



Modern Disturbances: On the Ambiguities of Archaeology

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Archaeology and Modernity

Archaeology was born of modernity. Indeed, it helped shape it. There are many ways to define modernity, but the very word indicates that the concept of time is central—modernity as a new way of conceptualizing time that emerged around the sixteenth century, specifically the perception of the present as distinct from the past: the break with tradition.¹ Alongside this temporal fracture was a new sense of history or historical consciousness that attempted to mend this break, but which was however faced with an inherent paradox: before modernity, understanding of the past had come through tradition, yet in breaking with tradition, with the past, modernity now had to find another way of understanding it. This was a problem faced by all Renaissance scholars in whatever field, a problem which was ultimately resolved by invoking the authority of reason (Descartes) and the senses (Bacon) against tradition, including religion. Understanding the past, particularly the human past of history, presented a particularly acute instance of this paradox, for it involved breaking from the very thing that was to be understood. The only way to respond was either to study the past through a critical analysis of traditional sources (history) or to find *other* sources, another authority; and this meant, above all, *material culture* (archaeology).

The antiquarians of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even eighteenth centuries played a critical role in articulating the project of modernity, for it was they who discovered a past previously unknown to tradition through the recognition of an ancient Eu-

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110 ropean material culture. It is too easy to forget the specific social and intellectual conditions which define archaeology. With all sense of the past coming from what had been handed down, it must have seemed near impossible to find an independent and alternative way of understanding. The significant thing about the recognition of this ancient material culture was that it was based on observation and comparison with *contemporary* objects. Just as it was realized that fossils were the remains of once living organisms, so it was realized that prehistoric objects were the material culture of once living societies. The example of thunderstones illustrates this perfectly. These objects were originally interpreted as “solidified lightning” and viewed as natural objects; we now recognize them as stone axes, dating back over four thousand years. It was only when Europe began its global expansion and encountered people living in very different conditions and using very different material culture—but one which included objects that looked like those found buried in European soil—that the possibility of their human origin was raised.²

Despite the increasing amount of empirical work conducted on ancient remains during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the contradiction between breaking with the past and depending upon it remained acute. In facing this new past, which was opened up by analogies with the present, the antiquarians did not develop the means to understand it much further until the nineteenth century. They were, for all intents and purposes, forced back onto what tradition—specifically written texts—said, and so they fitted the new discoveries into this framework. Classical and biblical texts spoke of stone tools, just as the world, according to Archbishop Ussher’s famous calculations, began only in 4004 B.C. The idea of prehistory—of a past radically earlier than written history—was unacceptable, if not inconceivable, until the nineteenth century. The great antiquity of the earth and of human culture was realized only when—similarly using analogies with the present—the layering of rocks and soil in the earth (stratigraphy) replaced traditional sources (such as biblical genealogies) as a guide to chronology. Combined with the development of typology—the classification of prehistoric artifacts—antiquarians now had the beginnings of a method for interrogating this new past; they could also give the final death blow to the antimodernists by claiming a past which existed even before tradition: prehistory.³

The idea of prehistory is in many ways the epitome of the modernist project: the creation of a past which has no connection to traditional history. Moreover, prehistory was not just a new past, it was also a lost past—lost to traditional forms of memory, whether written or spoken. For the new historical consciousness, prehistory was perhaps the greatest challenge and yet perhaps its greatest asset; on the one hand, it was a past which tradition has forgotten, and no amount of critical analysis of traditional texts would recover it. On the other, precisely for this reason, it was a past purified of all taint of tradition. It was a clean slate. The concept of prehistory is incredibly radical, and yet today we do not give it too much thought. Prehistory was about a time before text. We tend to think of prehistory as simply the recognition of a chronological period, a time before history, where history is the written or spoken word. Yet the “before” of prehistory is not just temporal, it is also ontological (though the two are

related). Prehistory is not solely about chronological priority, it is also about the ontological priority of material culture before text. It was not simply that archaeologists were forced to rely on material culture to interpret this new past—the modernist project *demand*ed it. It was an alternative path to constructing a new authority and foundation for understanding the past that did not rely on tradition (i.e., texts). Let me be clear here though: I am not suggesting some absolute priority of material culture over text, but a contingent one, according to the disciplinary context. In absolute terms, if I can use this phrase at all, the issue was making material culture the equal of text—and more than its equal: independent of it. But in the specific context of archaeology, material culture was to have the upper hand.

While the implications of this role of material culture have been long recognized in archaeology, they have not been connected to the concept of prehistory. In fact, ironically, most archaeologists continue to consider the concept of prehistory as primarily a chronological concept: the time before writing.⁴ Yet to appreciate fully the radical nature of the modernist project, the ontological status of prehistory needs to be properly considered. The word *prehistory* was only invented in the mid-nineteenth century and it caused some ripples at the time; other words were even considered for this “new” past, such as *antehistory*. Given the phonetic similarity to *antihistory*, perhaps this would have been more apt. But then, perhaps this would have underlined the break between traditional history and the new history too much.⁵ Yet the break was always more than a temporal one: prehistory was, above all, history studied through material culture, not through texts. This characterization deliberately blurs the distinction between method and material. It relocates the split between prehistory and history from chronology to ontology. This means that even archaeologists studying the material culture of the historic past—medieval Britain or colonial America—are doing prehistory, not history.

That archaeologists do not think this way—that the idea of prehistory is reduced to a chronological concept—is problematic. To some, this may seem a mere question of semantics, but I think it signals an underlying lack of confidence in the archaeological project. To insist on the limited definition of prehistory as a time before text is to ignore the ontological status of material culture vis-à-vis text. It has been pointed out that when archaeologists suddenly opened up the vast period of prehistory in the nineteenth century, they ironically tried to reduce it to a simulacrum of the present through ethnographic analogies: prehistory was peopled by societies similar to contemporary savages. For Tim Murray, this is almost a betrayal of the initial achievement of the discovery of a new past.⁶ This is an important issue, yet I think the irony is even greater than Murray indicates: first, the discovery of this “new past” was founded on exactly such analogies—actualistic studies informed the very recognition of thunderstones as stone axes, of deep stratigraphy as long chronologies. Without such contemporary analogies in the first place, there would have been no “discovery” of the antiquity of human culture. Second and more significantly, the “discovery” of prehistory was not just the discovery of a long chronology. It was the discovery of a new method of understanding the past: the analysis of material culture.

112 What I find really interesting about the history of archaeology is how many of its key developments were linked to the key contradiction of modernity: the need to understand the past without relying on it as a source of authority. Archaeology resolved this contradiction, on the one hand, by creating a *new* or different kind of past from that laid down by tradition: prehistory; and, on the other, by creating a *new* way of understanding the past: the study of material culture. The two are closely connected, especially through the wider social context in which these concepts emerged—particularly capitalism. Through mercantile capitalism, the expansion of European people around the world, particularly the discovery of the New World, produced material analogies for those “curiosities” of the Old World such as thunderstones. Through industrial capitalism, the development of mass production and consumption provided a new way of understanding material culture, through the notion of the serial object, which changes through time. Archaeological typologies were quite explicitly inspired by mid-nineteenth-century exhibitions of this new material culture, which arranged objects according to series.⁷ These social conditions not only provided the means for one solution to the contradiction of modernity; they also provided the context for actually thinking in a modern way in the first place. Indeed, one cannot really separate these issues, and in fact one might define modernity as the persistence of this dialectic.

This can be seen in archaeology’s continued dilemma about the relation between the present and the past. As mentioned earlier, there is a disturbing question surrounding our knowledge of prehistory: on the one hand, it was defined as a new past, a new time, but on the other, it can only be understood (and was created) through analogies (direct or indirect) with the present. The concept of analogy articulates this dialectic well. However, archaeologists are forever uneasy about such ambiguities and concurrently developed a means to conceal this dilemma, as if the line between past and present were not a slash but a hyphen. If analogy represents the modernist divide of past/present, chronology represents the modernist patch of a historical consciousness linking past-present. In short, archaeology created its own mode of time—a temporalization which is not necessarily unique to archaeology (except in its details), but which nonetheless serves to plaster over the fracture between present and past by creating a specific time in which material culture resides. The oldest mode of archaeological temporalization was the narrative of evolution, which placed all material culture in a progressive sequence from savagery to civilization. This model has been continually refined since the eighteenth century, and is still employed by many archaeologists today, especially in North America, albeit in a very modified form. However, evolutionism has not always been in favor and its popularity varies with time and the place. On the other hand, basic chronology—whether drawn from radiocarbon dates, dendrochronology, or typology—remains a fundamental part of the discipline. Periodization in particular—from the Paleolithic to the Iron Age—has remained a key device for structuring this material culture, and even while many archaeologists may have abandoned the grand narratives of social evolution, it is hard to imagine the discipline ever abandoning chronology in some form. It is chronology which provides the most successful temporalization, for it embraces all material culture within a universal

temporality, and makes us believe that the prehistoric past is joined to the present through a shared, universal time.

However, we need to be conscious of the political consequences of this kind of historical consciousness, and the political nature of time it incorporates.⁸ Archaeology has of course been closely tied to nationalism and the formation of nation-states whether or not it is explicitly used to create origin stories:⁹ archaeology—ironically—as the invention of traditions. The politics of nationalism are often—though not always—quite transparent. But archaeology has always also been a modernist project, as this paper has discussed, and one which investigates pasts beyond national frontiers, as the science of the history of humankind. The politics of this humanism have been less transparent. The problem with this vision of archaeology as part of modernity and the project of humanism lies in its politics of time—as Foucault has so minutely deconstructed in his genealogies of European history. For if archaeology is seen as one of the guardians of our time-consciousness, maintaining the temporal continuity or link with the past of humanity, what implications does this have for archaeology vis-à-vis *other* histories, other strategies of cultural remembrance? The question is whether this concept of time-consciousness does not claim some special and universal status, for its totalizing vision would seem to erase or denigrate other claims to the past. Archaeology as part of the hegemony of a Western discourse on history, a scientific colonialism, a *white mythology*.¹⁰

Analogy and chronology represent archaeology's two articulations of modernity as a temporal problem. While analogy expresses the fundamental dilemma, chronology represents the primary solution. But what about material culture? It is very much caught between these two articulations, for on the one hand it represents something of both the past and the present *simultaneously*, and on the other, it is captured within time, belonging to a particular point or period: the stone axe as both metaphor and concept. The textual articulation of material culture, which has become a dominant feature of much archaeology since the 1980s,¹¹ is perhaps a little ironic given the association between material culture and prehistory discussed earlier. Indeed, we need to remind ourselves of a key axis in the concept of prehistory: as a time before writing—not “before” in a chronological or temporal sense, but “before” in an ontological sense. Of course one needs to be wary of associations with Heideggerian concepts of primordality, for the priority being asserted here—as I have already mentioned—is not absolute but contingent, and related to a methodological strategy. But as with the restricted, chronological conception of prehistory, I think many archaeologists are also working with a restricted conception of material culture that makes it secondary or supplemental to language, or “mental culture” if you like. To illustrate this, I want to turn towards the archaeology of modernity, towards an archaeological analysis of modernity. For here it is possible to see how archaeology has for a long time either ignored or marginalized an archaeology of the modern period. In doing this, I hope to return to the question of material culture with a revitalized sense of its significance to archaeology.

114 **Archaeologies of Modernity**

The grating of metal teeth on concrete, the pounding of a breaker, dust and noise—typical sights and sounds on the initial stages of any urban excavation, as mechanical excavators rip up modern surfaces and foundations. It is normal practice on archaeological excavations, particularly those in cities and so-called “brownfield” (i.e., built-up) areas, for the upper layers of a site to be machined or dug away in order to get down to the “archaeology.” Tarmac surfaces, concrete foundations, or service pipe trenches all constitute what is often called “modern disturbance” and if they are recorded at all, it is as a blank zone, their sole importance defined as an area of truncated archaeology—that is, of *no* archaeology. On reflection, one should of course ask why these features are excluded from consideration as archaeological remains, and the usual answer is, “they are *too* modern.” But what is “too modern”? The question is critical because by default, it also raises the question of what is “the archaeological.” Indeed it is as if a major barrier separates the modern from the archaeological gaze. Why are archaeologists usually uninterested in such material remains—is it a question of chronology, disciplinary boundaries, or is there a more concealed issue of ontology and temporality implicated in this simple phrase—“too modern”?

Ironically, throughout most of its history archaeology has not given much attention to the material culture and remains of the very period in which it was born and grew up, its contemporary past. Indeed, it has only been since the late twentieth century—that “postmodern period”—that anything like an active research interest in this vein has developed. Of course in different countries there are different responses to this problem—in Europe, archaeologies of the modern world are very poorly developed (“too modern” is regularly applied as far back as the eighteenth century);¹² but in North America, by contrast, the archaeology of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries is a thriving subdiscipline. Indeed, explorations of the role of material culture in the development of capitalism and global expansion—the very processes connected to the rise of modernity—have formed a core part of some of the most exciting archaeology being done in the United States.¹³ The reasons for this regional disparity no doubt relate to broader social issues about the role of archaeology in society. Is it any coincidence that North American archaeologists—mostly white, of European descent—should start using archaeology to explore their “own” past? Indeed, one might suggest there is a clear postcolonial geopolitics operating in this focus on the archaeology of the modern world: globally, the most active research of the modern period occurs precisely in those former colonies where the European-derived population is or has been politically or numerically dominant (such as North America or Australia) in contrast to those where the indigenous population regained power (such as India or other countries in southeast Asia).

Yet the more insistent question is perhaps not why the archaeology of the past three centuries is stronger in some former colonies than others, but why it is so weak in the colonial homeland of Europe. This is slowly changing, but it is a long time coming and the resistance is not so much active as passive: it never really occurred to us that this

was an important avenue for archaeology. Not that there has not been—and still is—some active resistance, especially when faced with issues of priority; I have no doubt that if you asked ten archaeologists what was more important, a Neolithic or a nineteenth-century site, nine of them (if not ten) would probably say the former—without hesitation. Yet why do we value the remains of the past in this way? Is it simply that *older is better*? Or is it perhaps something else—a fear of getting too close to the present? There is, I suppose, a threat of ridicule entangled in this fear of the present, because no matter how much archaeology might be defined by its set of methods and its focus on material culture, it retains a strong sense that its subject matter is the past; indeed, that instead of moving forward in time, it should be moving backward in time, exploring the darkest depths of prehistory. But at the same time, putting a date on the limits of archaeology also seems ludicrous. Why stop at 1750, 1800, 1900, or 2003? Indeed, given the variability in national, local, and individual responses to the archaeology of the past three hundred years, it should already be clear that this cannot be a chronological question. That is, there can be no date or time after which we might say that this is no longer archaeology, even though many archaeologists routinely do this in practice, if not on principle. But if it is not a question of chronology, then what is it that creates such resistance to an archaeology of modernity?

A typical response is often: “We have masses of textual and testimonial sources from which to address the history of the recent past, so why bother with archaeology?” I have heard many people—archaeologists and nonarchaeologists—use this argument, and I think it is an irony bordering on tragedy. What happened to the radical project of modernity and its attempt to put material culture on an independent basis for understanding the past? It is as if these people have no idea what archaeology is about. For if you use this argument, then you also accept that archaeology will always be in the shadow of documentary and oral-led history or ethnography and is effectively the poorest and most pathetic of all historical or social disciplines. If you use this line, you should not be an archaeologist at all. Many archaeologists had to go through this argument in the mid-twentieth century, whether they were studying medieval Britain or colonial America, and I would hope that few would actually maintain this position today. Yet it is still heard, even from within the discipline. This is not to deny the value of using textual and other sources in historical archaeology. Rather the point is the power of material culture. I mention this moreover not so much to lament the theoretically vacuous position some might hold, but to highlight the close relationship material culture has with textuality, or discursivity. I want to explore the nature of material culture and the project of archaeology through this opposition; to put it in rather negative terms—using negativity as a *positive* concept—to explore material culture as the nondiscursive, the nontextual.

The one place to explore this question best I believe is to focus on an archaeology of modernity as contemporaneity: the archaeology of the present, or, as it has been called elsewhere, the “contemporary past.”¹⁴ For even while many archaeologists may accept the importance of an archaeology of the modern period, even of twentieth-century archaeology, some still stop when it comes to doing the archaeology of *now*. Is it

116 even possible to do this kind of archaeology? Does the archaeological context not have to be, by definition, *dead*? Archaeology as autopsy. Consider this: even if archaeologists decided to pay attention to the very surface of an urban site—the tarmac, the service pipes, the concrete—why should it stop there? Why do the archaeologists leave the site once all the cultural material traces have been dealt with, when new ones might be being constructed in their place? What would it be like if archaeologists stayed to analyze the construction of the new building being erected on that urban plot—and then stayed to examine its occupation and use . . . and possibly its eventual destruction and replacement by another building. An archaeologist could devote her whole life to the material history of just one site.

This is a provocative idea, though some skeptics might question whether such a project is archaeology. Well, actually I do not care. And I am not sure many people care that much about disciplinary purity, which is surely the only reason for engaging in such debate. Archaeologists have been borrowing for decades and are increasingly exploring interdisciplinary spaces—just look at this volume. What is more important here is the nature of material culture in relation to the archaeological method. What does it mean to perform archaeology on a living context rather than a dead one? Archaeology has routinely been doing this since the 1960s, and less systematically before that time. What is called *ethnoarchaeology* is an established subfield of archaeology where archaeologists study living societies to help them interpret dead ones. In such a case, ethnoarchaeology is largely seen as methodological: it helps us to reflect on our methods. But an archaeology of a living society also has a very different role. It reflects back, not on the discipline but on contemporary society at large. The archaeology of the present might be characterized as a two-way mirror: on the one hand, we could just see it as a mirror, held up to our own discipline (as in ethnoarchaeology); on the other, we could try to see it as a window onto wider society, albeit an obscure rather than a transparent one. This use of archaeology is much harder; it requires much more effort, for we have first to ignore its reflective properties and, second, to struggle to see through to the other side. Indeed, ironically, it is perhaps the reflection of ourselves which is the most difficult obstacle to overcome in this process.

What kind of archaeology looks through the mirror? There are any number of examples one could choose,¹⁵ but let me focus on just two: garbology and forensic archaeology. Garbology is the study of people's rubbish, pioneered by William Rathje, from which critical understanding is gained of a community's habits of consumption and waste.¹⁶ One of the more interesting aspects of this "project" is the frequent incongruity between what people said and thought about their consumption habits and what they actually did, as revealed by an examination of their trash cans. It is not simply about people lying or deluding themselves; it is about the significance of nondiscursive behavior in people's lives. It is about material culture. And what applies on an individual level applies equally on a social level, as similar studies of landfills have demonstrated. Forensic archaeology involves a similar revelation, but in the field of criminal behavior. Archaeologists are increasingly being drawn into cases of civil and war crimes, where they serve as part of the judicial process. Archaeologists have,

for example, worked on the bodies and graves of serial killers' victims, or have participated in the excavation and analysis of mass graves around the world.¹⁷ Once again, it is dealing with contexts in which discursivity is either absent or intentionally suppressed.

The nature of archaeology in these examples might be described as a presencing of absence—or making discursive the nondiscursive. Archaeology as exploring the prehistory of the present, where the word “prehistory” invokes the radical ontological meaning given earlier in this paper. For our world is not transparent; it is not fully constituted: there are gaps, shadows, silences, and absences which are not simply outside of discourse, but are often structurally excluded by discourse. And here I want to introduce a notion of archaeology as *an engagement with the unconstituted present*. If we can call this unconstituted present a prehistory, then I would suggest even further that this is exactly what all prehistory is, indeed what all archaeology engages with, whether excavating Neolithic burial mounds or late-twentieth-century landfills. The objects that archaeologists study are unearthed and existing *in the present*—even if they can be said to have been made and buried in the past. To be clear: this is not to deny the age of objects, or their historicity, merely the temporal bracketing which would reduce the temporality of an object to *another* time—such as the Bronze Age or the Neolithic. Prehistoric artifacts are *contemporary objects*, as much as the latest Nokia cell phone or BMW. Indeed, archaeologists routinely bring new things into the world through their excavations, and these add to the material culture of contemporary society—even if they are tightly contained in museum cases, or concealed in archives. Archaeologists, above all, engage with the unconstituted present and attempt to make it part of a discourse.

How is this constitution performed? Critically and most momentously, through the act of fieldwork. Archaeology is a materializing activity—it does not simply work with material things, it *materializes*. It brings new things into the world; it reconfigures the world. The public watches on as slowly over the weeks a Viking longhouse emerges from the soil. To the public—indeed to archaeologists—the rhetoric of the dig is about exposure, uncovering what has been buried. But this seriously misrepresents the creative process of excavation. A rhetoric of sculpture, of design, might be equally apt. The archaeological site as a gestalt image: sculpted or buried? Would the passer-by be able to tell? Would you? Of course in a Platonic epistemology, the sculptor is only uncovering what was already there anyway, inherent in the material; perhaps archaeology is no different. But I think the issue is not about the end product as much as the process; not about what is made, but the process of making. Moreover, archaeology viewed as an act of materializing also incorporates the act of translation, which is often less noticeable. The passer-by now sees an archaeologist making a drawing of the sculpted/buried remains, making notes, taking photographs. She witnesses the process of translation from object to image/text.

This is not simply a case of representation either, despite what archaeological orthodoxy would say. Rather it is a *double materialization*, where both excavation and translation constitute each other. The way the site is excavated is largely performed with reference to the way it will be recorded; for example, sections of earth are cut

118 vertically in preparation for drawing the layers; pegs are put in the ground to reference gridded drafting paper; lines are scored around layers, like pencil on paper. Which is representing which? Excavations and even laboratories are the sites where this unconstituted present is engaged, and made discursive. The nature of this discursivity is not given in the nature of the materials either but is something which has to be performed; archaeology is just *one* performance. Others are possible: even on the same site other materializations could take place. The question is, should archaeology be worried by this possibility?

Modern Archaeology

Ultimately, this brings us back to the beginning of this paper and the contradictions of modernity. The core dilemma of modernity was how to understand the world without turning to tradition—how to find a new authority which resided outside of tradition—effectively, outside of time. As part of this search for a new authority in studying the past, archaeology developed the analysis of material culture which subsequently produced in the nineteenth century the concept of a new past. Prehistory was this new past, unrelated to tradition and paradoxically, a *very modern* past. Yet its meaning was always rendered ambiguous through the connection to the present, through analogy, an ambiguity which is concealed by chronology. An archaeology of the present, of modernity as the contemporary, however, raises a new conception of prehistory. It unsettles the role of chronology by once again focusing on analogy. Only instead of seeing an archaeology of the present as analogical (i.e., ethnoarchaeology), it demands we see it as an engagement with the unconstituted present. The present is no longer an analogy for the past, it is the field in which pasts are constituted. Prehistory should no longer be viewed as a new past, but rather a new present—rather the performance of presencing. The significance of material culture is no longer about a new authority or foundation for understanding the world (specifically the past), but about a critique of any absolute authority or foundationalism. Depending on your perspective, this is archaeology as an antimodernist, postmodernist or, simply, late modernist project.

The implications of this conception also explode the restricted notion of archaeology as the search for knowledge. Archaeology is often seen as simply an academic discipline, producing authoritative knowledge about the past. But however you characterize or contest the nature of such knowledge (or the past), it is also important to recognize that archaeology is a mode of cultural production: a cultural work.¹⁸ Archaeology is important to most societies in the world today because it contributes to a broader educational project about national and even universal identities: who are we? It can be exploited to support nationalistic ideologies (as was the case in Nazi Germany)¹⁹ or critique them. It also serves more recreational functions as entertainment, either directly (e.g., a day at the museum) or indirectly (e.g., technical advice on the latest Hollywood movie). One could no doubt cite more roles; however, the route from the very specific and highly specialized job of excavating, say a Viking house, to the wider social reception of archaeological knowledge affecting people's lives is long—

often too long. Indeed, insofar as archaeology enhances people's lives and society in general, its major impact might be said to lie in popular culture rather than any noble vision of improving self-awareness. One could debate the relative merit of these different roles of archaeology in society—should it be emancipatory or is it enough to be entertaining? I do not want to address such questions here (though they are exceedingly important), but rather argue that however one views its cultural role, an archaeology of the present opens up a much broader forum for cultural work, and one whose relevance is potentially immediate rather than distant.

In many ways, it is through exploring the interstitial spaces between cultural projects that archaeology can expand most; conventionally, by viewing itself primarily as an academic discipline, archaeology has perceived its limits to lie on the border of other academic disciplines—history, anthropology, or geography, for example. But archaeology's limits go far beyond academia—it can equally explore its relation to other fields of cultural production, such as art or theater. Indeed, these have been explored through dialogues between individuals from their respective fields, such as Colin Renfrew and Mark Dion on art,²⁰ or Michael Shanks and Michael Pearson on theater.²¹ And then why not similar dialogues between archaeologists and construction engineers or architects? (I am not talking about practical issues of conservation or mitigation, but about theoretical issues regarding the significance of the built environment.) The possibilities are endless, as is the field of archaeology. Moreover, such a perspective deconstructs the hierarchy of knowledge, which privileges the didactic role of archaeology. For the cultural value of archaeology lies not solely in the grand narratives of the past. It is not just in synthetic works, popular books, museums, or heritage sites that archaeology performs its cultural work. Any segment or part of archaeological practice, even its most scientific, mundane operations, is potentially able to participate in a wider cultural project. The projects I discussed earlier, garbology and forensics, have much broader and rather different cultural implications and social relevance than traditional archaeology. Extending the notion of archaeology to a more generalized concept of cultural critique and redemption, archaeology can be likened to an act of therapy on a social level. It can help a community or even a whole nation come to terms with and understand key social problems, such as a sudden tragic event (e.g., war crimes) or a more long-term, structural malaise (social deprivation and inequality). This is archaeology breaking the boundaries of its normal role in cultural work. This is modern archaeology.

Notes

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14. See Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas, eds., *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (New York: Routledge, 2001), esp. Laurent Olivier, “The Archaeology of the Contemporary Past,” trans. Véréne Grieshaber, in *ibid.*, 175–88.
15. See, e.g., Buchli and Lucas, eds., *Archaeologies*.
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