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Whatever future people end up with, clearly archaeology and archaeologists have a major opportunity to add degrowth to our theoretical and methodological toolkits to contribute to the communities we live in, whether they be local, scholarly, or indigenous, in the present and looking ahead to many possible futures.

Note

1 Following the current convention present in Australia, I will refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under the banner 'Indigenous', using 'indigenous' to refer more generally to the world's First Nations. This is a marker of respect for the ancestral people and lands from which I write this comment and means no disrespect for other indigenous peoples in other parts of the world.

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Degrowth and archaeological learning beyond the neo-liberal university

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Academia has been described as a cake-eating contest where the prize is more cake. This is generally taken as a comment on workloads, but the competitive brutality of the academic job market suggests a coda: the winner chokes on cake, but the losers starve. The neo-liberal university – I write from the British version – reproduces itself and grows through the overproduction of PhDs with minimal academic career prospects, ensuring feverish competition for grants and jobs, and promoting precarity, fear and conformity (Flexner 2020, 159). Meanwhile, as government subsidies for degree programmes evaporate, those same neo-liberal universities need to increase enrolments to grow, to compete and to survive. In archaeology, the resulting overproduction of bachelor's degrees contributes to the oversupply of labour and the suppression of wages in professional archaeology. If there are no jobs, why not take out another loan and go back to university for a master's degree? And if, on the other hand, student recruitment falls, the same merciless meatgrinder logic demands redundancies and programme closures.

Those of us privileged enough to be employed in academic archaeology might prefer to focus on the benefits and pleasures of studying archaeology, rather than the more mercenary considerations of student loan debt versus graduate incomes. It pleases us to think of ourselves as educators or public servants, rather than as the purveyors of luxury goods to an increasingly elite clientele, with a faint sleazy whiff of the pyramid scheme about the whole enterprise.

The degrowth movement in archaeology that Nicolas Zorzin has outlined (and see also Flexner 2020) is a fascinating exercise in imaginative thinking. Part of the totalizing cultural power of neo-liberal capitalism is the difficulty of thinking outside or beyond its bounds. Degrowth is a powerful challenge to these logics, offering snapshot views of alternative worlds. On this basis it is interesting to consider what archaeological education, and higher education in particular, might look like in a degrowth economy.

The first model we might consider is the more modest one: Zorzin's proposal for professional archaeology transformed by the introduction of a basic minimum income (BMI), also known as universal basic income (UBI) (see, for example, Haagh 2019). The core principle of UBI is that

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every adult in a society receives an unconditional sum of money sufficient to cover their basic costs of living. In some models (there are many) this would replace all other forms of state benefits and support, and would be funded in part by eliminating the costly infrastructure of assessing individual needs. There are, as Zorzin rightly observes, more reactionary and nationalist proposed forms of UBI as well. Nevertheless, in controlled trials UBI has consistently demonstrated increases in well-being in often surprising forms.

The primary advantage of UBI – or disadvantage, from the perspective of neo-liberal employers – is the elimination of the need to take bad jobs at low pay with poor conditions in order to survive. In short, it makes people less exploitable and more free, particularly in how they spend their time. Zorzin's model of archaeology with UBI focuses on the freeing of diggers from the endless cycle of digging, allowing them the freedom to choose to spend time focusing on analytical aspects of their work, research activities and public archaeology.

I would add to this that UBI would enable archaeologists to engage easily with higher education. With the pressure of work eased, there would be time to study other aspects of archaeology and heritage, to take skills and professional-development courses, and to engage with life-enhancing studies in anything from poetry to particle physics. The freedom to access learning would also include the freedom to separate learning from a narrow focus on vocational training.

As well as interacting with higher education as consumers, UBI would enable professional archaeologists to engage in teaching and to contribute more easily to training and skills development programmes, including as part of public archaeology projects. The breaking down of the categories of student and teacher and moves towards more open, democratic forms of learning would be a logical development, building on existing structures and models of radical education.

It is reasonable to suggest that the greater free time and lower-pressure employment that accompany UBI would lead to a transformation of archaeology as a whole through the softening of professional boundaries. Field archaeologists could develop skills courses while museum archaeologists reconnect with fieldwork and academic archaeologists learn to play the bagpipes. If the student of cuneiform is the teacher of bioarchaeology, and vice versa, the labels of 'teacher' and 'student' will become more fluid and contextual markers of role rather than identity.

Flexner (2020) rightly points to commercial publishing as one of the most damaged and damaging areas of neo-liberal academia, both in its shaping of academic careers ('publish or perish') and in its often extraordinary profitability based on widespread exploitation of unpaid labour. I would add that the time pressures of both academic and professional archaeology have created a vast body of almost unreadably low-quality writing, where the emphasis is on technical reporting at the expense of interpretation, speculation and, most of all, storytelling. Flexner suggests a 'slow-science' approach to crafting fewer, better stories targeted at specific audiences. I can only imagine the pleasure of reading a report written by archaeologists who have been able to take the time to reflect on their work, read widely and craft a narrative of landscapes and time-depth and human stories and transformations and natural–cultural environments and life cycles and so on. Better archaeological writing of all kinds, for all types of audiences, would open up so many new avenues of learning.

The importance of this open approach to learning in a degrowth-oriented society cannot be underestimated, and I would gently suggest that Zorzin has neglected it. The model of archaeology as a craft proposed by Shanks and McGuire (1996) and developed by Zorzin as a socially engaged 'dissident, convivial, anti-capitalistic, non-self-serving archaeology' (p. 13) would need to be grounded in an understanding of learning and teaching as lifelong processes that emerge naturally and organically from our professional practices. Ultimately a degrowth model of archaeology would involve less archaeology – less fieldwork, less money and fewer person-hours of labour required. The value of UBI in a degrowth economy would be to decouple this decline in demand for labour from the decline in the number of employed professionals, and create the space for a radical reimagining of archaeological learning.

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If UBI represents a loosening of the bonds of neo-liberalism, the logic of degrowth points towards a post-capitalist future. What might this look like for professional and academic archaeology? Zorzin imagines a reshaping of archaeological labour into non-profit cooperatives working in and with communities to enrich their cultural lives through archaeological scholarship and care for heritage. Flexner (2020, 163), in turn, imagines a degrowth future in which 'universities provide a shared and accessible space for people to pursue research interests with an end goal of co-publishing or publicizing knowledge for society'. Flexner also recognizes that a utopian vision for the future of archaeology might look a bit like antiquarianism, or a leisure activity for the wealthy.

In fact, in Britain at least the early 19th-century roots of the discipline lay not in universities (and certainly not in private companies) but rather in clubs and societies (Levine 1986). Over the past two centuries this has grown into a vast web of associations dedicated to the archaeology of specific counties or towns, periods such as Romano-British or post-medieval archaeology, and specialisms such as numismatics or church architecture. Their memberships range from the dozens to the thousands, and their activities include congresses, lecture series, fieldwork, small grants for students and researchers, and the publication of learned journals. I do not want to over-romanticize these British archaeological societies. Many are antiquated in their attitudes and elite in their memberships, but most serve their constituencies well and many are struggling to survive. The very idea that they might serve as substitutes for academic or professional archaeology in a post-capitalist society grounded in degrowth would likely drive the honourable and aristocratic trustees of the more venerable county societies to apoplexy.

Imagine instead a model of archaeology based on the voluntary membership of one or multiple cooperatives, some organized in conjunction with local communities as in Zorzin's vision, others around specific research focuses as in Flexner's. In a post-capitalist and post-work economy these open cooperatives – self-organized both internally and, most importantly, into broader networks – could take on the rescue-archaeology functions of professional units; the teaching, learning and training functions of universities; and many of the collections care and communication roles of museums. Models for this form of organization lie not only in voluntary societies but in the ecomuseum movement, which aims for community self-management of cultural resources (Davis 1999).

The narrative of degrowth in archaeology that Zorzin has outlined, as well as Flexner's in his earlier paper, is a seductive one – but also realistic in its account of the social–political, economic and conceptual obstacles to its existence. It is strikingly difficult to get oneself into the right mindset for post-capitalist imaginaries. Once this thought experiment has been achieved, it is quite disappointing to return to reality. Of course, the value of imaginative thinking lies in part in that painful realignment with the world-as-it-is. Nothing seems quite the same, quite as solid, permanent, necessary or inevitable. The flaws are more obvious, and we are less willing to ignore them. The hardships and cruelties seem less necessary and less tolerable. The ideological poisons of neo-liberalism are twisting higher education beyond recognition, forcing growth where it cannot be sustained and transforming public goods into elite luxuries, against a grim background of indebted students and an increasingly precarious professoriate. My own university doubled its student numbers in less than ten years: we do not see this as a crisis because we are told that it is a success. In higher education, as in every other part of the public sector, the ideology of the free market has wrought untold damage. It is comforting and stimulating to be reminded that another academic world is possible.

In this brief response, I have tried to draw out the ideas presented in Zorzin's paper in the direction of archaeological education, both in universities and in a more general sense. I am confident that the concept of degrowth in archaeology will continue to spark numerous productive discussions and activities, and I look forward to the continuing conversations. For now, I am going to retreat to my ivory tower to contemplate Zorzin's notion of 'sabotage' and all of its rich and dangerous possibilities.

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