Airing Political Contexts

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WAC in Washington was a dramatic departure from the way American archaeology is run through the meetings of the Society for American Archaeology and the Society for Historical Archaeology, where there is virtually never a discussion of politics closely juxtaposed to the substance of archaeology. Throughout virtually all of WAC-5 there was a constant consideration of local politics, people, agendas, and needs for archaeology. The explicit consideration of minorities, exploitation, indigenous peoples, workers and wage earners as inherent in archaeology was a great relief to me as someone who routinely uses Marxist explanations for archaeological materials. WAC was a refreshing environment and a rewarding one when it comes to considering the local political environment for science and scholarship.

It was also nice to have it in Washington at the very time when the U.S. Supreme Court made its two decisions showing that the current U.S. government is not entirely reactionary. Although most attendees at WAC-5 were not aware of them immediately, the Supreme Court's decisions on affirmative action and the privacy due consensual sexual relations among adults was a welcome relief in the context of the consideration of cancelling WAC-5 in the U.S. as a way of protesting the U.S. war in Iraq. WAC-5 is all about considering politics in archaeology. Although I had helped to organise WAC-1 and WAC-3, I had never attended WAC itself before, having pulled out because I disagreed with the attempt at inserting political action into the actual way that WAC itself was administered. WAC is strong because it allows, even insists on, the consideration of political contexts. This is uniquely important, even though I disagree on the effectiveness of using WAC itself as an organisation to effect national policies.

Last, it was great to have WAC-5 on the campus of the Catholic University of America. The Congress participants could see this little-known campus which has housed a vibrant Department of Anthropology in Washington for many decades. WAC-5 has helped to place CUA on the map. I was also proud to show off Washington, D.C. in the bus tour of the archaeology of Dumbarton Oaks, Mount Vernon, and Annapolis.

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