

A world full of adjectives: sustainable archaeology and soothing rhetoric

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The constant questioning of archaeology over the past 30 years from many, mostly non-academic, standpoints has produced a curious if predictable re-positioning of the discipline. The noun *archaeology*, which reigned for more than two centuries in a solitary manner, is now usually accompanied by other terms. Adjectives have been attached: indigenous, feminist, public, collaborative, committed, militant—and sustainable. If an adjective is something that does not stand by itself, a word that seeks only to modify, it is possible to discern why archaeology has allowed itself (or even sought) to be accompanied by adjectives: it runs no risk of being transformed by the addition. The adjectives that prefix archaeology are not essential; they are secondary and therefore partake of the same ontology. They are accessories, things that the discipline can live without. In truth, these modulating adjectives leave the archaeological noun untouched.

Disciplinary power is so strong that the noun *archaeology* is undisturbed by even the most rebellious of adjectives that nowadays accompany it. Instead, it seems to me that these adjectives reinforce archaeology, lending it support and legitimising it. Adjectives do not question or alter archaeology. Rather, they strengthen it because its minimal claims—its more stable metaphysical and ontological core—are not discussed, but are permitted. The adjectives that have been summoned to the fore have not fundamentally changed archaeology; they are only additions that it tolerates, domesticates and, as we have seen in recent years, ultimately belittles.

This is the case for ‘sustainable’: an adjective that does not alter archaeology yet legitimises it. This situation arises because sustainability is a product of the political correctness of the day, by virtue of which the global order (capitalism, for example, but also modern academic disciplines) is maintained and furthered, even though—or perhaps because—it looks more just, accountable and responsible. These, however, are mere appearances. Hutchings and La Salle (2019) are correct: ‘sustainable’ archaeologists are indeed more just, accountable and responsible, but only to themselves and to the archaeological record, that reified entity whose existence and importance are undisputed, and for which archaeologists work unabashedly, no matter what. But whether archaeologists are just, accountable and responsible in any wider, non-disciplinary sense is quite another matter.

Sustainability in archaeology complements the work of accommodation to the changing conditions of late modernity initiated some decades ago by ethical codes, which have frozen reflexivity and the will to change—if it ever existed—but which have allowed the discipline to engage with multiculturalism. In the same way that the emergence of ethics in the discipline was a response to the transformation of nations into multicultural societies, the archaeological

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call to sustainability is a vague but appealing response to global environmental awareness. Yet, just as sustainability is the means by which development adapts to survive the very damage it has done to the fragile cosmic equilibrium and to move on with its trade, a ‘sustainable’ archaeology adapts to survive the awful effects of its logocentric arrogance—the way it has silenced and trampled other ontologies, other conceptions of time, ancestors and life.

By becoming ‘sustainable’, archaeology changes to remain unchanged. A ‘sustainable’ archaeology is self-contained, disciplinary and self-serving; it engages with the world from within its disciplinary limits and the cosmology of (post)modernity. I therefore could not agree more with Hutchings and La Salle (2019). Their debate piece is both relevant and bold. Relevant because it is necessary to break the corporate silence patiently woven around archaeology and which is meant to lend it support and protection. By doing so, archaeology’s more insidious and complacent practices, such as its complicity with development via cultural resource management and its desire to perpetuate its (post)modern stance, can be exposed, scrutinised and contested. It is also relevant because the authors’ warning is timely, and it comes at a point before which ‘sustainability’ in archaeology becomes fully substantiated and engaged by disciplinary practitioners as if it were an uncontested and immanent anthropological universal. It is bold, as to swim against the current means to contravene disciplinary principles, agreements and silences, and also bold because it is radical, in the sense of getting to the root of the problem.

Hutchings and La Salle (2019: 1658) ask “What can be done to address and/or avert this expansion of sustainable archaeology?” The answer is to resist, by proposing courses of action, by stirring debate such as this one, and by creating and promoting networks of information and activism. The dismantling and reassembling of the network through which ‘sustainable’ archaeology circulates begins by describing its historicity, just as done by Hutchings and La Salle (2019). From showing how archaeological discourse is composed in specific and variable circumstances in space-time, we can reveal the emperor’s new clothes for what they are. Instead of ‘sustainability’ and the like, there are many alternative options, but these can only come to the fore if we depart from the ontology of (post)modernity. Nothing can be reassembled if we allow the discipline simply to rebrand, such as in its opportunistic use of the adjective ‘sustainable’. This is purely a way of preserving privilege. Archaeologists, as members of a privileged cognitive minority, do not want to lose the benefits granted to them by ownership of a powerful form of representation that they are, at best, willing to share but not to change. That is why sustainability has become a trend in archaeology: it serves to maintain “reactionary status quo theories that serve to cover up ongoing injustice and harmful policies” (Hutchings and La Salle 2019: 1655), keeping the discipline safe from any real transformation.

References

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Sustainable archaeology: soothing rhetoric for an

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