

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
**AFTER THE PANDEMIC: REFLECTIONS FROM AN UNCERTAIN
PRESENT ON THE FUTURES OF PUBLIC ARCHEOLOGY**

Alejandra SALADINO

Leonardo FARYLUK

"The time after is neither that of reason recovered, nor that of the expected disaster. It is the time after all stories, the time when one takes direct interest in the sensible stuff in which these stories cleaved their shortcuts between projected and accomplished ends. It is not the time in which we craft beautiful phrases or shots to make up for the emptiness of all waiting. It is the time in which we take an interest in the wait itself."

Jaques Rancière¹

There are moments in history, perceived both individually and collectively, in which proposing to imagine—even project—becomes an apparently unattainable task. 2020 took us socially unprepared and, although in some places the current situation is deeply serious while others feel more tolerable, we have a total uncertainty about the future. We can consider that the information that allows us to visualize the indicators leading to situations like the current one is available. However, not all of us have the tools to interpret them, and the voices of those who do have them are not echoed strong enough, unlike those who in spaces of power, political or economic with the means and will to bring fear to wide sectors of the population.

As people with a particular way of looking towards the past and making it present—those whose experiences unfold in the

¹ Rancière, J. (2013 [2011]). *Béla Tarr. The Time After*. Univocal Publishing (Beranek, E. trans.), Minneapolis.

broad field that can be called “heritage sciences”²—, we know that this is not the first pandemic that humanity has experienced, and neither is it the most terrible in statistical terms (in fact, we will be able to measure it when it culminates). Of course, those who suffer the effects of the Covid-19, both in their bodies and their loved ones, will never find any relief in statistics. In the current situation, however, there seems to be one clear thing: except for those who pass the disease, this is the most aseptic pandemic of which we have record. Despite the fact that we live in an era of unparalleled communications and information circulation, we assimilate it through the filters imposed by the mainstream media. Through them, only two discourses in dispute for hegemony can be observed so far, and that can be exemplified with the cases of Argentina and Brazil, where the specific weight is placed on one or the other. The one that exacerbates terror by demanding trust and absolute obedience to standards that are intended to be issued with the best intentions and total transparency, and that which minimizes the problem by openly exposing an immeasurable contempt for people (and by *people* here we refer specifically to all those who, even before the pandemic, did not have more than public health systems, which, although they guarantee accessibility as they are free, not necessarily availability, due to the enormous shortcomings of the sector). From apparently opposite positions, both options seek a return to normality, understood as the realities experienced just a year ago. A speech demands the strengthening of the control roles of the State, economic assistance, more presence of the repressive apparatus in order to educate those who do not comply with the established, and a social isolation that goes far beyond the absence of physical contact, limiting the networks of interaction and support that are woven outside the institutional verticality. The other discourse is expressed in a range running from the contempt for human life, to the denial of the problem by explaining that link disjointed plots that border on the paranoid: both far-right and liberal positions are alike here, under the

2 Represents the transdisciplinary field constituted by the human and natural sciences, highlighting the Science of Conservation, Archaeological Science and the Science of Restoration (Stirlic, 2018), which contemplates “physical and material aspects that give support to Conservation-Restoration, but also management, record, documentation and interpretation of cultural heritage”. In: Gonçalves, W. B. (2019). *Ciência do Patrimônio*. Associação Nacional de Pesquisa em Tecnologia e Ciência do Patrimônio. <http://lacicor.eba.ufmg.br/antecipa/index.php/ciencia-do-patrimonio/>

umbrella of freedom. Freedom that, of course, is none other than that of the market, free to continue exploiting and free to continue plundering. Both discourses, so different at first glance, are aimed at keeping the system on track, with as few deviations as possible. Regarding the expected result, the differences are methodological, different models of governance.

Faced with such scenarios, imagining the future comes to be understood as the challenge of building it. While this statement has always been valid, it now feels more pressing. Do we accept that these two paths are the only possible ones? Is one or the other really more desirable? Or do we embrace the need to think outside the box?

What does all this have to do with what we call “public archeology”, and which summons us here? Well, a lot. Let’s take it bit by bit. Those of us who are convinced that other worlds are possible have to turn a deaf ear to those who accuse us of “utopians”, demanding plans, models and prototypes that demonstrate the full functionality of a society that still only exists in scattered fragments³. Speculating about what technical tools will emerge to simplify the technical work, or build data more accurately, or which media to use in order to socialize the information generated, does not have much importance. There will be new ones and without a doubt we will use all we have within reach. So, if in that sense imagining what public archeology will be like in ten years is impossible, imagining what do we want it to be, or even more, who do we want to be, is indispensable. There is an important distinction here between the first use of the verb “imagine” and the second: one refers to the resulting image at the end of a process, “*is neither that of reason recovered, nor that of the expected disaster*”, the other “*is the time in which we take an interest in the wait itself*” that constant present in the making⁴.

3 As David Graeber puts it: “Normally, when you challenge the conventional wisdom—that the current economic and political system is the only possible one—the first reaction you are likely to get is a demand for a detailed architectural blueprint of how an alternative system would work, down to the nature of its financial instruments, energy supplies, and policies of sewer maintenance. Next, you are likely to be asked for a detailed program of how this system will be brought into existence. Historically, this is ridiculous”. In: *A Practical Utopian’s Guide to the Coming Collapse* (2013). <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/a-practical-utopians-guide-to-the-coming-collapse>

4 As expressed in the quotation from Rancière at the beginning of this text.

This creative waiting could be crossed by the questioning of the tautological process by which we configure our discipline and our field of study. Defining, researching, protecting and disseminating heritage provides us with sustenance⁵, which is why we define, research, protect and disseminate. As a mechanism, it always works subject to a constant need for recognition, for appreciation by people not dedicated to the “heritage sciences”. Those people we tend to call “society” or “the public”, as if we were not part of that same framework. It is very common to hear or read, in different texts from colleagues, arguments that can be simplified into “*what is not known is not valued*”. In reality, we tend to seek legitimacy for our ways of knowing. Which in itself is not bad, it is normal and understandable in any category. But perhaps the best way is not positioning ourselves as the vanguard of the meaning and uses of archaeological references, but rather, put ourselves at the service of those considered in need of our knowledge; starting with the concerns or demands of the communities where we work—the reluctance that usually exists on the part of some colleagues to comply with the provisions of ILO Convention 169 regarding the free and informed consent of indigenous and tribal communities, is just an example of how far we can be from this idea—; work on problems that concern us as members of a specific community; and enable the possibility of being facilitators of examples of past solutions to current problems.

This alone would generate a drastic change in the way we see ourselves and relate to each other, as a profession. We are too used to working in tightly closed, vertical and hierarchical structures, which both in academia, administration, and consulting firms tend to function under criteria of inheritance or meritocracy. Returning to the two disputed discourses on the pandemic reality, our practice is strained between similar postulates. We submit to directives from project managers in exchange for the promise of scholarships or assistantships; and these, to obtain meager subsidies, are submitted to the theoretical and thematic perspectives considered as a priority according to the administration’s criteria. Meanwhile, those who work in entities protecting archaeological heritage, deal with the enormous lack of resources and political vagaries of the party

⁵ Or we hope it eventually does. “Oh! Archaeology... What are gonna live from” and “Did you find dinosaurs yet?” are still too common places.

in power. And consulting firms that carry out impact assessment studies not only make their workers precarious but are seen as a stumbling block to a “progress” that mega-companies of any kind claim to provide. These professionals are generally hired simply to comply with regulatory obligations, and those who provide the most economical budget and the fastest solution get the job. The resulting reports usually end up accumulated in drawers at the end of the labyrinths of bureaucracy, and sometimes paying a fine for the destruction of cultural goods is easier than troubling the construction works.

Undoubtedly, the existing problems in the field of archeology are many, very diverse, and even invisible to us, due to the enormous thematic fragmentation of the discipline. At times the distances are so great that we seem to forget that we are part of the same profession. However, generally speaking, we have at least one thing in common: an inability—not absolute, by the way—to perceive ourselves as mere workers and, as such, act consequently. Unions and similar associations are non-existent in most places and at most, we tend to bind to those relating to the tasks we are supposed to perform (teachers, public workers, etc.). The associations and schools are scarce and tend to function as clubs, to settle an occasional conflict between colleagues, or as if their function was to exercise roles of surveillance. Networks, on their part, tend to be excellent spaces for mutual support and information exchange, with voluntary affinity groups and more or less permeable, but, in general, increasingly hyper-specialized and somewhat prone to overlooking cross-cutting issues. Of course, there are exceptions, but current exceptions are not the norm, although they could be.

Those who live and work in the Global South, away from the great centers of power, seem to be more sensitive and critical in respect to the colonial heritage of archeology and its effects—something that can be attributed to almost any modern discipline—and great treaties proliferate, written in an attempt to purge historical guilt. If they do not remain in mere rhetoric, in practice, they resonate in very dissimilar ways: there are those who proclaim archaeologies of social utility, created however with a top-down logic, like fictitious ancestral aliens arriving on the planet to provide us with the knowledge to build pyramids; while others are removed from the field to not interfere with local autonomy and self-determina-

tion processes (those same aliens fleeing in hopes of being remembered). Both positions continue playing logic critics, although not the intention—again, as at the beginning of this text, paternalism or abandonment to an uneven competition—, positioning ourselves as agents of foreign influence on those we want to help, alien to multiple forms of oppression, exploitation and existing inequality. Few are still those who manage to escape from this dichotomous path, understanding that public archeology is all archeology, and that it can be thought “amongst subalterns” rather than “for subalterns”.

Perhaps in these moments close to completing a year of pandemic, we can propose to start slowing down the productive machinery and turn our gazes on ourselves to discuss again about these topics that will never reach consensus, but that ultimately are what allow the emergence of turning points and course changes. What are the implications and how this slowdown is achieved—being the professional and academic “curriculitis” also a pandemic disease—, are questions that by themselves invite us to debate.

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