

Semiotix Course 2008, The epistemology of Pleistocene archaeology

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## Lecture No. 5. **The neocolonialism of archaeology**

Western archaeology is a discipline bedeviled by many problems. Some are fairly obvious and have been discussed in previous lectures, such as the curatorial aspirations of the discipline that are perhaps rooted in its antiquarian origins. They have led to numerous confrontations with various interest groups, particularly indigenous populations who object to many practices of archaeology. Moreover, they are also a fundamental deontological stumbling block of the discipline in attaining a scientific status. Exclusive executive control over the resource being studied exists in no other discipline (except for ethical reasons in certain areas of medical research), and since such control is incompatible with the independence and the absence of a vested interest that is the first precondition in unbiased scientific enquiry, archaeological claims for scientific status are paradoxical: it is on the basis of scientific status that archaeology makes its claims of control, and yet it is this control that precludes such a scientific status.

The principal epistemological impediment in archaeology, the difficulties of providing hypotheses with adequate opportunities of refutability, has also been addressed already. Here I will rehearse some aspects that have received less attention, and that relate to an underlying neocolonialist ideology. Eurocentric 'science' postulates that the European way of experiencing reality is the only valid one, and all claims of knowledge, to be scientifically acceptable, must be presented in a form that relates them to this model. There is no allowance for the possibility that alternative systems of scholarship, which have been silenced in past centuries by European military superiority, might provide valid alternatives. This is odd, considering the discovery in the course of the last century that the fundamental laws of European science are both logically and experimentally inconsistent. One would think that such ideas as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle would provide Eurocentric scholars with enough doubts to cease converting humanity to their belief system.

Let us consider a specific example. In empiricism and in archaeology, time is a non-spatial continuum in which events occur in an irreversible, linear succession, incapable of acceleration or deceleration. Many non-European metaphysical systems have quite different perceptions of time,

and today we know that time is not the entity in a non-accelerated frame of reference empiricism expects it to be. Yet nowhere is there any acknowledgement in archaeology or anthropology of the obvious possibility that some indigenous concepts of time might be more realistic than that of empiricism, and whenever archaeologists are confronted by indigenous objections to their naive empiricist interpretations of the past, they defend them by reminding us of their status as the shamans of modern times. Like shamans, they are highly elitist, undergo life-long training and professional rigor, believe in their own power of interpretation and in the potency of the means they use in their quest for truth, and have a great influence over the society they serve. Like shamans, they use severely limited knowledge and understanding of natural phenomena and processes in explaining reality, they produce metaphysical models, derive their power and social status from their activities, and like shamans they are the center of a subjective belief system.

While Eurocentric archaeologists squabble over whether Aborigines were in Australia 40,000, 60,000, 140,000, 180,000 or over 300,000 years ago, and change their consensus every decade, Aboriginal people have all along maintained that they were here since time began. Their metaphysical beliefs, which are so much more plausible and realistic than those of the religious belief system the recent colonizers tried to convert them to, explain vividly their descent from animals, and our DNA is indeed almost immortal. European scientists discovered only in the 19th century that their religious model of the descent of humans was incorrect, that humans are descended from other animals. They still consider this to be an important discovery, which only underlines their complete Eurocentrism. After all, Aboriginal savants had always known this. Other scholars cannot understand Aboriginal concepts of how events and phenomena are arranged in time and space, and in the typical fashion of Western righteousness they relegate possibly valid aspects of a cosmography to the status of mythology. This is intellectual colonialism, and a guild of self-appointed scientific shamans has no mandate to judge or belittle an alternative, and in some aspects probably superior, interpretation of the past.

### Political dimensions of archaeology

This is an example of overt intellectual colonialism, but there are also more subtle forms in scholarship. In Lecture 2, we have briefly considered some factors influencing archaeology politically. Historically, the discipline arose from the need to provide the nation-states developing after the Napoleonic wars with grand ‘histories’ and origins myths (just as sections of it endeavor to justify religious beliefs by searching for supporting evidence). This dependency on the states (or on religion) remains one of the most characteristic features of archaeology, with states providing nearly all employment opportunities for practitioners. They are either servants of the state, at museums, government agencies or universities; or they work as contractors for corporate or government clients, in which case their existence is entirely dependent on relevant heritage protection legislation.

Nationalist imperatives have remained an integral driving force in the evolution of national traditions throughout the world. Leaving aside the more overt nationalist archaeologies, such as those of totalitarian regimes, less extreme forms can be detected in any of the many regional archaeologies, which inevitably developed as national schools. This marks again a fundamental difference between archaeology and the sciences, and is manifestly the result of imperatives of nationalism. A good example is provided by the involvement of archaeologists in creating modern mythologies about militarism, e.g. by researching places of ‘heroism’. This is not so much driven by demands of the public, but is in direct response to government policies. For instance in Australia, a recent conservative government developed a distinctive policy of glorifying the country’s military past, promoting sites of conflict in other parts of the world as national heritage sites (Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea, Gallipoli in Turkey), while at the same time rejecting any notion that the only true defenders of Australian soil deserved the same consideration. In Australia, tens of thousands of warriors have bravely faced the rifles and cannons of the British invaders with spears and boomerangs, and fought long guerrilla campaigns defending their territory (Fig. 1). Yet their sacrifices remain ignored, in fact they were swept under the carpet and labeled by government leaders a part of ‘black armband history’. Instead of



Figure 1. Aboriginal massacre in Western Australia.

challenging this re-writing of history by the state, as would be the role of academe, the country’s archaeologists smartly adapted to the political climate and found ways to facilitate the glorification of Australian militarism: they offered their skills to study battle fields, war graves or anything that would attract government funding.

Thus the symbiosis of militarism and nationalism finds much expression in the archaeologists’ eagerness to curry favor with the state. Other political dimensions of the discipline are less tangible or more subtle, but just as effective. Two types are of particular interest here. As the colonizing European powers expanded their control over indigenous societies around the world, they were able to force their own ideologies on them. Whenever Europeans made attempts to understand the intellectual basis of the metaphysical constructs of people they considered primitive or inferior, the intent tended to be better control of these subjects. Any accommodation to be made in the relationships always had to be made by the colonized; they were expected to adopt the constructs (Wittgenstein’s *Begriffswelt*) of their conquerors, or be relegated to the scrap heap of history.

More insidious is the academic appropriation not only of indigenous histories, but also of beliefs and metaphysical or social constructs, particularly through the practices of anthropology and ethnography. These disciplines, closely related to, and to some degree interwoven with, the hegemonic project of archaeology, profess to serve the betterment of human knowledge, but they are easily corrupted to serve the ambitions of power elites of many descriptions. For instance anthropology operates today in the service of many covert agencies and unethical organizations (see Lecture 2), in much the same way as some scientists serve unethical tobacco companies or corporate entities patenting indigenous knowledge or copyrighting genetic data. Anthropology and archaeology work largely for the nation-states, therefore their acquisition of knowledge about the ontologies of indigenous societies can easily become the first step of dispossession, of diminishment of indigenous values, of gaining power through ‘interpretation’. Academe is a power system and a reward system, and any academic consumption of fragile cultural information occurs inevitably in corrupted form, and in a form that serves the dominant society. It is simply not possible to translate indigenous metaphysics into forms decipherable within a Western construct of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Pinker 2002) without significantly corrupting it. But even if that impediment did not exist, the exposure of precarious and very vulnerable belief systems to the glare of academic attention is itself injurious to the societies concerned. Many of their beliefs are restricted, sacred or secret, therefore reviewing them, discussing them under the guise of academic freedom already debases them. And most importantly, it thus becomes a political act. As sometimes happens in biology, an organism may change simply by being examined (e.g. exposed to light), and in a sense this always occurs when societies other than one’s own are studied. As archaeology usurps non-Western histories, it contributes to devaluing the societies in question. And this occurs even before we remember that most of its Pleistocene interpretations are, in any



Figure 2. Massive destruction of sacred rock art sites on an industrial scale, perpetrated by archaeologists, Dampier Archipelago, Australia, 2007.

case, probably false.

The topic of pathological archaeology has already been considered in Lecture 2, and the destruction by archaeologists of cultural sites, sacred sites or places of veneration well expresses the political power of the discipline. Having acquired some basic knowledge about such places, the archaeologist, as servant of the state, proceeds to facilitate their destruction. Archaeologists are specifically licensed by the state to assist developers to destroy such places, they are the states' gatekeepers of sacred sites of indigenous peoples. The traditional owners of such sites always object bitterly to this destruction (and the imposition by the state of an alien metaphysical system over their traditional), anywhere in the world where it occurs. Whereas in Europe, significant cultural heritage sites are very effectively protected, their destruction by European or Western society in the New World occurs on a daily basis. There can be no doubt that this illustrates the colonialist agenda of the modern states of the Americas and Australia: indigenous heritage is not valued in the way it is in Europe. And therein lies the problem, because at the same time it is argued that universal values should apply. There can be no level playing field for indigenous cultural heritage if it is dominated by European values.

To illustrate this with an example: in the state of Tasmania, the maximum fine for damaging indigenous cultural heritage is \$A1000; the corresponding fine for damaging European (essentially British) heritage is \$500,000. In 2006 I pointed out to the state government that this practice is racially discriminatory. Since then there have been numerous enquiries and submissions into the issue, but at the time of writing it remains unresolved. It is important to note that this anomaly is reflected in the attitude of the general population to cultural monuments. There is an endemic culture of vandalism of Tasmanian rock art sites, one quar-

ter of which have been severely damaged as a result of this glaring disparity (Sims 2006; Bednarik 2006a).

In various parts of the world, archaeologists are engaged in the destruction of rock art sites by clearing the sites of the art. This practice robs the rock art of its site, and the site of its rock art (Fig. 2). It is an act of ultimate cultural usurpation, of colonization as a continuation of the process begun when the land was originally appropriated and its resident tribes massacred or 'pacified'. It also amounts to a practice of selling humanity's cultural heritage to the highest bidder, usually multinational corporate players of enormous power. It is therefore equivalent to cultural theft, and where it is facilitated by archaeologists, it is definable as *pathological archaeology* (Bednarik 2006b, 2008; Chaloner 2004; Escobar 1991; Houtman 2006, 2007; McNamara 2007; Moore 1999; Price 2000, 2005; Ritter 2003).

Against all of this stand several arguments: that a 'modern state' has little choice, that it must maintain or improve living standards and therefore 'development' must have precedence over the cultural values that are destroyed in the process. Also, it would be argued, the state governs for all, including the indigenous population. This may sound reasonable, although it could be said that often the state fails in governing for the benefit of the indigenes (for instance when it steals their children, as occurred widely in Canada and Australia until quite recent times). Moreover, it must be remembered that the militarily defeated or colonized autochthons have no reason to like, or to recognize the legitimacy of, the states that usurped their sovereignty; and that they object politically to the archaeology of the occupying power as just another form of cognitive colonialism (see below).

In the final analysis it is, all over the world, the archaeologist who manages the remains and monuments of the

defeated, marginalized and superseded cultures for the victorious states he or she serves. Archaeology as it is being conducted is therefore a political pursuit whose ultimate goal is to write the histories of the states, in the parlance of the dominant power.

### Archaeology's curatorial ambitions

One of the most fundamental principles of the academy is the concept of academic freedom: the notion of an inalienable freedom of enquiry of researchers. The exact meaning of this concept differs somewhat in various countries, but the general idea concerns the liberty of thought, teaching and debate. Curiously, archaeology is a discipline that at the same time both embraces and rejects this principle. This is one of the strangest contradictions in any academic pursuit.

The cognitive and intellectual colonization of indigenous societies, be they extant or extinct, is based on the presumption that an academic endeavor has the right to investigate or study any subject matter, irrespective of whether this may be injurious to some subjects. In the Western intellectual tradition as it has evolved, the right to investigate is held to be a fundamental principle of academic research, and is also embraced by archaeologists. They sometimes find themselves in the courts, opposed by indigenous groups who have different views. A classical example was the wrangling over scientifically unimportant midden contents from Tasmania, detailed below. It was based on two specious notions: that archaeology is a science, which we have seen it is not, and that a science has unfettered 'rights to know'.

The self-contradiction occurs when archaeology at the same time *rejects* the principle of academic freedom. Most obviously, it restricts the right to excavate a site to specific accredited members of the discipline, irrespective of their relative competence. Unless one has a university degree in archaeology and is defined as a 'professional', one is not allowed to conduct excavation of an archaeological site. This is, first of all, an absurd rule, because there is hardly any piece of ground in the world that could not reasonably be described as an 'archaeological site'. Secondly, it assumes that only an archaeologist who is paid can have the required competence; indeed, the assumption appears to be that payment is a measure of competence. This is another absurdity, it favors the politically adept, and negates the principle of academic freedom: no astronomer would ban amateurs from studying the stars, no paleontologist excludes knowledgeable amateur paleontologists, no chemist considers banning others from working with chemicals. Nevertheless, archaeology manages to enforce this principle to some extent, by effectively banning amateur archaeologists from working, irrespective of their level of competence. This is then another imposition of political power over academic freedom. Moreover, in this the discipline ignores that practically all really important discoveries of archaeology, be they practical or theoretical, were contributed by people other than 'professional' archaeologists—who in fact contributed little of consequence to the discipline (but numerous academic follies; for some of the more prominent examples, see Lectures 1 and 4). Perhaps even

more importantly, in assessing the epistemology of archaeology, they also ignored that outsiders almost always corrected the errors of archaeology.

So there are several reasons why mainstream archaeology might profitably draw on resources external to it, but as a discipline it rejects this idea categorically. Instead it tends to surround itself with protective and restrictive structures and practices. It limits access to its data and collections to its accredited practitioners by a variety of means. For instance, many archaeological reports and results are privately owned, typically by the corporate masters of archaeological consultants. Or they may be held in supposedly public agencies of the state that can in various ways frustrate 'outsiders' from gaining access. In cases where immensely powerful corporations are involved in the control and exploitation of valuable economic resources, related archaeological work tends to be secretive and avoids public attention the best it can (Laurie 2006). Again we see the political role of archaeology in the service of the existing power hegemony, and we see the corruption of principles of academic freedom.

However, the principal opponents to the political powers of archaeology are the indigenous peoples of the world, because they object to the usurpation of their culture and history by dominant hegemonies. Around the world there have been many political confrontations between archaeologists and traditional peoples, in all continents other than Antarctica, including in Europe (e.g. with the Saami), over a variety of issues, especially over the curatorial aspirations of archaeologists. For instance in Australia, Aboriginal people have frequently needed recourse to the law to gain both respect for and control of their cultural heritage material. Notable early examples are the cases of *Foster v Mountford* in 1976 (29 FLR 233), *Pitjantjatjara Council v Lowe and Bender* (unreported, 25 March 1982), *Berg v University of Melbourne* (unreported, 18 June 1984) and *Berg v Museum of Victoria* (1984; VR 613). The material in question is often skeletal, but may also include artifactual material, even midden contents, as in the following case. The archaeology department of La Trobe University in Melbourne, ostensibly basing its claim on the perceived 'academic rights of science', refused to return some 130,000 items (generally stone artifacts and faunal remains) to the Aborigines of Tasmania, represented by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council (TALC). In July 1995, after extensive unproductive negotiations with the Tasmanian state government (a racist government, as noted above), TALC initiated litigation in the Federal Court. Professor Jim Allen from the University opposed the return of the material after it had been in storage for several years without being subjected to detailed study. The five permits for temporary possession had expired, no new permit was granted, and the issue was not about some material of great scientific importance, but about the principle that the archaeologists exercised control over their finds in perpetuity. The court directed the university to hand the material over and it was repatriated to Tasmania.

This led to hysterical reactions from some archaeologists, such as an article 'The death of archaeology' (Mur-

ray 1995), and the use of the argument that archaeologists gave Aborigines “confidence and pride in their prehistoric achievements”. This implied the notion that Aborigines ought to be grateful to archaeologists, not oppose them, rather as if archaeology was conducted for the benefit of the people being studied. Adverse press comments railed against the waste of taxpayer’s money, first in amassing tonnes of materials that nobody ever studied, and then in expensive but equally unnecessary legal action. Archaeology, after all, is being conducted for a variety of reasons, including consolidating the power of the state and the academy, and the advancement of individual academics within the latter. Idealistic support of indigenous causes is not its primary motivation.

More recently another Australian archaeology professor prompted a related public debate. Professor Iain Davidson, from the University of New England, who infamously acted as an apologist for a large company engaged in the destruction of rock art (Bednarik 2006b), also bought into the polemics concerning the property rights of members of his profession over archaeological finds. In connection with the highly publicized dispute between Indonesian and Australian researchers over possession and interpretation of the newly-discovered bones of humans from Flores (called *Homo floresiensis* and dubbed ‘Hobbit’, see Lecture 4), Davidson had stated in a newspaper that “it was the sole right of the team finding the remains to decide who had access to them”. In February 2005 I reminded him that the archaeologists were servants of the state and had no such property rights, that this restricted access to researchers of opposing views and that the highly controversial finds were in any case Indonesian. I also asked him to clarify for how long he thought the finders should have exclusive possession of the finds. He nominated the duration of the funding period as a minimum, which I rejected on both ethical and epistemological grounds. Most importantly, it refused academic freedom.

The perverse demands of some archaeologists that they should have unfettered control over finds or sites, excluding even their own colleagues if they disagreed with them on interpretation, are only one of several expressions of curatorial ambitions. These are clearly unscholarly, restrictive and without legal basis; they are part of a political desire for greater power. It appears that they also may be due to a misunderstanding: some archaeologists seem to subscribe to notions of the rights of independent scholars, such as those of the 19th century. These ‘gentlemen researchers’ were of course amateurs, in modern terminology, and may have had some personal though debatable claims over materials. So the modern archaeological servant of the state and of the public seems to assume that he has similar rights, while at the same time brandishing his ‘professionalism’ (i.e. his dependency on the state) at every opportunity. He seems to want it both ways: when the question of intellectual ownership arises, he tends to forget that he was paid, and thus owns neither the objects, sites, reports, or any intellectual property he produced while in the employ of someone else. Much the same, conversely, applies right through the academy, when it comes to intellectual property rights: the per-

son who produces something for payment should not own the result of the labor; his master does. Thus the *independent* researcher or amateur owns his work; the paid academic does not, he or she is a *dependent* researcher.

Another self-contradiction of archaeologists is when they assume that, in the majority of cases, the societies they investigate are extinct, therefore have no objection to being investigated. But on the other hand, the very reason for developing archaeologies in the first place was to study the beginning of present nation-states by investigating their origins through ‘extinct’ societies. If this were the case, then all previous societies would have cultural heirs, and these can object to being subjected to the revisionist histories archaeology produces. In the same way as Aborigines or San or Inuit have the moral right to object to the attention of archaeologists (or anthropologists), so should every citizen. Any modern Englishman could claim the right to regard himself as a descendant of the people who created, say, Stonehenge; therefore he could object to the destruction of the site’s research potential or sacred status by archaeologists. All archaeological work is, after all, of inadequate technical standards, as the standards centuries from now will be significantly higher. But once a deposit is excavated, it has been destroyed forever.

#### Archaeology and ‘the other’

All political and ethnic groups of humans define themselves, in part at least, by contrasting themselves with others, and traditionally this is by viewing the others in condescending ways. These are inevitably regarded as inferior, in any culture, nation or ethnic group. Indeed, group cohesion is often facilitated by diminishing, dehumanizing or even demonizing those ‘others’. This tendency is in a general sense related to the inherent fear of the non-conforming we find in many social constructs: the saints, criminals, mental patients, geniuses, foreigners, heretics, the rude and obnoxious, the truly assertive are all perceived as threats to the social reality and fabric of groups. (For instance many archaeologists reading my words here will find them threatening, objectionable and offensive, because they treat their discipline as a social construct rather than a science, which would be capable of discussing any issue in a detached intellectual format.)

One of the most pernicious political aspects of archaeology is the effect of its particular relationship with its subjects: it seeks to understand our past by necessarily contrasting ‘us’ with those perceived to be more primitive than ‘we, the civilized’. It has to be inherently concerned, in most cases, with ‘the other’: peoples or ‘races’ other than one’s own — the latter being most often White and Western, and always ‘proper’. Archaeology has no choice but to contemplate the ‘cultures’ of ‘the others’ from a perspective of considering its own methods of acquiring knowledge superior to those of the societies it professes to study. Its pursuit would make little sense if practitioners were to concede that these other cultures were superior: judging the workings of a superior system and expecting much validity would seem futile. Since all cultures studied by archaeology are earlier or technologically less advanced, it

is readily assumed that they are simpler, that they can effectively be analyzed by members of the technologically dominant society. Technology, then, is the measure of sophistication in this relationship.

Needless to say, this is a misconception. Technological superiority is no proof of cultural, moral, ethical, cognitive or even intellectual superiority. Indeed, as pointed out in Lecture 2, “Western civilization, unfortunately, does not link knowledge and morality but rather, it connects knowledge and power and makes them equivalent” (Vine Deloria). This is not only undeniably true (we even value the aphorism ‘Knowledge is power’, a fair indication of the degree of our intellectual corruption), as Western civilization totters towards its own destruction, because it ignores this principle; it also demonstrates its moral and ethical inferiority. These issues were popularly explored in the 1968 film *Planet of the apes*, featuring a post-apocalyptic Earth culturally dominated by apes, holding up a mirror to our academy. The ape academy scoffed at the preposterous notion that humans were once more advanced than apes, and when its leader, Dr Zaius, realized that he had been wrong he destroyed the evidence deliberately to maintain his dogma (Fig. 3).



*Figure 3. Scene from Planet of the apes (1968 version), in which Dr Zaius realizes that the imprisoned Taylor is intelligent but destroys the evidence to preserve the ape dogma.*

Nevertheless, academic archaeology takes it upon itself to define, judge, quantify and describe the peoples of the past, those ‘others’ of history. In purely epistemological terms this means that we, who have great difficulty comprehending the reality we ourselves created, dare to attempt defining the reality constructs of the ‘others’, our ‘subjects’. While this is of course a legitimate academic pursuit, we must not expect it to yield finite truths and we must duly respect these ‘others’ (Heyd 2007). It is, nevertheless, always very difficult to prevail over the inherent ethnic partisanship of all archaeology and history (Wailes and Zoll 1995: 23). For instance, we need to avoid discriminating between those we identify as our ancestors and those we exclude from them. Another issue tends to creep into glorifying our own societies’ pasts, a predilection of emphasizing differences at the expense of the ‘others’. Although most expressions of ethnic archaeology became politically incorrect by the middle of the 20th cen-

tury, in part because of the defeat and subsequent erosion of fascist governments in Europe (in Spain and Portugal occurring in the decades after World War 2), these currents survived in alternative dimensions. Most particularly, the handmaiden of both fascism and archaeology, religion (especially Christianity), has always had severe concerns about differentiating between the ‘crown of creation’ and other beings. In past centuries religion had been able to deal with the ‘others’ by defining them as unworthy heathens, but through the centuries much of the power of this idea had been eroded by more enlightened ideologies. These also marked the decline of religious power, the gradual diminishment of slavery and the rise of the idea that women should have political rights. The final shock came in the mid-19th century, with the European discovery of a fundamental wisdom long understood by all the ‘heathens’ of the world: that humans are biologically animals, that they descend from other animals. This threatened the very foundations of Christianity, which was based on the notion that humans (Aryans, especially) were god-like; they had been created in God’s own image. If noble Europeans were the descendents of ‘more primitive’ folk, and ultimately of apes, the inevitable question was: at what precise point in time, and for what specific reasons, did they suddenly become humans, capable of entering into heaven?

One of the several ways Christianity fought enlightenment was to encourage clerics to take up ‘prehistoric’ studies, enabling them to influence the new discipline’s direction and public impact. In trying to emphasize the division between humans and other animals, numerous devices were employed, ranging from tool making to self-awareness. Yet tools were used by countless species, and self-awareness can be assumed to exist, or have existed, in at least a dozen species (all known and unknown hominins, and in chimps and bonobos), and its level in the contemporary human is debatable (most of what we tend to regard as self-awareness relates to muddled religious, ideological, ontological, academic and cognitive a prioris, and to simple biological equipment, such as proprioceptors). Moreover, today thousands of archaeologists practice Biblical archaeology, apparently unaware that the very concept is an oxymoron. The nebulous purpose of this field, which we visited already in Lectures 1 and 2, is not only the confirmation of the contents of one single book, but also a watering down of the more ‘strident’ strains of fervency in the discipline. It is no longer socially acceptable to discriminate against extant societies, and missionary activities among them have been curtailed significantly, or have been slanted towards humanitarian aims. Archaeology now confronts the ‘other’ in new contexts on behalf of Christian values. No longer is it acceptable to depict non-Christian societies as inferior, and the last-ditch endeavor on behalf of religion is the new frontier of defending the special status of humans in the Pleistocene context. This is directly related to the fundamental need of religion to find an arbitrary demarcation between those capable of salvation, and those too primitive to qualify.

An epistemologically similar aspect of Pleistocene ar-

chaeology derives from the position that absence of evidence equals evidence of absence. Some Pleistocene archaeologists argue that if we cannot perceive any evidence for communication then that capability does not exist archaeologically. Some even extend this to non-archaeological topics, contending that animal communication exists only when it is perceived by humans (Davidson 1992). This ultra-empiricism expresses an ontology in which current human knowledge alone determines how things really are in the world, and things do not exist until humans become aware of them. It is an underlying ideology in archaeology; e.g. we have no evidence of human occupation in North America predating Clovis, hence that continent was not occupied earlier. Irrespective of its incompatibility with South American evidence, it is clear that this pronouncement rests entirely on negative evidence—on the absence of evidence. Such conservatism may seem commendable, but it is applied in a completely random fashion. We have no hard evidence prior to 6000 BP that hominins possessed soft tissue or hair similar to our own, but archaeologists assume they did; we have no material evidence of navigation prior to 9500 BP and yet it is generally accepted that vessels were used by Middle Paleolithic people. In numerous cases, archaeologists do not require hard evidence to accept the existence of a phenomenon, in others they require hard evidence in the form of large numbers of incidence (e.g. for symbolism). Not only does this indicate the exercise of unexplained double standards in the demands of evidence, the division between those phenomena requiring hard evidence, and those not requiring it seems entirely random, in the sense that there appear to be no rules determining these categories. To take the above example of animal communication: no ethologist would dream of using human capability of detecting animal communication as a measure of such phenomena, because ethologists, as scientists, begin with the assumption that we do not know how things really are in the world (if we did we would not need to find out). But when the student of human ethology (and ‘prehistoric archaeology’ is just an unscientific name for human ethology) considers the communication ability of hominins, a totally different epistemology takes over: we assume that communication is absent unless there is glaringly hard evidence in its favor (e.g. iconic pictures of things, according to Davidson and Noble 1989).

Today the frontier of religion-inspired ideology in archaeology finds its finest expression in the ‘African Eve’ model, which stipulates that all ‘modern’ humans descend from a single female, and that only her progeny has survived. All other humans have now become the new ‘others’ (Fig. 4), which has the considerable benefit that they cannot defend their case and, apart from a few researchers who are too much concerned about veracity, nobody objects much to this version of the human past. Nobody seems to mind that it is a cynical exercise of ethnic archaeology, which has been driven out of more recent periods, justifying the definition of some ‘other’ as inferior and primitive, as the antithesis of our glorious ancestors. The African Eve or Replacement Model is the current archaeological myth of how the world’s brutish forces were de-



Figure 4. The author in conference with Mr Neander, who is much offended by what archaeologists have said about him.

feated. Chris Stringer and his coterie of supporters would indignantly reject the notion that he might have been influenced by Christian values, but the thought-patterns of Europeans, and many others, bear the indelible imprint of their religion—however dedicated they may be as atheists or agnostics. I cannot escape the fact that my culture is largely based on Christian values (e.g. the calendar I am forced to use; just as Stringer’s Christian name is, well, Christian), which have in the past been the basis of slavery, fascism, pogroms, crusades and inquisitions. To suggest that any of us can entirely escape the cognitive conditioning of the dominant culture (and the religion it is based on, no matter how non-religious we may be as individuals) is foolhardy.

But we could try.

#### Neo-colonialist effects of contemporary archaeology

In discussing the emerging ‘world archaeology’ it is requisite to consider the effects of such global developments on the research traditions of non-Western countries: the socialist or former socialist countries, and those of the developing world. It may at first glance appear that such structures would benefit developing countries, but on closer examination and after considering the existing practices and research philosophies, the issue is considerably more intricate. Local research traditions already disadvantaged may be affected even more adversely, and there is the complex issue of the political dimensions of archaeology.

The late Bruce Trigger (Fig. 5), we have noted (e.g. in the conclusion of Lecture



Figure 5. Professor Bruce Trigger, 1937–2006.

3), perceived only three types of archaeology: nationalist, colonialist and imperialist. We have visited some of the more obvious manifestations of these aspects, but some others are perhaps less apparent. There are subtle biases in favor of the wealthy countries, which tend to facilitate an inconspicuous neocolonialism through monopolization. For instance there are distinct preferences for methods that are sophisticated, complex, expensive and monopoly-forming. If there is a choice between two apparently similarly reliable methods, the one that is much cheaper and requires little expertise will quite likely be rejected. It is not the case that researchers in wealthy countries wish to exclude those from poorer countries; they are most welcome to solicit assistance from institutes in those richer countries. But their dependence on this help from Western countries may be induced by this preference for methodologies facilitating the establishment of scientific monopolies.

Similarly, prominent and outstanding archaeologists tend to publish their best work in the most prestigious journals, which today are mostly in the English language. Do their choices reflect a desire to educate or inform, or are they influenced by ambition and self-advancement? Scholars in developing countries may not be in an economic position to subscribe to these prestigious (and expensive) Western journals, they may rarely get to see such work. This is in addition to the 'brain drain' that occurs in any case in the poorer countries.

Academic disciplines may even reject methods that are perceived to pose a threat to their control. When in 1980 I introduced the first successful attempt to date rock art via a direct, non-archaeological method my paper was rejected by five archaeologist referees, essentially on the basis that they doubted the validity of the geomorphological method employed. This was even though they admitted never having heard of it, and despite the references to previous similar work in speleology. These references, admittedly, were all to German and French papers, which points to another problem in Anglophone archaeology we have visited before.

Since then, the development of non-archaeological dating methods for rock art has helped rock art studies to break away from traditional archaeology. Ten years later, I developed another dating method, this time with the implicit purpose of providing a cheap, easily applied and almost universally available technique that would be well within the reach of most specialists in developing countries. It was refereed by two leading protagonists of highly sophisticated rock art dating methods. Both rejected the paper categorically without giving any credible technical reason. They found the idea that one might date a petroglyph without the use of millions of dollars' worth of hardware, and date it perhaps even better and more reliably, so unpalatable that they did not even want the method discussed or considered.

Researchers in developing countries need to understand these neocolonialist dynamics, and that their indebtedness to their Western 'sponsors' may not be quite as justified as it seems: some of it may have been induced by restrictive practices that may be illegal in commerce, but nevertheless

flourish in academia.

These may be viewed as minor issues, and it is admittedly true that the various fundamental epistemological issues discussed above are more effective in presenting us with archaeological models marked by systematic deficiencies. The political roles of the discipline, its categorical lack of a scientific universal theory, its tolerance of pathological practices, its several inherent self-contradictions and its cognitive colonization of other cultures and societies all conspire to render the discipline an exercise in neocolonialism—even if individual practitioners bravely oppose such currents and resist their influence. In the end archaeology has long become an institution of the state, an integral part of its technocracy. Those who could have prevented this from happening, the independent archaeological scholars, have been gradually marginalized over the entire 20th century, and today are perceived as troublesome interlopers that need to be opposed at every opportunity. Today, the academic support indigenous peoples enjoy from this discipline derives largely from its dissenters, its heretics and outsiders. It is truly a sad state of affairs, and one that all the media propaganda the state's machinery churns out cannot paint over.

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