If Archaeology tries to create new knowledge from the study of past societies' material culture, Public Archaeology intends to study all the relations between this Archaeology and present society, in order to improve the general understanding and cohabitation of Archaeology* (Almansa Sánchez, 2010: 2).

In some sense, this coincides with Ascherson's definition, and has been practiced in what Gabriel Moshenska termed "some common types of public archaeology" in a poster inside the lift of UCL's Institute of Archaeology —which lists "archaeologists working with the public; archaeology by the public; public sector archaeology; archaeological education; open archaeology; popular archaeology; and academic public archaeology."

A closer look reveals that five of these have been extensively practiced for decades, when nobody even talked about public archaeology. The sixth, open archaeology, is only possible now with the development of the Internet, while the seventh is a conglomerate that brings everything together. A definition of public archaeology from the chart would thus be the way we involve people, the way people do archaeology, the way we do archaeology, the way people learn about the past, the way we provide access to materials, the way people create their own, and the way we study all of the above.

In some way, this represents the old new territories, the spaces in which we now feel comfortable. Some of these old new territories have been more populated than others. Community archaeology, which would be represented by the two first types, is clearly the most extensive practice. Archaeological heritage management, meanwhile, is not always understood from the perspective of public archaeology, although it was initially, in the sense of what McGimsey wanted to offer. The same happens with education, being practiced for decades and now forcedly linked to public archaeology just because it is about people, and so on.

In some way we have even tried to conquer some old territories without really considering transformations in the way these are managed. This is therefore the first task we have at hand —making public archaeology actually occur in those old new territories.

THE PATH(S)

I understand public archaeology as a critical theory of archaeology (Almansa, 2017). Explaining this in depth would require a long article on its own, but in a few works, and following the precepts of critical theory (as outlined by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, etc., or a short introduction in Bronner, 2011; Sim and Van Loon, 2012), the role of the pubic archaeologist would be thus of a critical reviewer of archaeological practice, understanding it in its social context.

As if reviewing an article, we analyse and highlight the problems arising from what we see, proposing solutions to make it more understandable and, in our case, engaging with society. Of course, with this critical background, engagement should not just be a buzzword, but a set of actions full of meaning with a final objective of a transformative impact in society.

In a recent article (Almansa, 2016a), I argue that we should continue exploring new territories, without losing sight of the old. This path(s) will take us to places that have, in a sense, been populated already, but the aim is to bring new perspectives to a critical practice. Exploring these new territories is essential and should be one of the tasks we keep in mind while working.

In a previous article (Richardson and Almansa, 2015), we made a call for a professional public archaeology, which led to some contrary reactions. However, I believe this response was due to a misunderstanding of the initial claim. When we speak about a *professional* public archaeology, we see a compatible path with the wider goal of embedding public archaeology within archaeology (Grima, 2016). Actually, it is an essential issue for the agenda of public archaeology, as it is the only way to actually claim these old new territories for good, and be able to build on new territories with a solid foundation.

Having said that, the issue of professionalisation has to do with a very simple principle. The same way we all accept nowadays that we need to conduct certain analyses (fauna, seeds, dating, etc.), and to include in the team or contract a

professional in the area, a good community project —or, even better, a good intervention planning from the perspective of public archaeology— should be conducted by professionals. That is, colleagues with a specialisation in the topic that can offer added value to the project, and not reduce actions to mere outreach activities or direct participation in the excavation, as is usually done.

Perhaps this is harsh, but I would argue that this (alone) is not public archaeology. It is only outreach, or community work, for the sake of our own egos. And, therefore, this is the first and most important path we need to venture on that will lead to better practice. Following from the idea of public archaeology as a critical theory of archaeology, but, at the same time, understanding public archaeology as an embedded practice within archaeology, our old new territories —and even the new territories to be explored— are within the range of critique.

Evaluation then becomes the first aspect to develop within the practice of public archaeology in its current terms. We need to evaluate what we do, how we do it, and its impact and challenges in order to improve our practice. A glance at the current literature reveals that the theoretical background is still weak and methodologies are fluid, making it difficult to set standards, compare, or even try to reproduce scenarios for practice (Carman and Sørensen, 2009).

Most interventions are carried out without prior knowledge of the socioeconomic and political context, which may distress the dynamics of the communities affected in ways we do not normally expect. Working with communities is a sensitive issue, and thus should not to be practiced blindly, regardless if we are in our neighbourhoods, or a remote village on the other side of the world.

The same happens with other common types of public archaeology. We are still facing a lack of proper knowledge of the profession in most countries; a limited understanding of archaeology in popular culture; policymakers not taking into account many necessary changes in management; open data still being a chimera; and to a lesser degree, education not being extensive. Therefore, a thorough and critical intervention in the old new territories is still needed —I would say urgently— before we consider exploring new paths.

However, why should we stop moving? This call for a critical intervention is just a brushstroke in the vast canvas of public archaeology and, if we really want it to happen, we need to keep painting together. Which leads to the second most important issue to raise: the collective. The 'herds' exploring new territories need to unite and be a real part of the bigger 'tribe' of archaeology. Conferences are not gathering most of the colleagues working in the sector, and networks are still weak. Whenever we have tried to build one, we have failed. Only some small groups gather, still competing, without a clear goal or much communication. I usually say that our first focus community should be the community of archaeologists, but I am starting to think we still need to build a real community of public archaeologists. Maybe this will make everything else easier.

Looking back, it looks like I have only ranted about the current situation of public archaeology before even considering outlining a path. However, I strongly believe the old new territories need to be properly settled in soon, especially in relation to

method and practice (Gould, 2016). I have just finished watching the fifth season of *Vikings*, and feel like an earl who has left his land, fearing return and finding it in the hands of a greedy opponent. I don't think public archaeology belongs to me, but I care for it and I am devoting my career to its growth, so would like to see my colleagues continue exploring with clear ideas and best practices.

I use the metaphor of the *greedy opponent* to segue into the economics of public archaeology —or archaeology itself— and how they can distort any enterprise. Some time ago, I tried to outline the ethics of economy in archaeology from the perspective of public archaeology (Almansa, 2015). Among the many issues that relate to this topic, the most pressing has to do with the unrestrained growth of interventions carried out in the name of public archaeology (Almansa, 2016b).

Shall we ask again what public archaeology actually is? A decade ago, I got used to hearing that heritage management is 'lame', and that public archaeology a burden for 'real' research. Sometime after, the Faro Convention was held in 2011, European funding encouraged projects with outreach in their proposals. Public archaeology became a wildcard to obtain funding and many projects claimed their talks, site visits or mock excavations for children were great public archaeology activities. As said before, maybe we can consider this to be within the scope of public archaeology, but we really need to move beyond it —as this is not even an old new territory; it is just old.

Outreach is attached to archaeology by principle; it should have never been exceptional. The consequence for public archaeology was mainly a bunch of new case studies in journals and conferences that hardly contributed to the development of the discipline but, on the contrary, extended a misinterpretation of its scope. Then, of course, there are those who rejected the necessity of public archaeology before, who practice it now.

Therefore, and always celebrating new colleagues starting to value the need for a more social and committed archaeology —note the contradictions that arise in the discourse when dealing with these topics— I would like to finish this section with a positive note. After all, when we started to explore the limits of archaeology, there was always one common goal: the creation of a better society.

FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

Our destination is changing the world for the better. In attempting to achieve this, public archaeology can play a role by dealing with the consequences of archaeological practice in society. Though they can sometime be negative, most of these consequences can be very positive for communities. Two quotes from a *Archaeologists as Activists* (2010) come to mind: "Is trying to save the world with archaeology what we want to be doing?" (Jeppson, 2010: 63), and "Perhaps it is the world of archaeology which needs to be changed in order to be saved" (Little, 2010:154-155).

Here is where the definition of public archaeology comes into play. Archaeology is about society and material culture. From archaeology, we produce heritage and discourses. They are usually framed under the now-famous term authorised heritage discourse (Smith and Waterton, 2009), and have consequences. Therefore, curating these discourses, as well as heritage, is essential. The critique of these consequences, and archaeological practice as a whole, is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of public archaeology —as a critical theory of archaeology— which merge the two quotes above in a simple principle: changing the world of archaeology in order to save the world.

Archaeologists are part of the world after all. Society entangles us; every movement on one side affects the other. When we start walking the path towards a better society, we must remember to look back every once in a while to make sure we are travelling in the right direction.

With this common goal in mind, it is time then to more clearly define *public* and *community*. Since Akira Matsuda (2004) attempted to do so, the concept of the public sphere as an arena in which relations happen has been taken for the norm (Habermas, 1989). This lack of distinction between public as people and public as state provides a frame for most aims of practice, but does not really clarify what we actually understand as society or community. We tend to use a bullseye approach to communities of interest, mainly focused on topography or proximity in preconceived values. We assume everyone within our constructed communities wants the same things, and predefine them without a real analysis.

In this light, I would like to call for a first new territory: to actually understand society in all its complexity, and how it relates with archaeology from different perspectives. From my experience, communities are far more complex than we usually think, and the number of conflicts we can trigger is serious enough to take this into account. Exercising our right to act is a way to enforce archaeological practice and participation. "We are here, because the law says so". "You have to like us because we are important". "You are a community because you live around our site". And so on.

I prefer to understand communities from a more chaotic perspective (fig. 1), in which groups of interest overlap, depending on many circumstances. Thus, we need to understand these circumstances in order to understand communities better. Sociology is an essential tool in this regard, and all qualitative approaches to social research are useful to understand our communities better. I like to explain this from set theory (see Bagaria, 2014), and encourage readers to think about all the different communities they belong to and how permeable they are by context.

Image and implicit education

I have said elsewhere that public archaeology usually presupposes the value of archaeology uncritically: we assume people like archaeology, should participate in it, and value archaeologists. In this assumption, the study of popular culture and
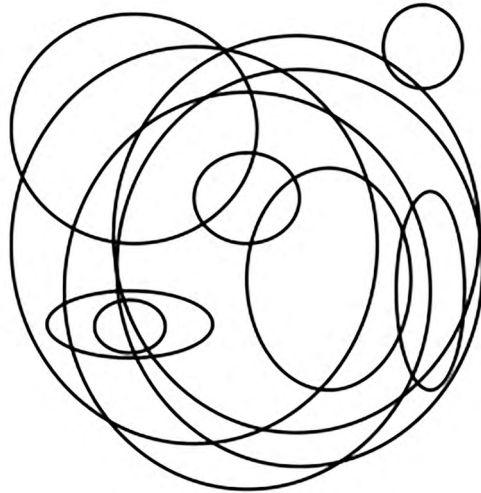
Fig. 1.—From the bullseye approach to a more chaotic definition of community (author's slide).

how people understand archaeology (e.g., Holtorf, 2005, 2007) has been essential to understand certain trends. However, the *archaeoappeal* Holtorf defines is not enough in a context where we actually do not really understand what makes people think what they think —and how dealing with pseudoarchaeology remains a challenge.

This leads to the second territory: the study of popular perceptions of archaeology and the past from an analytical perspective, that actually attempts to understand what moves people towards or against archaeology. In other words, why "I love archaeology, but if something appears while my house is being built, I would rather destroy it than pay for it" is still a norm.

In this sense, I argue that most of the values we forge out of archaeology are based on implicit learning as described by Reber (1967), in conjunction with other more explicit stimuli. Studying this can be complicated, especially as we cannot empirically measure lifelong learning, since it is out of our control. However, delving into this topic seems essential to improve our understanding of the public and the uses of the past, as well as for improving our own outreach and education strategies.

Economy and development

After the global economic crisis in 2008, archaeology suffered its own —proof that we are part of the global economy in every sense. Commercial archaeology (Schlanger and Aitchison, 2010) was hit hard, but also had collateral effects in other aspects of work. For instance, cultural/heritage tourism —a fundamental resource for many regions— was severely affected (e.g., Papatheodorou, Roselló and Xiao, 2010). We tend to think heritage by itself empowers and enriches communities, being a source of development (Nypan, 2004), but development can sometimes also be a source of pain that we do not oppose (Ribeiro, 2015). Anyhow, we still understand development as a direct economic factor (Gould and Pyburn, 2017), either from an embracing perspective or a critical one. I argue there are other side-effects to development that should be addressed first.

Taking into account our impact on local economies and dynamics, as well as the position of power we actually hold, the possibilities of action from archaeology are manifold. Although it is not always the case, contemporary archaeology in the United States has shown some impressive examples (e.g., Stottman, 2010) of how discourses of the past can actually be empowering in situations of historical inequality. Class, race or gender are common topics approached from this perspective, which is normally referred to as "political action" (e.g., from Tilley, 1989 to McGuire, 2008), but what happens with other periods or other communities?

Archaeological heritage management —and archaeological discourses— might help to give rise to a practice of an encompassing political archaeology (González, 2008), taking into account that archaeological work happens in the present weighed down by the load of infinite pasts (Olivier, 2008), and with all periods and scenarios involved.

This is one of the territories public archaeology can settle in, with a critical approach to heritage that converges with current social realities in ways we normally do not address. This has to do with the needs of communities and the mitigation of impact. For example: finding solutions for the conservation of archaeological heritage that do not negatively affect a neighbourhood (less parking space, limited uses, etc.); using restoration and museumisation to actually improve the infrastructure of a region, or to set up social spaces; trying to solve social or community problems with archaeological heritage, etc.

I have experienced these situations on many occasions, in both positive and negative ways, from the first mobile network being set up in my village following a request from the archaeological team working there, to the limitation of public parking spaces for a garish archaeological wall display in the street. But going a step further, we can practice what I like to call "archaeology as an excuse", such as our attempt to decontaminate a river in Melka Kunture, Ethiopia, with archaeological heritage management, which hopefully solved a health issue for the surrounding communities (Degeffa and Almansa, 2011).

Identity and conflict

This approach leads to another opportunity that has also been extensively practiced in present day archaeology. Contemporary conflicts and controversies, as well as other less traumatic current situations, can be approached from the long-term perspective of archaeology and archaeological discourses.

The figure of the archaeologist as a public intellectual (Tarlow *et al.,* 2013) is interesting from this perspective, since it concerns the role of archaeology in contemporary society. An example of this potential is in the community work we conducted in Ethiopia between 2006 and 2010, in the initial stages of a project about the Jesuit missions in Lake Tana region (Fernández *et al.*, 2017), where religious tensions carried on from the focus period to the present (Almansa *et al.*, 2011). Identifying and dealing with these tensions, but also addressing the topic from a more tolerant perspective during activities with schools and the university, was one of the positive outcomes from the work we conducted there. This was a local contemporary problem where the experience of the archaeological past we had in front of us could be of help.

Of course, identity is probably the most claimed —and used— resource, but its potential is still limitless in light of current events. First, with discourses that challenge past identities in the present, but also using identities forged by archaeological heritage to foster further interventions. Several projects are starting to delve into these issues, with the understanding of archaeological heritage management as a social work tool, in the same way that archaeology is being used for therapy (e.g., Winterton, 2014). These are only some paths I have taken in recent years, trying to explore new territories for public archaeology. However, the field is immense and the opportunities as large as our imagination. We should start imagining.

DISCUSSING, ALWAYS

One of the strengths of negative dialectics (Adorno, 1973) is its truly critical essence, laying bare all the contradictions of the discourse. There are many in the lines I have written above, but in a circular reflection on the topic I just want to highlight some basic ideas.

- Public archaeology needs to be more present in everyday practice.
- There are common practices encompassed within public archaeology today that need to be evaluated and strengthened.
- The breadth of the definition we acknowledge opens a range of possibilities for development that go beyond traditional community archaeology and outreach.
- Public archaeology can provide a theoretical framework and the tools for the development of archaeology and archaeological heritage management.
- This can lead to a committed critical practice with a positive impact on society.
- We should explore new territories in order to do so.

- My priority proposals have to do with how the profession, the public, and an oriented impact are understood.

Having said that, many other territories are in plain sight, and calling for participation in their exploration is pertinent, as well as for self-reflection and critique. We should never stop questioning the work we are conducting, while acknowledging advances in practice.

The volume this paper closes is a combination of works on public archaeology from very different perspectives, with very different backgrounds and varied goals. However, all the entries within have one thing in common: transforming society today. This end should drive the planning of every project, driven by the subliminal question: what are we doing this for? I believe that we should be answering this with "for a better practice, for a better world," as in the quotes from Jeppson and Little above.

Archaeology does not move into the real world, as Ascherson said, but *is* the real world. The continuous impact we have on this world and this world has on us makes it essential to embrace some of these ideas. We cannot continue practising an archaeology that is sealed from the outside world and fictional societies of the past. If we create knowledge, this knowledge has meaning today; if we create heritage, this heritage is a fundamental part of today. Let us walk together on the paths to the future of (public) archaeology.

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