

Forum

Commodity Forms and Levels of Value in Archaeology: A Response to Gestrich

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Gestrich's response to "What is Public Archaeology?" (Moshenska, 2009) and the subsequent discussion raise a number of important points. These and the more general critique that they represent include many valid and constructive criticisms as well as some useful original ideas. While Gestrich's argument to some extent misinterprets some fundamental aspects of the original debate, these points of friction are themselves illuminating and productive, and invite a review of the commodity model of archaeology proposed in the original article.

Our aim in this brief response is to review the commodity model of archaeology and public archaeology (Moshenska, 2009) in light of Gestrich's comments, focusing in particular on the concept of the commodity and the importance of an ethical perspective in economics. Following this, we consider alternative approaches to value in archaeological heritage, specifically the strategic and ethical dimensions of arguments based on inherent rather than instrumental values, and the uses of rhetoric derived from the environmental movement.

Gestrich's critique, like the previous responses and the original article, is founded on a common concern for the protection and responsible stewardship of archaeological heritage, as well as for the wellbeing of the heritage profession and other stakeholders. Consequently this debate centres around the appropriate strategies and methods for achieving these aims rather than any fundamental disagreement; however, to argue that the discussants share common values regarding heritage highlights the most important and problematic dimension of this discussion—that of *value* in all its forms.

"What is Public Archaeology?" introduced a model for studying archaeological economics based on the idea of archaeological commodities. In this reductionist model, archaeology is the process of the production of archaeological commodities, while public archaeology is the study and critique of the processes of production and consumption of the same. This interest in production and consumption is not, as Gestrich suggests, a 'supply-and-demand model'. In fact, one of the fundamental problems in public archaeology is the apparent disconnect between the producers and consumers of archaeology: the former

often ignorant or uninterested in the demand; the latter just as often unaware of the supply. By some standards, a functioning supply-and-demand model might represent a substantial step forward.

At the core of the commodity model was the germ of an idea to bridge the conceptual gulf between the different forms of value in archaeological heritage, and more generally in the cultural sphere. Thus the concept of commodities in the original paper, drawing loosely on Marx's formulation, described them as 'things possessing value'. Implicit in this description, and slightly more explicit in the later forum response (Moshenska & Burtenshaw, 2009), was an understanding that value in archaeological commodities took a number of forms including monetary, cultural, intellectual, social and emotional. The aim in subsuming all of these diverse factors within the undifferentiated and reductionist category of commodity value was conceived in part as a thought-experiment to side-step the problem of the multiple irreconcilable forms of value in archaeological heritage and the obstruction that they present to unified theories of archaeological economics. With this experiment we hoped to provoke a productive discussion about one of the most complicated areas of cultural economics.

Gestrich's response suggests a two-fold failure of this framework. The first and less serious is one of clarity: we did not adequately explain the diverse forms of value that we considered to fall within the model. Thus Gestrich concluded (incorrectly but not unreasonably) that we advocated measuring the value of archaeology 'in terms of its monetary turnover' (2011: 80). This was never the meaning of the model nor its intention, but the language of economics, value and supply and demand can certainly make it seem so. As Gestrich notes, archaeology is a public good and many of the values that it offers are not traded in the market, and therefore will never be covered by simply monetary valuations. We have begun, or tried to begin to advance an economics of archaeology that is suitable to the discipline. 'Economics' is not limited to studies of money: it is the science of examining the allocation of scarce resources. 'Wellbeing' is often a term used in economics to describe its goal, one that is beyond pure profit. The aim of any economics of archaeology, including our own, is to examine how archaeology contributes to 'wellbeing' and 'quality of life' to the full extent of those

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terms, and to advocate and support best practice based on evidence.

The second problem is more fundamental, and relates to the ethical dimension of value. What we had considered to be a problem of quantification and non-comparability between different forms of value created a potentially problematic ethical equivalence. Put simply the question of whether or not they *can* be reconciled ignored the question of whether or not they *should* – or even if the attempt ought to be made at all. Gestrich draws on the work of a number of scholars including Michael Sandel to argue that value cannot be measured on a single scale due to the existence of *levels* as well as *scales* of value. While the ranking of value systems is necessarily subjective and contextual, the existence and importance of such a mechanism is beyond question. The impact of this ethical critique of a unified model of archaeological commodities is obvious.

Another interesting dimension of Gestrich's critique relates to strategy. Both the original paper and several of the responses recognised the practical uses of a streamlined model of archaeological values in lobbying on behalf of the archaeological sector. Gestrich seems to imagine a more crudely mercenary model of this process than what we had originally suggested. However, the risks that he associates with this general strategy are real and worthy of consideration: by presenting archaeology as an economic benefit, we risk losing out (or selling out) to a higher bidder. An interpretation centre on a historic site might bring in £x per year; a bingo hall on the same site would bring in £y. Gestrich is not, I am sure, suggesting that archaeologists withdraw from the meagre delights of the heritage industry, but the caution he advises is justified. The strength of any model of archaeological value lies in its ability to communicate the roundest possible view of the benefits that archaeology offers.

There is an argument that defenders of cultural heritage have a great deal to learn from defenders of the natural world; thus Gestrich cites Amartya Sen's 2004 essay on environmentalism to buttress his ethical rather than economical argument for heritage protection. However Sen's argument extends beyond the common concept of an ethical duty to protect the environment, arguing that participation in debate and a sense of common stewardship of natural heritage also serve to strengthen citizenship. Building on this argument we offer a related hypothesis that a participatory public archaeology, built on an idea of heritage as a shared human legacy, can offer generative as well as critical concepts within the wider discipline. Such an emphasis on common humanity rather than cultural specificity in public archaeology would be more analogous to the highly successful environmental campaigns, and might counteract the tendency toward exclusionary ethno-nationalist discourse in heritage.

There is a widespread conception that 'culture as an economic force' and 'culture as a public good' are two separate and diametrically opposed viewpoints, and that inherent and instrumental values cannot or should not be spoken of in the same context. A chaotic zigzagging

between these two perspectives has characterised and arguably undermined the arguments in defence of funding for the cultural sector in the UK (Burtenshaw 2010: 241). Such chaotic pseudo-compromises are unnecessary; provided the two viewpoints are carefully and skilfully integrated into a coherent argument, they can be stronger – not weaker – together.

At present we know very little about how and why the public enjoys archaeology, and what other benefits they derive – or think they derive – from it. To ignore the public benefits of archaeology would reduce it to a mere hobby for those with the private means to indulge it, but to adequately evaluate and understand these benefits, we need appropriate conceptual and practical approaches. The commodities model is a helpful step (and just a step) toward building these approaches. In light of Gestrich's critique it might be useful to consider value in archaeology in terms of a set of value spectra with points or areas of overlap and connection.

At the same time, the argument for archaeology as an inherently valuable and important 'good' has potency and attraction, not least because it has never been expressed in particularly clear terms. Heritage has not had its 'Silent Spring' nor its 'climategate': this is not to suggest that cultural heritage is as vital as natural heritage to the survival of our species, but it highlights a disparity in communication. To understand the forms, levels and degrees of value that heritage professionals, politicians and the public ascribe to cultural heritage, we need to create a framework for constructive discourse. As public archaeologists we will continue to study and experiment in this vital field of interaction. The commodity model, evolving and incorporating the critiques that Gestrich and others have provided, is just one of many tools that we can employ.

References

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