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What kind of being do we humans want to become? Our most precious quality is becoming, and our freedom lies in choosing to try to become one thing rather than another, aspiring toward one ideal rather than others. ... Increasing specialization is of fundamental importance because it bears directly on the issue of the kind of being we are becoming.
– Fathali M. Moghaddam, 1997:127

I often wonder what archaeologists think of the state of the world, and how they envision the future. I do so because archaeologists have so very little to say about it, especially where I work and study. It is in that light that I decided to write this short commentary. It is about archaeology, technology, and ethics. It is about what historian Robert Gerard West (1995) terms the “rapidly scientification of humanity.” It is, ultimately, about specialization—and the “kind of being we are becoming.”

My overarching concern here is with archaeology’s blind (uncritical, unreflective) celebration of the ideology of technological progress, thus violence.¹ While the fetishization of science and technology in archaeology is certainly not new, it is perennially reaching ever more disturbing heights. To that end, I ask: What does the unchecked scientization of heritage and heritage stewardship mean? Specifically, what does it say about archaeology’s stewardship ethic?

While I have been reflecting upon these issues for some time now, my interest (and concern) escalated a few years ago when I encountered Fathali Moghaddam’s profoundly important book The Specialized Society: The Plight of the Individual in an Age of Individualism. Moghaddam’s thesis is simple: while late modern hyper-technologization and concomitant hyper-specialization may benefit a privileged few in the form of material reward and prestige, it is a death knell for the individual and society at large.²

Despite these early ruminations, it was ultimately University of British Columbia’s 2014 Archaeology Day that prompted me to put pen to paper. The abstract for the event, titled “Digital Perspectives on the Past: New Methods and Research in Digital Archaeology,” opens with this statement:

Digital methods are revolutionizing the way most archaeologists do their work. New geospatial technologies, including ground-based and airborne methods of remote sensing (e.g., laser scanning, or the use of unmanned aerial vehicles or ‘drones’) now allow for the rapid and accurate 3D recording of archaeological phenomena from single artifacts to excavation units and even entire landscapes.

If this sounds to you like it was ripped from a CIA briefing on U.S. military activity in Afghanistan, you are not alone. You are also not wrong. In reality, every technology mentioned above has military roots and applications, raising fundamental ethical questions about their use with heritage.

Indeed, there are enormous externalities³ or “hidden” socioenvironmental costs associated with the technologies described. All digital technologies, for example, require metals and plastics that are linked to human exploitation, warfare and industrial-scale environmental destruction. The industrial-scale disposal (dumping) of electronic or e-waste in (on) so-called “developing” countries is also well documented. Of course, driving this “rapid digital transformation” is cheap energy, itself directly linked to war and global ecological breakdown (think resource wars, mass extinction, climate change).

Archaeologists need to consider their technologies within what environmental

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sociologists call the “industrial ecosystem” (Harper and Fletcher 2011:108). Like industrial economies, industrial and digital technologies depend on mining the earth for minerals and materials (e.g., metal ores, or petroleum derivatives that make plastics):

Industries extract raw materials from geological sources and transform them into ‘products’ that you use, consume, and ultimately discard—sometimes quickly in a throw-away economy. But a broader and more integrated view of this process would include not only production and consumption, but prospecting for mineral sources, extraction from sources, discarding solid wastes in various sinks, and—sometimes—recycling materials. Capital and energy investments are required at every stage...

Thus, rather than thinking only about producing and using products, you can envision the broader process as sort of ‘industrial ecosystems’ that would ideally function as an analogue to biological systems. But unlike respiration in a biological ecosystem, or even the burning of materials for fuels, consuming materials such as metals, concrete, plastic, and glass does not turn them into gases after use. They either accumulate somewhere as solid wastes, are vaporized, or are otherwise dispersed into soils, water, or the air.

Failure to account for one’s place within the industrial ecosystem is to practice archaeology in a socioenvironmental vacuum. The UBC Archaeology Day abstract ends with this prompt, presumably written for the benefit of both conference participants and attendees: “Archaeologists are only beginning to come to terms with the practical and ethical implications of this rapid digital transformation. This symposium explores some of this new terrain.” Despite this stated concern for “ethical implications,” I note a complete absence of critical engagement with the “ethics” of digital technology in the abstracts of all eleven scheduled presenters.

All this does not bode well if one is truly concerned with the ethics of “rapid digital transformation,” or what archaeology critic Robert West calls the “rapidly spiraling scientification of humanity” (1995:ii). West’s concern is with how archaeology renders other people’s heritage—predominantly Indigenous peoples’ heritage—and to what ends. As West points out, if scientific archaeology constitutes colonialism—as it does in every sense of the word (Nicholas and Hollowell 2007; Ravetz 1971; Smith 2004)—then increasing scientization furthers the colonial agenda. For West, scientization is significant “because specialists inform the State about who we are as citizens, and impose identities on us which partly dictate how the State regulates our access to resources” (West 1995:ii; see also Feenberg 2002 and Bridge 2014). Put differently and more concisely, West thinks British Columbia archaeologists “inform the State about who [First Nations peoples] are as citizens” for the purpose of control (see also Smith 2004).

Further, Moghaddam (1997:127-8) points out that, contrary to conventional wisdom, increasing specialization does not “correspond to ‘better’ knowledge, or beings, or anything else.”

In some cases specialization may increase survival chances, but the quality of what survives—its worth in moral, artistic, or other important terms—is independent of survival. The most important choices about what we should strive to become, are essentially moral in nature. Among the most consequential of these choices are those concerning the type and degree of specialization we undertake.

Thus, science and technology are not the answer; indeed, they can be considered the root of the problem (Böhme 2012; Feenberg 1991; Leiss 1972 [1994]; Mander 1991).
If academic archaeologists are interested in honestly discussing the ethics of archaeology—which I do not think they are—the conversation about science and technology is ultimately about capitalism, neoliberalism and globalization (Springer 2011, 2013). A useful and necessary point of departure for future discussion of ethics in archaeology, therefore, is Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster’s (2011) book What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism (Monthly Review Press, NY).

At the end of the day, the cautionary tale, as Emerson put it in 1847, is this: “Things are in the saddle, And ride mankind.” It is in this light that archaeology finds itself firmly and unyieldingly planted on the wrong side of history. Indeed, Emerson’s turn of phrase gives a whole new meaning to the notion of the “cowboy” archaeologist. Meant to signify the rugged, adventurous and outdoor character of archaeology and archaeologists, it now signifies to me the discipline’s essential links to scientism and materialism. In a way, this makes sense insofar as academic disciplines (re)present the dominant culture (Moghaddam 1997:23-51). It just turns out that our culture is the culture of capitalism, consumption and domination, and technology lies at the heart of all.

Notes

1. The link between technology and violent industrial-scale heritage destruction is well as established, as is the central role of the state in facilitating that destruction (Leiss 1972, 1990; Mander 1991; Blaser et al. 2004; Bodley 2008; Foster et al. 2010; Springer 2011, 2013; Bridge 2014; Moens and Zorzin 2014; Hutchings and La Salle 2014a). The technology–heritage destruction nexus is best captured in the famous I=PAT equation, whereby Heritage Impacts (I) are the product of Population (P) × Affluence (A) × Technology (T).


3. For mainstream economists, externalities are the “unintended consequences” or “side effects” of an “otherwise rational and socially benign system. They include pollution of water, air, and soil...” (Magdoff and Foster 2011:39). My point here is that archaeologists rarely take account of externalities (Flatman 2007, 2012; Goldenberg 2014). Rather, they typically operate in a “silo” whereby contradictions are simply rationalized away, a practice that is commonplace in our highly technologized (Leiss 1990) or “McDonaldized” (Ritzer 1993) society. In light of excitement surrounding drone technology, a relevant example of the externality concept is Hall and Coyne (2013).

4. Human social environments “encompass the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined groups of people function and interact. ... The social environment subsumes many aspects of the physical environment, given that given that contemporary landscapes, water resources, and other natural resources have been at least partially configured by human social processes” (Barnett and Casper 2001:465). A central element of and major disruptive force in the late modern social environment is the industrial ecosystem, thus capitalism (Foster et al. 2010).

5. As far as I am aware, no academic archaeologist in British Columbia offers a course in archaeological ethics, and serious discussions of ethics at regional archaeology conferences are a rarity. These two points are correlated insofar as “forgetting” is a learned behavior (Hutchings and La Salle 2014a, 2014b).
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