

Assignment 2 Archaeology as Politics (due: Sunday 30/11/2025 at 23:59 hrs)

2000 words, 50% of the module assessment

“A great deal of critical work in archaeology remains political but without any politics” [Shanks, M]. On the Surface the link between archaeology and politics may not easily be immediately clear or even appear unrelated. However, this is not the case, and it can be easily said that the two are so closely linked it becomes impossible to separate archaeology political roots. Whether this is thought the legislation and laws that restrict and protect archaeological sites or practice, impact its methodology or how certain site or structured are chosen to excavate when other are left behind without a second thought or the more personally effects, in regard to its effects on archaeological interpretation and how's one's personal politics and bias can impact conclusion, often without intention or retaliation, leading to incorrect assumptions, and a lack of understand of the past, when an attempt to view the past in terms of the social structure and moral of the present. And although in recent years more focus has been placed in overcoming personally politics bias, it is still rampant within archaeological practice, and its effect as still clear held in public memory.

People are shaped by the culture and politics of their time and place, and it is impossible to sperate oneself from that, the idea of a non-bias perspective is an impossible ask in any situation. This is, of course, true in terms of archaeology and its interpretation. Although, though awareness, impact can be minimised, it can never be rid of entirely and it becomes increasingly prevalent in terms of past practice in Archaeology in the Western world. Of which could be said to be often suffering from the ‘Streetlight effect’, which is “a type of observational bias that occurs because people are more likely to search for something where it is easier to look” [Khurana MP.] which causes a focus and bias towards archaeology within Europe, often disregarding the importances of more further afield sites. This focus towards European archaeology, creating and pushing Eurocentric narratives and implementing “The world, past and present, into a single universal narrative, with Europe representing both the geographical centre and the summit of all temporal movement” [Montón-Subías S] Increasing the likelihood of overlooking and disregarding non Europeans archeology, or that that does not fit the modern Eurocentric ideology, being another impact of personal politics in the archaeological world, suggesting how truly links the two are.

The impact of personal politics and bias can be very prevalent when viewing how interpretations of archaeological sites and their purpose change over time. Past archaeological viewpoints and interpretation can often very clearly reflect the person who wrote, which in itself, reflects the time and place the person was from, and both

their personal beliefs and a practice as well and the societal changes around them. Showing the impacts of politics within the field of archaeology is very prevalent.

One site where this impact can be seen clearly is within the interpretations of the motives and purpose of the Cave Art of Lascaux, a network of caves in southern France, with a vast collection of cave paintings from the palaeolithic period around 17,000 years ago. Since its initial discovery on September 12, 1940, by a group of four teenagers [Cavendish, R. (2015)], the Lascaux cave art's true purpose and motive have puzzled historians and archaeologists alike. The interpretations and views towards the origins and purpose of the Lascaux cave art can begin to reveal the political beliefs of the time and the view of prehistoric humans and their society and culture and in turn what it was capable of. Showing a strong connection between changing archaeological viewpoints and the changing social climate of the late 1940s.

Throughout the 1940s, after its initial discovery, began the earliest interpretation of the possible meanings behind the cave art, the leading theory behind the cave paintings was that it was simply art for the sake of producing art, the very human want to create, reflected onto the cave's walls. Furthermore, it challenges previous ideas of prehistoric humans only being concerned for hunting and survival, however it can also reveal a view of prehistorical humans and being far too simple, lacking a further need or want for art beyond its aesthetics purpose [Hughes, F] which in turn suitably reveals the political mindset of the time, showing the impact of politics on archaeological interpretation.

Furthermore, as political mindsets developed and change moving into the 1950s with the post war world came around such as concepts of the nuclear family, in turn influencing the ideas behind suggesting concepts of the art representing maps for use with hunting and its connection with possible rituals, "suggests that the prehistoric people who used the cave may have believed that a way to overpower their prey involved creating images of it during rituals designed to ensure a successful hunt" [Lonney, M.B].

At this time, there is also the idea of the art being created by men began to immerse due to its possible connection with hunting. Suggesting idea of a gender bias, by the assumption of prehistoric humans in terms of gender stereotypes of the time, while lacking any further supporting evidence for these assumptions at the time of these theories, showing political influence.

The end of the 1950s also saw the emergence of ideas of possible religious links with the art itself, which was revived when organising the paintings "emphasised the intentional aspect of the combinations, which had similarities to genuine mythical and religious themes." [archeologie.culture.gouv.fr.] this leading into the start of the 1960s brought a new wave of religious expression and this reflects onto archaeological theories of Lascaux, with rise in idea about Totemism, "Totemism is a magico-religious

system characteristic of tribal society” [Edwards, E] and magic became much more prevalent [Jones, R.M.] furthering thoughts of shamanism.

The 80s with continued the ideas of shamanism, proposed in the 60s, popularised greatly by the work of Joseph Campbell, who unlike the in the previous years, interpretations the ‘birdman’ as a shaman, with a ceremonial staff rather than a slain hunter as previously thought [Hauser & Wirth, 2018], however even more theories began to arise surrounding the idea of concepts of fertility, this is very in line with the sexual liberation movement of the 1980s, the reducing of social stigma allowed for a more female focuses view on the, different from the hunting map theories of the 1950s, reflecting the change in political perspectives from the time frame to allowing for the theory to gain traction, however still producing theories that presented contemporary gender roles on to a society that it may not fit, without further doubt or questioning.

The 2000s brought theories of a mean of a type of writing system name two put forwards the idea of the Lascaux cave art being some form of writing system, more so a type of “logographic: a form of writing in which each character represents an object or objects, rather than either a word or the sound from a word” [Magazine, M] furthermore, suggesting a more devolved idea towards prehistoric society's, being presented are more capable and complex then early

With the 2000 also came more feminism theories and representation of the cave are, with a push agent previous leading theory for their exclusion of women, suggesting further idea of certain animals represnting pregnancy and maternity. [Christ, C.P. (2013)]

The leading cause is that people are generally unaware of own biases, and this is true for archaeologies as well and therefore, are unable to prevent it from seeping in their work. Furthermore, even when archaeologist amend previous interpretation filed with political bias, many of these older theories live on through public memory and are very much still prevalent, often leading to widespread misinformation as a result. This can be exceptionally detrimental to archaeology because it can often be wrong, and a shallow minded view leading to the loses off, possible or even more accurate, theories and ideas, which in turn is limiting to archaeological interpretation.

When answers are not clear, archaeologists can have the habit of falling back and relying on modern day stereotypes, which interterm are a reflection of modern politics, even when those stereotypes don't cleanly fit the situation, often causing forgotten and unexplored narratives, made worse when interpretation are not reconsidered and reworked later.

When it comes to archaeological practice as a field it can be very limited, especially when it comes to historical practice where it was, on the most part, only available to who had access to both higher education and the funds and support to pursue it. The forefront of 19th century archaeology was being practiced by western European, male scholars, who mostly all had a shared world view, resulting in the foundations of archaeological practice being built on historical political ideas.

Although the archaeological industry has begun to become more diverse, even now in the modern day archaeology is, on the most part, still limited to those who have the funds, time and acceptability to university in order to get the degree required to work in most part of the field. Which results in those who get to put forward ideas and theories being from similar social background, leading to a possible limited political mindset amongst archaeologists.

In conclusion, narrow minded view, lead to a lack of further understanding, closing off possibly options when it comes to past discovery if people are unable to perceive their own biases and political viewpoints, which will always slip into their work.

Archaeological interpretation is just one way that politics has its influence in the world of archaeology, as personal politics and bias are impossible to separate from archaeological theory, as can be seen from interpretation of the Lascaux cave art which changed and developed with the political ideas and changes of the times, often unaware of the political influence. How often people are unaware of their own biases allowed them to be more prominent in their interpretation.

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