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A Consideration of Public Archaeology Theories

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It is possible to identify four approaches to public archaeology: educational, public relations, pluralist, and critical. The most significant divide in the discourse of public archaeology over the last few decades has existed between the educational and public relations approaches on one side, and the pluralist and critical approaches on the other. Today, however, the dividing line in these four approaches is gradually shifting, as the pluralist and critical approaches, which have so far tended to be grouped together as a more theoretical and post-processual category, are progressively splitting apart. What is emerging, as a result, is a new divide between the educational, public relations, and pluralist approaches on the one side, and the critical approach on the other. This shift seems to be caused by economic neo-liberalism which demands that archaeology be more viable in economic terms. The more archaeology seeks economic viability, however, the more it alienates itself from critical reflection. The critical approach is, thus, faced with the danger of being regarded as a detriment to the sustainability of archaeology. What seems to be crucially needed today, then, is to reconfigure public archaeology, so that it can cope with the presently dominant economic paradigm, while at the same time continuing to keep critiquing it.

KEYWORDS educational, public relations, pluralist, critical, economic neo-liberalism

Introduction

The aim of this article is to offer a theoretical reflection on the current state of public archaeology. Before beginning, it is worth considering whether the theorization of public archaeology is necessary at all. Those who regard public archaeology as ‘applied archaeology’ might well consider that public archaeology is practical in essence and therefore its theorization is unnecessary or bound to be limited. If one thinks that the main business of archaeology needs to be theorized first, and then that theory should be applied wherever possible to address social issues such as education, community development, and site preservation, public archaeology would

not seem in need of much theorization in itself, except, perhaps, for its methodology. In this case, public archaeology is viewed as an adjunct to, or a sub-field of, archaeology; in other words, archaeology can operate by itself, whether or not informed by discussion of public archaeology.

Public archaeology, however, can also be understood as informing and underlying any forms of archaeology. This idea makes sense if one thinks that archaeology always has some public aspects, whether in terms of where the funding comes from and how it is spent, where and how to carry out fieldwork, how to manage archaeological sites, how to treat finds, or what impact the outcome of archaeological research generates. It is therefore possible to argue that having an idea about how archaeology relates, and should relate, to the public already constitutes public archaeology.¹ In this view, public archaeology is inherent in all archaeology, and its theorization has to go beyond methodology; it needs to address how we want archaeology to be in relation to modern society.² In this article I see public archaeology as such, and shall examine its recent and current trends theoretically in order to make a case for how I think archaeology should relate to the public.

Debating and defining public archaeology

Public archaeology as a term and concept has slowly yet steadily gained recognition within the discipline of archaeology over the last few decades. This recognition was initially limited to Anglophone countries, in particular the United States, Britain, and Australia, but since around the turn of the century public archaeology has been introduced, discussed, and practised in non-Anglophone countries, too (for example, see [Almansa, 2008; 2011](#), for Spain; [Bonacchi, 2009](#), for Italy; [Fredrik & Wahlgren, 2008](#), for Sweden; [Funari, 2001; 2004](#); [Green, et al., 2001](#), for Brazil; [Cao, 2004](#), for China; [Křenková, 2005](#), for the Czech Republic; [Matsuda & Okamura, 2012](#), for Japan).

Reflecting the diversity of the theory and practice of archaeology, and even the greater diversity of local traditions of engaging with the past and of legal instruments regulating archaeological activities in different countries, divergent forms of public archaeology have emerged — and are still emerging — across the world ([Richardson & Almansa, 2015: 196–97](#)). While it would be too demanding to examine each of these forms in detail, Okamura and I suggested elsewhere that, by analysing their aims, one can classify them into one of a combination of four categories, which are helpful in grasping the overall trend of public archaeology in each geographical area ([Matsuda & Okamura, 2011: 5–7](#)). In this article I refer to these categories as four approaches to public archaeology — educational, public relations, pluralist, and critical — and discuss how they are playing out in the global context of public archaeology today.

First, it is useful to briefly define each approach. The *educational* approach aims to facilitate and promote people's learning of the past on the basis of archaeological thinking and methods; the importance of protecting and conserving archaeological remains can also be a subject of learning in this approach. The *public relations* approach aims to increase the recognition, popularity, and support of archaeology in contemporary society by establishing a close relationship between archaeology

and various individuals and social groups. The *pluralist* approach aims to understand the diversity of interactions between material remains and different members of the public; it treats archaeology as one way of making sense of the past and considers how it can meaningfully engage with various other ways of interacting with the past. Finally, the *critical* approach engages with the politics of the past (Gathercole & Lowenthal, 1990), typically by seeking to unsettle the interpretation of the past by socially dominant groups, in particular ethnocentric and elitist groups, or to help socially subjugated groups achieve due socio-political recognition by promoting their views of the past.

The four approaches build on the models proposed by Merriman (2004: 5–8) and Holtorf (2007: 105–29) of how archaeologists engage with the public (see Figure 1). The educational and public relations approaches correspond to Holtorf’s ‘education model’ and ‘public relations model’ respectively, and the combination of the two approaches represents Merriman’s ‘deficit model’, in which the public is viewed as devoid of archaeological knowledge (Merriman, 2004: 5–6). The combination of the pluralist and critical approaches, on the other hand, corresponds to Merriman’s ‘multiple perspective model’ and Holtorf’s ‘democratic model’.

One of my contentions in the present article is that it is vital to distinguish between the pluralist and critical approaches to understand what is happening in public archaeology today. Before I elaborate on this point, however, it is important to remember that the most significant divide in the discourse of public archaeology over the last few decades has existed between the educational and public relations approaches on one side, and the pluralist and critical approaches on the other; this divide is represented by a bold vertical line in Figure 1.

The divide has existed on multiple levels. On one level, it has reflected the divergence between the more practice-oriented educational and public relations approaches and the more theory-oriented pluralist and critical approaches. In terms of the history of public archaeology, the educational and public relations have been recognized as legitimate approaches for longer than the pluralist and critical approaches; indeed, the latter became prominent only after the 1990s under the influence of post-processual archaeology (Merriman, 2002: 542–43). The divide has also reflected the difference as to how the public is conceptualized. The educational and public relations approaches regard the public as the object of intervention; in

	More practice-oriented		More theory-oriented	
Merriman’s models (2004)	deficit model		multiple perspective model	
Holtorf’s models (2007)	education model	public relations model	democratic model	
Four approaches to public archaeology	educational approach	public relations approach	pluralist approach	critical approach

FIGURE 1 Correspondence between Merriman’s models, Holtorf’s models, and the four approaches to public archaeology

other words, the public are to be educated, informed, and interested.³ In contrast, the pluralist and critical approaches regard the public as a subject, which has its own agency and interacts with the past according to its beliefs, interests, and agendas.

The growth of public archaeology over the last few decades was in part driven by a series of heated debates that revolved around the divide. Two debates among them were particularly important. The first took place between Holtorf and McManamon, which featured in the initial volume of the journal *Public Archaeology* in 2000. In this debate, McManamon argued that archaeologists should engage more in public outreach in order to generate the public who are supportive of archaeological preservation and who can also ‘serve as an invaluable source of political, volunteer and economic backing’ for archaeology (McManamon, 2000a: 7). Holtorf criticized McManamon’s argument for being prescriptive and uncharitable. He contended that non-professionals should be ‘welcomed and indeed be encouraged and supported in their own encounters with archaeology, whether these may closely resemble professional attitudes or not’ (Holtorf, 2000: 215), and stressed the need for ‘[c]ritical understanding and dialogue’ in order to ‘engage with the multiple pasts and alternative archaeologies’ (Holtorf, 2000: 215). McManamon subsequently replied, justifying his earlier remarks by maintaining that ‘professional archaeologists and others who believe that historical and scientific archaeological methods and techniques provide an informative and valuable view of the past need to promote this point of view more avidly’ (McManamon, 2000b: 216).

It is important to note that in the debate McManamon called for more education and public relations of archaeology, while Holtorf argued for pluralist and critical approaches to archaeology and the past. Characterized by Holtorf’s acute criticism and McManamon’s somewhat restrained counter-argument, the debate was no doubt engaging. It was thought-provoking because the appeal for education and public relations, which had long been considered as obviously important, came under scrutiny for the first time; the readers were invited to seriously reflect on how archaeologists should approach, and interact with, the public. The debate not only helped the journal *Public Archaeology* make a successful launch, but also contributed to the establishment of public archaeology as a distinct and promising area of discussion.

The second significant debate in public archaeology took place in the journal *World Archaeology* in 2007 (Fagan & Feder, 2006; Holtorf, 2005). It was again Holtorf who initiated the debate by criticizing archaeologists who dismissed and denounced alternative archaeologies. Pointing out the similarities between scientific and alternative approaches to the understanding of the past, he argued that ‘[a]rchaeologists do not serve as a special state police force dedicated to eradicating interpretations that are considered false or inappropriate by a self-selected jury’ (Holtorf, 2005: 549). Fagan and Feder, who were among the archaeologists criticized by Holtorf, hit back emphatically. They wrote an article titled ‘Crusading against Straw Men: An Alternative View of Alternative Archaeologies: Response to Holtorf (2005)’, in which they rejected most of Holtorf’s contention as overblown or misinformed. Fagan and Feder insisted on the ‘validity and legitimacy of archaeological prepositions’ that are based on scientific methods and evidence (Fagan & Feder, 2006: 724), and argued that it is important to distinguish between rational

archaeology and pseudo-archaeology and to reject the second when it disguises itself as the first.

The debate in 2007 was notable for Holtorf's continued sharp criticism and Fagan's and Feder's acrimonious response to him, and it helped reinvigorate the critical discussion of public archaeology. Holtorf was again a proponent of pluralist and critical approaches to archaeology and the past, which was contrasted with Fagan's and Feder's position that was largely positivist and educational. While centring on the question of whether and how archaeologists should engage with alternative archaeologies, the debate had much wider implications, as it touched on other important issues, such as the social role of the archaeologist as expert and the usefulness of archaeology in contemporary society.

Crucially, the two debates cited above revolved around the divide between the educational and public relations approaches on one side, and the pluralist and critical approaches on the other. In both debates the divide provided a theoretical contrast, which was conspicuous and easily comprehensible for readers. In that sense, the divide provided an important basis for discussion in public archaeology — and Holtorf's contribution to conceptualization of this divide was remarkable.

Neo-liberalism and the divergence of approaches

Today, however, the dividing line between the four approaches to public archaeology is gradually shifting. The pluralist and critical approaches, which have so far tended to be grouped together as a more theoretical and post-processual category, are progressively splitting apart — and this brings us back to my earlier contention that it is vital to distinguish between the two approaches. What is emerging, as a result, is a new divide between the educational, public relations, and pluralist approaches on the one side, and the critical approach on the other (see Figure 2).

The shift seems to be caused by the expansion of economic neo-liberalism, which is characterized by the logic of the free market and the pursuit of exchange value in any social activity. The current economic circumstances demand more 'value for money' in most sectors of society worldwide, and archaeology, which is often regarded as a self-indulgent middle-class pursuit and sometimes even as a hindrance to economic development in the context of preserving archaeological remains, is increasingly expected to be more accountable in financial terms.

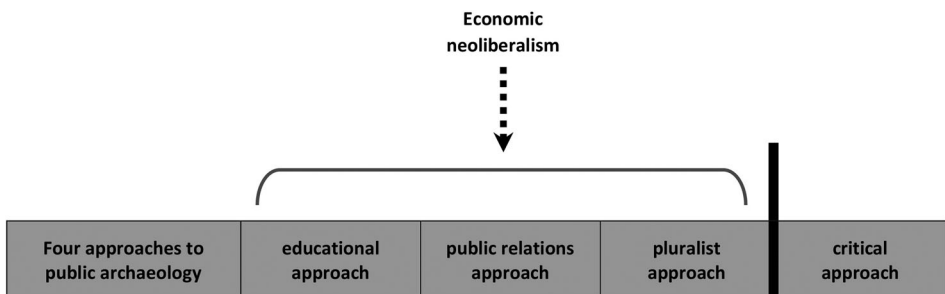


FIGURE 2 A new divide (represented by a bold vertical line) that is gradually created in the four approaches to public archaeology under the influence of economic neo-liberalism

This has two consequences. First, archaeology is under pressure to demonstrate what ‘public benefits’ it can bring to the modern world (Little, 2002). When it comes to public archaeology, this encourages espousal of the educational approach, as by delivering public education archaeology can prove its usefulness for learning about the past. Second, there is a demand that archaeology should maintain and foster good relations with its stakeholders, especially its funders, and various other social groups in order to secure social and financial support from them — this creates an impetus for adopting the public relations approach to public archaeology. It is no coincidence that educational and public relations activities carried out by archaeologists are on the increase under the current neo-liberal economic climate.

Interestingly, the pluralist approach can be useful for such education and public relations of archaeology. This is because effective delivery of education requires a careful understanding of the recipients of that education — namely, members of the public. First, the pluralist approach can help archaeologists gain a nuanced understanding of a diversity of individuals and social groups. Likewise, the pluralist approach can also help archaeologists optimize their relations with their clients, stakeholders, and even potential customers, by providing an insight into a wide array of different perceptions and understandings of archaeology.

Thus, the educational, public relations, and pluralist approaches can merge well, albeit with some adjustment between themselves, for the purpose of justifying archaeology’s *raison d’être* in contemporary society and strengthening its financial viability. This would explain why many recent publications on public archaeology emphasize ‘collaboration’, ‘sharing’, and ‘dialogue’ with various external groups to enhance archaeology’s usefulness and sustainability in the modern world (for example, Jameson, 2014; Stone & Hui, 2014).

All this is to be welcomed, but one should also realize that the critical approach does not partake in the new development. In fact, the critical approach seems to be gradually losing ground at the forefront of the discussion of public archaeology today. This is because, unlike the other three approaches which can adapt in one way or another to neo-liberal market economy, the critical approach does not easily lend itself to neo-liberal logic and would even challenge the very idea of making archaeology subject to market economy. To give an example, one of the central questions explored in the critical approach is: whose interests are served by a particular interpretation of the past or by a particular practice of archaeology (Faulkner, 2000; Hamilakis, 1999a; 1999b; Leone, et al., 1987; McDavid, 2004; Shackel, 2004: 3–6; Shackel & Chambers, 2004; Shanks & Tilley, 1987). It would not be difficult to imagine the reluctance of funders or collaborators of archaeology to let themselves be examined in such a critical light.

This brings to light the difference between the critical and pluralist approaches (Matsuda & Okamura, 2011: 7–8). Echoing the ‘critical theory’ in the social sciences (Calhoun, 1995), the critical approach aims to reveal and critique the power structure underpinning the discourse and practice of archaeology, with its ultimate aim being to make the modern world more just and equitable through archaeology. In other words, the critical approach aspires to reform contemporary society, in line with the thinking of the traditional Left. This can be contrasted with the pluralist approach, which is much closer to the thinking of the postmodern and liberal Left. The pluralist approach breaks away from any grand narratives,

including Marxism and Progress, and is more interested in the fragmented nature of (post)modern society, where there is little concern about ‘domination and resistance’. This explains why the pluralist approach can adapt to, or even fit well with, economic neo-liberalism.

The divergence between the pluralist and critical approaches first surfaced in a short debate published in the journal *Antiquity* in 2008 (Holtorf, 2008; Kristiansen, 2008). The debate involved Holtorf again, with his vision of a people-driven archaeology coming under criticism by Kristiansen (2008). Kristiansen considered Holtorf’s argument as an ultra-liberal deconstruction of archaeology ‘in the service of popular culture’ and ‘at the mercy of the free market and its forces’, and pointed out its lack of critical examination of the very nature of popular culture (Kristiansen, 2008: 489). Holtorf responded by arguing that Kristiansen’s criticism was ungrounded, referring to his own earlier critical discussions of the popular consumption of archaeology and of the potential problem in its political and ideological applications (Holtorf, 2008: 491). He also stated that his earlier works had not focused so much on economic markets.

Whilst Holtorf has not discussed economic markets in relation to archaeology or popular culture much in his works, it is noteworthy that Kristiansen expressed concerns about the effect of economic neo-liberalism on public archaeology. His argument that the examination of the role of archaeology in modern society needs to be informed by ‘a critical understanding of archaeology’s ideological and political role’ (Kristiansen, 2008: 490) can be interpreted as a warning against the disappearance or weakening of the critical approach in the agenda of public archaeology. One might argue that Kristiansen was the first critic to voice the gradual decline of the critical approach in public archaeology.

Concerns about the diminishing interest in the critical approach were expressed more vocally in a controversy surrounding the possibility of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) establishing a partnership with the mining multinational Rio Tinto Limited. The controversy started when WAC was approached by Rio Tinto, which sought to work with WAC to enhance its practice of cultural heritage management in economically disadvantaged countries and for indigenous groups (Smith, 2011: 228–29). According to the ideas then discussed between the WAC leadership and Rio Tinto, WAC was to receive a range of funding from Rio Tinto for the purpose of strengthening its organizational capacities, in return for providing Rio Tinto with professional advice on cultural heritage management, especially in relation to indigenous heritage (Shepherd & Haber, 2011: 102–04, Smith, 2011: 228–29). The willingness of the then WAC leadership to engage with Rio Tinto attracted harsh criticism from Shepherd and Haber, who were deeply concerned about the suppression inflicted on indigenous peoples by mining companies in different parts of the world. For Shepherd and Haber, the idea that WAC, which had been championing indigenous people’s rights, was to partner with a multinational mining company was tantamount to selling out WAC’s ideals (Smith, 2015: 30). The controversy was subsequently debated in *Public Archaeology* (Shepherd & Haber, 2011; 2012; Smith, 2011). While the details of controversy were explained in the debate (see also Folorunso, 2012; Smith, 2015: 29–33), it is important to note that the main issue at stake was the extent to which archaeologists should retain a critical stance in their engagement with external organizations, including business

corporates. For Shepherd and Haber, the critical approach was always of primary importance, whereas for the then WAC leadership engagement with external organizations was equally important for WAC's growth and sustainability.

Conclusion

As shown above, public archaeology is today entering a new phase, in which the previous divide between the educational and public relations approaches and the pluralist and critical approaches is being replaced with a new divide which is gradually created between the critical approach and the other three approaches. Under the current neo-liberal economic climate, the impetus for amalgamating the educational, public relations, and pluralist approaches is strong, for it is considered to increase archaeology's viability. Ironically, however, the more archaeology seeks viability, the more it alienates itself from the critical stance. The critical approach is, thus, faced with the danger of being regarded as a detriment to the sustainability of archaeology.

I would argue that public archaeology based on any approach should be welcomed in principle. However, remembering that the subject has thus far grown largely by critiquing 'the problems which arise when archaeology moves into the real world of economic conflict and political struggle' (Ascherson, 2000: 2), relinquishing the critical edge for the sake of attaining viability and sustainability is likely to cost public archaeology too much in the long run. Crucially, what seems to be needed today, then, is to reconfigure public archaeology, so that it can cope with the presently dominant economic paradigm, while at the same time continuing to critiquing it.

Notes

¹ Some might think that such an amorphous view of public archaeology does not allow a healthy development of the subject due to the lack of a clearly defined remit of it. Yet I still prefer considering public archaeology as open-ended and as inclusive as possible, so it can adapt and respond to a variety of social and disciplinary needs. I would also like to welcome archaeologists who usually do not undertake some obvious form of public engagement, such as outreach and education, to the arena of public archaeology, instead of discouraging them from expressing their views as to how archaeology should relate to the public. For the same reason I disagree with

the professionalization of public archaeology (Richardson & Almansa, 2015).

² This emphasis is resonant with the theoretical shift observed in museum studies about thirty years ago (Vergo, 1989: 3). Sometimes referred to as New Museology, the advancement of theorization in museum studies (see Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996) has contributed to the change in museum practice in many drastic ways.

³ This does not mean that the educational and public relations approaches deny the agency of the members of the public. What is discussed here is the conceptualization of the public in relation to the aim of the two approaches.

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