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ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

**MULTIPLE IMPACTS,
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

Edited by Nathan Schlanger
and Kenneth Aitchison

2. The crisis – economic, ideological, and archaeological

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1 Introduction

Since its creation more than a decade ago, the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) has served as a useful forum for debating different understandings of the organisation of archaeological heritage management across Europe. This has been one of the tasks taken on by the EAA sponsored “Committee on Archaeological Legislation and Organisation in Europe” and this is also one of the goals of the EC funded ACE project, “Archaeology in Contemporary Europe”. This EAA session and the publication that ensues is therefore highly appropriate for raising and summing up some of the broad issues, economic, ideological and archaeological, brought to the fore by the current global crisis.

2 Two world views

Broadly speaking there are in Western philosophy two contrasting concepts of society. In the Anglo-Saxon ‘common law’ tradition, society regulates itself, either, following the optimistic version of Adam Smith, through the operations of a “hidden hand” or, in the more pessimistic versions of neo-Darwinism, socio-biology and economic liberalism in general, by means of the ‘struggle for life’. For the American economist Nobel prize winner Milton Friedman, for example, “the State is not the solution, but the problem”. This principle seems to have been abandoned in a matter of hours at the beginning of the recent economic crisis, in October 2008.

For the other tradition, mainly in continental Europe, it is the state, in its role as the expression of the community of citizens, which organises and regulates social life. Up until the 1980’s in many parts of western Europe, most of what concerned the general interest – such as education, a large part of culture, as well as transports, energy, post and telecommunications, and indeed banks and insurance companies – were the responsibility and the property of the state, that is to say of the community of citizens. It was only during the 1980s that this state of affairs was put in question, essentially for reasons of ideology rather than economic inefficiency, and without a real public debate.

As for archaeology: in the second model, it is the nation state that takes charge of the protection of archaeological heritage, either through a state archaeological service or through dedicated public bodies. In the first model archaeological heritage is treated as merchandise or a service. Commercial archaeological companies are at the service of their clients, the developers, with only the postulation of some ‘code of ethics’ to ensure quality control within the overall framework of the free market economy. It should be noted that the term of ‘developer-led archaeology’, as sometimes used in Anglo-Saxon countries (and in translations into English) is

in this respect misleading. In reality, it is not the developers who originated the protective measures such as preventive or rescue archaeology, but rather it is the community of citizens, as expressed through the state, its laws, regulations and policy guidances. It is the state which decrees that archaeological remains need to be studied prior to their destruction. The seemingly innocent term of ‘developer-led’ in this sense reveals wider conceptions of heritage management.

It should be remarked that there has never been anything in the nature of a public debate or consultation within the European Union regarding these two different economic and political approaches. For instance, it is possible to imagine and bring into being a common European public service in such fields as railways, postal services or electricity provision – just as there now moves towards common European airspace, or, more topically, a common banking supervisory mechanism. Such an approach was never really considered. In almost every field of economic and social life, the option of a generalised commercial competition was the one taken, as if as a matter of course. The advantages of such generalised commercial competition, as claimed by the likes of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, were supposed to result in lower prices and better quality, on the premise that people will choose to buy the best products at the lowest prices. This has not really been the case, for several reasons.

3 Half a dozen reasons for questioning the benefits of economic competition

– *First*, as shown by the Nobel prize winner for Economics, Stiglitz, the “hidden hand” of the market would work only if people had complete information regarding merchandises and services. But it is never the case: people often chose the degree of information they feel they need, and they can also very easily be manipulated regarding the information they have access to.

– *Second*, supposedly competing companies often engage in agreements of various sorts, verging on illegality. Such deals between mobile phone operators or between roads and infrastructure companies have recently occurred in France, for example.

– *Third*, commercial companies and their shareholders prefer immediate concrete benefits to long-term investments – as can be seen with privatised railway companies.

– *Forth*, regarding archaeology, the notion of competition is often seriously misunderstood. It so happens that developers do not set out to buy the best possible archaeology, that is, the most securely dated and documented interpretation of, say, Early Bronze Age occupation in a given region of Northern Italy, as could be provided by the best archaeological operator. Developers simply want, following the regulations in force, their grounds to be cleared of archaeological remains as quickly and cheaply as possible. Economic competition in the field of archaeology has therefore nothing to do with scientific competition: it is simply an incitement to excavate for the lowest possible costs, as unfortunately can be observed every day. Scientific research is of course also subject to various calls and grants, many of them highly selective and competitive, emanating from national and international bodies. But the criteria for choosing between competing proposals have little if nothing to do with the lowest possible costs, and much with the research project proposed by the bidding departments or laboratories, and their record of excellence and delivery. Private sector research does of course exist, but

it thrives mainly in economically rewarding domains (such as medicine, weapons, food, transport) where quality can be directly controlled and enforced, and where research has mostly applied rather than fundamental objectives.

– *Fifth*, the ‘Code of Ethics’ is a noble notion that may be relevant or applicable in some (possibly Protestant) countries of Western Europe, but is it not pertinent, to be realistic, in many parts of our continent and in much of the world. Such a code supposes in fact a shared commitment to strong scientific control, which does not seem to be the case, for example, with the first attempts at introducing commercial archaeology in France.

– *Sixth*, as a final point to return to our preoccupations with the current global economic crisis, it is clear that the effects of such a crisis on commercial companies, in any economic or cultural field, are quite different and more challenging than is the case with public bodies operating under the guarantee of the State.

4 A case study : the introduction of commercial companies to French archaeology

As we all know, and as we can further appreciate from the analyses and details provided throughout this volume, the effects of the current economic crisis on archaeology are serious indeed. Many colleagues in private companies have lost their jobs, and there is also a risk that much scientific data and documentation will definitely disappear – just like the professional expertise generated over the years. We have, of course, to express our feelings of solidarity with these jobless colleagues.

I would like now to take up as a test case the example of France, where commercial archaeology was introduced only in 2003 (see also Schlanger & Salas Rossenbach, this volume). Over the years, France had accumulated serious delays in matters of archaeological heritage protection. One of the reasons was that for long archaeology did not play much of a role in the construction of national identity: the country’s ‘noble’ ancestors were rather the Greeks and the Romans, and the Louvre, with all its rich holdings in these domains, contains almost no finds recovered from the French soil. It was only in 2001, some time after the Malta convention was ratified, that the parliament passed a law which installed the ‘polluter pays’ principle and which created a national research institute in charge of preventive archaeology, INRAP, which took charge of evaluations and preventive excavations across the country in collaboration with the universities, the CNRS, the ministry of culture and the archaeological services of various towns and counties. For my part, I have participated in the drafting of the law, and I served as INRAP’s first president from 2002 to 2008 (see Demoule 2002, Demoule & Landes 2009).

The sudden generalised application after 2001 of the ‘polluter pays’ principle to all development projects across France led to numerous reactions, especially in regions where preventive archaeology had hitherto been poorly practiced. These reactions coincided with the arrival of a new conservative majority in power. Resentment against preventive archaeology in general focussed on the 2001 law, and the parliamentary majority decided in 2003, among other amendments to the law, to open archaeology to commercial competition.

Presumably made under the expectation that excavations costs would be reduced, this decision was clearly ideological in its motivations. It certainly had no scientific justification: the scientific community as one vigorously protested this decision, through demonstrations, petitions, newspaper articles and so forth.

Internationally, the EAA board issued a declaration whereby, taking into account the traditions in each country, the French system of preventive archaeology was perfectly coherent. At the same time, the European Commission in Brussels received complaints regarding the 'state organisation' of French archaeology – and then rejected them (2 April 2003) on the grounds that it was the sovereign right of each member state to set the organisation it saw fit in the field of culture. Thus, for the member states of the European Union, there is absolutely no compulsion to introduce commercial competition in archaeology.

In the first years following the 2003 amendments, there was little competition to be seen from commercial companies, who had to obtain a licence from the ministry of culture in order to operate. From 2007, however, this competition begun to be increasingly felt, to the extent that it represents now something like a third of archaeological excavations undertaken in the country. It should be stressed that in France archaeological assessments or diagnostics prior to excavations can only be carried out by public bodies, for the most part INRAP or the licensed services of towns or départements (counties). The legislator sought here to avoid the risks, observed in quite a few countries, of private companies, under pressure from their commissioning developers, having so little luck at findings archaeological remains at all. For the same reasons, private archaeological companies in France cannot be directly linked to developers, even if some attempts are being made now to bypass this rule. Of the twenty or so private companies now licensed to operate in France, two are foreign (Swiss and English). At least one company, having applied highly reduced costs, went into bankruptcy and raised the fate of the excavated finds and related documentation (see annex II, in this volume; for some UK advice in this matter).

The introduction of commercial competition in French archaeology has had a number of effects, including several that were not anticipated. Excavation costs, to begin with, have not actually seen any significant reduction – which at least shows to the developers that the rates practiced by INRAP were in no way excessive. Together with that, the defects of the system are becoming apparent. For example, there are known cases of private companies which, having won their contract by proposing lower prices, went to the developer to renegotiate and increase the price on the pretext that the evaluation did not fully reveal the extent and complexity of the area to be excavated. In other cases, some private companies simply ceased excavating as soon as the limit of their revenues was reached, while others applied far more summary (and cheaper) methods than initially commissioned. The reactions of the French ministry of culture have been variable. By law, its services are responsible, in each region, for prescribing excavations, for issuing permits to the operators, and for controlling the quality of their work. In some cases, the regional services welcomed and even encouraged the arrival of private companies, which made it possible for them to increase the number of participants and retain power and importance. As well, their level of scientific exigency towards private companies is often reduced, in comparison with INRAP standards. A paradoxical situation was also observed where one state service unduly favoured a private company at the expense of another state service, INRAP.

Another harmful consequence of this ideologically promoted commercialisation has undoubtedly been the fragmentation of the archaeological process. Before then, the methodology for excavations and for the recording and analysis of archaeological finds could be defined in a homogenous way by INRAP. With the array of participants now in existence, it is possible to find different parts of

the same archaeological sites excavated by different operators following different methodologies, making any coherent synthesis impossible. It is clear that this system of commercial competition, however desirable it was to some for political and ideological reasons, will have to be considerably reconsidered also in scientific terms as soon as circumstances allow.

5 Towards a coherent approach to European archaeology

In a recent issue of the journal *World Archaeology*, dedicated to ‘Debates in World Archaeology’, Kristian Kristiansen wrote a paper entitled “Contract archaeology in Europe: an experiment in diversity” (Kristiansen 2009). Comparing the different systems of preventive archaeology in operation, Kristiansen regrouped them into two main categories – those of statist (or ‘socialist’) inspiration, and those of ‘capitalist’ obedience – and concluded that the former offered the best guarantees of scientific quality and communication. With the crisis, it becomes all the more timely for us European archaeologists to come and think together, especially within the EAA, on what could be the more relevant kinds of organisations for European Archaeology. Decisions need not be taken of course in the immediate future. But we have to put on the table all the current problems, make them explicit and debate them together.

The crisis shows us that, following twenty years of growing economic and commercial deregulations, the ‘hidden hand’ of the market has somehow lost its touch, and seems not to work, at least not in any simplified form. Without the massive state interventions of the states of the Western world, the economic situation would have been even worse. Closer to our concerns, there is ample scope to reconsider the value of the ideas that cultural heritage might be just a merchandise, and archaeology a commercial service to be provided.

More specifically to the discipline, recent research in methods and theories have focussed on the conditions in which archaeological reasoning and hypotheses – such as ‘post-processual’ or ‘critical’ theory – were being generated. However, as archaeologists, historians and indeed social scientists, we need also to be critical and reflexive regarding the *concrete* structures and institutions within which archaeological research is conducted, concrete conditions which cannot be separated from the archaeological discipline as a whole.

To find a source of optimism in the economic crisis, it can be expected that the new programmes devised in France and in other parts of Europe to encourage the economy will lead to large scale state investments in such public works as roads, railways or other infrastructures programs, which in turn will create more jobs for preventive archaeology – and generate new knowledge about the past. Be it as it may, the complex situation emerging from the global economic crisis was not expected, and could well have serious and long lasting effects on archaeological heritage management and scientific research. Such bodies as the EAA can take a leading role in the ensuing debates, and it is our collective responsibility as citizens and as professional archaeologists to take part and to contribute.

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