Whose World and Whose Archaeology? The Colonial Present and the Return of the Political

Yannis Hamilakis, University of Southampton,
Southampton, United Kingdom

ABSTRACTS

Abstracto: El autor identifica un proyecto colonial crecientemente agresivo funcionando en Irak y Afganistán y considera que el fallo catastrófico de la comunidad arqueológica occidental de responder apropiadamente a las condiciones en ambas naciones. La manera de énfasis sobre arqueología está contribuyendo activamente no solamente a la legitimidad de una guerra ilegal y sin ética, sino también a la reproducción del régimen de poder y verdad que la guerra busca establecer. Se llama al WAC a "descentralizar" al mundo como es visto por los centros metropolitanos Occidentales, dejando a la "periferia" tomar la iniciativa, poner la agenda, y promover las medidas arqueológicas alternativas.

Résumé: L'auteur identifie un projet colonialiste de plus en plus agressif en Irak et en Afghanistan, et considère l'échec catastrophique de la communauté des archéologues occidentaux à répondre de façon appropriée aux conditions dans chacune de ces deux nations. Insister sur l'archéologie contribue activement, non seulement à légitimer une guerre illégale et immorale, mais aussi à reproduire le régime de force et de vérité que la guerre cherche à établir. Il en appelle au WAC pour 'dé-centrer' la vision du monde des centres métropolitains occidentaux, afin de permettre à la 'périphérie' de prendre l'initiative, de mettre en place un agenda, et de préconiser des épistémologies archéologiques alternatives.

As I write these lines in late November 2004, the Falluja onslaught still on my mind, I reflect on the latest episode in the never-ending war in Iraq, or to put it more accurately, the illegal, U.S.-led invasion, occupation, and colonisation of Iraq. The major U.S. and British offensive in Falluja may have marked a turning point in this event, as the images of endless violence and killing in Iraq that have saturated the Western media become news no longer. This is in the aftermath of the study published in the academic journal *The Lancet*, in which

it is estimated that the civilian deaths in Iraq may have risen to 100,000, and reports describe the indiscriminate killing of civilians by the occupation forces and the random destruction of houses, mosques, and other buildings on the assumption that an "insurgent" may be hiding in every house and that every mosque can be potentially used as a place for them to find refuge. These events no longer require an explanation, nor do they demand any manner of inquiry; for the captains of the Western information industry, this is too much of the same thing. Readers, listeners, and viewers need variety; otherwise they will switch over or worse, switch off.

Yet it seems that members of the Western media, even those who had maintained some critical distance from the invading countries' rhetoric, have suffered "Iraq fatigue." U.S. forces and their allies are, as Naomi Klein (2004) puts it, "no longer bothering to conceal attacks on civilian targets and are openly eliminating anyone—doctors, clerics, journalists—who dares to count the bodies." The unaccounted dead bodies in Iraq, like those in Afghanistan before, are now officially declared *Homines sacri*. The concept of the *Homo sacer* derives from an ancient Roman law, which denotes persons who exist outside the divine law (they are not worthy of sacrifice to the gods), as well as outside the juridical law; that is, they can be killed with impunity. The concept has acquired relevance and potency recently, after its discussion by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998), and it has been deployed in powerful critiques of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by Slavoj Žižek (2002), as well as by the human geographer Derek Gregory (2004), among others. In these recent conflicts both civilians and "insurgents" or "unlawful combatants" (to use the novel technical terminology invented by the U.S. administration to describe them) are not simply marginalised. They are located beyond and outside the margins and have been placed at a *topos* where no ethical principle, nor any treaty, law, or convention applies (Gregory 2004:62).

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also signify a return to a much more aggressive colonial project—a project that, while it incorporates many novel features and devices, also connects directly with the Western colonial project of the previous centuries; from its evocation of the binarism between "civilization" and "barbarism," to its Manichaean dilemmas and divisions between "us" and "them" and its creation of homogeneous, bounded, and discreet entities.

The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) was founded with an agenda (if not always explicitly expressed) to decolonise archaeology, resist Eurocentricity, embrace diversity, and, more importantly, advocate the importance of an engaged and value-committed archaeology. Its birth was fully implicated in the struggle against apartheid, but its primary focus since has been to support the rights of and give voice to Indigenous groups whose past and present were colonised by the European powers. While many of these battles have been won, WAC's overall agenda is far from being successful, despite the progress

that has been made. New forms of colonialism and imperialism are now making advances, and Eurocentric ideologies and practises, in archaeology and elsewhere, are still dominant. How is this organisation, and the archaeological community overall, to react and position itself in the colonial present?

In Iraq, the Western archaeological community has failed catastrophically. It acted primarily as an advocate of the "archaeological record" of the Mesopotamian past which was described as "the cradle of civilization": a racist neoevolutionist notion that equates "civilization" with the invention of literacy and the development of urbanism, thus rendering as "uncivilized"—even "barbarian"—peoples and cultures that do not posses these features (cf. several papers in Pollock and Bernbeck 2005). Interestingly, these terms were used at the same time by the Western leaders that invaded Iraq. The Western archaeological community also pronounced the Mesopotamian past "our past," thus performing an act of symbolic appropriation. It lamented the looting of the Baghdad museum and of the archaeological sites, yet very few of its members explicitly opposed the illegal invasion and occupation, although undoubtedly some saw in their advocacy of the record and the emphasis on looting an indirect means of opposing the war.

The organisations that coordinated the efforts of the archaeological community even adopted the rhetoric of the invading armies. In the most explicit example, a letter sent to U.S. President George W. Bush on 16 April 2003 by 21 organisations representing most professional bodies of archaeologists and anthropologists in the United States, the invasion was called a "return to freedom" for the people of Iraq. Moreover, these organisations offered to act as advisors to these armies, in order to prevent the destruction of antiquities and recover the looted artifacts (Hamilakis 2003). Indeed, some archaeologists "embedded" themselves in the United States and United Kingdom military structures in the run-up to the invasion, providing information and expertise. In so doing, archaeologists prioritised certain aspects of the material archaeological past at the expense of others (What about the recent Islamic past, the present-day houses, monuments, and buildings?), adopted a rhetoric that was akin to nineteenth-century colonial archaeology, and, more importantly, prioritised their professional identity over and above other forms of identity—that of the citizen, the ethically committed human being, and so on.

More recently, substantial U.S. government funds were made available to promote archaeological activity in Iraq, including the training of Iraqi archaeologists by U.S.-based academics. According to its official website, this programme is very important for the United States as it "promotes long-term higher educational contact and exchange with the Iraqi middle class, strengthening pro-democracy elements and pro-U.S. teaching allies in Iraq" (www.sunysb.edu/usaidhead/SBU%2003_04_Semiannual.htm). Undoubtedly, some of this aid may help the Iraqi archaeologists, and it may even lead to effects perhaps unintended by its donors. As is clear from the passage above,

however, archaeology here is actively contributing not only to the legitimacy of an illegal and unethical war, but also to the reproduction of the regime of power and truth that the war seeks to establish. In the most recent act of this legitimising exercise, in 2004 the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, DC, put up an exhibition on American wars, starting with the early wars of American independence and finishing with the invasion to Iraq: its title "The Price of Freedom."

As for the WAC, it lacked the courage to take a radically different stance, and it was only after pressure from its members at the WAC-5 that it adopted a stronger policy against the war, deciding to set up a team to investigate the involvement of archaeologists with the military at times of war (Bernbeck 2003; Hamilakis 2003; Pollock 2003 for more detailed discussions of this complex situation). The Iraq affair is not merely of historical value: at a time of "permanent war" and at a time when neocolonialism and imperialism threatens to invade all our futures, this affair could prove of key importance for the future direction of WAC and for the future of an ethically committed archaeology as a whole. The case exposes more issues and aspects than I can afford to discuss here and I have thus chosen to focus on only two of them: What does the notion of the "world" mean in the project of world archaeology, and how does our world differ from the "world" that is the object of neocolonial regimes? Furthermore, how does an engaged and politically committed archaeology—one that WAC is supposed to advocate—react to the pressure of professionalisation that advocates the primacy of the stewardship of the "archaeological record"?

To start with the first question, the evocation of the global and of the "world community" has been central in the rhetoric of the recent neocolonial projects. During the recent wars the invading countries marshalled a number of satellite states so that they could justify their assertion that they were acting of behalf of the "international community," despite the fact that the only generally acceptable body of the world community, the United Nations, was bypassed and severely undermined in the process. As Homi Bhabha (1992) has noted, in a far-reaching text that was originally written as a critique of an exhibition on the "age of discoveries," (88) the desire to grasp the world has been at the basis of not only the colonial and imperial projects, but also of the institutions and agents that rest on the logic, the economy, and culture of colonisation. This desire is to conquer the world and also, more importantly, to represent the global and to claim that your view of the world is the global view. "The global perspective . . . is the purview of power," (88) Bhabha notes in the same text.

This politically charged symbolic geography of representation not only conceals its colonial origins, but it also embraces and advances neocolonialism, often in the name of universality and multiculturalism (cf. Žižek 1997). This is the attitude that allows museums such as the British Museum, for example, to

declare themselves to be global museums—that is, museums that have the right (on what basis?) to represent global culture, rejecting out-of-hand claims for the restitution of material culture (often problematic for other reasons) expressed by countries and museums that are deemed "peripheral" (MacGregor 2004). This is the same logic that allows major Western publishers to produce books that claim to represent "global archaeology." However, a close inspection of these publications will show that the academics who set the agenda in these books are based primarily in the Anglo-American world and the canon they promote is the familiar Western one. This is a logic that is partly driven by financial concerns: the biggest market for academic books is the United States, and therefore publishers want books that are tailor made for that market. As any publisher will tell you, U.S. academia does not buy books that have not been at least partly produced by academics based in the United States. This logic is also driven by the old but ever-present colonial belief that the Western academic has the ability and the right to represent the global.

WAC can "decentre" the world as seen from and represented by the Western metropolitan centres, enabling the "periphery" to take the initiative, set the agenda, and advocate alternative archaeological epistemologies. This decentring is not simply an ethical and political responsibility; it can also bring to the fore a whole range of issues currently overshadowed in archaeological discussion, or even undermine Western dichotomies and logo-centric traditions. Moreover, it is time that we pay attention, not only to the communities and people who are marginalised, but also to those who are beyond the margins, to those whose rights are not recognised by the dominant world order of today, and to whom the status of world citizen, or even of human being, is not given. These are the new outcasts that the recent twenty-first-century wars have produced by the millions. If the victims of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century colonialism were the Indigenous groups and communities in the Americas, Africa, Oceania, and elsewhere, then the twenty-first-century victims of the colonial present—of the recast discourses of "civilisation" and "barbarity"—are the millions in the Middle East and elsewhere, whose lives, cultures, and recent heritage are being eradicated as we speak. These are the people who, if they manage to reach the shores of "fortress Europe," are treated like criminals by many of the "Indigenous" European governments, and often end up in prisonlike camps, waiting for their asylum application to be—more often than not—rejected.

Nowadays, many archaeologists seem quick to embrace the naive discourse that sees globalisation as a new liberating state of affairs that allows people to travel more and communicate globally with each other, forgetting that, along with the new opportunities, the past decades have created new boundaries and borders and new sophisticated techniques of global surveillance (Bauman 1998). More importantly, to recall Bhabha (1992) again, "the globe shrinks for those who own it," while for the "displaced or the dispossessed, the

migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers" (88). These are the worlds that we need to embrace, not in any attempt to represent them as hopeless and powerless victims in need of humanitarian help, but as worlds and communities whose voices, whose pain—but also whose frustration and anger—need to be heard, and whose views and links with their material culture and heritage need to be embraced and understood.

The championing of Indigenous people's rights has been a worthwhile cause, but in some contexts, such as in present-day Europe, it is often the immigrants and not the Indigenous communities that are persecuted and marginalised, often by "indigenous" cultures that advocate essentialist, nationalist, and xenophobic—if not racist—attitudes. Our alliances with these worlds will benefit from a close contact with the World Social Forum (WSF), the umbrella organisation that coordinates, in a loose and nonhierarchical manner, the multitude of present-day world emancipatory movements. It may take some courage and some imagination, but how about holding one of the future WAC conferences in conjunction with a future gathering of the WSF, attended by tens of thousands of people and groups from all over the world? Of course the WSF gatherings debate much more urgent and important issues concerned with the survival and struggle of millions of people. In such a context the concerns of primarily middle-class archaeologists would sound naively "academic"; yet such an occasion would perhaps expose the self-serving nature of some archaeological concerns. After all, if WAC is about social justice in the world, why not coordinate with a forum that strives to devise ways to achieve social justice? As for the politics of academic publishing, we may need to confront the publishing industry head-on and accept that the best way to guarantee that the messages of true diversity, multivocality, and empowerment that we want to advance can only be served by the creation of a WAC not-for-profit publishing company, and not by Anglo-American multinational publishers that, at the end of the day, tend to define our agendas.

What of my second question, that is, our reaction to the fetishism of the "record"? As Bernbeck (2003) notes, "chronic problems of academic praxis come to the fore in times of major political crises" (112). The archaeological reaction to the 2003 Iraq war exposed a major crisis, which an archaeology that is committed to ethics and WAC in particular will have to address. The reactions that focussed on the rescue of monuments and sites while the legitimacy and ethics of the war were questioned by the vast majority of people in the world (as it turned out, rightly so), rest on the "professional ethics" that recognise, as a primary ethical responsibility of archaeologists, the preservation and stewardship of the "record": a metaphysical entity that has been produced by archaeologists themselves out of the material fragments of the past (Hamilakis 1999).

If WAC claims to be committed to social justice, then it needs to distance itself from such "ethics." The dominant archaeological reaction in the Iraq war was the logical extension of the depoliticisation of archaeology and its domination by the logic of professionalisation. In that logic "ethics" has now become a byword for "professional standards," as opposed to values and commitments that respect human lives and strive for social justice. To recall Edward Said (1994), professionalisation leads to the obedient figure of the academic or scholar who is ready to serve any power (always holding the highest of professional standards), but never questioning the agendas to which his or her work is put, nor the broader dynamics of power in which that work is inscribed. At present, it seems that there are voices within WAC that would prefer for it to play such a role: to become a "respectable" professional body, much like the Society for American Archaeology, but on a worldwide scale. The recent emphasis on conservation and rescue of monuments and sites since WAC-5, often with no reflection on the logic, the genealogy, and the underlying assumptions of that logic of conservation (especially vis-à-vis the broader social and power dynamics at play in each case), points to the same direction. It is often forgotten that the idea of prioritising the conservation and preservation of the material traces of the past in an abstract manner and above everything else is a recent Western notion (Ouzman 2003). If these voices were to succeed, it would mean the end of WAC as we know it, and as it was founded.

I am not arguing here for the abandonment of the principle of preserving the material traces of the past, that is, the material memories of past generations. I am arguing, however, for the problematisation of the notion, for an examination for the power and political dynamics in each context (Who wants to destroy what and why? Who wants to preserve what and why?), and, more importantly, for an ethics that rejects the fetishism and the self-serving principle of the "stewardship of the record."

It is often noted that we live in the era of postpolitics (Zižek 2002). Indeed, the politically committed archaeologies that emerged in the mid-1980s seem to have been more recently replaced by depoliticised calls for an ethics of professionalisation. The return to the political is now long overdue, especially in the current colonial present, in the performance of which all of us are implicated (Gregory 2004:256), one way or another.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Reinhard Bernbeck (who also brought to my attention the "Price of Freedom" exhibition), Joan Gero, Susan Pollock, and Karoline von Oppen for their encouraging words and their useful suggestions.

References Cited

Agamben, G.

1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by D. Heller-Roaxen. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

Bhabha, H.

1992. Double Visions. *Artforum* 30(5):82–90.

Bauman, Z.

1998. *Globalisation: The Human Consequences.* Polity, Oxford, United Kingdom.

Bernbeck, R.

2003. War-Time Academic Professionalism. *Public Archaeology* 3(2):112–116.

Gregory, D.

2004. *The Colonial Present.* Blackwell, Oxford, United Kingdom.

Hamilakis, Y.

1999. La trahison des archéologues? Archaeological Practice as Intellectual Activity in Post-Modernity. *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 12(1):60–79.

2003. Iraq, Stewardship, and the "Record": An Ethical Crisis for Archaeology. *Public Archaeology* 3(2):104–111.

Klein, N.

2004. Smoking While Iraq Burns. *The Guardian*, 26 November 2004.

MacGregor, N.

2004. The Whole World in Our Hands. *The Guardian* (review), 24 July 2004.

Ouzman, S.

2003. Is Audit Our Object? *Antiquity.* Electronic document, http://antiquity.ac.uk/wac5/ouzman.html.

Pollock, S.

2003. The Looting of the Iraq Museum: Thoughts of Archaeology in a Time of Crisis. *Public Archaeology* 3(2):117–124.

Pollock, S., and R. Bernbeck (editors)

2005. *Archaeologies of the Middle East: Critical Perspectives.* Blackwell, Oxford, United Kingdom.

Said, E.

1994. *Representations of the Intellectual.* Pantheon Books, New York.

Žižek, S.

1997. Multi-Culturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism. *New Left Review* 225:28–51.

2002. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* Verso, London.