Antiquity 2026 Vol. 100 (409): 218–220
https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10242

Debate Response

Multiple pathways to applied archaeology, actionability and intervention: a response to Davies & Lunn-Rockliffe

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It is exciting to read another debate piece in *Antiquity* critically examining the opportunities for what can be called applied archaeology of global challenges, defined as a branch of the discipline concerned with the application of knowledge about the past generated from archaeological research to address any of the broad array of first-rate wicked problems identified in Agenda 2030 (United Nations 2015) and similar charters and discourses (cf. Isendahl & Stump 2019a: 585). It makes sense to briefly compare Matthew Davies and Samuel Lunn-Rockliffe's argument to that of Michael E. Smith, made in another debate article in this journal a few years ago (Smith 2021), not only because both articles address the same broad issue but because their pitch and structure are similar. Both argue that (1) many archaeologists proclaim their discipline's relevance for addressing present challenges (*observation*), but that (2) this promise is largely unfulfilled (*caveat*), followed by (3) a prescribed solution (*remedy*). In short, Smith (2021) suggests that archaeologists need to engage collaboratively in transdisciplinary research—in the sense of "research for which individuals collaborate deeply and learn elements of one another's discipline" (Smith 2021: 1064)—to generate quantitative results that are informative to scholars in fields more directly involved in applied science. Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe champion a complementary route, arguing "for a more explicit model of community-embedded research design, where archaeological questions, research programmes, data and outputs are collaboratively produced with the view of questioning and refining existing policy discourse and driving meaningful future change" (Davies & Lunn-Rockliffe 2026: 213). The participatory vantage point evokes the phrase 'nothing about us without us' (*nihil de nobis, sine nobis*, in Latin) used in other academic and activist contexts to emphasise that groups affected by policies should be included in the decision-making process (e.g. Penn State Center Philadelphia 2024).

I support both recommendations; they are well argued, demonstrably true and operational in their respective contexts—because, as Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe point out, there are multiple and contested pathways to addressing global challenges from the vantage points of archaeology (how could it be any different than pluralism?—no other discipline is expected to follow one single methodological route). For instance, the argument that open science principles for increased access to archaeological and cognate

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https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10242 Published online by Cambridge University Press

datasets is crucial to some archaeological approaches addressing global challenges—a core idea of the Swedish National Infrastructure for Digital Archaeology (Swedigarch; https://swedigarch.se)—complements the points that Smith and Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe make. In this brief contribution to the ongoing multivocal conversation (rather than 'debate', which alludes to a confrontation between opposing arguments) on the potential for an applied archaeology of global challenges, I take the opportunity to raise a few basic points that reading Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe's article stimulated.

I suggest it remains purposeful to 'simply' state the relevance of archaeology without instructing exactly how applied archaeologies of global challenges are best conducted—indeed, in such an expansive field there is no definitive best practice. I welcome Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe's suggestions, as well as Smith's and any other demonstration of how applied approaches can be made more impactful (for a few, see Isendahl & Stump 2019b; Hawken *et al.* 2025)—these are important and helpful contributions. But stating the simple fact that archaeology is relevant for addressing present challenges still bears constant repetition in archaeological fora (such as this) as well as in other contexts: pursuing it serves a broader purpose to changing the framing of archaeology, within and beyond the discipline and profession, from strictly looking at the past to doing so for the good of improving the present and future.

I expect the view that scientific knowledge about the past is generically useful to be widely held among the readers of this journal, scholars in other fields, as well as laypersons and the public. "To understand the present, we must know the past", is a cliché for a reason. All archaeologists, arguably, strive to piece together as much as is theoretically and methodologically possible about the past from the material and cognate records at their disposal—knowledge that is both shaped in the present and enriches it—because it makes sense to do so and we have been taught to. But it does not automatically follow that the knowledge and critical insight about the past published annually in archaeological reports, journals and books can directly support intervention that addresses present-day challenges; the potential for that kind of immediate actionability is often low or non-existent. Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe suggest one route to increase that potential, under certain context-dependent conditions.

The term 'actionable science' is currently championed in sustainability science and natural resource management to direct attention to science that "has the potential to inform decisions (in government, business, and the household), to improve the design or implementation of public policies, or to influence public- or private-sector strategies, planning and behaviors that affect the environment" (Palmer 2012: 6; see also Beier *et al.* 2017). In the main, archaeology is not expected to engage in that sense, nor does it pretend to do so; archaeology is not considered an applied science by default and suggesting that it could be is still met by much disbelief, disapproval and disregard—seemingly an instinctive reaction. Few archaeologists are trained to plan what the actionable outcomes of their research will be, and most of our students are not properly prepared to envision that their future professional life can contribute towards improving social and/or environmental conditions—even less, admittedly, to operationalise how. To push actionable archaeology into the mainstream arguably requires changing the discourse and framing of archaeology—an agenda to which Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe's article and the work of many others

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contribute. Archaeology has, of course, gone through its interpretative turn, but it might be particularly helpful if we rethink scientific observation itself as a form of intervention, as systems scholar Gerald Midgley proposed some 20 years ago. Lightning short, Midgley (2003: 79) defines intervention as "purposeful action by an agent to create change" and proceeds to critically examine the supposed opposition between observation and intervention, finding that the distinction is dubious and concluding that scientific observation is a kind of intervention. The argument is compelling, significantly drawing on social psychologist Kurt Lewin's "harnessing of science in the service of intervention" (Midgley 2003: 82) for social benefits, an approach fundamentally different from Popperian purism. From this perspective, the emerging discourse and practice of applied archaeology of global challenges represent an intervention by itself. Davies and Lunn-Rockliffe and a host of colleagues around the world taking part in that same conversation (see, for example, the research network Integrated History and Future of People on Earth (IHOPE); https://ihopenet.org) are the collective self-organised agents of a field in transition.

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