

# Archaeology's 'People'

Reinhard Bernbeck<sup>1,\*</sup> & Susan Pollock<sup>1</sup>

We commend González-Ruibal *et al.* (above) for their well-formulated challenge to a widely held view in Anglophone archaeology. Their insistence that archaeologists must rethink their position in a radically changed political context is highly apposite, although we do not agree entirely with all of their arguments. Here, we address three principal issues.

First, it is striking that the 'People' who seem to matter to González-Ruibal *et al.* all exist in the present, while those whose past traces we discover, analyse and document are of no apparent concern. Should archaeology really focus solely on the past for present purposes, as the emphasis on heritage suggests? Based on our own experience with an archaeology of the Nazi period (Pollock 2016; Bernbeck 2017), we are convinced that the claims and desires of past people—especially those that were never fulfilled—remain open historical accusations directed towards those who did not allow their fulfilment to the present day. We are prompted by Walter Benjamin (1968) and Theodor Adorno, who both argued that the past, even millennia ago, is not closed: “The unprecedented torture and humiliation of those abducted in cattle-trucks does shed a deathly livid light on the most distant past” (Adorno 2005 [1951]: 234). Events, processes, actions and suffering are never entirely finished; the idea of closure is a typically Western, and probably capitalist, phenomenon. We need to listen to the aspirations of past people whom we cannot encounter physically; whether we can or should give them a voice—and how—is another more complex matter, and one with strong political implications (Bernbeck & Pollock in press).

Second, González-Ruibal *et al.* (above) suggest that a “coalition of predatory capitalism and reactionary populism” is at work in the present. It remains unclear, however, what 'predatory' or 'unbridled' capitalism means in this context. At the root of the class divisions that the authors describe in the American Rust Belt is a globalised capitalism that has no concern for those who lose their jobs. Social scientists such as Richard Sennett (1998), Ulrich Beck (2015) and Paolo Virno (2004) have shown that late capitalism requires extreme flexibility from the new precariat, from agricultural to industrial or academic workers or those in digital industries; an acceptance of being uprooted; and adaptability to constant change. Reactionary populism—as exemplified by the United Kingdom Independence Party, right-wing continental European parties and the current US administration, and often bordering on fascism—pushes *against* a globalised transnational capitalism. Left-wing movements such as Occupy and the extreme right make strange bedfellows in this regard. Archaeology serves such anti-globalist desires well. After all, excavation practices are mostly locally anchored and can be inserted easily into narratives whose tenor is that of 'we have always been here'. A politicised archaeology that successfully

<sup>1</sup> Institut für Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Fabeckstrasse 23–25, Freie Universität Berlin, 14195 Berlin, Germany

\* Author for correspondence (Email: [rbernbec@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:rbernbec@zedat.fu-berlin.de))

addresses these issues by provoking critical reflection must pursue research into movements and hybridisations of material culture and people.

Third, the proposal to shift from affirmation to provocation, and from collaboration in the production of heritage to education, seems to us to be only rudimentarily contextualised. There are historically specific situations, such as that of the Nazis, or the recent attempts by the Bharatiya Janata Party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India to 'Hinduise' the Taj Mahal, where an archaeology of provocation is needed (Bernbeck & Pollock 2007). It is another matter, however, when we consider the archaeology of Buddhist sites in Afghanistan. These favoured spots for foreign researchers have contributed to renewed conflict between groups intent on 'modernisation' and those who insist on traditional models of change. A provocative archaeology would seem to be warranted where the stirring of controversy aims at dismantling real existing power relations. 'Real' is important here: we live today in what is described euphemistically as a 'post-truth' world. This post-truth world is a regime of lies, and for this reason, the insistence of González-Ruibal *et al.* on education is well taken. But the addressees should not just be communities in a traditional sense, but also the institutions and media through which 'post-truths', such as historical censorship and revisionism, are disseminated: TV, social media sites and video games urgently need to be researched. Moreover, the authors' discussion of teaching comes dangerously close to reversing what gains have been made through attention to archaeology's colonial legacy. Should we really return to a simplistic (and condescending) notion that archaeologists have the right to dictate to others how the past is to be understood? Surely this is not González-Ruibal *et al.*'s intent, but to make that clear requires a more explicit commitment to the importance of teaching the skills of critical thinking and engagement.

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