

FORUM

Response: the Values of Archaeology

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Public archaeology, broadly conceived as a critique of the discipline, remains a stimulating and dynamic area of research. This forum has demonstrated some of the strengths of the topic as well as some areas in need of significant further study. There is clearly a particular need or desire for cautious, critical, data-driven research on public archaeology and specifically on the economics of archaeology. Each of the discussants has raised valid concerns and valuable ideas in these areas; all are concerned about the future development and wellbeing of the discipline.

One of the key themes to emerge from this discussion is the need for a mechanism to justify and advocate for continued funding for archaeology whether in universities, local government or the commercial private sector. Archaeology in Britain can be considered part of the heritage sector, itself a subsection of the cultural sector. The threat of reduced funding in a time of global economic crisis affects the cultural sector as a whole, and one response has been the publication *Cultural Capital: a Manifesto for the Future*. This document aims to justify the value of the cultural sector as “a great British success story”, while at the same time pleading that “people ... do not want to see buildings closed, performances and exhibitions reduced” (Anon 2010: 1, 15).

The palpable desperation in this document conceals its nature as the latest step on the winding road of justifications for cultural sector funding that has swung between championing the economic and, to some extent, social benefits of cultural resources and the subsequent rejection of these ‘instrumental’ factors in favour of claims that culture should be valued ‘in and of itself’ and that it should not be subjected the indignities of economic scrutiny. During times of prosperity this strategy of trying to both have and eat the economic cake has been successful up to a point, but in the current straitened climes it is doomed to fail if compared to other areas of public services.

The main problem facing any attempt to assess the value of the cultural sector is twofold. Firstly it is difficult to assess the instrumental economic and social values of cultural resources in the real world, with the quality and utility of this data previously questioned (Selwood 2002). Secondly it is even more difficult to identify and assess the non-monetary ‘cultural’ values of cultural resources, which include slippery concepts such as ‘wellbeing’, with many in the cultural sector believing this is not even possible. It would seem that any current data and valuations of this area are not yet sufficiently articulated or viewed with enough confidence to be presented as part of *Cultural Capital*. There is obviously a pressing need to defend and justify public spending in the cultural sector and any method of assessment that could successfully master these two areas, and find a way of combining the two in a meaningful and useful manner, would be of considerable value.

There are a number of reasons for an economics of public archaeology to look closely at cultural economics but we must also look beyond it, as archaeology arguably straddles a number of different economic sectors, not least the construction industry. For this reason any research that aims to examine and communicate the economic justifications for archaeology needs to be based on a distinctively archaeological cultural economics rather than borrowing frameworks from elsewhere. The points raised by the respondents in this discussion highlight some of the unique practical and ethical viewpoints from which to critique any analysis of what archaeology has to offer.

It is in this challenging context that the (modest) value of the commodity model outlined in Moshenska's initial paper and developed in this forum emerges. Perhaps it offers a first step in better articulating and analysing what archaeology offers and the public consumes. While it cannot provide a complete economic framework it contains the potential bases of a conceptual bridge between cultural and economic values from which we can begin to build more nuanced theoretical models. It provides a common language for discussing several key issues in archaeological economics, and potentially for formulating and approaching research questions. This is a small step on a long but hopefully valuable journey.

References

- Anon** 2010 *Cultural Capital: a manifesto for the future: investing in culture will build Britain's social and economic recovery*. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/publications/Cultural_Capital_Manifesto.pdf
- Selwood, S** 2002 The politics of data collection: gathering, analyzing and using data about the subsidised cultural sector in England *Cultural Trends* 12(47): 13-84, doi:10.1080/09548960209390330.