

FORUM

A Reply to "What is Public Archaeology?"

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Moshenska's very stimulating forum article is all the more welcome for its crispness and clarity, reminiscent of a mathematical proof. The model is essentially put forward in two steps; the first defines 'archaeological commodities', the second seeking to define 'public archaeology' by locating it in relation to the production and consumption of those commodities. The points raised on each below might only help to make the model more robust and more widely applicable.

The definition of archaeological commodities

The definition of Type 1 commodities – 'archaeological materials' – as 'the material outputs of archaeological research' risks excluding all material remains from the past that have not yet been subjected to formal archaeological research, which people may nevertheless be encountering in other ways in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. The relationship between indigenous groups and their material environment is perhaps the most salient example of what we would not want to exclude from the concern of public archaeology.

There may be a similar difficulty in the definition of 'Type 2 – archaeological knowledge and skills' as 'the intellectual aspect of archaeological work', which work is defined in Type 3 as 'the forms of work carried out by archaeologists'. Taken together, these two definitions risk excluding all those forms of archaeological knowledge that are not the result of archaeological work by archaeologists, which have had and still have immense importance in many historical and cultural settings. Of course it may be countered that 'archaeologist' here is meant to include anyone trying to make sense of material remains of the past, whether he is a person living in the Neolithic and curating the bones of his ancestors, or whether she is a contemporary native American transmitting ancestral myths to her children.

Most readers will however understand 'archaeologist' in a very different sense, restricted to the contemporary, western model of archaeological practice. This concern is reinforced by Type 4 and Type 5, which risk locating popular knowledge as subsidiary to and dependent on the products and processes generated by specialists. In this sense, these definitions may be unintentionally subscribing to a deficit model of archaeological knowledge (Grima 2004), rather than one that empowers present-day 'people without history' (Wolf 1982). A model that forms the basis for a definition of public archaeology needs to be applicable beyond the confines of current western paradigms of archaeological practice, and to challenge those confines.

Locating public archaeology

That brings me to the second step in the model. The pivotal statement here is '...public archaeology in the broadest sense is that part of the discipline concerned with studying and critiquing the processes of production and consumption of archaeological commodities'. I would contend that the most pivotal word in that statement is 'critiquing'. As I am sure the author would be the first to agree, a central role of public archaeology is to create a space for informed and critical debates on the ethics, power-relations and culture-specific values surrounding people's encounters with the past. Perhaps it would not be superfluous to spell this out more explicitly to the reader.

References

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- Wolf, E** 1982 *Europe and the People without History*. University of California Press, Berkeley.