Power, knowledge and the past

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With his 'The Brexit hypothesis and prehistory', Kenneth Brophy (2018) has written a vital paper addressing a major conundrum for the modern archaeologist. He provides an excellent overview of the problem and its disparate manifestations, and offers sound suggestions for some of the ways in which we, as a community, might proceed. I will return to the nature of our community of practice later, but will begin by reflecting on how we have come to be in the position where our work can be considered so relevant to contemporary concerns, but is also open to new—as well as some familiar—forms of abuse.

The first point to make is that recognition of the relevance of archaeological work for current questions of identity should be considered as a 'good thing'. Although one might sometimes bemoan the seemingly inevitable entwining of contemporary politics with justifications rooted in the past, rather than progressive visions of the future, this does indeed seem to be an inescapable feature of how identity works—during modernity at least (cf. Appiah 2018). Arguably, indeed, this is why archaeology has been such a feature of modernity (Thomas 2004). Without such relevance, it is hard to see how public support for archaeology as exists might be sustained. We should welcome the chance to shake off the stereotype of the esoteric 'boffin' and to participate in debates shaping the present (cf. Holtorf 2007: 75–83), linking —in some sense at least—our work and our citizenship.

Such acceptance, however, is the easy part. Clearly, the debate on how much we should own our personal political views in relation to our work goes back at least to the early days of post-processual archaeology (e.g. Tilley 1989). Aspects of the debate today are no different, but the context has changed. Rather than anxiety about whether ley-line enthusiasts or ancient astronaut fanatics might gain from a relativistic turn in mainstream archaeology (Renfrew 1989), the post-truth environment that Brophy describes entails the mainstreaming of feelings over facts, conspiracy over expertise and a real risk—not seen for over half a century —of a return to nationalist influence over many cultural domains, including archaeology (Niklasson & Hølleland 2018).

How we respond to this situation now must therefore be seen as part of a wider movement to address contemporary epistemic challenges, which are receiving considerable attention, with varying diagnoses (e.g. Davies 2018; Kakutani 2018). I am drawn to the notion that part of the answer to this dilemma is to argue simply that truth is progressive—that, if you will, reality has a political bias. Yet, while this argument is relatively easy to make in relation to climate science or the anti-vax movement (e.g. Boseley 2018; Carrington 2018), it is perhaps less straightforward in archaeology, where different aspects of the Roman period, for example, can appear in different political arguments (Bonacchi *et al.* 2018). To make more progress we perhaps need to use the controversies raised in our domain to try to understand

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why it is that increasingly greater access to knowledge appears to be developing hand in hand with greater suspicion of expertise. What might this tell us about the nature of the relationship between power and knowledge—a relationship that, as social scientists, we should surely be interested to understand in a cross-cultural and cross-temporal sense?

This theme intersects with other current debates in archaeology, particularly those related to the so-called 'ontological turn', as well as debates that now seem old-fashioned but are worth revisiting, such as that over the concept of ideology. Another crucial angle on the power-knowledge relationship that we should explore concerns archaeology within university education systems. There are plausible arguments that some of the polarisation that is driving the politicisation of knowledge in Western countries relates—counter-intuitively perhaps—to the expansion of higher education, creating more visible boundaries between groups with and without degrees than hitherto (Runciman 2016). This brings the debate, again, to the intersection of practice—educational, this time—and citizenship.

I want to conclude on the theme of citizenship, in a narrower sense; our 'citizenship' within the community of practice of archaeologists. In the conclusion of his paper, Brophy quite rightly calls for archaeologists to embrace the role of 'engaged public intellectuals', to stand our ground and to push back. As he equally rightly notes, this can require a thick skin and individual courage. But we can all help by supporting each other in public fora —tweeting in support of colleagues and contributing to below-the-line arguments—as well as sharing advice on dealing with confrontation, and coordinating lines of response within our own discussions, at conferences for example. This can be another way to turn this situation to our advantage and to buttress our own community against some of the fragmentary trends of recent years.

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