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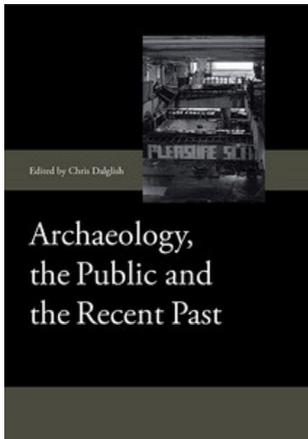
Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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REVIEWS



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**Archaeology, the Public
and the Recent Past**
[Chris Dalglish (Ed.)]

Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer
ISBN: 978-1-84385-1-7
189 pages, 2013

When we define public archaeology (Almansa 2010: 2), current relationships between society and archaeology are the key to understanding what makes it different from other approaches. We do not talk about the past, but about the present. This is probably why contemporary archaeology has become one of the better scenarios for the practice of public archaeology. I tend to remember a forgotten title, *Public Archaeology in Annapolis* (Potter 1994), which is one of the most interesting books to understand the scope of the discipline, even in its theoretical approach drawn from Critical Theory. Dalglish's volume continues with these ideas in a collection of papers about memory and engagement in the UK.

My primary critique comes from the global South and points out an issue we have been facing for too long. I still remember an activity in the British Museum while I was studying in London back in 2008. We deconstructed Room 51: "Europe and the Middle East 10,000-800 BC. My worry was about calling like that a room with only a couple of items from outside the United Kingdom, especially

in a museum like this with such an international collection. Since then, every time I read a book title with general terminology, such as the one I am reviewing now, I expect four additional words in the title: "in the United Kingdom". Occasionally these books are not only about the UK, but still they clearly do not represent a global approach like Okamura and Matsuda's book actually did (2011). This is not just a rant about a title, but about an academic system monopolized by Anglo-Saxon academics, a language —I know it sounds hypocritical from here—, and a "market" (Almansa 2015) that makes it difficult to get access to content.

That said, the book offers a great overview of projects where archaeology of the recent past encountered the public. The editor decided to separate the ten chapters into two sections, the first one dealing with the idea of community and memory, and the second being about actual engagement with the recent past. I must admit I expected fewer case studies, but in general most pieces provide interesting content and context to reflect on. However, I would like to focus on a few of the chapters only, as I believe they stand out from others in the volume. The first one is James Dixon's political essay that highlights a stance that I strongly support which can be summed in the abstract:

"This paper will demonstrate, through recent fieldwork and political engagements in Bristol, UK, the potential for a new kind of political archaeology, not based around supporting political parties or facilitating community engagement as ends in themselves, but around creating new kinds of knowledge that can be used to influence politics and politicians at the highest levels."

The idea is not new and has been previously suggested from a Marxist-Activist arena years ago —as far as Potter's (1994) book and in the conclusions of McGuire's (1992), *A Marxist Archaeology*, leading to further works (i.e. McGuire 2008; Stottman 2011)—

although no precedent is quoted. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of a political archaeology nowadays. "Political" in the terms Dixon defines in his chapter, but also in further enterprises even more separated from traditional concepts of archaeology or even political archaeologies. Still, as Dixon states: "this does not necessarily look like archaeology. [...] but that does not mean it is not archaeology" (121).

The second chapter I would like to underline is Siân Jones' text that would not only work as a kind of conclusion to Dalgish's volume but also a great reflection on a public archaeology of the recent past, or even a critical review of the book itself. Her analysis of the different chapters is very helpful to understand both the linking points among them and the two main ideas in the book (memory-community), framed by politics. In terms of Memory, understanding how and why people "remember" —and thus, engage with the past— is essential. Connerton's now classic works (e.g. Connerton 1989) are the basis for any analysis we make in this sense, especially when linking memory and identity. This link is shown throughout the book through different examples, mostly dealing with minorities. Traditionally, community archaeology —and I start connecting with my next point— has dealt with small groups, either "minor majorities" (villages, small islands, etc.) or minorities (both ethnic and social), which have been the main focus of contemporary archaeology too. However, we still know very little about ourselves —as a social majority, me being a white, occidental, middle-class cultivated professional...— even in terms of community. With this I don't mean we should not focus on minorities, even as a political action, but just to reclaim something we are taking for granted. Because communities are infinite, and political ties exist also within the majority, normally with major public repercussions.

I have a strong concern about community archaeology and the real use of the extensive debate over top-down and bottom-up

approaches, and I often find myself wondering or even doubting whether they actually are real or fake in practice. I really do not care who promotes participation or how, as long as there is content behind the project. My main concern is with the aims and consequences of the projects, as well as the uses we give to them—we cannot be naïve about it. Two chapters, Robert Isherwood's and Audrey Horning's, shed some light on the topic and are worth special attention. However, most options still evade critical and activist approaches beyond archaeology.

The role of archaeology and archaeologists is highlighted as essential—through material culture and the focus on traditional archaeological practice as the means—, but still questioning the Authorized Heritage Discourse—in the words of Smith and Waterton (2009)— and the power relations set between archaeologists and non-archaeologists in these projects is still under question. The debate is visible in the book as well as in the latest literature on community archaeology. Still, there are multiple contradictions regarding this issue and the controversy is far from being solved. Contemporary heritage is maybe a better arena to stand for a more “relaxed” relationship as Michael Nevell, Melanie Johnson and Bidy Simpson point out in their chapters, an idea also extensively examined in another recent book reflecting on the Faro Convention (Schofield 2014). Personally, however, I would align with Isherwood's stand on opening up for new values and meanings, but still in control of the final messages, especially when dealing with a more remote past.

But dealing with the concept of contemporary past makes the book more along the political spectrum, and so I should get back to this and leave archaeology aside for a while. If we have a look at all the papers, archaeology is still the centre of the discourse. We use knowledge from archaeological research to engage with communities, politicians or a wider public. The value of this is huge

and that is why I need to point it out again. However, I still would like to go a step further, towards a political archaeology without archaeology or beyond archaeology. Sometimes archaeology and cultural heritage have apparently nothing to do with their surrounding communities, but can be of use to help them solve problems. This is not only an activist approach, but also a means towards engagement, as it can be the link to a non-identitarian past.

I might have been critical with the book —actually I did not write much about it— but still it is an interesting resource for delving into the role of archaeology in contemporary contexts and the use of contemporary archaeology from a political perspective. We are used to reading about case studies discussing the situation while still lacking the theory to provide context —such as Dixon’s chapter—, but step by step we are moving forward towards a more relevant practice.

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