Discourses of heritage: implications for archaeological community practice.

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1 This paper explores the implications of the arguments I have made elsewhere about both the nature of heritage and the existence of an Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) for archaeological engagement with community groups\(^1\). In particular, I have examined the power and consequence of the archaeological idea of heritage, and considered how this has facilitated the development of a Western Authorized Heritage Discourse, which provides a framework for archaeological theory and practice, and for the way that heritage is interpreted and managed. I argue that the current investment archaeologists, not only in Australia, but worldwide, have in the idea of an ‘archaeological heritage’ constrains archaeological practice and the relationships archaeologists have with a range of publics, including Indigenous communities and peoples.

The idea of heritage

2 Heritage is not a thing, site or place, nor is it ‘found’, rather heritage is the multiple processes of meaning making that occur as material heritage places or intangible heritage events are identified, defined, managed, exhibited and visited\(^2\). In the book *Uses of Heritage* (2006), I posited the idea that heritage can be usefully understood as a subjective political negotiation of identity, place and memory; that it is a ‘moment’ or a process of re/constructing and negotiating cultural and social values and meanings. Moreover, that it is a process, or a performance, in which we identify the values, memories and cultural and social meanings that help us make sense of the present, our identities and sense of physical and social place. Heritage is a process of negotiating historical and cultural meanings and values that occur around the decisions we make to preserve, or not, certain physical places or objects or intangible events, and the way these are then managed, exhibited or performed. They also occur in the way visitors engage or disengage with
these things, places and events. Places and intangible events of heritage are therefore given value by the act of naming them 'heritage' and by the processes of heritage negotiations and re/creations that occur at them.

3 Heritage is consequently understood as something that is 'done', rather than something that is possessed or 'managed'. There is, moreover, no one defining heritage action, but rather a range of activities that include remembering, commemoration, communicating and passing on knowledge and memories, asserting and expressing identity and social and cultural values and meanings. As an experience, and as a social and cultural performance, it is something with which people actively, often self-consciously, and critically engage in. This definition of heritage is at odds with traditional archaeological definitions that tend to assume that heritage is the material as sites, places or monuments that archaeologists study and care for.

4 However, if we de-privilege the material, and look at heritage as a verb rather than a noun, it becomes possible to ask: what then does heritage do, what are the consequences of these heritage experiences or moments? The product or the consequences of heritage activities are the emotions, experiences and memories of them that they create. These work to facilitate a sense of identity and belonging, but that is not all that they do. What is also created, and indeed continually recreated, are social networks and the historical and cultural narratives that underpin these binding relations. This process is facilitated through an activity in which social and cultural values, meanings and understandings about both the past and present are either explicitly or implicitly negotiated. In these negotiations ideas, meanings and the legitimacy of particular historical and cultural narratives are worked out, and may be rejected, embraced or transformed. Identity is not simply represented by heritage places, but rather is actively and continually recreated and negotiated as people, communities, experts (such as archaeologists) and institutions reinterpret, remember, forget and reassess the meaning of the past in terms of the social, cultural and political needs and aspirations of the present.

5 The cultural process or performance that is heritage is framed by particular heritage discourses. There are many different and competing discourses of heritage. Nonetheless, there is a dominant discourse, which I have termed the Authorized Heritage Discourse. This professional discourse is often involved in the legitimatization and regulation of historical and cultural narratives, and the work that these narratives do in maintaining or negotiating certain societal values and the hierarchies that these underpin. The AHD originated in nineteenth and twentieth century European architectural and archaeological debates over the need to preserve the ‘fragile’ and ‘non-renewable’ past for ‘future generations’. It advocates a ‘conserve as found’ conservation ethic that assumes that value is innate within heritage sites. In doing so, it privileges material heritage over the intangible, and emphasises monumentality and the grand, the old and the aesthetically pleasing. This Eurocentric discourse has been taken up, and in turn authorized internationally by organizations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS.

6 The concept of discourse drawn on here derives from critical discourse analysis. As Norman Fairclough states, discourse is ‘a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning’. Discourses therefore make the world meaningful and intercede in the negotiation of social relationships and relations of power. Discourses of heritage, and not least the AHD, constitute and reflect a range of social practices that, amongst other things, are used to give meaning to group identity, historical narratives and collective and individual
memories, and these in turn organize social relations and identities around nation, class, culture and ethnicity.

Consequently, the AHD is itself a process of heritage making and of regulating and governing the political and cultural meaning of the past, and the role that the past then plays in defining certain social problems or issues. The AHD is just one, albeit the dominant, heritage discourse, but the heritage that it makes is the continual affirmation not only of certain universalising or nationalising traditions, but also of certain forms of dominant identity. This includes not only national identity and the received identities of certain cultural and social communities, but also the disciplinary identity of expert communities themselves, which includes archaeologists. If we accept the existence or possibility of the AHD, it becomes useful to consider the implications and consequences it has for both archaeologists and the groups with which archaeologists work and engage.

As archaeologists we are secure in our understanding of what heritage is – it is those things that archaeologists care passionately about, which we work to conserve, preserve and interpret for public consumption. The Anglophone archaeological literature abounds with the phrase ‘the archaeological heritage’. This phrase implies that there are ‘things’ and places out there waiting to be ‘found’. It also implies that a universal archaeological value exists, which can be used to ‘find’ and interpret material culture as heritage. Through this process, the item or site in question will be revealed as being part of the inheritable human past. Moreover, this phrase implies that it is archaeologists who not only have the knowledge, but also the professional ethic, to become stewards for the past (singular). These ideas come out of the very raison d’etre of the archaeological discipline. During the 1960s, the Anglophone archaeological literature promoted a sense of ‘crisis’ that was besetting archaeology – new dating technologies had overturned the certainty of archaeological interpretations in Europe, and in Europe, North America and Australia the discipline sought to remake itself in an era when science and technology offered promising new futures.

Anglophone Archaeology struck a new pose, remaking itself within the frameworks offered by logical positivism. Within this debate, the issue of the ‘relevance’ of archaeology to the public gets considerable attention. As Fritz and Plog pointed out archaeology needed to demonstrate its relevance to contemporary society:

We suspect that unless archaeologists find ways to make their research increasingly relevant to the modern world, the modern world will find itself increasingly capable of getting along without archaeologists.

The Anglophone discipline of archaeology claimed a new ‘relevance’ for itself by arguing it had the ability to make the past understandable in the context of rapidly urbanizing and changing cultural contexts. Moreover, it had the ability to speak to and for an inheritable past that became re-defined as the archaeological heritage.

At the same time as the discipline was struggling with ideas of relevance, growing public concern with post-war urban development and expansion saw significant threats to archaeological sites, and to the familiar landscapes that communities valued. Anglophone archaeologists, with their new zeal to make the past relevant to the public, stepped into to ‘save’ the past. Legislation in much of Europe, North America and Australasia, which explicitly or implicitly recognizes the authority of archaeologists to safeguard the past, was developed, and the process that is variously referred to as cultural heritage management, cultural resource management or archaeological heritage management was born. Archaeologists became in this process the stewards for the past, and thus the
stewards of humanity’s heritage, and the phrase ‘the archaeological heritage’ became a tautology within the discipline, so that ‘archaeology’ became synonymous with ‘heritage’.

A distinct Anglophone archaeological discourse of heritage developed during the 1960s and 1970s and continues into the present. It stresses ideas of stewardship, universal understandings of the past, the almost antiquarian idea of the inherent value of archaeological sites and artefacts, and the need for archaeologists to be not only scientific but also professional. As a discourse, archaeological definitions of heritage help regulate not only Anglophone archaeological disciplinary identity as professional stewards, but also the relationships archaeologists consequently have with other community groups.

These developments within archaeology during the 1960s and 1970s coincided and interacted with international movements to protect humanities ‘universal heritage’, which led to the development of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 1972. Underlying this convention (and latterly UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention, 2003) is the desire to ‘save’ and protect the masterpieces of human creation and expression. The Anglophone archaeological ideas of heritage of the 1960s-1970s found synergy with architectural debates about the nature and meaning of architectural conservation. These debates, originating in nineteenth century Britain and France, were very similar to those that were to occur within Anglophone archaeology, as they stressed the role of architects as stewards for humanity’s built heritage. They also stressed the professional duty of architects to uphold a conservation ethic and to preserve the aesthetic values of the built environment. The similarity of the discursive construction of the archaeological and architectural assertion of the idea of stewardship over material culture is startling. Subsequently, these two debates and discourses come together internationally in the drafting of the World Heritage Convention, and in the development of national policies in the West to conserve and preserve those things – redefined as heritage – that archaeologists and architects (and to a lesser degree, but no less significantly, art historians) defined as ‘heritage’.

So what exactly is the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD)? The AHD defines heritage as aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that are non-renewable. Their fragility requires that current generations must care for, protect and venerate these things so that they may be inherited by the future. The AHD assumes that heritage is something that is ‘found’, that its innate value – its essence – is something that will ‘speak to’ present and future generations and ensure their understanding of their ‘place’ in the world. The inheritance offered by cultural patrimony is the creation of a common and shared sense of human identity.

The AHD also stipulates that as heritage is inevitably fragile and in need of protection by bodies of experts. Thus, those experts that deal with the material world take on the task of custodians of the human past. Within the AHD experts have a duty to not only protect the past, but to communicate the heritage values of that past to public audiences.

Heritage, the AHD also stresses, must be passed on to the future unchanged, so that the assumed meaning in inherent heritage, and the past and culture it represents, will not be changed or challenged. This idea of unchanging heritage values derives from assumptions about the inherent value of heritage, but also from the ethic that heritage must be ‘conserved as found’. This ethic encapsulates the idea that heritage professionals must respect the aesthetic and other assumed ‘inherent’ values represented by the fabric of heritage sites. In observing such respect, current generations thus have no ‘right’ to change the visions or heritage values represented by a site or place. Thus, the ‘thing’
identified as heritage tends to be conflated with the cultural and social values that are used to interpret and give meaning to heritage things and events. Within the AHD heritage thus becomes the monument or archaeological site or building.

17 Assumptions about the innate value of heritage also reinforce the idea that heritage represents all that is good and glorious about the past, especially when it represents national history. The dark or contested nature of the past is simply relegated to a 'special' status and defined as 'dissonant heritage', rather than as simply part of the complexity of history and heritage itself. Thus the various conflicts over heritage interpretation and preservation become isolated events rather than 'routine or fundamental aspects of the nature of heritage.

18 Another given in this discourse is that of 'identity' – heritage is about the construction of identity, specifically national identity. However, this is an assumption that is rarely questioned within the frameworks of debate defined by the AHD, thus, within both the archaeological and wider heritage literature there is very little sense of how identity is actually constructed by or from heritage sites or places. This lack of understanding helps to facilitate the acceptance of established and legitimized cultural and social values and identity – identity becomes an immutable given somehow inherently embedded within heritage places and objects. The AHD constructs not only a particular definition of heritage, but also an authorized mentality, which is deployed to understand and deal with certain social problems centred on claims to identity and patrimony. Three consequences are important to note.

19 The first is that the AHD excludes those understandings of heritage that sit outside or are oppositional to it. Thus, non-elite, sub-national, non-Western, non-archaeological or other forms of heritage that challenge or do not confirm to universalizing heritage narratives are ignored or dismissed, and defined as the special pleadings of minority interests. The cultural heritage management process that archaeologists have come to dominate controls the use, value and meanings given to certain cultural objects and places, and provides procedures through which archaeological knowledge and expertise may be called upon and deployed in a policy context. Thus, cultural and social conflicts that rest on understandings of the past become converted into technical issues of site management and de-politicized. This has significant implications for those groups or communities caught within struggles over social justice issues, a point I will return to below.

20 The second consequence is that the AHD obscures the processes of cultural production that occur at and around the management and conservation of heritage sites, by obscuring or delegitimizing debate and contestation over the interpretation of the past and present. In effect, the AHD obscures the cultural production that it creates and disseminates. This means that the exclusionary nature of the AHD is seldom considered in public policy, as the AHD and the heritage it creates just 'is'. Thirdly, the AHD continually validates those forms of knowledge and values that have contributed to it. Forms of expertise, such as Anglophone archaeology and architecture, continually reinforce this discourse by maintaining the values on which it is based. The AHD recognizes and validates certain bodies of expertise, and in doing so allows those bodies privileged access to heritage resources. This means that it is often in the interests of experts to maintain the discourse that ensures not only their access to data, but also ensures that their values, knowledge and pronouncements about heritage are given a central position in public debates and forums about the interpretation and meaning of the past. However,
archaeological discourse and knowledge is itself regulated within this process, as the discipline must continue to invoke the discourses of scientific rationality and stewardship whilst also continually asserting the status of its data as ‘heritage’, in order to maintain its position as an underpinning form of expertise of the AHD. Failure to do so will jeopardize both the discipline’s position of authority bestowed by its adherence to the AHD and the dominant sense of disciplinary identity.

21 It is important to stress that the AHD, despite its dominance, is contested and challenged. In Australia, for instance, the archaeological discourses of heritage, and the Australian AHD more generally, has been publically challenged by Aboriginal communities and activists. The AHD, and the positioning of archaeological knowledge and practice within this, does not mean that archaeological requirements and desires are always supported by the state, nor that expertise identified by the AHD are all powerful, or that they will always override Indigenous or other community interests. Political and economic expedience will mean that the AHD and the bodies of expertise that both authorize, and are authorized by it, will not always win the day. The point here is that the deployment of archaeological knowledge within the AHD, and the AHD’s role in framing heritage practices, ensures that certain knowledge frameworks are never really overthrown. The AHD maintains its utility and authority for the state because it renders certain problems manageable – in doing so it confines the parameters of debate and thus other forms of knowledge, and more specifically other ways of knowing or thinking about ‘heritage’, are constrained.

22 This has two important consequences for archaeologists and other communities of interest concerned with heritage. First, for archaeologists it means that archaeological practices that intersect with community performances of heritage will be framed by the AHD, unless there is a critical and reflexive will that aims to work outside or question it. It is certainly possible to argue that as archaeology gets so much from the AHD – authority, access to data, status as custodian of heritage and so forth – that it need do nothing. However, any constraint on practice is a constraint on theoretical debate and development. If theory is practice and practice theory, then how we frame our practice will inevitably frame the way we think about and theorize what it is we do as archaeologists. Secondly, it means that archaeologists, as they engage with heritage, will become engaged in ‘identity politics’. Heritage, as even a casual glance at the literature reveals, is highly contested. From Indigenous land rights, to the internationally infamous cases of the Bamiyan Buddha and the Parthenon Marbles, to neighbourhood planning disputes, heritage is about conflict. If heritage is a cultural process or performance concerned with negotiating cultural and social values in response to the needs of the present, then heritage is also ultimately about the negotiation of social change and dispute. Not only is it concerned with the negotiation of values within particular communities but also between community groups. As such, archaeologists involved in heritage practices are engaged in the negotiation of disputes – even though we may not be aware of it or a dispute may not be evident.

23 In the latter part of the twentieth century, identity has become a significant arena of cultural and political conflict. This has often been dismissed as ‘identity politics’, as essentialism and/or as the ‘special pleadings’ of minority groups. However, the work of Nancy Fraser, amongst others, has suggested this phenomena may be more usefully understood as the ‘politics of recognition’.\(^{16}\) Within the framework offered by the politics of recognition approach the politics of cultural difference and identity claims are
understood as being entangled with struggles for the distribution of resources. Increasingly these struggles are predicated on the ability of marginalized groups to have their claims to justice legitimized through the recognition given to their appeals to specific cultural or historical identity and experiences. The ability of communities and other groups to influence how they are recognized, and thus avoid being misrecognized, is central to these struggles. Heritage as a discourse that legitimizes and underwrites claims to identity is thus heavily implicated in social justice claims. As a political resource, heritage cannot be (nor should it be) confined by the special pleadings of the community of archaeologists to ‘know’ what heritage means. Archaeological knowledge may sometimes support such claims, but any tendency to claim a universalist knowledge will deny social justice to those groups whose cultural and social experiences and understandings of the world do not tally with archaeological understandings. This does not mean to say that all claims to recognition or heritage are equally legitimate, or should be given equal weight. As Fraser notes claims can be tied to reactionary politics. However, within the model offered by Fraser those requiring recognition must show that not only do majority cultural norms deny justice, but also that remedies to injustice will not themselves deny parity to community or to non-community members.

Rather than dismissing ‘identity politics’ archaeologists, through their engagement with heritage, are now required to understand the consequences of our practices.

I suggest the model offered by Nancy Fraser provides us with a way to see the political consequences that the AHD and, more specifically, archaeological discourses and pronouncements over heritage have.

**Conclusion**

The scientific values that underpin archaeological theory are daily reinforced through heritage management practices. Discourses about ‘archaeological heritage’ do not simply define those things archaeologists feel should be seen as humanity’s heritage, they also frame the heritage performances archaeologists engage in through the management and conservation process. These performances continually define what it means to ‘be’ a professional archaeologist. A critical understanding of the nature and history of archaeological interactions with ‘heritage’, coupled with an understanding of the consequences of archaeological practice, is required to not only challenge the AHD, but also to widen and free up the negotiations and relationships between archaeologists and community interests.

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NOTES

18. Fraser, 2001, op. cit., p. 35.
This paper summarises previous arguments about the existence and nature of a Western and Eurocentric Authorised Heritage Discourse and examines the consequences this discourse has for archaeological practices associated with community engagement and outreach. This discourse frames archaeology heritage practices and works to conceive heritage as specifically 'archaeological heritage'. The archaeological discipline owes much to the existence of this discourse, which privileges expert values over those of community and other sub-national interests and which works to constrain understandings of heritage as primarily material. This discourse hinders productive and critical community engagement and the paper argues that archaeologists need to engage in self-conscious and explicit challenges to this discourse to facilitate meaningful community partnerships.

Este trabajo sintetiza argumentos anteriores sobre la existencia y naturaleza de un Discurso Autorizado de Patrimonio Occidental y Eurocéntrico (Smith 2006) y examina las consecuencias que este discurso tiene para las prácticas arqueológicas de extensión e involucramiento comunitario. Dicho discurso enmarca a las prácticas arqueológicas relacionadas con el patrimonio convirtiéndolo específicamente en “patrimonio arqueológico.” La disciplina arqueológica debe mucho a este discurso, dado que el mismo privilegia los valores de expertos por sobre los de las comunidades y otros intereses sub-nacionales y limita la definición del patrimonio como fundamentalmente material. Este discurso impide por lo tanto el compromiso crítico y productivo con las comunidades, por lo que el artículo argumenta que los arqueólogos necesitan confrontar a este discurso de manera consciente y específica, a fin de facilitar la creación de colaboraciones comunitarias significativas.

Keywords: heritage, authorized heritage discourse, community archaeology, civic engagement

Palabras claves: patrimonio, discurso autorizado de patrimonio, arqueología comunitaria, compromiso cívico.

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