

NOTES FROM THE CORNER OFFICE: Let's Align Theory & Practice

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When I returned to graduate school after fifteen years as an energy entrepreneur and executive, I was stunned by the prevailing views toward economics and business in my anthropology department and beyond. Only three members of my fifteen-person cohort had taken even one class in either of these subjects. The professor for my core cultural anthropology class (not the editor of this Journal!), without any sense of irony whatsoever, stated on the first day of class that we were only going to read ideational authors and none of the materialists, while on the last day noted in passing that the leading issues in cultural anthropology at that time were transnational economic and legal systems, two topics that seemingly cry out for the inclusion of a materialist perspective. Particularly as an archaeologist, I was struck by what Arjun Appadurai (1986:11) described as anthropologists' tendencies to romanticize small-scale societies, forget that capitalist and other economically motivated societies operate according to cultural designs, and to minimize the calculating self-interest in earlier non-capitalist societies.

Perhaps these biases are not surprising. Anthropologists, like most academics are a group that is self-selected against economic rationality and motivation—people do not enter the field for its pecuniary benefits, and a “rational man” economic analysis would almost never favor doctoral studies. Anthropologists do not control the means of production of material goods in society, but have some such control in the production of ideas. I am obviously not suggesting that academia is not a wonderful pursuit and career.

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Nowhere is this skewed perspective more problematic than when archaeologists must deal with the living, rather than the material remains of the past. I refer here primarily to interactions between archaeologists and the communities that surround them, commonly referred to under various rubrics and theoretical perspectives such as community archaeology, sustainable development or preservation, community empowerment, heritage, social entrepreneurship, multivocality, decolonization, identity building, conservation, social action and many others.

Deeply embedded in the communities in which they work, archaeologists could offer unique insights into community requirements and dynamics. Yet, actual human needs play little role in the community archaeology discourse or projects based upon it, even though satisfying these needs and improving their lives is normally the first expressed desire by community members. Rather, community archaeology practitioners focus on the ideational and the didactic: the production, dissemination, teaching and transmission of knowledge. A second group of practitioners focuses upon the preservation of sites, buildings and objects, usually in a framework that prioritizes these and an abstract notion of heritage over community needs.

While better knowledge production and site preservation can be valuable to local communities, these are top priorities of archaeologists and heritage specialists, who are arguably the greatest beneficiaries of the implementation of these paradigms. Moreover, these programs are rarely sustainable by the local communities themselves, lasting only for the duration of the archaeologist's research project, funding and presence in the community.

One of the frequently expressed goals of community archaeology is heritage preservation. Yet our global heritage is disappearing at a rapidly accelerating rate. Why? The gravest threats to cultural heritage and archaeological sites are alternative and destructive economic uses, such as looting, agriculture, development, grazing, and residential and commercial development. All of these uses are economically more attractive than archaeology and conservation. Giving priority to economically superior uses is prevalent in both more and less developed countries, ranging from developers razing historically significant buildings in major cities to build condominiums, to poor local residents looting rural sites to sell artifacts. Yet this near universal characteristic of human behavior fails to enter into the heritage destruction discourse.

Existing preservation paradigms, such as conservation or heritage education, don't create sustainable opportunities, primarily due to the absence of an economic incentive for local communities to continue preserving their sites after the departure of archaeologists and conservators. Conservation projects generally produce economic activity

that is limited temporally to the duration of the actual work, and wholly dependent upon continued external funding sources. Similarly, site protection methods such as legal property demarcation, fencing and hiring of security guards, while helpful, fail to provide a sustainable economic alternative or funding source. Nor am I aware of a single project focused upon the education of a community about its own past, however laudable, that has stopped archaeological site destruction. Yet, in spite of a large though admittedly understudied data set which demonstrates the lack of efficacy of these paradigms, they are continually employed and remain the focus of most preservation and community archaeology programs.

On the other hand, economic development and archaeology have been mortal enemies. Proponents of development and local residents have frequently and correctly regarded archaeologists and preservationists as obstructionist and unconcerned with job creation and economic well-being, while archaeologists have associated economic development with the commoditization and destruction of heritage and swarms of tourists clambering on walls and helping themselves to "souvenirs". Government entities and communities are more often asking "what's in it [archeology] for us, a question that archaeologists and others have been loath to answer in economic terms.

This issue is not solely an economic one, but moral: How can we tell an underprivileged person not to economically exploit a site to feed their family, even if that exploitation is destroying the site, without providing a viable economic alternative? Can we provide an opportunity that provides income to that person while simultaneously preserving cultural heritage?

When I was conducting my dissertation research at the monumental site of Incallajta, local residents grew crops, and grazed cattle on the site, while playing soccer within the site's most famous and enormous building—all destructive activities. I employed some of the techniques described above...a guy from New York telling local residents about the history of the Inca and the importance of their site so they would not continue to damage it. I suffered from the same lack of success as most other practitioners utilizing this approach.

My response was to found the Sustainable Preservation Initiative ("SPI"). Many of humanity's most important heritage sites co-exist with some of the world's poorest people. Their combined futures are in danger. SPI creates economic stability by giving communities the tools to be self-reliant, leveraging their historic sites responsibly and freeing them to thrive. The result: the preservation of our collective legacy.

Since 2011 SPI has led efforts to protect, for the long-term, threatened archaeological sites by empowering the people who matter most - those who co-exist daily with these places. SPI identifies and

develops local entrepreneurs and artisans, most often women, and trains and helps them to develop cooperative businesses that utilize cultural heritage assets sustainably. The training, expert guidance, and support which SPI provides ensures that communities have the right skills to own and grow their enterprises for many years, creating the foundation for community-focused economic development.

SPI works only in those communities who wish to sustainably utilize their heritage assets and desire the SPI capacity building program. SPI has created a “business school” for people with little or no formal education to provide them with the skills necessary to manage and grow their businesses themselves. From our perspective, this is true empowerment and decolonization-resolving concerns expressed by local residents, providing communities with the education and resources required for them to flourish independently, and then leaving them to do so (though we remain available to provide advice if requested). Rather than imposing a hierarchy of so-called community benefits in which archaeological and heritage practice are central, true multivocality and decolonization require the prioritization of solutions for locally defined concerns. These concepts also mandate solutions that maximize local ownership, control and management, and are not dependent upon the continued presence of archaeologists to manage or fund or continue them—i.e. sustainable programs. This is what SPI does.

24 women at the monument pilgrimage site of Pachacamac, Peru have been trained in business skills and design and have sold over \$50,000 in products in the last three year. At the site of Chotuna, Peru, 10 women use native cotton to weave beautiful textiles based on the iconography of the site, helping to feed their families and achieving some financial independence. One of these women expressed the views of her fellow community members well when she noted “This project is a dream come true. We had always hoped for economic opportunity, but never thought we would have the chance.”

These and several other small scale non-destructive heritage and economic development projects, undertaken by SPI (which I founded and direct) have not only alleviated poverty, empowered local entrepreneurs and communities and provided opportunities to women who are often excluded from the economic sphere, but changed dramatically community attitudes toward women and the past while halting or reducing looting and encroachment upon their sites. More details are available at www.sustainablepreservation.org. All this and more is possible with an engaged and relevant anthropology and archaeology that embraces economics and business principles.

For example, the SPI “business school” has attracted enormous interest from organizations desiring to employ it in non-heritage contexts. SPI recently announced a collaboration with the **United Nations Office**

for Project Services (“UNOPS”) to utilize and disseminate SPI’s ‘Business School and Capacity Building Program’ in UNOPS’s Global Innovation Centers to be created around the world. The press release stated that SPI’s business school will “train and empower local entrepreneurs, especially women, in essential business skills, enabling them to be independent and successful business owners.” The successful dissemination of this business would likely have a substantially broader impact than SPI’s existing heritage-related projects.

Prior to concluding, I note I am not suggesting that all community relations are governed by material determinism and essentialism, or even that primarily material approaches are correct for and can be efficacious in all circumstances. On the contrary, at SPI we frequently turn down projects because we feel that such an approach would not be sustainable for a particular project, and we expect that some of our projects will fail. Nor am I dismissing the value of outreach and conservation projects, but rather merely pointing out that they have little to do with stated goals of preservation or community betterment. My own recent research is beginning to demonstrate that these programs are far more effective when combined with or following a project which generates a meaningful economic benefit to the local community.

The great cultural and social commentator Yogi Berra supposedly said: "In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they are not". If we can better align theory and practice, archaeology and anthropology have an extraordinary opportunity both to preserve heritage and generate meaningful benefits to poor communities around the world. Embracing community empowerment and social entrepreneurship leads to a richer archaeological and anthropological practice that is more deeply embedded in the real world, and provides better and additional opportunities both to educate the public about the past and demonstrate the relevance and importance of archaeology in the present.

References

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