Preface: The Future is Now: Common Problems, Common Threads

Stephen A. Mrozowski · LouAnn Wurst

Published online: 30 March 2014

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2014

The papers in this special issue provide concrete examples of what using archaeology to do history backward might look like. No doubt there will be subsequent attempts that will build on these efforts with improved results. As a group the papers are varied in their focus and in some instances time frame, but what they share is a common concern for the future. The uncertainties and anxieties surrounding the future are clearly evident in the case studies presented by the various authors. They reflect the authors' deep concern that the future of our existence is imperiled by policies and ideologies couched in rhetoric that is all too familiar. That familiarity stems from the common problems and common threads that bind the papers as efforts to transcend the boundaries of past, present and future, as well as other boundaries such as society and nature.

Wurst and Ridarsky set the stage for the papers that follow by examining the rhetoric of the New Deal by first governor, then President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt and his advisors confronted the problems of the Great Depression through a variety of programs that involved a massive infusion of government funds. In areas such as upstate New York, efforts to aid the plight of rural farmers involved the government purchasing unproductive farms. The formula used to classify which farms would be deemed unproductive is consistent with the Neoliberal axioms of our own time. Rather than using government funds to help farmers who wanted to remain farmers, Wurst and Ridarsky found that those who really benefited the most were successful commercial farmers. These policies were justified by a progressive rhetoric similar to that being invoked today as a model for how to tackle our own challenges. The formula used in New York for determining marginality stands in sharp contrast to a different reality revealed by a combination of archaeology and historical research. As Wurst and Ridarsky demonstrate quite convincingly, many farm families who were deemed

---

S. A. Mrozowski (✉)

Fiske Center for Archaeological and Research, Department of Anthropology,
University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA, USA
e-mail: stephen.mrozowski@umb.edu

L. Wurst

Department of Anthropology, Western Michigan University,
Kalamazoo, MI, USA
e-mail: louann.wurst@wmich.edu

marginal appear to have lived lives that were stable and satisfying, calling into question the basis of the rhetoric that many on the left look to with hope.

The power of rhetoric is also central to the paper presented by Quentin Lewis. Focusing on the early nineteenth century community of Deerfield, Massachusetts, Lewis critically examines the rhetoric of improvement and its links to scientific farming. Situating his study within the broader topic of climate change, Lewis evokes the Marxian concept of the metabolic rift between humans and nature to argue that Capitalism's insatiable appetite for energy is to blame for our current environmental crisis and that by using archaeology we can study this process backward. What he finds is that the ideology of improvement was strongly associated with more commercial forms of agriculture in which greater productivity was deemed more important than maintaining the long term fertility of soils. The growth of scientific farming was led by merchant agriculturalists who speculated in land and sought to use credit and more intensive production to accumulate wealth. In this instance the ideology of capitalist accumulation tended to abstract nature to the point where it was seen as something to be manipulated and improved through technological intervention. Although these did indeed produce greater wealth for the few, it was at the expense of sustainable farming practices that have resulted in the loss of farming as a way of life that continues in the region today.

Randall McGuire begins his paper by confronting the stark reality of the decline in worker's wages, rights and protections in the contemporary world of fast capitalism. He argues that capital's anti-union agenda is framed in the context of the "monstrous lie" that workers no longer need unions since all of these rights have already been granted to workers by the capitalists themselves or the government. Instead, he uses the examples of archaeological work at Blair Mountain, the Lattimore Massacre and the Ludlow tent colony to remind us that workers rights were only granted through serious and engaged class struggles and that they often paid for them with their blood. McGuire suggests that connecting ideas of workers' rights present and past is vital to our recognition that contemporary struggles are a continuation of those occurring at these and other sites, and that this memory work is instrumental in fostering the solidarity necessary for the political action to fight back.

Margaret Wood addresses a different, but not unrelated topic by examining the role of material culture in struggles over nationalism and citizenship in early twentieth century Colorado and early twenty-first century supporters of the War in Iraq. She begins by revisiting the conflict and violence that surrounded labor strife in Colorado in 1927. The story she outlines is connected in a powerful way to the Ludlow massacre discussed by Randy McGuire in his contribution to this volume. Immigrant laborers in Colorado found themselves fighting the same battles that the coal miners of Ludlow (1914) had fought a few decades earlier. While class played a major role in the events at Ludlow (see McGuire this issue), it was ethnicity that would emerge as the over-riding narrative in the 1920s. The events at Ludlow had embarrassed mine owners leading some to hope that hard won union benefits would become the norm. Wood, however, notes a shift in sentiment after Ludlow and the 1927 events that resulted in a change of perception. Progressives who supported unions viewed the United States as imperfect and in need of change, while others viewed the source of labor unrest as being European immigrants. These views were fueled by a strong anti German/German-American sentiment that led to a call for tests of 100 % American. At the same time

corporations and coal companies rebuilt their reputations by drawing closer to the state and patriotic rhetoric. Unions were associated with German or Bolshevik radicalism. The American flag become part of a larger materiality used by both groups as symbolic of what it meant to be an American. Woods suggests the same process is at work when Tea Party advocates wear clothing that incorporates portions of the Stars and Stripes or when others wear yellow ribbon magnets to symbolize their support for the troops fighting in Iraq.

Wood's linking of past and present serves a similar function in O'Donovan's discussion of creative destruction in Binghamton, New York. In the same way that coal mining companies in the early twentieth century sought to link their own, self-serving practices to patriotic support for all things American, government officials in New York mask the process of creative destruction by evoking the Neoliberal rhetoric of private/public partnerships in the hopes of revitalizing down-town Binghamton. O'Donovan provides an instructive example of how doing history backward can be woven into the design of a cultural resource management project by ingeniously drawing on the metaphor of a parking lot as a blank space. As a common symbol of the destructive forces wielded in the 1960s and 1970s under the rhetoric of urban renewal, O'Donovan's parking lot represents an erased history that archaeology can bring back to life. In doing so, the archaeologists find themselves confronting the ruins resulting from the boom and bust cycles of industrial and post-industrial Capitalism and the creative destruction these economic regimes engendered. The neighborhood that lay dormant under the parking lot revealed a history of working class life that was itself part of an earlier reform movement that sought to make workers more efficient. The promise was a better, more middle class existence; however the end result was greater exploitation. This history, revealed through archaeology, was itself erased as part of urban renewal that envisioned a new start helped by government sponsored destruction. The failure of these initiatives has not impacted more recent efforts under the "Restore New York" rubric, which is built on Neoliberal economics in which public funds are used to lure private investment. The result is an ironic replay of the same tropes employed in earlier episodes of renewal in which the wealthy benefit from an infusion of tax-payer dollars.

The power of rhetoric and reform is again highlighted in Hadley Kruczek-Aaron's study of the rural communities of Smithfield and North Elba, New York. Kruczek-Aaron begins her paper by recounting the excitement of Barak Obama's election in 2008 and the hope it offered for progressives across the United States. Those expectations have, as she notes, been largely unrealized as the forces of conservatism have steadfastly fought every attempt to usher in a more progressive political agenda. The question that Kruczek-Aaron raises is whether the expectations of those on the political left were realistic. In addition she finds herself asking deeper, more pragmatic questions—what does change really look like, and where is the sense of struggle in polarized politics of the early twenty-first century. Kruczek-Aaron seeks answers to these questions by looking at the experiences of two communities in rural New York that were led by Gerrit Smith, the famous reformer of the nineteenth century who played a major role in the abolitionist movement. Smith was a vocal advocate for ending slavery and aiding escaped slaves in establishing new lives in the northern states. He was also a devote Christian who was against all forms of drinking and smoking. For Smith, sobriety and hard work were the keys to success. Even today, Smith is recognized as having been a successful reformer whose work is celebrated.

Through a combination of archaeology and documentary research Kruczek-Aaron examined two of the communities in which Smith played a large role in influencing a reform agenda, his home town of Smithfield and North Elba, a town he helped to establish for African Americans. What she found raises questions about the reality of daily life in these communities and the manner in which some realities have been erased as part of the celebration of Smith as a reformer. Through the analysis of both texts and archaeological materials Kruczek-Aaron found evidence that not everyone in Smithfield agreed with Smith on temperance. Even today the narratives of reform and abolition fail to speak to the struggles involved and the more complex narratives that suggest that the celebratory narratives do not tell the whole picture. The conflicts highlighted in literature are those external to the communities with little discussion given to internal conflicts. It is these internal conflicts and other inconsistencies that Kruczek-Aaron points to as examples of the real life struggles that surround reform that needed to be considered when assessing the progress that some of the political left may see as being unfulfilled today.

Robert Paynter's paper takes a different approach to studying history backward. Drawing on his long association with W.E.B. DuBois homestead in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Paynter provides a detailed picture of the steps it took to realize the site as a heritage center that celebrates the life of DuBois. It is a narrative full of disappointments and struggle that lay bear the prejudices that remain in American society. Although Paynter describes the archaeology that he and his colleagues have carried out at the property, it is the recent history that provides such a compelling example of the hard work it takes to bring together the different stakeholders so often a part of heritage efforts. In the case of DuBois, one of the most celebrated African American intellectuals in American History, there are familiar themes that link Paynter's paper with the others in this volume. DuBois' stances on a wide array of political, social and economic issues did not endear him to many on the political right. And we are not talking about ancient history—Paynter chronicles the contentious nature of steps taken to memorialize an individual who some saw as anti-American because of this political views.

Stephen Mrozowski's contribution presents a passionate argument that archaeologists need to consider the past that we study as the composite of a multiplicity of possible futures, some of which were realized and many of which were not. Mrozowski asks us to think about the implications through two main examples. One example links commodity production and global warming, connecting the modern petro-chemical industry, two gulf wars fought to control oil resources, and the impacts of global warming and environmental devastation with a plastic Dr. Grabow pipe stem recovered from Lowell, Massachusetts. Viewed simply as a "small thing forgotten," it is difficult to see the connections among these varied phenomena. Mrozowski argues, however, the connections become clear only through the systematic process of doing history backward. Any archaeologist working on late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century sites where plastic artifacts represent such a small percentage of our assemblages should wonder how it is we live in a world characterized by such things as the Freshkills landfill in New York and Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The realization that there was nothing inevitable about these outcomes can play an important role in working toward a different future. Perhaps this is a research agenda that historical archaeologists should seriously consider for their own future.

Mrozowski's second example focuses on the Nipmuc struggle for Federal Recognition. Looking backward from this present, he uses archaeological data for communal eating at the Sarah Burnee Phillips/Sarah Boston farmstead as clear evidence of Nipmuc cultural and political continuity. This interpretation of several centuries of continuity belies typical assumptions of rupture that characterizes archaeological classifications of prehistory/history, and is reinforced by governmental assumptions of the inevitable acculturation that accompanied colonization. While the Nipmuc past was written within the context of a capitalist system whose goal was their dispossession from the land, Mrozowski suggests that the idea of studying history backward may have utility beyond the bounds of capitalism and into the deeper human past.

The volume concludes with an afterward by Bertell Ollman whose work was our inspiration for this volume. In this, Ollman provides a clear and detailed overview of the philosophy of internal relations and the dialectical connection of past, present and future that are the basis for studying history backwards. He concludes with a challenge to all of us who approach historical archaeology as the archaeology of capitalism: to use our research into the past to help uncover capitalism's "law of motion." As Ollman states, we all have a distance to travel, but the realization that we have good company for the trip is comforting.

What these papers all share is a commitment to link the work of archaeologists to the problems of our time, and there are many. Sobering is a good word to apply to these papers because they confront themes that literally jump off the front pages of newspapers and websites across the globe. Global climate change, economic collapse, immigration and xenophobic nationalism, attacks on unions, marginality, racism and other forms of inequality, all of these topics run through the accompanying papers reminding us that the problems of the present do not represent a rupture with the past, they are one and the same, past is present and present is past. Although the case studies vary they seldom veer far from the issues outlined above—the power of capitalist ideology and practice to abstract the world in such a way as to mask social inequalities as a product of nature. The power of rhetoric, whether the aspiration is temperance, improvement, patriotism, or nationalism, to mask alternative realities that have been erased, interrupted, or forgotten emerges as a common thread that binds these papers.