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## IS ARCHAEOLOGY ONLY IDEOLOGICALLY BIASED RHETORIC?<sup>1</sup>

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The first meeting of WAC after its third world conference in New Delhi in December 1994, took place in early May this year, having as its theme the destruction and conservation of cultural property. The recent WAC inter congress was hosted by the Croatian Archaeological Society in Supetar, on the beautiful island of Brac in the Croatian Adriatic Sea. If WAC itself can already refer to its own history (Ucko 1987, Thomas 1998), the islands of Dalmacia have their history of hosting conferences, even in former Yugoslavian times. It is of no little significance that these peaceful pieces of earth surrounded by crystalline sea seemed to be far away from the conflicts of remote continents. As one Chilean-Croat told us during our stay on the island: "for Brac the war just meant the sound of the bombs across the sea and the mountains, and the images on the TV...". This sort of isolation of the world was perhaps, not so many years ago, one of the reasons for choosing Korcula as the place where the Yugoslavian Praxis philosophers held their Summer School. By the 1960s and 1970s, the role of philosophy and the relationship between philosophy and science in both the bourgeois and socialist world was on the agenda of this group. In the 'Praxis' debates, Habermas (1974) called into question the relationship between science, technique, philosophy and ideology and/or the forces of production ("ist die Philosophie eher Produktivkraft oder falsches Bewusstsein?"). Twenty five years later the islands had the opportunity to revisit this question.

In those years the concept of "non-aligned" states still made political sense and Yugoslavia was one of the leading countries in promoting this separate path. WAC is linked with this tradition not only because of the geographical location of the meeting, but -more deeply- for organising a forum to explore the common basis on which intellectual practice could be examined and judged. WAC supported the idea of an intellectual world not dominated by the East-West opposition but open to the voices of women, and the post-colonial and Fourth-Worlds. The first years of WAC belonged to the historical context of non-alignment but, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 collapse of the post-war framework, such international agendas had to look for another basis for legitimacy. One of the main questions, however, survives and can be posed in terms of the kind of judgement archaeologists are looking for: A professional one? A political one, based on post-Berlin Wall political correctness? an ethical one? A politically engaged one? A socially engaged one? If these two last are the case, engaged with what? Or are we looking for ways to cope with the problem of the (dis)unity of science? In Brac, however, we went straight to the fact inherited from WAC-3 which WAC wanted to evaluate: the demolition of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya and archaeologists' responsibility when confronted with this kind of situation. No less meaningful was the issue of WAC's responsibility in banning debate on the issue during its Third Congress, which had been criticised as contrary to its statutes.

The ban and the issues that arose from WAC-3 have been reviewed from different points of view (Álvarez Sanchís 1995, Bernbeck and Pollock 1996, Bernbeck and Sommer 1994,

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Colley 1995, Podgorny 1996, Rao 1995, Reynolds 1994, Ronayne 1995, Tierney 1995). In New Delhi, it was already clear -at least for WAC's Executive Committee and Council- that in the coming years a meeting should be organised in order to analyse these points. So the Brac meeting was strongly connected with the New Delhi Congress and tried to bring together not only an international audience but also representatives of the several Indian groups involved in the Ayodhya issue. Some of the Indian archaeologists who participated in the inter congress are by now strongly linked to or co-opted by the BJP government, while others were independent scholars, some even without institutional links. On the other hand, most of the non-Indian archaeologists were affiliated to universities, museums or educational establishments.

The conference was attended by some one hundred participants from all over the world. The academic programme comprised some forty papers, split into several sessions based on seven subjects: the interpretation of archaeological evidence in an academic context, popular uses of archaeological evidence, criteria for evaluating the worth of archaeological and architectural monuments in multi-cultural societies, restoration or conservation, the fate of cultural property in a global economy, the destruction of cultural property in war and ethnic conflict, and the Ayodhya issue. The papers were supplemented by group discussions, three video presentations and a plenary session.

The aims of the meeting ranged from the more theoretical to the more down-to-earth worries of archaeologists dealing with mass-scale destruction of property and life. Ethics relating to publication, criteria for discriminating between alternative readings of the past, reasons why the past is important in popular culture, ethical responsibilities of scholars, techniques for turning archaeology into news were discussed, alongside questions relating to the definition of a world cultural heritage according to universal or national/ethnic criteria. Case studies included historical as well as contemporary material on liberal or sectarian political philosophies in multi-cultural societies. The contemporary uses of monuments sometimes apparently conflict with their historic value, and the planned destruction of monuments was related to the question of who has the right to decide on these matters. In a global context, the antiquities trade and tourism run parallel to the destruction of people and property grounded in fundamentalist standpoints. All these questions were debated freely and the sometimes frank exchange of views pointed to the contentious issues underlying the practice of archaeology on a world stage.

Some papers were keen to emphasise that "archaeological reasoning should neither be driven by nor assessed on the basis of dogmatic or subjective beliefs based on fear, self-importance, authority, prejudice, superstition or mental instability. In a changing world, archaeologists should be wary of misuses and abuses of archaeology by global hegemonic enterprises, chauvinistic nationalists, 'ethnic' separatists, and dogmatic sectarians" (Hassan 1998). This humanist approach, claiming that peaceful coexistence should be a paramount aim, was put forward again and again by speakers from different quarters of the world. S. Oluwde Ogundele's argument moved the audience, when he claimed that "the major goal is to promote good scholarship which is capable of paving the way for international peace, harmony, understanding and friendship, not an attempt to tear the human race into pieces" (Ogundele 1998: 10). The multi-cultural character of societies was stressed, as the past everywhere tells us about the hybridity of cultures. All cultures are hotchpotches, *mélanges*, the result of borrowings and mixtures, disregard for this can easily result in bigotry (Olsen 1998: 13; cf. Jones 1997 *passim*). Pluralism and humanism were thus presented as two sides of the same coin (Pachauri 1998: 6), and historic examples of peaceful coexistence, like in the case of

Medieval Córdoba, in Spain (Edwards 1998), were put forward, whilst traditionally respectful uses of monuments were shown to have been put in jeopardy, in recent years, by the totalitarian use of buildings in disregard of other people's concerns, as in the dispute over Thessaloniki's rotunda (Stewart 1998: 9-10), where secular and sacred uses of the same space are asserted to be incompatible by those who cannot accept a pluralist Greek identity.

Krishna M. Shrimali (1998: 8) spelled this out when he argued that archaeologists should not emulate the German archaeological community that played a pivotal role in legitimating notions of racial and cultural superiority and thus contributed to the political legitimation of Nazi ideology. Pluralism means that there is more than one possible interpretation of any past (Ronayne 1998: 11) and that cultural heritage belongs not only to nations or specific groups, but to the whole of mankind (Khan 1998: 1). There are several menaces to the integrity of cultural property, some directly linked to market forces, as is the case of looting (Tubb 1998: 4) and, most ubiquitous, the antiquities trade (Brodie 1998: 1), both responsible for widespread loss of information during the course of unrecorded digging. Sometimes archaeologists are directly involved with the antiquities trade (cf. Funari 1998: 12). Another important destructive factor is war; several areas have been ravaged by both international and civil conflicts (Boylan 1993: 6). Armies have not avoided bombing and burning vast treasures of antiquities and cultural heritage in Africa (e.g. Mbunwe-Samba 1998: 6), Asia (Krishnan 1998: 1), and elsewhere (in Europe, the Balkans area is a case in point, cf. Sulc 1998), raising two related subjects: repatriation and restoration.

Restitution of plundered heritage is a tricky issue, as *The Economist* recently reminded us (December 20th, 1997, pp. 106-8). Spoils of war and colonial loot remain as deep scars in the minds and hearts of people who claim ownership of property legally in possession of others, but can poor countries afford to conserve monuments now safely kept in rich museums? (cf. Mbunwe-Samba 1998). As for restoration, too little attention to monuments may mean that they will decay, as is the case with the majority of out-of-sight, ordinary buildings and artefacts, whose obscurity contributes to their slowly falling into ruin (Gauch 1998). On the other hand, restoring monuments may also cause destruction in the name of restoration (Wijesurya 1998: 5), even though some archaeologists are not really worried about so-called genuine remains. Cornelius Holtorf (1998: 6) considers that there is no sense in preserving too much of an outdated past that will not be needed in the future, so much so that a certain amount of destruction of archaeological resources is not only unavoidable but indeed desirable. Holtorf's arguments try to accommodate the interests of scholars on the one side and of developers on the other side. In the same vein, Gustav Trotzig (1998: 4) proposes that every generation has a need to create their own monuments to pay symbolic tribute to heritage, reinventing old-style buildings and exhibitions. It is probably symptomatic that these calls for archaeological destruction do not come from poor countries, nor from areas affected by real destruction of heritage by conflicts, but arise in peaceful environments.

Most speakers preferred advocate the protection of cultural property, even from ordinary ignorance and short-term economic interests. Pamela Eze-Uzekama's paper was a moving appeal to educate people about their own heritage: "my efforts are as futile as a drop in an ocean of complete anarchy since there are many more sites of archaeological importance strewn all over the country (i.e. Nigeria)" (Eze-Uzekama 1998: 8; cf. Funari 1998, for a similar situation in Brazil). Henry Cleere (1992: 5) focused on the related subject of defining the "outstanding universal value" attributed by World institutions, such as UNESCO and ICOMOS, to monuments linked first and foremost to the West. A more holistic approach should thus pay the same attention both to the Renaissance and to, say, African art. And last

but not least, the transformation of archaeological sites, widespread world wide thanks to economic factors such as construction of dams and promotion of tourism, should be managed in non-destructive ways, as was proposed by S. Cace., S. Forenbaher and V. Gaffney (1998: 3). Referring to the Adriatic islands, they concluded that the "island's climates are suitable for all-year tourism, not the damaging, economically and socially unhealthy mass tourism of the summer migration in search of sea, sun and sex. This might in turn revitalise the dying interior villages".

Overall, the main conclusions of the conference referred to the responsibilities associated with any archaeological endeavour. Even though there were conflicting and sometimes irreconcilable standpoints, it was obvious that political engagement is inevitable. Scholarship has never been value-free, but a conference like this one on cultural destruction and preservation has touched powerful feelings. This was reflected in the motions passed by the plenary and executive meetings, which condemned the use of archaeology to promote ethnic, religious or political conflicts and calls on archaeologists world wide to respect the full complexity of their country's history in the conservation of all aspects of cultural heritage.

The Ayodhya controversy remained the main axis of the conference. The debate did not finish with the plenary session; on the contrary, it still commands international attention thanks to the new and old media and to something that we could not predict in Croatia: the BJP nuclear policy and the nuclear explosions in India and Pakistan. The destruction of the mosque -as it has already been pointed out (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996, Podgorny 1996)- confronted the international audience of archaeologists with the problem of considering the "Other" as homogenous and always in the right [3]. This easy and naïve way of thinking about the distant and conflictive world implies that "we", the poor of the world, are the good oppressed salvages, our main conflict being with the bad rich countries. At the same time, this naïve way of thinking conceals how difficult it is for an international audience to evaluate the political situations and conflicts of different countries. But as historians and archaeologists we think we can try to provide a critical insight to the problem from our specific background. So in this report we would like to stress three points: a) that the kind of connection between the state and the archaeologists is not an Indian peculiarity, b) that on Brac we forgot the problem of evaluating the truth or, in other terms, the problem of judging the evidence, and c) and that whatever the argument, there must be an ethical approach which precludes the destruction of property and people.

Such analysis tends to see the problem in terms of the invention of cultural/national or regional identities (cf. Bernbeck and Pollock 1996 for a critical revision of this). But in doing so, we think that we are only perceiving part of the issue. We are dismissing another important process that takes place at the same time as is the building of archaeologists' identity in terms of the relationship between scholarship and the state. It is true that, since the modern institutionalisation of science and the humanities, i.e. since science began to be incorporated in state policies, the practice of archaeology should be perceived through its relation with the state. Professional identities are interwoven, in different degrees of co-option, with institutionalised practices. However, archaeologists' practices cannot be analysed as direct consequences of national or regional policies but in terms of their interaction with the different groups and ideas competing or trying to keep their hegemony in the academic world. The analysis of cases of the uses of the past by the regimes of all possible trends and political orientations is neither new nor an exception. The building of national identities by inventing a past is well established and studied in many different countries (cf. Funari 1994<sup>a</sup>). The opportunism of intellectuals in order to climb the academic or administrative ladder (cf.

Funari 1994b) is also very well known [4]. So it is that the political game uses appeals to patriotic rhetoric and to the logic of war in characterising its opponents. This does not only happen in India. It is also true that not all the modern political traditions have used the past as the resource for building legitimacy (some have been based on a promised future) but, if this was the case, the political rhetoric helped to coin a partisan history and pushed intellectuals into taking sides. So a patriotic rhetoric and public consensus on the importance of the past for building the nation could (we are not saying that it does) lead some groups of intellectuals to subscribe to this ideology in order to legitimise the practice of a discipline that, in fact, has not a little pragmatic meaning in itself. It can also happen that party-engaged intellectuals use their knowledge for making up mere propaganda for the party. In the case of India during the last few years, the growing popularity of the BJP with its emphasis on Hindu identity as the national one, had this effect among Indian intellectuals (cf. Podgorny 1996). The destruction of the mosque was -above all- a demonstration of the growing power of a political group in its career toward government and an action against the order established by the civil laws. Having succeeded in ignoring the rules of the Indian state, the BJP appeared as an option and many Indian citizens -among them archaeologists and intellectuals- choose to work for it as party members.

The advocates of the existence of the temple of Rama based the right to rebuild it (one of the main points on the BJP political agenda) on archaeological remains, some of which are claimed to have been found after the destruction of the mosque. Neither of us is an specialist in the period or the culture this evidence represents and we cannot evaluate it. These are, indeed, very difficult times for advocating the truth or for a discussion in exclusively narrow, scientific terms. Nevertheless, we do advocate these things.

We can display the uses of the past by studying either the sociology or the history of archaeology and by doing so, help to clarify the part a group and certain ideas play in the game of academic and political power. But we can also evaluate the evidence with which this past is being created. Archaeology has some technical and methodological principles that can still resist the idea that everything is ideologically-biased rhetoric. Acceptance of the social conditions in which archaeology is practised does not entail that the scientific enterprise is an entirely rhetorical world where anything can be enunciated. We believe that, in the case of the debate on the Ayodhya issue, we are forgetting that -if we want to- we, archaeologists, have the tools for judging the evidence which would have proved the existence of the Rama temple and for saying whether or not it is true or false. In any case, the existence of an earlier building could never justify the destruction of a later monument, and even less lead people, archaeologists or not, to condone the destruction of human lives. The rhetorical dimension of archaeology could never justify condoning violence, bigotry, and the destruction of people.

In a way, science and international fora still conserve their nineteenth century language of common values and habits. Those annual banquet congresses, where gentlemen from different continents crossed the sea to put on their black suits and to share for a week the *concordia animorum* of the common language of science, have not completely gone. Science has lost its aura, the jacket and the big banquets, but -we hope- archaeologists can still distinguish between the invention of pasts and the search for the past: if nobody -except for the Indian archaeologists- can judge whether the presented evidence is false or true the Ayodhya issue could be read as one of the historical marks of the death of international science. If we -the international audience- insisted on condemning the uses of the past only by rhetorical means, we would have helped to open this new age of incommensurable rhetorics and very active destructive forces. It is up to us, as archaeologists and human beings, to choose between

condoning violence and exploitation, and confronting them by aiming at freedom, not oppression, looking for dialogue, not silencing.

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### **Notes**

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3. As Bernbeck and Pollock (1996: 140) pointed out: "The case of Ayodhya (...) makes clear that the use of the past for identity building is by no means a neutral enterprise. Nor is it possible to say that because the principal actors in the Ayodhya drama are all members of a

non-western nation they can be viewed as a single subordinated Other whose specific projects to create a past for itself should be wholeheartedly endorsed"

4. Germany is perhaps one of the most favourite examples for proving how far the wrong political agency of archaeologists could go. And probably one of the reasons for remembering Germany as an admonitory example is the widely international condemn to the Nazi regime after the World War II. Although German archaeology seemed to be one of the main providers of Nazi racial superiority ideology, things were more complex. Suzanne Marchand (1996, cf. Chapter 5) has recently explored the conditions that made it impossible to regain control of patriotic rhetoric and prehistory so attractive for Nazi exploitation.