

## **Based on a paper presented by Dr Joan Gero at the American Anthropological Association Meeting, November 18, 1999**

### **Introduction**

Since the immediate objects of archaeological study are not human beings -- but rather material remains -- archaeology has been thought, by its practitioners and by others, to lack a critical perspective in the modern world. Archaeology is perceived as a curiously a-political, "head-in-the-sand" endeavor with little relevance to contemporary social and political life. In this brief paper I argue that archaeology indeed has undertaken its own critical trajectory parallel to the critical perspectives that have developed in other areas of anthropology, and that this perspective motivates and is most visible in the World Archaeological Congress.

From the start, archaeology developed out of parallel industrial and capitalist roots as anthropology, in North America and elsewhere. In fact, in the second half of the 1800's, archaeology emerged from the very same sand pits and limestone quarries, railroad beds and factory foundations that displaced anthropology's first objects of study: "primitive" human groups. Archaeology's 20th century development has also, like anthropology, witnessed an increasingly exclusionary trajectory of professionalization, representing ever less diversity in the voices that speak for the past, an increased sidelining of the descendent groups whose ancestors and antecedents are of interest to archaeologists, and a greater convergence on single interpretative stances.

At the same time, the international arrangements of archaeology have allowed, encouraged, and even insured the dominant nations exclusive rights to mine the pasts of poorer and less influential countries and, of course, to tell the stories of these nations in generalized, rationalized, scientized terms. Many of the oldest sites and most splendid sites are located in the poorest countries in the world and are considered "world patrimony"; they are studied and reconstructed in non-native languages and non-native imaginations, put forward as repositories of knowledge about MAN (in general), while access to knowledge about these sites is controlled -- at least in part -- by the agendas, funding agencies and cultural institutions of hegemonic regions such as the United States and western Europe... locking out other interpretive voices. In fact, the modern global distribution of archaeological research maps global power. Archaeology underwrites, reasserts and reinforces the present-day world order, and it is little wonder that many First Nations people on this continent, as well as indigenous peoples on other continents, feel little affinity for the goals and methods of archaeology.

Meanwhile, it has been commonplace for practicing archaeologists in industrialized centers to oppose the unseemly "insertion" of politics into archaeology. Self-approving, normative, un-self-reflective..., the archaeological community often employs research models that distance itself from knowledge production and erase context, including the very perspective that defines the relationship between subjects and objects. Thus, archaeologists can maintain that "archaeology has nothing to do with politics; politics should be left out of archaeology; archaeology pursues facts about the past": all the while that archaeological organizations retain heavy lobbying contingents in political centers, involve few minorities and indigenous voices in interpretations of the past, and while the cover of a recent Society for American Archaeology

Bulletin features a photo of the executive head of SAA standing with Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the US Dept of the Interior! The politics of the past may be invisible to those whose day to day lives revolve around them, but they form the very foundation for unequal access to resources, and unequal awareness of, and control over, one's heritage.

### Formation of the World Archaeological Congress

An international forum for archaeological research was first organized in 1931 with the founding of the International Union of Pre- and Proto-Historic Sciences (IUPPS). Archaeology was largely restricted (at the time) to Europe and to other small pockets of the developed world, and the IUPPS was -- and continued to be -- run by and for Western European intellectuals. In fact, all but one of its conferences has been held in a major European city; its conferences are organized around European perceptions of world-wide archaeology; and Europeans dominate its policy-making bodies. Although the IUPPS was the only organization with an international responsibility for archaeology, other organizations like the Pan-African Congress and the International Congress of Americanisms arose with time to compensate for the IUPPS' geographic bias.

It is not surprising, then, that IUPPS planned its 11th International Congress for Southampton, England to take place in September 1986. But it was quite a sensation when the local labor-dominated city government of Southampton announced, late in 1985, that it would withhold promised financial support for IUPPS unless the IUPPS disallowed South African and Namibian delegates to participate. Against a backdrop of growing violence in South Africa, and in light of the United Nations cultural and academic bans against Botha's apartheid regime, local Southampton conference organizers upheld the city's decision to ban South African participants from the event. Partly, they argued, the entire conference would collapse financially if they didn't go along with the city ruling, but also, they insisted, this was a moral issue, and it was time for archaeology to recognize its potential for contributing to change in the present. IUPPS responded with outrage, framing the issue as one of academic freedom: "the conference had to be open to all bona fide archaeologists and related scientists with no distinction of race, country or philosophical persuasion" (Clark 1989:214). The Society for American Archaeology Executive Committee issued a December 1985 statement to all its members that "the SAA upheld, and will continue to uphold, the principles of freedom of research and the freedom of scholars from all nations to meet and exchange ideas" (cited in Hodder 1986:113-4).

In January 1986, after negotiations had made it clear that no middle ground would be accepted, the IUPPS Secretary-General and its International Executive Committee met in Paris and disavowed the Southampton conference. Most of the IUPPS British Committee resigned further involvement in the congress, and the media had a heyday. Outraged headlines (not only in *Science* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, but also in *Newsweek*) pitched the battle between academic freedom and the free practice of science on one hand, and apartheid politics on the other. All but a handful of North American archaeologists withdrew papers and canceled their participation, and the entire Israeli delegation withdrew, but there was a flood of support from the Eastern European block, Africa, India and South America.

It is important to stress that the North American boycott of the Southampton conference can't be seen as a simple litmus test of righteous positions. Some North Americans who defied the boycott and went to Southampton were substantially ignorant of the events that had transpired between the city of Southampton and IUPPS, or they were aware of what had transpired but figured it just didn't matter that much one way or the other... while other North Americans attended precisely because they embraced the strong-minded political agenda represented by the Southampton City Council. By the same token, reasons for NOT attending WAC-1 ranged widely, including an informed indignation on the parts of some North American archaeologists who had worked in South Africa and recognized that their excluded South African colleagues were among the most active and vociferous opponents to the apartheid regime. Other North Americans pointed to allegedly arbitrary and inconsistent criteria in banning South Africans but not participants from other countries whose politics were also thought abhorrent. Others said that banning archaeologists, as opposed to athletes, simply lacked the clout to make this a meaningful action. Anger, rancor, confusion and dismay were all apparent.

Still, the National Secretary of the Congress, Peter Ucko, insisted on moving ahead with a newly reorganized meeting under the name the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), no longer linked with the IUPPS.. From its inception, WAC emphasized its differences from its antecedent institution. It insisted on recognizing that science, far from being politically neutral, constitutes a value system linked to dominant social interests, and the idea of science "being open to all" is ultimately a belief about the way the world should be, rather than how it is. WAC made clear statements that archaeology had long served state interests in shoring up nationalist identities and asserting territorial domains. At the same time, WAC put itself forward as a forum not merely for professional archaeologists and allied scientists, but for everyone interested in the past, with native people from underdeveloped countries specifically encouraged to attend, their travel supported by high registration fees from those who could afford it. (A particularly controversial action taken by WAC was to retain the registration fees of withdrawn attendees, specifically to fund attendance by people who could otherwise not afford to come.)

Since 1986, WAC has constituted itself as a uniquely representative non-profit organization of worldwide archaeology that recognizes the historical and social role, and the political context, of archaeology, and the need to make archaeological studies relevant to the wider community. It especially seeks to debate and refute institutionalized views that serve the interests of a privileged few to the detriment of disenfranchised others. WAC explicitly values diversity against institutionalized mechanisms that marginalize the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, minorities and the poor.

A major function of WAC is to hold a major international conference every four years -- in 1990 in Barquisimeto, Venezuela; in 1994 in New Delhi, India; and -- coming full circle from the first divisive congress -- in 1999 in CapeTown, South Africa. In years between major congresses, WAC has sponsored regional thematic "InterCongresses": in 1989, at Vermillion, South Dakota: "Archaeological ethics and the treatment of the Dead"; in 1993 in Mombasa, Kenya: "Urban origins in Africa"; in 1998 in Brac, Croatia: "The destruction and restoration of cultural heritage"; in 2000 in Olavarría, Argentina "Theory in South America", and in 2001 in New Zealand "Indigenous issues and archaeology", and in 2001 in Curaçao in the Caribbean, on "The African Diaspora".

WAC's agenda continues to grow. Working without any permanent funds and with no full-time staff people, WAC solicits funds on a project-to-project basis. Since WAC was conceived in part because many less-advantaged colleagues, indigenous caretakers of sites, and concerned groups from around the world were being excluded from international debate, either from personal or institutional financial situations, WAC has funded approximately one third of the attendance at the major conferences out of solicited funds and other inscription fees. It has supported the training of colleagues from less-developed parts of the world with tutorial programs and museum training. Resolutions passed by the WAC Executive draw attention to local archaeological communities trying to protect archaeological sites, or indigenous groups protecting sacred sites from industrial encroachment or tourism development. WAC was recently approached by the World Commission on Dams (WCD) to create a panel of experts for collaboration, working towards the WCD Year 2000 Report regarding the effect of dams and reservoirs on different cultural heritage sites around the world, and WAC is working on resolutions to address issues of tourism, heritage and illicit traffic in prehistoric artifacts. WAC communications include its Newsletters and the World Archaeological Bulletins, as well as the 40 volume list in the "One World Archeology" series, published by Routledge and based on the proceedings of the four World Archaeological Congresses to date, which yield royalties to help representatives attend congresses. . In addition, a recently launched journal called Public Archaeology has its editorial board composed almost entirely of past WAC executive officers.

Interestingly, in 1998 the newly elected Secretary-General of IUPPS initiated a meeting with WAC officers about the possibility of reintegration of the two organizations, but the WAC Executive board ultimately rejected this outcome on the grounds of on-going incompatibility! Currently WAC is exploring the possibility of NGO status with UNESCO and is seeking operating funds to run a permanent office and at least a single full-time staff member to carry out its activities.

### **Whither WAC? What comes out of having more Voices?**

The emergence of WAC in the world has established and legitimated, and in turn been supported and legitimated BY, a new kind of archaeology -- or archaeologies -- sometimes called "value-committed archaeologies" (P&H 1996: 526-527) or "engaged archaeology". The call for the reconstitution of archaeology in terms of value commitment emerged immediately after the first WAC conference (Shanks and Tilley 1987), and since that time, value-committed archaeology has taken many forms. But all share an admission that archaeology carries in it a source of empowerment, not only in the generalized sense, as a means of knowledge production about the past, but more specifically as a means to grant time-depth and legitimation to individuals, groups or nations.

This turn toward admitting values in archaeology -- the acceptance that political commitment and ethical judgement COUNT in archaeology and constitute an important FOCUS of inquiry -- these programs carry serious consequences. Epistemic implications suggest -- and we have started to see -- an abandoning of the rationalized, disembodied, uniform-ing systems of knowledge that archaeology has regularly imposed onto the intimate living traditions of ancestors and sacredness, meaningful history and oral stories of peoples on the margins of state level societies. Multiple perspectives, multiple voices, many interpretations can be

accommodated, and the once-hierarchical voice of Project Director can, will and is learning to lay out newly complex, interactive and parallel courses of investigation at single sites.

At the same time, indigenous and non-Western groups are being encouraged and sometimes required to participate from their own perspectives rather than being spoken for through a paternalistic or universalistic science (P&H 1996:527). In the USA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has forced American Indian groups to engage with archaeologists, learn federal process and perform legalese speech-acts to repossess the skeletal remains and sacred objects of ancient burials... but interaction is taking place, accords are being struck and native voices are empowered to be involved in archaeological research. Community-based archaeology projects not only incorporate local knowledge, history, education and work schedules into research agendas, but the very objectives of archaeological research are now being set by local communities, as "value committed" archaeologists put themselves at the service of endangered ethnic minorities.

In fact this is the archaeology of the future. The discipline of archaeology is no longer the exclusive province of white European upper-class men, and there is no going back to a pre-WAC era of exclusionary, hierarchical and scientized knowledge that marginalizes the multivocal archaeology from the peripheries. The question of "who controls the past?" is no longer a conundrum because it must be generally conceded that there are many pasts and they will be known differently from many views.