

## FORUM

# The Economics of Public Archaeology: A Reply to "What is Public Archaeology?"

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Moshenska's forum article is a welcome tough new approach to public archaeology, which has an unfortunate tendency to be seen as inherently 'fluffy' by both practitioners and the 'public' alike. Hard thinking and *any* writing about the economics of archaeology are rare enough (although see Aitchison 2009 as an important recent example); specifically on public archaeology these outputs are virtually unprecedented. Moshenska's model is a good starting point for thinking about the 'economics' of archaeology in general, as both he and as the first forum discussant have both highlighted (see Burtenshaw 2009).

My thoughts on Moshenska's article come to me in three ways:

- Firstly, the egotistical: where do I fit into this model?
- Secondly, the opportunistic: how might we expand on this model?
- Thirdly, the anarchic: how might we break down this model?

I found myself nodding along in agreement with Moshenska's article and the model he proposes within it. Sure, it's simplistic, but most good models *are* simplistic (the ones that stick around in use for any length of time anyway), and it works. Moreover, if you outlined the model to any politician then they might just get it, surely the acid test. So in terms of points one and two, my observation would be that some slight expansion of Moshenska's five 'types of archaeological commodity' would be useful, to expand as a sub-set (of type three?), or perhaps even add as a sixth type of, commodity: archaeologists *themselves*. In particular, I am thinking of distinctive types of archaeologists where the funding stream for their position is either opaque or else totally obscure: especially university and government archaeologists who fulfil a generic 'public service' and who are paid out of either national or local general tax revenues. Such archaeologists help produce many of the commodities Moshenska outlines (alongside their more economically visible peers in contract archaeology where the funding stream is clearer), and together, the economic value of both archaeology and archaeologists could sorely do with better public awareness (see Flatman, 2009). How to clearly commodify the work of archaeologists needs more work though, and Moshenska's is a start.

Turning to my third, anarchic thought about Moshenska's article though: how might we break down this model? As I note above I agree with the model – in that I feel it usefully simplifies / clarifies the current circumstances of archaeology – but I'm also concerned by the subtext of 'commodification' of archaeology. Do we want / can we / should we divide archaeology into 'commodities'? Writing on the day that the historic British company Cadbury's

(founded need one remind oneself by Quakers with at least a partly 'civic' remit) accepts a takeover bid from the giant multinational Kraft, does this seem like a good thing – five or so 'archaeological chocolate bars' produced in some vast virtual factory somewhere? I don't have an answer to this, but what I do know is that as much as I admit the reality of the model, it worries me to see archaeology broken down into 'commodity types' even for the point of debate – it sets a precedent, a mindset, that concerns me.

Archaeology is really, really important. It 'matters'. It does now and ought in the future to be given funding, either public and/or private, no matter the argument that 'its fun' or that 'you'd willingly do it for free' – the same can be said of plenty of other things that society values, and to *de-value* archaeology by suggesting its just too 'fun' to cost anything is moronic (and before anyone reading this leaps to the wrong conclusion, what I'm *not* saying here is that only 'paid' archaeologists ought to be allowed – all I'm saying is that archaeology does cost money and that we shouldn't be afraid to admit this and find ways of always covering those costs as part of the wider costs of corporate social responsibility – being active participants in a civilised society). People in the past have, to a greater or lesser extent, fought wars over archaeology; right now a significant proportion of the world sees fit to contribute an admittedly small proportion of tax revenues to funding it, and to devising laws that by intent if not implementation aim to better protect the archaeological resource for future generations; a tiny percentage of the global population even scrape a living paid to be archaeologists. What I'm concerned about is how Moshenska's model of 'archaeological commodities' which represents the observable reality might be changed by, might help change, a fairer, future world and a fairer, more 'public' archaeology for all? How do we de-commodify?

I'd like to end on a quote from my favourite TV show of all time: the *West Wing*. During a fictitious presidential election in season 4 (episode 71, 'Game On') of the show a debate occurs between the sitting (Democratic) President (Bartlet) and the (Republican) contender. The debate concerns (overtly) taxation and (subliminally) social and governmental complexity, and the final response by Bartlet reflects the conundrum I find myself in responding to Moshenska's article:

'Bartlet: There it is. That's the ten word answer my staff's been looking for, for two weeks. There it is. Ten-word answers can kill you in political campaigns. They're the tip of the sword. Here's my question: What are the next ten words of your answer? ... Give me the next ten words. *How are we going to do it?* Give me ten after that, I'll drop out of the race right now. Every *once* in a while... every once in a while, there's a day with an absolute right and an absolute wrong, but those days almost always include body counts. Other than that, there aren't very many unnuanced moments in leading a country that's way too big for ten words'.<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The\\_West\\_Wing](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_West_Wing). Retrieved 20 January 2010.

## References

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