Black Flags and Black Trowels: Embracing Anarchy in Interpretation and Practice

Alex Fitzpatrick

Department of Archaeological and Forensic Sciences, University of Bradford

Richmond Road, Bradford, West Yorkshire BD7 1DP

A.L.Fitzpatrick@bradford.ac.uk

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The concept of an "anarchist archaeological framework" is not new; anarchy and archaeology have been explored in many forms together, including conference sessions (see SAA 2015 conference), special journal issues (Borck and Sanger 2017) and, more recently, as the focus of a manifesto written by a group known as the Black Trowel Collective (2016). This coincides with a broader movement across academia (and in general politics) calling for self-reflection and critical engagement with the problematic foundations that many of our disciplines have been based on, specifically with regards to sexism, racism, and colonisation.

This paper continues this discussion by critically engaging with past attempts to utilise anarchist theory in archaeological interpretation, as well as expanding these arguments further by applying them to archaeological *practice* as well. I argue that engaging with anarchist theory in both interpretation and practice is a form of further detaching ourselves from the problematic foundations of our discipline and moving forward towards a more equitable archaeology that can imagine both a different past *and* future.

I. Introduction

The word "anarchism" brings to mind a variety of images – protestors clad in black, punks with homemade "Circle A" patches on their denim jackets, or riots in the streets, with broken windows and flaming trash bins. These are all valid forms of anarchist praxis on the streets, of course, but the images that "anarchism" conjures up have perhaps muddled the general public's perception of the concept.

Anarchism is much more than direct action and aesthetics, despite this popular belief. It is also a widely applicable philosophy, with such a broad appeal that it has developed into many variations and offshoots (i.e. anarcho-communism, anarcho-

primitivism, green anarchism, etc.). Unsurprisingly, anarchist theory has found its way into academic literature, where it has found some success in application by like-minded scholars, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. In this particular paper, I will briefly discuss the influence of anarchist thought on archaeological practice and interpretation. It is my belief that through anarchist archaeologies, we can perhaps move closer to a more equitable discipline that is much more removed from its shameful, violent roots as a tool of white supremacy and colonialism.

II. What *is* Anarchism?

For this discussion, I will use Comfort's definition of anarchism from the preface of *People Without Government* (1996); in this, anarchism is defined as, "the political philosophy which advocates the maximum individual responsibility and reduction of concentrated power"(7), as well as "an attitude, not a program" (9).

"Anarchy" is often used as a synonym for "chaos" given its rejection of centralised power and hierarchical organisation, but this is also intentionally misleading; most anarchists do not advocate for a world without law, but rather a world where agency is returned to the people without the need of an authority, such as a government body or select representatives. Emphasis is placed on group consensus and establishing support through communal efforts (Barclay 1996: 132; CrimethInc 2018: 31, 34). Anarchists do not want to just critique power dynamics – we want to constantly negotiate and push against these dynamics.

III. Anarchism and Archaeology

Although anarchy is often associated with politics and governments, it can also be applied more generally given that it is, at heart, a critique of how power structures are developed and maintained, and how this inevitably marginalises and disenfranchises others. As such, anarchist praxis has been utilised in a variety of academic disciplines, specifically those that find themselves "tied up in our history and ideologies" (McGuire 1992: xv), such as archaeology.

In practice, anarchist archaeological approaches have been used as a means of decolonising the discipline – pushing against assumed norms and biases that come from the overrepresented perspective of white/western, cis-heteronormative male archaeologist during the interpretation process. This sentiment has been echoed in

across various anarchist/archaeologist literature, suggesting that this is the overall goal for any anarchist praxis within the field (BlackTrowelCollective 2016; Borck and Sanger 2017).

It can be argued that we already utilise this sentiment in current archaeological discourse, suggesting the validity and potential of harnessing such a useful praxis. For example, let us look at the debate surrounding the concept of "social complexity": although not claimed to be part of an anarchist praxis, critiques made by archaeologists such as Kohring and Wynne-Jones (2007: 15, 23), as well as Herrera (2007: 161) in the same edited volume have utilised anarchist-adjacent ideas to suggest that most "mainstream" (read: highly biased perspectives based on neoliberal capitalist societies of today) interpretations of social complexity are too Euro-centric and do not fully convey the intricacies of past social organisation. Unfortunately, many of these critiques are often ignored and not incorporated into popularised archaeological narratives; modern day biases and cultural traditions still make it difficult for some archaeologists to use anarchist theory to define past societies (Barclay 1996: 11).

There have also been some instances of practical application of anarchist praxis during the physical act of archaeological excavation and research; this is unsurprising, as anarchy emphasises the decentralisation of power from select, specialist groups and promotes *equal* participation regulated by one's own agency (Taylor 1982: 6, 10). This includes the creation of excavation "collectives" that attempted to organise as a non-hierarchical group, such as the Ludlow Collective (2001). Other excavation teams and institutions have been developing new methodologies to excavation and interpretation that are heavily based in anarchist praxis. For example, single context archaeology, which collates interpretations into a single Harris Matrix through (Morgan and Eddisford 2018). Such developments within excavation and fieldwork organisation can arguably be traced to the class dynamics that have become rather prominent within these acts of labour; commercial archaeologists and "shovel bums" have created a working class contingent (Kintz 1998: 6). These class dynamics become further compounded through capitalism, which creates inherent hierarchies and power inequalities based on production and profit (Jenkins 2017: 3).

IV. Case Study: An Anarchist Approach to Archaeology Interpretation

Clearly there have been many attempts to broach the gap between anarchy and archaeology within theory and practice. However, to further explore the potential of anarchist praxis for our discipline, I will use the process of interpretation as a case study.

The act of interpretation has since highlighted further issues of power dynamics, particularly between archaeologists and the non-archaeological community and "ownership" of the past (see Moshenska 2017). Collis (1999) has succinctly summarised two major issues within the interpretation process, referring to these issues as the "*Hierarchy of Acceptability*" and the "*Level of Incorporation*". Both of these terms are used to create an artificial divide between archaeologists and non-archaeologists; the Hierarchy of Acceptability determines what "non-archaeological" interpretations are deemed acceptable, and the Level of Incorporation represents how non-archaeological interpretations are treated in comparison to archaeological ones (131, 133).

As Collis' concepts were originally written with folklore in mind, let us continue using the artificial divide that's been created between the "archaeological" and the "non-archaeological" to further explore how engaging with the inherent power dynamics of archaeological interpretation can be part of anarchist archaeological praxis. Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf have argued that both archaeology and folklore are simply two different perspectives of the past (1999: 3). Symonds, in the same edited volume, adds that superstitions and folklore should not be scoffed at by archaeologists, as together they create the sort of framework that past people lived their lives under (1999: 124).

And yet, there are power dynamics in play with regards to folklore (seen here as "non-archaeological" knowledge) and archaeology. Why do we see one source of information as more reliable or "acceptable" than another? Specialists (in this case, archaeologists) often find themselves, regardless of intent, holding significant power over non-specialists. As "experts", archaeologists gain the authority to veto sources of information and exclude them from the narrative that they eventually create through interpretation of the archaeological record. This becomes intensely

problematic as it intersects with other dimensions of marginalisation: gender, race, class, etc.

An anarchist approach to interpretation would "level the playing field", so to speak. It would provide space for self-reflexive critique as well as elevate non-archaeological evidence to consideration, rather than outright rejecting them as "lesser". Adopting anarchist praxis to how we interrogate the archaeological record would allow us to push back against our own biases and create a new, more inclusive space that gives equal weight to all sources of knowledge.

V. Conclusions

But how much of this is actually practical? Can we *truly* utilise anarchist praxis to help further decolonise and restructure our discipline? And what would this actually accomplish?

An anarchist approach to archaeology would be a step in the right direction, towards a more equitable discipline that eschews the westernised, white, cis-heteronormative, and patriarchal norms that have created the foundation that modern archaeology is built upon. However, the only way we will achieve such a profoundly more optimistic version of archaeology is through the complete destruction of archaeology as we understand it today. Current archaeological theory and practice is still heavily reliant on colonial frameworks that will constantly skew our perspective of the past. As Frantz Fanon concluded in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), "we must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind" (311).

Finally, it should be stated that the goal of adopting new approaches towards academic research is *not* to achieve a state of "perfection"; rather, we should *always* be critically engaging with theory, constantly questioning our biases and assumptions, even as we shed our more problematic aspects from our work. Perhaps Harold Barclay said it best in his concluding thoughts from *People Without Government* (1996): "…there is no final battle. The battle is forever" (150).

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