

FORUM

Locality, Hegemony and WAC: A Reply to Iacono

ALEJANDRO F. HABER

Universidad Nacional de Catamarca – Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina

I appreciate Iacono's dedication in critiquing my paper on WAC. He has highlighted several points that deserve some clarification. It is always surprising to see oneself through someone else's eyes. Rather than revisiting one by one the different points he passes through, I would like instead to focus on the points of this discussion that are most fertile for accomplishing my own aim when writing the original paper, that is, discussing the actual and potential roles of WAC in the contemporary world (characterised by terms such as 'globalised', 'network-society', 'post-colonial', 'post-capitalist', 'empire'). With that aim in mind, some pieces of (political) theory were introduced in my paper, not because I identify myself monolithically with those bodies of theory, but because I felt that some inspiration could be obtained from them – and communicated – in order to move from commonsensical understandings (sometimes referred to as 'ethics') into a theoretically informed political discussion. After all, the aim of my paper was and still is, to produce an informed and open discussion on WAC's politics. And Iacono's comment is particularly timely for getting into that sort of open discussion. At this point in time, after repeated calls for an open and informed discussion on WAC politics regarding relationships with multinationals, and after almost two years since the onset of WAC negotiations with the Rio Tinto Group (RTZ), WAC officers have proposed a members-only discussion on 'engagement' on the WAC website. Thus, I want to express my sincere gratitude to both the *Present Pasts* editorial board and to Iacono, for this open conversation.

The main focus of Iacono's comments is about the place of locality within theory. For him, classifying me as post-colonial and consequently reading my text through Callinicos' reading of post-colonial theory, I essentialise the locality, in some way mystifying the local as a pristine and ideal place of resistance. My understanding of the local is, however, not essentialist but relational. I see the local as an antagonist force in relation to power (or 'empire' to return to Hardt & Negri, if the reader can avoid assuming that from this word that I subscribe to everything that these authors say). And it is within this antagonism that I prefer to place several different issues normally considered to pertain to discrete fields: archaeology, archaeological heritage, multinationals, large-scale mining, transnational organizations, WAC, and several other global discourses (such as that on 'global ethics' referred to in the title of the panel in which my paper was originally read, as well as those advanced by Iacono in his comments - 'historic reconstruction', 'education' and 'social criticism'). In order to bring these phenomena into the antagonistic field between localities (or territories) and power (or empire) I thought that Hardt & Negri's category of empire was useful as a description. I am not necessarily implying that power is incorporeal. After the panel discussion already referred to, several senior WAC people travelled to a particular place within the

Business School in the city of Melbourne in order to have a meeting with RTZ people. Alternative places where one could find RTZ would be their mining areas, for example those in my own country, near to the place from which I departed for Melbourne; but the fact that not those areas but Melbourne was selected as a suitable venue is probably related to a difference that is not reversible, but colonial. Even if power has its particular locales, it wants to be represented as incorporeal and global, thus escaping from being geopolitically analysed (Mignolo 2003). In fact, the central argument of my paper is that in order to discuss one's role (as an archaeologist, an inhabitant, a WAC member, a community member, a political actor, etc.) in the contemporary world, the geopolitics of both one's place (locality as a place of life and territory as a place of counter-power) and power (*via* the localization of global discourses) should be seriously considered both in their epistemic and socio-economic dimensions.

In regard to Localizing WAC, I noticed at least two broad tendencies within the organization almost two years ago (Haber 2008, a text prepared for a forum on WAC/RTZ negotiations to be published in *Archaeologies, The Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, but eventually censored by WAC officers). One tendency, already governing WAC, is building it into a centralized organization, technically managed (even using technical business management vocabulary), and ready to interact as a global organization on archaeological heritage with other global organizations (academic organizations, multilateral governmental organizations, and multinational corporations) in assessing different kind of interventions in particular locales. Regarding the mining corporation, it was about assessing (indigenous) community relations in order to facilitate extractive projects (or, as the company's wording went, to act as 'trusted brokers').

Another tendency that I noted was that WAC has, as well as a place in the organization of imperial power, also a potential place in the mobilization of counter-power. And that potential leads to thinking of WAC according to a network-model, more as WAC was during the first 20 years following its creation in 1986. The potential of a network-based model for WAC is, as I wrote in the paper, its capacity for networking horizontal connectedness between particular localities, thus enhancing their resistance to imperial power and their capacity for building different sets of world living conditions. This potential is of great importance for the geopolitical South, for while each place in the south is connected to the North, South-South connections are far less common and more difficult to establish. As the WAC Dublin conference showed, while the majority of WAC members are not actively situated in either of these polar positions, they nevertheless contribute consensus to the building of a hegemonic position. And, as Iacono's text exemplifies, this consensual contribution towards an hegemonic position is facilitated because the set of discursive tropes and symbols mobilized by the hegemonic position within WAC are already hegemonic in the social life of the geopolitical North (and in part of the South as well). In fact, it is from the North that the hegemonic symbols and beliefs – such as the concept of lineal history (also reproduced by Hardt & Negri), education as transference of knowledge, science as an ideal form of knowledge, as well as particular bodies of theory such as Marxism – have been exported to the rest of the world. Although this hegemonic place likes to see itself (and to be seen by others) as general, global, universal, as is the case with imperial power, it should really be localized in particular localities, and shown to be as provincial as it is in reality.

Given that such hegemonic place assumes the position of normality (that is, is monotopic, in that it doesn't recognize another place of utterance but itself), any voices that speak from outside of it – such as my paper – produce a kind of perturbation (Mignolo 2001). This perturbation cries out to be subdued through classification (that is, allocating a piece of thought

to a particular, named pigeonhole), border-guardianship (noting the distance between outer voices and the 'normal' disciplinary stream, e.g. recalling the 'true' aims of archaeology) and disciplining (assessing the presence or absence of authority-resources, such as references to canonical texts, usually written in the dominant languages in metropolitan universities). Fear of perturbation makes that any resistance to these disciplinary strategies (in short, dissent) tends to be seen as abnormality and abjection (Butler 2002). This is an important issue given that one central premise of an organization like WAC is that everybody should develop and maintain the capacity to enter into a conversation across difference. Thus, a close examination of the constitution of hegemonic positions regarding what archaeology is and should be in the present world is needed in order to create the conditions for a true world conversation. As is usually the case with hegemonic positions, while representing themselves as universal they develop a blindness towards dissenting positions, that is positions that are not simply different to the mainstream in seeing the world differently, but that are constituted within the difference, i.e. they see the world from another place, and this place is the difference. Neglecting the critical consideration of this blindness of hegemonic, geopolitically northern archaeology in regard to dissenting positions, would diminish, and even put an end to, the possibilities of building WAC into a platform for a world conversation, which means listening to each other on an equal basis even if constituted on the other side of colonial difference. It is worth recalling that this was at the very heart of WAC at its creation in 1986, and a regeneration of WAC in alignment with this core aim should accompany changing conditions in the world at large.

Iacono labels me as postcolonial, and I have already been labelled as marxist in Australia and as post-processual in South America. It is interesting that these labels say much more about those who need to label that about myself. Due to being unable to accept the inherent instability of theory, it is quite commonly the case that metropolitan (either leftist or rightist) theory is used as a symbol of identity, a fantasy of stability in our intellectual relationship with the world: a stable and seductive place of normality from where the world can be thought of, and written about, without the need to account for the constitutive colonial difference. From such a place one could easily condemn the operation of a multinational mining corporation because of its questionable procedures regarding ecological depletion and government corruption, and yet at the same time fail to connect those issues to the basic fact of a renewed phase of capitalist expansion (or imperialism, in Lenin's sense) that consists of new forms of colonial exploitation of the land resources of 'disadvantaged countries' (using WAC's classificatory schema).

A world organization such as WAC assumes a classification in terms of advantaged and disadvantaged countries to be stable enough, while remaining unable to see that both advantage and disadvantage are causally produced, one because of the other. More to the point, neither of them is geographically distributed in countries, but geopolitically constituted in colonial relations. Within which classification do immigrant poor populations in Europe, Australia and US belong? Are they from an advantaged or disadvantaged 'country'? Going further, one of the factors in the production of the colonial experience, besides the movement and the exportation of capitalism, is the exporting of beliefs and knowledge, whose condition is the assumption that there are both peoples in possession of (correct) knowledge and peoples lacking that knowledge. The WAC program *Archaeologists Without Borders*, celebrated by Iacono, (described on the WAC web site as "a unique endeavor that supports archaeological education and training in economically disadvantaged countries"), assumes that there are countries with and countries without the relevant archaeological knowledge. By assuming that there are countries – disadvantaged ones – where the inhabitants lack

some kind of knowledge about their past, ancestors and places, WAC addresses itself as a Northern and hegemonic place – literally, advantaged – that fails to acknowledge other ways of knowledge, other epistemes, of the past. Such epistemic violence transforms possible scenarios of mutual listening into a transference of the ‘correct’ knowledge to others, in order to make future conversations fluid enough in the normal language of the discipline. It is timely to recall that WAC, a non- ‘only for archaeologists’, worldwide archaeological organization, has been known for its original leadership in promoting communication across and beyond disciplinary boundaries, with particular emphasis on descendant communities. Not by chance, but probably because WAC is now tending towards one side of the colonial difference, one cannot find a parallel program for training economically advantaged countries in developing sensitivity towards their role in producing economic disadvantage in the rest of the world, and training advantaged countries’ archaeologists to develop a sense of locality in their writing and provinciality in their theories and disciplinarily-assumed truths. Maybe a program on ‘Borders For Archaeologists’ would contribute to the capacity of WAC (and hegemonic archaeology) to acknowledge dissenting positions (precisely those that are being raised on the other side of the borders of the North, that is, in the geopolitical South).

Trans-national mining corporations operating in my country extract several times more mineral material from it than is consumed by it, and also consume more energy themselves than the country’s energy deficit. They also spoil much more fresh water than that needed to transform the arid lands in which they mine into fertile gardens able to feed the country’s population. It would be of great benefit to people in ‘disadvantaged countries’ if ‘advantaged countries’ were to learn to waste less resources and invest less money in ‘developing others’ lands, and for their intellectuals (including archaeologists) to learn that their views of how the world and history work are nothing other than provincial discourses that are transformed into colonial ideology when represented as universal and exported to the rest of the world.

My position regarding trans-national mining at home is not dependent on the acceptance of history as being based on a time-line, as Iacono suggests, but is much more closely related to a sense of life (including intellectual and academic life) intimately related to place, together with the counter-power vision rooted in that territorial border thinking.

I don’t agree with Iacono’s (and many others’) definition of archaeology’s aim as “agreed historical reconstruction”, because I disagree with both the content and the form of his definition, which I see as intimately related to an hegemonic imperial standpoint. The western theory of history implied in ‘historical reconstruction’ is the very ideology that has supported every kind of colonial discourse and project since the fifteenth century. Globalization, development, enlightenment, evangelization, are nothing but different forms of the civilizing project once and again recapitulated throughout the already long history of European empire, all dependent on the assumption that history moves along a line of time that is homogenous and in a vacuum, towards a future on that same time line. I find that the Marxist writer Walter Benjamin’s sixth thesis on history is clear enough about this issue:

Articulating what is past does not mean recognizing “how it really was.” It means taking control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger. For historical materialism it is a question of holding fast to a picture of the past, just as if it had unexpectedly thrust itself, in a moment of danger, on the historical subject. The danger threatens

the stock of tradition as much as its recipients. For both it is one and the same: handing itself over as the tool of the ruling classes. In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew from the conformism which is on the point of overwhelming it.

(Benjamin 1959, Thesis VI).

I also disagree because I don't share the view that a consensus is needed; given that we are constituted in difference and that I make of difference the place from where I think, I prefer the idea of an antagonist diversity. In disagreeing I guess that either I should be excluded from the realm of the discipline or 'historical reconstruction' should be acknowledged as something archaeology cannot agree upon. This is not an oxymoron, but an exposition of the hegemonic position of fantasmatic (in)stability (Žižek 1992): given the impossibility of universality of the need for agreement, in the sense that I cannot be reasonably forced to agree (which would be, in this case, oxymoronic), antagonism cannot be sutured by an imagined consensus. Archaeology is, as I see it, much more related to the conditions of territoriality (in the sense of counter-power articulations of life relations to land), than to some agreeable historical reconstruction:

... the only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious...

(Benjamin 1959, Thesis VI).

It is not at all surprising that from the place of hegemony, 'epistemological discussions' concerning epistemic violence are already considered to be 'worn out', as this is a feature of Northern monotonical blindness. Instead, it is necessary to re-open the epistemological (and theoretical and political) debate when one's place is counter-hegemonical. 'Epistemic violence' is a concept that concerns the darker and unrecognized side – and condition – of colonialism; it means the denegation of local (colonized) knowledge as relevant, and local forms of accessing knowledge as valid. This epistemic violence, the epistemic side of colonialism that was called the 'coloniality of power' by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (1992), includes different kinds of strategies, including where academic/scientific Western knowledge that sees itself as the universally recognized, privileged form of knowledge, a privilege everybody is expected to 'forcibly agree upon'. In regard to the archaeological discipline, there is probably too much more to talk about than could fit within the size of this comment; but to disregard that discussion as 'worn out' only has the effect of reproducing the systematic deformation from which epistemic violence is exerted.

In the absence of a consensus (either because it is considered an aim to be realized in the future or because it is considered undesirable), what could the standpoint of a social criticism be? That point, which Iacono poses as the touchstone for the justified need of a an aim such as 'archaeology as agreed historical reconstruction', leaves his own argument in a vacuum or, even more, as posed from a point of history that is at the same time a point outside history. On behalf of whom can one claim to be at that point from where social criticism can be uttered, regarding a history that is a matter to be reconstructed and eventually agreed upon in the future? Certainly, the ability to put oneself in a place from which society and history can be judged in a way that we think can be agreed upon, (that is, inter-subjectively

considered to be real in the sense that it is something external to particular positioned views of society and history), depends on the assumption that we are already immune to society and history in such a way that we can produce an utterance on history that at the same time is over history. The Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez has depicted such an essentialist epistemological assumption as the “zero-point hubris” (Castro-Gomez 2005), a condition of colonial discourse (including a great part of academic discourse, both from the leftist and rightist writers of the North).

Now, turning back to WAC, the question is whether WAC should embrace one or another polar position. My answer is that it should NOT if that leads to the exclusion of some member’s vocality. I believe that WAC is the only organization with the potential to develop an arena for a broad discussion of the roles of archaeology in the contemporary world, in which the participants could talk on an equal basis, even across the colonial difference. If WAC develops close relationships with power agencies, and concomitantly positioned counter-power members are excluded (in fact, what seems to be excluded in the first place is not their membership, but their positioned vocality), there is no chance for WAC to develop such a platform, but probably only some kind of mimicry of it. WAC was, until the RTZ negotiations, a kind of symbol of plural academic plus positioned archaeologies. Position identity has not been excluded, but explicitly promoted during the organisation’s history. A failure to acknowledge the existence of dissident positions, and thus a persistence in turning the organization towards hegemonic positions, seriously threatens WAC’s promise. Because hegemonic positions are within a stage of normality and lived as natural, critical thinking should be developed towards them, including their localization as particular positions developed and recapitulated in antagonist relations. And the best place to begin with such a task is oneself. In seeing myself reflected in Iacono’s text, and in my answering him, I can see my own instability, both in my concessions to consensual hegemony and in my intended contribution of a territorial home for this debate.

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