Is archaeology a political practice?

Is archaeology a political practice? Before diving into this question, it is important to understand the definitions of the word political. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word can be interpreted in two different ways. The first is 'the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing government policy'. This definition is what most people tend to think about when hearing the word 'political'. The activities that surround government, the law, power, status, international relations and organisation. The second definition is 'the total complex of relations between people living in society'. This is focused less on governmental issues and leans towards a more anthropological, cultural view on the word. This definition would include the complex issues surrounding racial, gendered, classist and cultural differences between social groups. This essay will be focused on the relationship between nationalism and archaeology, which will touch upon both definitions of the word. So, can we say archaeology is a political practice?

Bruce Trigger, an archaeologist and anthropologist, created seminal work focused on the development of archaeological thought, in which he stated that "archaeology is strongly influenced by the positions that the countries and the regions in which it is practiced occupy within the modern world systems". In other words, a country's present and historical, social and political sphere will affect archaeological work, as well as its relationship with other countries. In an article published in 1984, Trigger analyses three categories of 'alternative archaeologies' which are: nationalist, colonialist and imperialist (Celik, Z. 2016). Trigger explains that interest in European prehistoric archaeology was motivated by the wave of nationalism and romanticism after the Napoleonic wars ended in 1815, some of which was focused on strengthening patriotic sentiments and often received substantial support from governments (Trigger, B. 1984). For example, in Eastern Europe, representatives from suppressed nationalities would use archaeology as a way of promoting their national past and to encourage defiance against domination from the Turkish, Habsburgs and the Russians. The same can be said for many other nations such as Denmark, Mexico and Germany. In Denmark, the Danes turned to archaeology and history after they had suffered greatly during the Napoleonic period as well as further attacks from the Germans in the nineteenth century. Archaeologists in Scandinavia attempted to reconstruct the past lives of the Danes, and their research created a surge of interest in Nordic folklore into prehistoric times. Like the Eastern Europeans, the Danes used archaeology to find comfort in their past greatness, specifically in the fact that they weren't conquered by the Romans like their neighbours were and took great pride in their Viking past (Trigger, B. 1984). In Mexico, it has been government policy to encourage archaeologists to improve public awareness and knowledge of their pre-hispanic history since 1910, especially as native people account for a large part of their population. Here is an example of governmental involvement in the archaeological world, which will be expanded on later. On a more extreme scale, German archaeologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century sought to prove archaeologically that Germany was the motherland of the Indo-europeans and the prehistoric centre of cultural creativity. They came to the conclusion that other Indo-european speaking people had interbred with lesser races and the Germans had managed to keep their racial purity and therefore their full powers of creativity (Trigger, B. 1984). This would lead to the Nazi's using this belief system to lay the groundwork for their racist regime against the Jewish, the Romani, the disabled and many other groups of people who weren't considered a part of the 'Aryan' race. These same beliefs are still held by neo-nazis across the globe, and it has stemmed from archaeological work being used to push political agendas, whether the work is

legitimate or not. It's possible to see the importance of people's past to the social and political landscape, whether that is on a personal or on a global level. The use of archaeology has been used to assert cultural distinctiveness, national pride and racist ideologies, all of which stem from political relationships between peoples and countries. This links back to one of the definitions of 'political' stated in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which is 'the total complex of relations between people living in society'. Here are four examples of communities, countries, nations that have used archaeology to access their past for societal and political reasons, whether that is to separate themselves from other nations or to push political agendas.

To elaborate on Mexico's governmental involvement in the archaeological world, it's important to cover some context. Between 1827 and 1896, the Federal Executive Power was established, who's job was to regulate the excavation and exportation of archaeological assets, both real and transportable property (Vasquez, M. 2009). This stemmed from a growing appreciation of pre-hispanic cultural works and its historical value. The laws of 1930 and 1934, the jurisprudence that the Mexican Supreme Court established in this era, and an addition to Article 73 of the Political Constitution, created in 1966, clearly defined federal authority in matters of historical, artistic and archaeological monuments in a manner congruent with the legal tradition (Vasquez, M. 2009). These laws have been critical for keeping Mexico's assets under state protection as the use, exploration and possession of historical, archaeological and artistic items have been able to be regulated. This led to the creation of the federal law for Archaeological, Artistic and Historical Zones and Monuments (FLAAHZM) in 1972, which enacted the legal regulation of archaeological items and removing the ability for them to be bought and sold. Here is an example of direct involvement from governmental departments, where archaeology and archaeological artefacts have been included in federal law. The historical remains of a nation is inherently political as it doesn't only get used to promote the culture of a community, but the treatment of them is important enough to be written into the Political Constitution.

One of the most well known cases of governmental policy becoming intertwined with archaeology is the repatriation of Native American remains and artefacts. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is a law enacted in 1990 that requires institutions such as museums and Universities to publicly report their native holdings and to consult with federally recognised tribes to repatriate their remains and objects. The way in which they do this is through the consideration of geographical, biological and archaeological links as well as oral traditions. The remains of 110,000 Native Hawaiian, Native American and Alaska natives are held by federal agencies, universities and museums with ten institutes being in possession of half of these remains (Jaffe, L. Et al. 2023). Most of these items were retrieved through large-scale collecting, which was underpinned by racist ideas, often through grave robbing and taking the recently dead from battlefields (Strauss, M. 2016). NAGPRA instructs museums and federal agencies that are receiving federal funds to identify the origins of culturally significant Native American items, which were removed from them illegally, and it requires the institutes to return them to the associated tribes. Although this may sound straight forward, it is difficult to determine the illegality of the transfer of items from individual tribal members. An example of this is the Calico-wrapped bundle which is the possession of The American Museum of Natural History. The bundle was created by the Plains Cree Chief Big Bear and was in his possession until his death. It was given to the museum by an unnamed native with the instructions "keep it well". Now, there are multiple individuals

and tribes which are declaring righful ownership of the bundle, including the Montana, Saskatchewan and Manitoba Crees (Harding, S. No date). Here is an example of a political dilemma which has stemmed from archaeology and ownership of archaeological items. Historically, Native peoples have fought against white colonial settlers who have tried to eradicate them and their culture. Their ancestors' remains, often their skulls, have been used to "prove" their inferiority to white people (Jaffe, L. Et al. 2023). Their culturally significant objects were taken from them by the same colonial white men. So, how does one manoeuvre around artefacts that were donated legitimately? The museums aren't obligated to give items that weren't obtained illegally, back to the relevant tribes, especially when there is often no significant evidence of a tribe's connection to a certain item. The reluctancy to give back items might seem politically insensitive in today's world, but is it right to give archaeological items to people who can't prove their claim to it? The political landscape of the past, especially the attitudes towards non-whites, has affected the political landscape today. The treatment of natives and native remains in the past has informed the treatment of natives and native remains in the present. This is evidence of how ingrained in archaeology societal politics and governmental Politics is.

To conclude, it is clear that archaeology is a political practice. As seen through the use and treatment of archaeological information and objects, it can and has been used to push political agendas by many nations across the world. It can be used in a positive sense to lift communities up by strengthening their bond to cultural and ancestral history. For example, the use of Scandinavian history and folklore by the Danes to help their recovery from the blows of the Napoleonic period. It can also be used in a negative sense to push racist ideologies and to "prove" the inferiority of another group of peoples. For example, the Nazi regime using racist archaeological theories to fuel their genocide of people who did not fall into the "Aryan" category. These attitudes towards different communities, mostly minorities, have shaped governmental policy in the last century. It is evident that archaeology is a political practice, in both senses of the word. It is ingrained in every aspect of it. Mexico, the United States and many other countries across the world have laws to dictate the treatment of archaeological finds, such as NAGPRA and FLAAHZM. Closer to home, the United Kingdom have the 'Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979' which states that damage to and metal detecting on scheduled monuments is a criminal offence. If multiple countries across the world have laws that specifically protect archaeological finds, it must be a Political subject. Aristotle stated in *Politics* that humans are by nature political animals and that humans are drawn to the city or polis: a political partnership (Abbate, C. E. 2016). Any subject that involves people, is inherently political as we are political beings. People live in communities. People have relationships with other people and other nations, past and present. People live and work in hierarchical systems. People are affected by the Political landscape of their time. As archaeology is the study of the human past, it must make archaeology political and it can not be any other way.

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