

History and Tradition, Archaeology and Authenticity

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The modern not only invented tradition, it depends on it. The modern has liberated us from tradition and constantly conceives itself in relation to it. But under colonialism tradition was consigned not just to a past but to a place.

NICOLAS B. DIRKS (1990, 27–28)

This chapter explores what an archaeology of history and tradition is by locating these cultural traits within social discourse and practice. To illustrate the ideas I introduce the chapter with two examples of contemporary archaeology that demonstrate its problematic relationship with the past. The first, an extract from Michael Crichton's recent book *Timeline* (1999), is about a story of time travel made possible through the application of sophisticated theoretical quantum physics. The destination is the medieval French countryside during the era of knights and nobility. Crichton employs archaeology and archaeologists to enliven the plot as they study the remains of the castle and monastery at the principle site, Castelgard. The real issue in the plot is not what they are finding as much as why they are doing the work. The group is funded exclusively by a high-tech company, International Technology Corporation, who seem to be good-hearted about their love of archaeology and their faith that the archaeologists are doing a good job. In other words, the company pays little attention to what the archaeologists are actually finding. As the plot thickens, a reporter makes it known that the company has recently and without much fanfare bought up the property surrounding the site. Only then do we learn that the company's primary interest is time travel and that they have been experimenting with a new technology that can send people (time tourists) back to Medieval Castelgard. As you might imagine in a book like this (Crichton is best known as the author of *Jurassic Park*), things go very wrong and the archaeologists, as experts, are sent back in time to rescue stranded travelers.

The passage I want to highlight surfaces in the book during this phase of the plot. The head of the company, a Bill Gates-type named Robert Doniger, while practicing his pitch to investors reveals his reasons for investing in time travel and underwriting the archaeological research at the site.

Ask yourself ... what is the dominant mode of experience at the end of the twentieth century? How do people see things? The answer is simple. In every field from business to politics to marketing to education, the dominant mode has become entertainment. ... Today everybody expects to be entertained, and they expect to be entertained all the time. ... But where will this mania for entertainment end? ... We already know the answer—they go into participatory activities: sports, theme parks,

amusement rides, roller coasters. Structured fun, planned thrills. And what will they do when they tire of theme parks and planned thrills? Sooner or later, the artifice becomes too noticeable. They begin to realize that an amusement park is really a kind of jail, in which you pay to be an inmate.

This artifice will drive them to seek authenticity. *Authenticity* will be the buzzword of the twenty-first century. And what is authentic? Anything that is not devised and structured to make a profit. Anything that is not controlled by corporations. Anything that exists for its own sake, that assumes its own shape. But of course, nothing in the modern world is allowed to assume its own shape. The modern world is the corporate equivalent of the formal garden, where everything is planted and arranged for effect. Where nothing is untouched, where nothing is authentic.

Where, then, will people turn for the rare and desirable experience of authenticity? They will turn to the past. The past is unarguably authentic. The past is a world that already existed before Disney and Murdoch and Nissan and Sony and IBM and all the other shapers of the present day. The past was here before they were. The past rose and fell without their intrusion and molding and selling. The past is real. It's authentic. *And this will make the past unbelievably attractive.* That's why I say the future is the past. (Crichton 1999, 400–1).

More than simply for profit and personal acclaim, Doniger is fully aware of one of the prominent roles of history in contemporary society: as commodity. He is also aware of a recent popular demand for authenticity in experience that modern commodity culture has developed. I offer this as a bit of truth within the fiction. What we see here is a portrayal of the role of archaeology as an instrument for the determination of authenticity. I would expect most archaeologists to reject this, but I would also expect that most would see why their work could be so confused. The public believes that archaeologists are revealing empirical evidence that establishes with scientific accuracy “what really happened” in the past. From this perspective such truths are self-evident in the artifacts, and archaeologists are merely expert translators. By now, archaeologists are aware of the problems with this understanding and the recent history of archaeology can be defined as the struggle to overcome the reliance on the self-evidence of archaeological data.

The New Archaeology sought to do this by adopting logical positivism and introducing a scientific rigor they believed would distance the archaeologist from the data through objectivity. The post-processual critique of the New Archaeology rejected this practice asserting that objectivity was also a myth of authenticity and that the scientific method in no way offered an absolution of the archaeologist from the data. Rather, archaeological data, to even be considered as such, are already theory-laden for they have been intellectually distinguished from the rest of the materials encountered in the field. Think, for example, of backdirt piles that are rarely photographed, drawn, or in any other way considered in the process of archaeological data-formation. Why did these materials become removed from the rest other than through the theoretical construction of them as non-data? Still post-processual archaeologists clearly agree that the determination of authenticity is not the purpose of archaeology. Among post-processualists, authenticity is rejected in principle because of its close link to a belief in a real and singular past. Through a hermeneutic approach (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987; Hodder 1991, 1999), the post-processual

past is less an isolable object of study than an open-ended discourse about the past conceived in the present. It is open-ended because it is plural: as there exist a multiplicity of pasts defined as much as anything by those who seek to know them, we cannot pretend to account for them all. The task is to be reflexive and encourage critical dialogues about our work that may illuminate how our efforts fall short of our goals, if not undermine our ability to reach them (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987; Leone et al 1987; Patterson 1995; Arnold 1990; Meskell 1998).

Though it has been established in archaeology that authenticity is evasive since its identification depends on the perspective of who is identifying it, we must not lose sight of the common desire for and assertion of authenticity and the effect of these public interests on our way of knowing the past. Just because we have begun to overcome the issue of authenticity in archaeology does not mean that the general public has come to the same realization. This is the essence of Doniger's claims. To offer a perhaps more persuasive, non-fictional account I turn to a second illustration.

In early 1990s a plan was proposed to repave Main Street in Annapolis. The old surface had buckled and broken over the years. In the plan this action was tied in a legislative fashion to the desire of Main Street merchants to improve and widen the sidewalks in front of their establishments. Many were eager to use the sidewalk for outdoor seating, which would capitalize on the city's picturesque historic landscape. It was this point that caused contention. Established historians and preservationists argued that such seating was antithetical to the historic character of Annapolis and thus would ruin its "authentic" landscape. The debate entered the public forum in the form of editorials in the local newspapers and in meetings of the preservation and city councils. Ultimately sides were drawn between those who favored the repaving and the expanded sidewalks and those who opposed it on the grounds of preservation and historical authenticity. The discourse was sharply defined leaving no middle ground that accommodated, for example, preservationists who favored repaving for the sake of infrastructural improvement but who opposed sidewalk seating.

I want to highlight how Annapolis' non-elite city merchants and construction tradespeople entered the debate. These people staked out their position by focusing on the actual work to be done to improve the street and the local economy. To repave Main Street, all agreed, would involve a total renovation from the street's foundations up. Thus the merchants and tradespeople, in a paradoxical twist of archaeological terminology usually employed by the Annapolis elite, rallied behind their desire to "Dig It." A slogan and logo were created (Figure 1) that caricatured the sense of an archaeological recovery of the past. What was at stake was not just the making of a new street but the right to make history at all. Activists working in favor of the Main Street renovation demanded the right to enter the living arena of making history in the present. In other words, to prevail the Dig It faction realized, as preservationists had all along, that the power of history is not in its remembrance nor simply in understanding that it exists in the present, rather, they understood



Figure 1. Placard with the “Dig It” logo on Main Street in Annapolis, November 1994.

that history is *made* by the forward-looking recognition of the historical importance of present action. Wider sidewalks not only accommodated outdoor seating but reified in the landscape of the future the successful resistance to a dominant elite by those trying live in the already confused mix of past and present that was Annapolis.

The story of Main Street in the 1990s illustrates two key points for this study. The first relates to the issue of authenticity. Local people who co-opted the identity of archaeological excavation for their own purposes were indeed rejecting an aspect of what they saw as elite culture, but they were not deconstructing their oppressors. Rather, they were confronting one supposedly authentic past with another. Their past, as working people, is strung throughout the history of Annapolis, yet it is not among the aspects celebrated in the current identity of Historic Annapolis. Being so overlooked may very well have led them to seize the opportunity to assert their grievances. However, it was not the elite in general that was being rebuffed, but the labor of archaeology in its service to the elite that was pointed out. The legitimacy of archaeology was challenged by demonstrating its ties to the desire of the elite to have an authentic past. The Dig It faction redirected the purpose of digging to support their effort to make history and, very astutely, simultaneously illustrated how archaeology, regardless of our efforts, continues to rely on its ability to determine authenticity.

The second point of the story is the important fact that this event took place in Annapolis. For more than 150 years Annapolis has considered itself a historic place, and it is the principle point of this book to show how this issue was worked out in the past. For the moment, however, I want to situate what it means in the present in light of the Main Street debate. The past in Annapolis has for generations served the city by situating Annapolis as a historical place. This, however, highlights only one aspect of the city (its history) at the expense of others. During times of stress, or following Walter Benjamin (1968, 255) "moments of danger", the interests of those who construct Historic Annapolis have an upper hand over those with other more practical interests and concerns. Now that the city annually attracts thousands of tourists whose spending supports the employment of hundreds in downtown shops and restaurants, these people and their families are subject to an established discourse of power that limits their political voice. They are encouraged to recognize that their position is the result of Historic Annapolis and thus they should respect and promote its authenticity. Put another way, they should act like archaeologists and support and legitimize the authenticity of the experience of history in Historic Annapolis.

Even though the search for authenticity is now strongly challenged within the discipline of archaeology, I present this example to show how this new direction has made few inroads with the public at-large. Though this is in part the result of academic distance and the slow trickle of knowledge out of the academy, I believe there is something more to it. I believe we need to be careful of programs that diffuse foundational beliefs without providing alternatives that make sense and retain some coherent security. Postmodernism is popularly rejected not only because it is hard to grasp but because it fails to retain qualities of humanity that most people hold dear (Eagleton 1996; Fox-Genovese and Lasch-Quinn 1999). In particular, I argue that these qualities are embodied in history and tradition. History and tradition provide ways of knowing that form individuals into meaningful social units. Such identities need not be essentialized to exist and they are in fact consistently contested. Yet, they continue to work because they provide shared experience and structure to everyday life, even in the struggle to change their meaning and impact. The content of histories and traditions offer referents as people encounter other people, places, objects, and ideas that have meaning and affect their understanding of who, what, and where they are. I see this in the Main Street story as those who resisted the authority of Historic Annapolis failed to reject history at-large, only the history that seemed irrelevant, not of use, and oppressive. Examining the way that the past is used to make cultural claims therefore is a key component of knowing how a cultures works.

These illustrations demonstrate the struggle of doing archaeology today. Archaeology creates new pasts in the present but faces the problem of situating those pasts in a meaningful way among living cultures. A good number of archaeologists embrace the diversity of pasts that the archaeological record can produce, and many have assumed and showed that the archaeological record provides a valuable critique of the dominant histories which currently

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