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## **Identity/Crisis** *Alexander H. Joffe*

### **Abstract**

Archaeology has an identity problem. At least three factors are involved. The postmodern view of radical instability has collided with processual aversions towards 'meaning', resulting in a stalemate regarding the past. Modern problems with identity, including the role of the past and archaeology itself, have generated additional confusion. Identity is a hall of mirrors which parallels other epistemological debates in archaeology, all of which revolve around the divide between realism and idealism. Archaeology cannot resolve this problem. The solution is not, however, to become either better technicians or more strident ideologues, but to become more informed contributors to larger debates in the human sciences and philosophy, in an atmosphere of civility and pluralism.

### **Keywords**

theory; identity; realism; idealism; tolerance; pluralism

### **Problems**

Archaeology has an identity problem. A discipline singularly unsure of its epistemological status, wracked by confusion about its position and future within the sciences and/or the humanities, and not knowing where its next meal is coming from, archaeology's insecurities are clear for all to see. Add to that the growing realization that archaeology in the present occasionally plays an unsavoury role in constructing identities, and sometimes other very bad things, and you have a discipline on the edge of a nervous breakdown. No wonder then that archaeology's approach to the question of ancient identities is chaotic and contradictory. Our own identity is intimately, and irretrievably, intertwined with our interpretive stances towards identity in the past, subject and object conflated more than we know or wish.

Why should this be so? Why should archaeology's understanding of itself be so precariously balanced, and how does archaeology's subject matter contribute? Conversely, how does all this borderline neurosis affect archaeology's approach to the past? One basic premise offered here is that archaeologists are far more attuned, or enslaved, to the rhythm of larger societal trends than they might recognize or care to admit. Our current thrall with identities in the past, and the difficulties in penetrating those identities, are a reflection, or transferral, of our anxieties and interests in the present. Archaeology is now officially back in the business of manufacturing identities

for bourgeois North Americans and Europeans out of the raw materials of the past, and this is a cause for some alarm. The frightening reality is that mimesis cuts both ways.

Part of the confusion is the position of archaeology within the political economy of universities and science. The bourgeois science of archaeology is lucky at best and opportunistic at worst (blindly in its Darwinian guise, merely calculatingly in all others), having lurched from one theoretical framework to another. We have swung from evolutionism to particularism and back again, and from self-images of humanistic pursuit, engine of modernism, predictor of the past, to full fledged science (Kehoe 1998; Patterson 1995; Trigger 1989). But the postmodern condition of fragmentation has not been kind to archaeology in that its final line of defence, exclusive interpreter of the past, has now been overthrown. Not only is archaeology irrelevant to the functioning of global capitalism, it has been supplanted by cable television and the plethora of internet shamanisms (Rowlands 1994).

Archaeology is caught in between a rock and a hard place. Global capitalism has little need for the kind of localized aesthetico-political foundations provided by archaeology, the integrative mythologies of the past, and stolid scientisms, which once served as the basis for leadership and citizenship. It can only act as a source of conviviality, as fodder for entertainment or, as will be argued later, for the aesthetic core of new transnational, associative identities, in short, global high culture. On the other hand, post-industrial nationalism, punch drunk but by no means down and out, gobbles up archaeology in the pursuit of ever more ancient, real and glorious pasts, great victories and even more noble defeats, projecting the present and the 'Other' of the moment as far back as possible, to justify pillage, slaughter and the like (Kohl 1998). This is a very old and traditional role for archaeology; the new boss is the same as the old boss, only the names signing the paychecks have changed.

### **Transatlantic contrasts**

Archaeologists from different traditions contend with the issue of identity in contrasting ways. Europeans, two world wars, one Cold War, a bunch of small wars and one large wall later, not to speak of innumerable pogroms, are saturated in identity problems. Ancient and modern concepts are interwoven and are sources of deep anxiety, at least for high culture, since their most obvious manifestations have been nationalism, leading frequently to conflict, sometimes to genocide. Old-new ethnicities have been revived like vampires, undead spirits stalking the continent, seeking redress for wrongs at the hands of the Soviet, Ottoman, Habsburg and Holy Roman Empires, among others, as well as searching for triumphs of will over smaller, preferably weaker, neighbours. European intellectuals, including archaeologists, find this all rather disturbing, the waking of the undead, supposedly vanquished in (although in fact brought to life by) the sublime alchemy of the Enlightenment and its enemies, the Paris Commune, existentialism, and other progressive artifices, and animated by the great warhorse of nationalism. Ethnicity, omnipresent, is old-fashioned in the new Europe, a black magic relic of romanticism (not unlike postmodernism generally, but that is another story).

Better then not to buy into the whole concept, or to keep it as light on its feet as possible, since the search for identity – or empiricism as a whole – inevitably turns archaeologists into Kossinas and Himmlers (Jones 1997, 3).<sup>1</sup>

Identity-less archaeologists therefore attempt to approach the identity-laden past in the identity-saturated present. ‘European’ identity amounts only to ‘most certainly not American’. Ironically, but not coincidentally, in this respect European intellectuals find themselves on the same side as technocrats and central bankers, ethnicity as embarrassment and impediment. Identities are perpetually in flux, usually in opposition to hegemonic forces, and resistance to anything is good. The archaeological focus is primarily on the individual, since the existence of larger social units is a source of conflict, in past and present. This apolitical façade, however, is another manifestation of the Enlightenment dream of pure reason and the universal man, which stands in contradiction of course to parallel romantic discourse on the virtues of cultural survival among the oppressed peoples of the Third World. Either way, the smell of totalitarian democracy, ‘the assumption of a sole and exclusive truth in Politics’, is strong, as archaeological theory and practice are recast in terms familiar to 1789 (Talmon 1952).

Americans, who hold certain truths to be self-evident, are mired in precisely the same problems but with a dramatically different configuration. A significant proportion of American ‘scientific’ archaeologists simply deny the possibility of recovering identity or other concepts of meaning, as well as the desirability of even trying. Identity is also a specific rather than a general characteristic of culture, and therefore automatically less compelling. For the progressive wing of American archaeologists the emphasis is typically on groups, marginal, marginalized or otherwise neglected. The once surprising if salutary revelation that there were women in antiquity, and that women are even accessible in the archaeological record, has been followed up by the discovery of children, and then witches, and the variously sexed, and so on, with the exception of cannibals (Dongoske *et al.* 2000). But the emphasis is on the individual as representative, or rather emblematic, of a group or category. This archaeology of difference obviously has strong political and class overtones in the ‘politics of identity’ and the pursuit of ‘equity’. The latest examples of this propose identity as an element of liberation theology, which will result in emancipation through the solidarity of the working class and progressive intellectuals, all under the wise leadership of the party (e.g. Duke and Saitta 1998).<sup>2</sup> The construction of categories such as ‘race’ and their public policy implications have of course bedevilled American anthropology from the start.

For Americans in the processual camp, the goal is low-level, mechanistic ‘explanation’ – the correlation of isolated variables in simplistic representations or models in order to derive and then wildly exaggerate idealized causal relationships – all done in the name of generating high-level theory and doing ‘science’. The focus on systems provides explicit identities for both subject and object: the unconsciously systematized and the conscious systematizer, the static and the dynamic, those colonized by science and those doing the colonizing. Implicit in this approach are the notions that science is good and that its practice and products somehow provide transcendent

frameworks for societies, in the forms of ‘explanation’ (hence knowledge and progress), and the potential for better-adapted behaviour (in the sense of optimization–maximization), all of which feed into identity. For scientists, science is the alpha and the omega; it is its own justification and explanation. For progressives, archaeology is simply politics, justified by the presumption that we cannot really know anything about anything.

The European–American contrast is instructive if only because it produces somewhat counter-intuitive results. Iconic American individualism and European class-based society are dramatically inverted. In both approaches earlier, now almost quaint, rhetoric of ‘negotiating’ identities has devolved into power/knowledge struggles across endless networks of resistances. Both have at their core a sensibility that Ernest Gellner described as the ‘expiation of colonial guilt’ (Gellner 1995a, p. x). And both demand frighteningly consistent adherence to totalizing systems of thought and hold deviance as the highest form of transgression. None of this sort of authoritarian behaviour by intellectuals, of course, is remotely new (Aron, 2001 (1955)).

### **The message is the medium**

An evolutionary science that has to model something as supremely diverse, eccentric and individualistic as human behaviour is bound to be schizophrenic, or even quadrophenic, lurching between the individual and society, the rational and the irrational, the predictable and the contingent.<sup>3</sup> Like identity itself, archaeology has been ever evolving, spinning wildly in this direction and that, with problems developing primarily when practitioners periodically decide that no more change is needed. This happens in every generation with the arrival of a new paradigm. The hedgehogs and the foxes among us have squared off in a perennial low-intensity conflict over the nature of reality and truth, and the past is dragged along accordingly.

If identity in the present is difficult to capture, then it should be no surprise that identity in the past has proved a vexation. The travails of one meso-scale aspect of identity, ethnicity, are instructive. Not an individual, not a society, but a series of dynamic collective and intergenerational beliefs and practices, sometimes adaptive, sometimes decorative, ethnicity is always on the move. But archaeology has the misfortune to track its prey in a hapless fashion. When we get it in our sights, it turns and fires back with salvos of complexity, evasion and equivocation, all the while impugning our capabilities, not to mention our motives for undertaking the quest in the first place. And once we get a really good look at it, isolating a few variables in a single site or horizon, it is gone with a poof, usually leaving the archaeologist hanging in mid-air over a cliff. Identity in the past is a quantum problem, rather like Schrödinger’s cat; if you know where it is, you cannot know where it is going, and if you know where it is going, you do not know where it is (see generally Emberling 1997; Keyes 1981).

Why all these problems? Is it merely that we archaeologists are unsure of our identity in the present and project our confusion onto the past? Or is it the nature of archaeology, and all historical sciences, to be conducted across an epistemological landscape that partitions us intellectually? As with so many problems in archaeology, identity can be defined in realist or idealist terms, an

epistemological – and ideological – spectrum that stretches from spandrel-like epiphenomena to false consciousness to building block of culture to individual psychological constructs. The issue may be crudely defined in (dreaded) binary terms. The extremes alternatively privilege the place of the group or the individual, technology or ideology, and all mirror the same set of concerns and approaches. Realism and idealism, atomism or holism, archaeology as all description or all politics. More fundamentally, the question can be phrased as whether archaeology is the analysis of the human experience or an exploration of the human condition. Archaeologists have created an unbreachable social and intellectual dichotomy between hedgehogs and foxes, which presumes to reflect the nature and goals of the enterprise, and through which, almost incidentally, research into the past is conducted.

Bruce Trigger's seminal article on archaeology and epistemology is an excellent discussion of the basic challenges faced by archaeology (Trigger 1998a; cf. Salmon 1993).<sup>4</sup> He perceives three epistemological poles – realism, positivism and idealism – each of which proposes a different relationship with reality and privileges different standpoints. A thumbnail sketch might be as follows. Realism proposes that phenomena that are capable of change are intrinsic subjects for scientific study. In contrast, positivism regards only that which is observable to the senses as real and hence susceptible to explanation. Finally, idealism regards categories and concepts as mental constructs of the observer, and holds that phenomena only acquire meaning in the minds of the beholders.

The experience of archaeology with these widely varying epistemologies is well discussed by Trigger and need not be recapitulated here. It might be fair to say, however, that the extreme positivism of the new archaeology, of the Hempelian deductive-nomothetical variety, has severely waned in archaeology, since its legislative agenda was a red herring that produced a jejune, if explicit, track record. 'Laws' have been replaced by 'principles', the nomothetical by the statistical-relevant (that is to say, the probabilistic), all of which concedes to the stochastic, the contingent and the historical (e.g. Flannery 1998).<sup>5</sup> The remaining contenders, it would appear, are realism and idealism.

Trigger suggests that archaeology can find its way clear by adopting a materialist ontology and realist epistemology. Commentators in other fields have suggested similar accommodations, for example George Steinmetz's advocacy of Roy Bhaskar's 'critical realism.' (Steinmetz 1998; cf. Smith and Smith 2000). These are eminently reasonable suggestions which avoid both empiricist and relativist/constructivist excesses, emphasize the centrality of critical awareness and re-establish rule of law, at least the law of gravity. In short, they propose a kind of mainstream approach which disciplines as a whole can adopt in the human sciences, if nothing else to ensure their own credibility and survival.

But however reasonable these are, I suggest they miss something about disciplinary, and individual, identity, namely the ability to simultaneously hold and reconcile a variety of views that might to outsiders appear utterly contradictory and incompatible. Humans are multidimensional and ever-shifting, a superposition of states, and no one theory or approach to identity

could ever hope to comprehend all the things we are. A general sense of realism, like a sense of gravity, is useful as a point of departure, but as numerous examples within the history of science and technology have shown, the imagination has a role to play, acknowledging the not infrequent and rarely constrained inversion of invention and necessity (Basalla 1988, 7).

A better approach would be to regard realism frankly as simply the centre of a wide field of epistemologies and approaches. This has both methodological and theoretical implications for archaeology, a way to understand the subject, the past and the object, and the archaeological enterprise. Perhaps we can at best establish some parameters for identity and the archaeological enterprise, using all the empirical and analytical tools at our disposal – including an appreciation of language and forms of speech (Pluciennik 1999). The social, economic and political; age, gender and sex; technology and environment; memory, experience and anticipation, all create a vast four-dimensional field for identity, as individuals and collectives hurtle through time. Preserved only as tantalizing fragments, these are all extraordinarily difficult to apprehend in the archaeological record by any one method.

Our experience as investigators has the opposite problem: too many stimuli. Archaeologists are limited by the intrinsic contradictions of similar macro-collective experiences, but a multiplicity of individual viewpoints, personalities, epistemologies, instrumentalities and goals. We can therefore at best only apprehend some of the parameters that comprise our own identity, and our approaches to the past. The material correlates of identity come into focus haphazardly, with greater emphasis on some variables under certain conditions at the expense of others. We therefore privilege identifiable dimensions hoping that this reflects ancient emphasis, but this is an unavoidable constraint. When we lack the clues or the wherewithal, identity remains cloaked. Understanding the content of identities, the emic meaning, proceeds in parallel, sometimes broad, sometimes specific. The density of data, the web of complementary evidence, including analogical inferences and, again, wherewithal, all determine whether the step into meaning is taken. That identities existed in the past can hardly be doubted, but what those identities were is a separate question that should not be conflated with the former.

But why bother? Our empirical brothers and sisters (of both processual and occasionally Darwinian stripes) insist that the quest for identity is a faulty one, that we can never step outside our own identities and the astral projections of past identities thrown into the present, to rationally understand the material patternings of some types of behaviour. Identities, beliefs and other types of ‘meaning’ are frequently disparaged as irrelevancies, irretrievable, or inevitably tainted by observer-dependent effects. Which is to say, it is too hard, and of less ‘meaning’ than the noble pursuit of prehistoric caloric-counting which, presumably, as a science, is somehow good for you. Flannery and Marcus, for example, argue that cognitive archaeology is only possible where there are multiple lines of evidence – historical, ethnohistorical, ethnographic – which can supplement material culture. For them, study of cognition and meaning in prehistory is tantamount to science fiction (Flannery and Marcus 1993).

That many Americanists in particular have been so dedicated to a concept of archaeology-as-something-useful is a measure of the post-war fusion of Calvinism, utilitarianism and Marxism-in-drag as techno-progressivism, as funded by the National Science Foundation (and increasingly the National Institutes of Health). This still greatly underexplored aspect of American archaeology betrays another part of its fundamental identity, as servant of the state (Patterson 1995; cf. Buxton 1985). It is another small manifestation of the Faustian bargain that converted the American university into the research and development, and training and certification, arms of American capitalism. In this view identity is virtually a form of irrationalism, and the search for such irrelevancies in archaeology would certainly qualify as such. The crux of the biscuit is the question of what archaeology is for and its corollary, the meaning of meaning in various disciplines and epistemologies. For American progressives, identity is merely means to an anti-hegemonic end. Once again we are returned the dichotomy – or at least the continuum – between the human experience and the human condition, and what, if anything, intellectuals should be doing about it.

European approaches are, again ironically, more optimistic about zeroing in on identity, if just in passing. Jones's *habitus*, following Bourdieu, can be defined in much simpler terms; paraphrasing the great American pragmatic philosophers Charles Peirce and Forrest Gump, identity is as identity does. This sort of abstract behaviourism has the disadvantage of trying to chase the meaning of identity all over creation. The problem with *habitus* is that it is ahistorical, without a fundamental appreciation of the cultural, historical and physical constraints and probabilities that conditioned ancient beliefs. Unlike the present, the possibilities of the past were not limitless, and the pace and scale of change, including individual and collective identities, did not move at the speed of thought. To believe otherwise is another iteration of the conceit that recasts the past in terms familiar, or advantageous, to us. This is paralleled by the confident American assertion that various modern categories like race, class and gender can be observed in the past.

The problem is that if we seek to individuate ancient identities to the extremes, trying to focus exclusively on ever-shifting situational personalities, noncommittal and jittery folks just like us, then we must jettison archaeological cultures as even heuristic concepts, much less ancient bounded temporal entities. In the ensuing atomic fog of individuals our ability to say anything significant about structure, process or change is severely curtailed. This is well exemplified by recent work on 'the body', the supremely individual site of contestation, yet one so rarely recovered by archaeology. This narcissist preoccupation, which Giddens notes is the reflexive, perhaps reductive, corporealization of identity (Giddens 1991), also arrived in archaeology second hand, via anthropology and literary studies. It posits, à la Foucault, radical instability and perpetual confusion as timeless, rather than good, old-fashioned binary oppositions and sexual dimorphism (e.g. Meskell 1996). Its contribution to broader historical or evolutionary perspectives is vague, perhaps deliberately.

The importance of metaphors should be apparent. Identity is a playing field across which we zig and zag, a lifelong rugby match where we gradually

learn some of the rules as our competence for play increases, even as we are pummelled by friend and foe alike. Archaeologists can try and reconstruct some of the field, some of the rules and maybe even some of the plays, but only infrequently the beliefs of an individual, usually one permanently sidelined with an especially ample supply of clues. Otherwise we reconstruct the possibilities, and maybe even the probabilities. But such an exercise in imprecision, whether described as extrapolation, hypothesizing or successive approximation, is precisely like every other archaeological exercise, even calorie-counting, where reconstructions are built up one unpersuasive seed at a time (VanPool and VanPool 1999).

The irony of any discussion of identity in archaeology is that as with so many other things we appear to be forever condemned to climb Hawkes's ladder, perilously ascending from the material to the ideational (Hawkes 1954). Indeed, archaeological theory as a whole is a proverbial case of chutes and ladders, with each succeeding generation apparently determined to slide back down to the bottom and start all over again, this time with a presumably new and improved set of epistemological rigging. Why is this still happening almost two centuries after archaeological pioneers like Worsaae and Thompsen, sixty years after Collingwood and Childe, fifty years after Taylor, thirty years after Clarke and Binford, and fifteen years after Shanks and Tilley?

Part of the problem is the social construction of this discipline, where successors make their names in part by climbing over the bodies of their vanquished elders. The dynamics of archaeology are much more akin to those of the humanities in this respect than the hard sciences, and this, ironically, reflects a strange application of Popperian logic, where reputation is built at least in part on the imputation of falsification, or at least outright obloquy (e.g. Lyman *et al.* 1997; cf. Trigger 1998b). But herein lies a fatal weakness, which accounts for the prostate condition of archaeology in academia, and society as a whole.

Internally the process has been characterized by the increasingly narrow, almost clerical, nature of intellectual debates, the cultivation of complementary disdain for addressing the public at large, and the academic system of rewards and punishments. Beyond this, Bintliff argues that the larger context, and rationale, for the processualist–postprocessual debate, and indeed the postmodernist critique of the academy generally, has been as a diversion for the incorporation of universities by consumer capitalism. Arguments about political correctness and tenured radicals have been cheered on from the sidelines by institutions who wish to see energies frittered away on meaningless debate over the nature of reality and representation, while the economic structures for knowledge, learning and employment are utterly remade. This rope-a-dope strategy can only be called a resounding success, and if anything has intensified greatly since Bintliff first wrote, with the advent of the World Wide Web and attendant structures of commerce and 'edutainment' (Bintliff 1993).

Why do we bother with frivolous debates over the numbers of angels dancing on pins? No one theoretical stance is remotely adequate. Proclamations that archaeology is or could be pure science are ludicrous, since



they ignore the fundamental irreproducibility of observations. Declarations that archaeology can only be pure politics are both ludicrous and terrifying. And assertions that it is only hermeneutics are merely auto-erotic. But messianic vigour with which such debates are conducted cuts to the heart of the matter. What is at stake is the present, not the past. Who will be master of the various domains of archaeology, those graceful hierarchies of power – professional organizations, department headships, chairs with and without names, big names and little names, promotion and tenure committees, endless social networks of peer review, ebbing and flowing conferences, grouchy subalterns of tyrannized graduate students and underpaid field technicians, all nourished by the annual flood of grant monies? These are the real stakes. But unfortunately for us, universities are no longer in the business of education and knowledge, governments have been re-engineered to serve the private sector, and most academic archaeologists either wish to usher in a Brave New World or restore the Paris Commune. We need to be looking for a better reason for doing what we do, if we are to survive.

### (No?) ways out

One solution to archaeology's identity problem might be directed at the modern individual, to the effect that the purpose of archaeology is not the mirror of nature but the mirror of meanings, our own imperfect understandings of the past in the changing present. Tracing identity and other forms of meaning is compelling precisely because it offers the chance to glimpse the kernel of the present in the past. Commonality with the past, a sense of participation (with or without conscious projections), is a cognitive and emotional way of shortening the distance between subject and object, which is something hard to do if you study atoms, rocks or stars. We do it unconsciously and consciously. A search for meaning is inevitable, even in the pursuit of pure subsistence data, or new particles, or new genes. But kinship with a biped or group of bipeds of your choice creates a sense of place, of identity, that even the most postmodern of us require from time to time. What it means to us, and what it means for us, are inescapable, they are part and parcel of the rationale for the entire enterprise of investigation and curiosity. Of course, scaling up the individual appreciation of the past to that of the collective is where it gets dangerous.

But that we should seek to understand past meanings with the same underlying motivations in the present is wholly understandable and acceptable. As Todorov points out, collapsing the separation between facts and values is a critical distinction between humanism and the 'social sciences', with the former being wholly superior ethically (Todorov 1993, p. x).<sup>7</sup> The search for meaning is frankly adaptive, for a sense of meaning(s) – place, personal and social identity, and so on – is what allows us to get up and face another day. This is a frankly high-culture alternative, attuned to the trans- and postnational sensibility. Here as in every other domain we must realize that humans both ancient and modern are satisficers rather than satisfiers; we make do with the best we've got. But the difference is that for the post-industrial, information-age bourgeoisie, we can utterly remake, reunderstand, and reproject ourselves; we have a whole lonely planet full of choices. One

can find kinship with Druids or Neanderthals if one chooses. Humans in antiquity, the vast majority of whom lived and died within a few-kilometre radius of their birthplaces, did not have this cruel luxury. They were the true satisficers.

The disciplinary approach to the past might be directed precisely at the question of limits. If we then seek primarily boundaries for ancient identities, with the occasional foray to pin down a few specifics (in a game where our opponent is constantly cheating), the same metaphor can be expanded to archaeology's identity as well. Pluralism must be our over-riding goal. We sail a sort of inland epistemological lake (an image used, somewhere, by Michael Oakeshott), in our terms a *Truman Show* of our own making. Whether we have indeed reached our limits and sailed over the edge of the world remains to be seen. But the tacking and rigging that Wylie insightfully describes (following Geertz) as the indirect means by which forward epistemological motion is achieved is also the bondage equipment at the core of archaeology's problem with self and identity (Wylie 1989). The submissive posture is a fundamental part of graduate education, which all too often acts as a leather hood pulled down and zipped shut (see also Bintliff 1995). Rebellion and reaction are inevitable.

The cycle also occurs because there is no one true path in archaeology. Both social and intellectual shifts in epistemology are an invariant feature of our disciplinary structure and identity. They are in part, dare we say, progressive, in that ever-changing approaches to the human condition mimic the human condition, not least of all identity. Only by embracing this pin-ball-like existence, through disciplinary pluralism, better philosophical training and civility, will we be able to accept and embrace our role, if not our fate.<sup>8</sup> The combination of epistemological indeterminacy and the all-too-real desire of intellectuals to dominate anyone they can has disastrous and misleading results. Identity is the ultimate emergent property, and without a methodological and philosophical toolkit that includes everything from classical theories of progress through chaos and complexity and the next new thing we will be condemned to relearn painful lessons, if only about the inevitable inadequacy of any single approach.

Part of our identity also requires a frank assessment of the place of archaeology within the human sciences. Archaeology is sometimes described as the handmaiden of history. While the image of archaeology as a handmaiden's tale is suggestive (though on land it is primarily the whore of nationalism), a more realistic view is archaeology as the galley slave of the human sciences. We row endlessly, rarely knowing where the ship is going because we do not steer it; we aren't even allowed on deck. There real theorists, philosophers, artists, writers, psychologists, historians, cognitive scientists, even some anthropologists and art historians, debate the interplay of the human experience and the human condition, sitting comfortably in deck chairs, sipping cool drinks. Occasionally we are allowed to pass notes upstairs, more frequently we just respond to demands for more speed. Archaeology, truth be told, has no theory of its own. All (all, all, all) are begged, borrowed or stolen from the historical sciences, into which anthropology, a.k.a. acculturation theory (Fox 1991; see also Layton 1997), must obviously

be placed, or from the physical sciences. Lacking any real theory of our own, even shallow, trendy and vaguely theological exegesis of Darwin, we row. This two- or three-tiered view of archaeological 'theory' simply recasts Schiffer's well-known Mertonian approach in more picturesque nautical terms.

We are the muscle in part because we are by and large unfamiliar with the basic navigational concepts, that is to say, the fundamental philosophical concepts that underlie every discipline. Every time one of us escapes onto the upper decks he or she either tries to commandeer the whole vessel, spouting orders about the one true path. The majority of us, however, are simply content to row and concentrate on the back of the head of the person sitting in front of us. But even below decks we tyrannize one another. The number of archaeologists explicitly identified as 'theorists' is minute, but even those of us digging one-by-one-meter test pits are sooner or later are pressed into varying degrees or expressions of self-identification with one theoretical flag or another, through the language we adopt in grant proposals, the journals in which we publish, the meetings we attend and at which we present, the methodology and rhetoric we adopt to situate ourselves inside or outside, pro or con, and the social networks we construct, both consciously and unconsciously. Or just the vaguely self-aware auto-reinforcement that comes from deciding what to read and what not to read.

Our philosophical shallowness and difficulty engaging other disciplines on anything beyond our own terms are major causes of our problem. It is the old story of mighty musculature but wee little brains. There is also the problem of our relationship with society at large, to whom we are beholden for our daily bread, raised on a diet of pyramids, Egyptian, Mayan and Martian, and blissfully unaware that archaeology in the West is a legally mandated, tax-payer funded, (probably) billion-dollar industry. The profession cannot simultaneously bemoan public ignorance of the 'real' issues and achievements and enjoy the popularity that results in lax oversight of how public money is spent. In the absence of sustained, meaningful and accessible engagement, all of us digging inglorious postholes or determining electron spin resonances should pray for the continued supply of gold-encrusted tombs and frosty-cold ice men.

Given that archaeology inevitably reflects the concerns or preoccupations of society at large, and is dragged along by methodological innovations in the physical sciences, what are we to do to reintegrate our approach to identities, past, present and future? The big question is which future to fight. Do we challenge each other's identity as 'scientists' of various stripes in hooting contests typical of intellectuals? Do we express solidarity with 'the people' and organize knowledge to subvert the establishment and 'empower' the dispossessed of the moment? Or do we fight both extremes along a broad front, against the forces and mentalities which are turning universities into dot.com companies, academics into content-providers and, not least of all, scholarship into either leftist utopian politics or science for profit? Without embracing the radical centre we will experience a sort of living death, at the hands of a bored and frustrated public stuck with the bill for our indulgences or, more likely, at our own hands.

The only conceivable answers for the future are better training for archaeologists, precisely in the areas of ethics and epistemology, a meaningful commitment to pedagogy that emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills (just like every other discipline), and the reinvigoration of the public intellectual. Ethics means confronting the ambiguous and the obvious alike, without slavish dogma, especially from the left. Training in the history of ideas is vital, if only to reduce the tedious repackaging of the old as the next best thing, or one true path. While the flavour-of-the-day approach to ideas has obvious benefits, namely the reintroduction of useful ideas and the lengthening of the curriculum vitae, the periodic Hegel! Wittgenstein! Heisenberg! spasms merely overlook that the nature of reality has been debated since the Greeks, and morality since the Bible.

Ethical and epistemological commonalities with the other disciplines should be emphasized and brought to the fore, precisely as a means of strengthening dialogue and redrawing stale and dysfunctional identity politics which characterize the ‘humanities’, ‘social sciences’, and ‘physical sciences’. Giving up the beloved departmental structure might be a good start. Commitment to pedagogy must go beyond the comically defensive and half-hearted (e.g. Bender and Smith 2000). As far as public intellectuals go, who better to provide the rich colour commentary required by global punditocracy than archaeologists, steeped in the *longue durée* and – hopefully – the competition of ideas? Of course, it would require us to take time from writing grant applications. Entering the marketplace of often half-baked ideas, we must realize fully that offering insights is part of our moral charter, but that the public is not required to buy. Those wishing to truly change the world are commended to three professions: emergency room physician, de-mining specialist and elementary-school teacher.

### Towards the end

If archaeology can only supply a stream of possibilities and probabilities about identity or anything, for the past or the present, then what is it good for? The constant supply of material to the quest for meaning is, at first glance, hardly a dignified role for science, but I suggest that this is precisely our role. Capturing ancient identities is like trying to drive nails through blobs of mercury, but at least we can corral most of the blobs. But then what? Caught between Bill Gates and Slobodan Milošević is no place to be. Archaeology’s utilitarian conceit, the ‘learn to make irrigation canals just like the ancestors’ argument, is an obvious falsehood. No one has ever learned anything from archaeology that has been put to use to make a better future for humanity, much less prevent humanity from ‘repeating the past’ (compare now van der Leeuw and Redman 2002). Archaeology is simply what we make of it. Here we must adopt a prescriptive, hence idealist, perspective.

What archaeology does well is provide people with a sense of their many identities; that is, an aesthetic appreciation of the past and their place in the continuum of hominid life. Aesthetics is used here not in the Kantian sense of perception (but that might work too) but rather in the sense of the psychological responses to beauty and artistic experiences. Beauty, like aesthetics, has been one of the usual suspects but is now mounting a long

overdue comeback (e.g. Nehamas 2000). Archaeology would be well served to at least partially align itself with this candid reacceptance not of canonicity but of personal and subjective paths to meaning. We provide *tesseræ* that individuals and collectives use to continually construct themselves, for good and for ill.

Is aesthetics the core of self and identity, the mysterious centre around which the bitter-sweet chocolate of science is poured? Perhaps archaeology's true calling is as a 'Willy Wonkaesque' purveyor of treats, some sweet, some sour, if you don't like your selection, reach into the box and please try again. This is not a bad deal overall, and a rather more realistic one than the present role of archaeology as part of a scientifically or ideologically balanced diet of things that are good for you. And as with all treats, they should come with the recommendation not to gorge.

Is this an ethical way for archaeology to conduct business? We may have provided fodder for fascists, but at least we never gave anyone machetes and then watched what happened. But what is the difference, really? We function within a social environment with rapidly changing ecologies and the reception of our results must be a perpetual concern. Ethics and a sense of service to humanity should include limits, a difficult-to-predict morality that would exclude the embrace by (or of) certain 'isms' and nervously tolerate others. But these limits are by no means obvious. Is nationalism as an identity-concept automatically an unacceptable master? Must we all be devoted to totalizing Enlightenment values which proclaim the absolute oneness of humanity or the opposite romantic values in which the individual either reigns supreme, or finds meaning only through the collective will?

Even liberal values are fundamentally incommensurable. Our current split between capitalist science and leftist politics may simply be another manifestation of the irresolvable contradiction between liberty and equality, between concepts that privilege the individual or the collective. These exist in 'an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in need of repair – that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behavior' (Berlin 1990, 19). Ignoring the question, or shifting the balance dramatically to one position or the other, will be catastrophic. But no ethical prescriptions for an applied field like archaeology are likely to be uniformly or everlastingly valid. Archaeologists would be well served by study of nuclear science, to help individuals decide whether they are Oppenheims, Bethes or Tellers. Who shall we serve, under what conditions, and for how long? Anthropologists, especially of the biological variety, might want to sit in too. All of this will be hard to do, however, given the fact that others pay our way and insist on 'results', and given the intellectual predilection for totalitarian thinking.

If the present is any indication, the future will be an unpleasant competition between the global citizen-consumer and the disgruntled native. Archaeology in the global capitalist world will serve one master, and in the remainder it will serve the multitude of others, presuming it can be paid at all and is not replaced by religion, mythology and witchcraft (see Corrales and Hoopes 2000). Archaeology's approach to identity will remain split, the progressive individuals will triumph in the first world, the angry collectives in another (and

newly certified subalterns, anxious for a slice of the pie, on the rise in between) (Haley and Wilcoxon 1997; Erlandson *et al.* 1998; Field 1999). As new, transnational, associative identities emerge (the mutated post-Enlightenment by-products of edutainment, eco-tourism, archaeo-tourism and cyber-reality) archaeology will pander to these sensibilities. By de-emphasizing ‘culture’ and re-emphasizing ‘Culture’ the specific and the general will be rebalanced into a more consumer-friendly product (Brumann 1999; cf. Finkelkraut 1995). The contradictions inherent in progressive Westerners digging in terrible or totalitarian places will be rationalized by ignoring the present or valorizing local resistance to hegemony and, as always, the getting of good results.

While resistance to this globalization of archaeology is to be expected, it will likely be coopted by the shiny, happy vision of all peoples of all varieties, holding hands and finding common ground beneath the golden arches, especially since those golden arches will also be holding up what is left of archaeology. Archaeology will become an even greater force in the nostalgia industry of ‘heritage management’, that is to say, the global, neo-colonial, and hopefully profitable, business of manufacturing warm, pleasant identities for people once called North Americans and Europeans.<sup>9</sup> For everyone else the future is somewhat more problematic, since archaeology will continue to be part (but only part) of the problem rather than a solution. A significant number of archaeologists, especially those with tenure, will help man the barricades of the next psychodrama. But some of us should try and come together in the radical centre. It is precisely the least we can do, since we cannot change the larger rules of engagement. Civility and integrity are the first goals.

Realism and idealism will always be with us, another unity of opposites that form one of the fundamental splits in human cognition and identity. What millennia of philosophers and artists have been unable to resolve is unlikely to be even dented by a few generations of archaeologists. Ancient identities are the among the grails of archaeology, the collision of the quotidian with the Procrustean, the inner self with the outer world, needs and wants, chaos and anticipation, yesterday on the edge of tomorrow. One need not posit a Jungian unity of psychic friends to suggest that dynamism in identity is a quintessential feature of human cognition, personality and culture. The search is necessary if only in that it provides our discipline with some meaning beyond scientism and anti-humanism of the left and the right alike. The only difference perhaps between them and us, between past and present, is that change way back then was analogue rather than digital, narrowband rather than broadband. Its general lack of speed is our only hope of catching up with antiquity, but then again, recall the parable of the tortoise and the hare.

So what about us and our search for identity? Are archaeologists in the end condemned to tack endlessly back and forth between the two poles of realism and idealism, occasionally fighting pitched battles with one another, with miniature warships on the flooded Coliseum floor for the bored amusement of the masses before the main event? The debilitating zero-sum fallacy has been thinking that one side or another can win the war and create a sort of majestic water ballet for all time. A more pacific vision of a giant hot

tub where we all get to share our toys with whomever we want is more desirable. We might even invite the public in. But in making this altogether unoriginal call for tolerance, pluralism and interdisciplinary approaches, it must be stressed that archaeology follows, it does not lead. It serves, it does not command. Which is probably the way it should be.

In the end we are left with a timeless question: I know I am, but what are you? To which we can only reply, who's asking?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Díaz-Andreu and Champion (1996), Kohl and Fawcett (1996), Jones *et al.* (1995), cf. Lamberg-Karlovsky (1997). See also the apparent equation of empiricism and oppression by the Lampeter Archaeological Workshop (1997), and the subsequent bitter exchanges about correct criteria for evaluating explanations. For an important discussion of European tensions and identity politics see Judt (1996).

The discussion in this paper focuses on European and American traditions in archaeology, with which I am most familiar, but Monica Smith correctly points out that the same forces and divisions are to be found worldwide. See generally Ucko (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For an example of the humourless debate in American archaeology over the nature of science see VanPool and VanPool (1999), Hutson (2001), Arnold and Wilkens (2001) and VanPool and VanPool (2001). For archaeology and native Americans see generally Trigger (1980).

For overviews on identity from the sociological tradition see Cerulo (1997), Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995). See also the discussion and references in Cruz (2000). For a critique of the Western concept of 'self' in anthropology see Suzannek (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For an eloquent statement about the exact sciences and 'the world as it comes, unengineered by us, both messy and arbitrary and not the sort of thing about which the kind of knowledge we call scientific is possible', see Cartwright (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Compare Trigger's formulation with Gellner's (1995b) far more piquant array of relativists, fundamentalists and Enlightenment puritans. For an older discussion of science and quantification from the perspectives of philosophy of science and psychology see Meehl (1986).

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, Darwin, ever-malleable, fits both extremes, a unity of opposites that ancient Egyptians would have especially appreciated. The recent, tedious disputations between various denominations of Darwinian/evolutionary archaeology about the nature of reality, observation and 'science' merely rehearse those long-transcended in philosophy of science.

<sup>6</sup> For a painful example of an individual's struggle with contradictions, and identities imposed, lost and remembered, see the address by Gay (2000), commenting on his book.

<sup>7</sup> For a parallel commentary from economics see Heilbroner (1994). See also Burkhardt (1999) on values in scientific education. For a discussion of changing meanings of the past see Kenny (1999). We would also do well to recall Heidegger and acknowledge that ethics do not always come easily, even to very smart people.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of pluralism in archaeology see Wylie (1999). See also the comments on the tension between local and general unification in science in Kitcher (1999).

<sup>9</sup> For the hopeful distinction between ‘heritage’ and ‘history’ see Lowenthal (1998), who suggests that history ‘seeks to convince by truth, and succumbs to falsehood. Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error’. The vast bulk of archaeology done under the banner of cultural resource management must therefore be understood as history. Ironically, this may be the only truly scientific branch of American archaeology.

For the methodologies and constraints of national identity formation see Cruz (2000). Consider also the increasing dynamism of identity formation among diaspora and dispersed communities (see Joffe (2002)). For a frank statement regarding corporate support for culture, education and the arts by the president of the Texaco Foundation, and the goal of ‘becoming the preferred business partner in countries where it is doing, or wishes to do, business’ see Dowling (2000). Contrast these with the call for a ‘reasoned choice of identity and community’ in the context of a Rawlsian approach to justice in Sen (1998).

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