Material Culture and Education in Archaeology

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State of Knowledge and Current Debates

Introduction

In the 1970s, while strongly influenced by a certain interpretation of oriental mysticism, the former Beatle George Harrison released the album Living in the Material World (1973). Imbued with the sounds of sitars, the songs were presented as musical alternatives to the Western way of life, particularly the US capitalist variety. Barely 10 years later, the theme of the material world returned to the music scene. Madonna’s rendition lacked Harrison’s orientalism (2003), declaring more complacently that “you know that we are living in a material world” (1985). To continue with our musical references, Pink Floyd’s rock opera invoked a schoolboy choir against “dark sarcasm in the classroom” as, ultimately, they didn’t “need no education.”

The assertion that we live in a material world is no novelty to either the world of art or academia. Interpretations of the different sets of meanings resulting from these relations, however, are varied and can be construed from different perspectives. Among them we are concerned with how these sets of relations negotiate learning relations and the constitution of social subjects through materiality. The 1970s and 1980s marked a true conceptual turn in both archaeology and education. Our intention is to briefly outline a panorama of such a conceptual turn, as a guide to our present understanding of the partnership between these expressions of human activity.

Material culture is a constant presence in human life. We are born, grow up, and die interacting within diverse constellations of materiality, devised for different purposes: these are the structures, objects, and modifications which make up our leisure, work, and dwelling spaces among other countless possibilities. Material culture, being everything that is made or modified by human beings and that makes up humanity’s day-to-day experiences, is therefore independent from time and even space.

One of the roles of this materiality is the transmission of knowledge, whether the result of a learning process – e.g., when making a tool – or by shaping the existing models of education as in the spatial layout of a classroom. We understand education as a learning process, a flux of knowledge in which the elders have a duty to cultivate the immature while guaranteeing their right to
“shake up and question everything that is enshrined in the name of what is yet to come” (Brandão 2007).

Historic Panorama
If we now move away from the world of music and focus on the academic world, an example of a sharp analyst of the multiple meanings of material culture can be found in the British archaeologist Julian Thomas. Thomas proposes an understanding of the changes in the way material culture has been conceived as a key to the changing relations between people and the varied manifestations of materiality. Starting with the ideas of materiality of Aristotle, through to medieval scholastics and present-day philosophers, Thomas constructs an overview of the world of ideas and its effects and relationships with the constructions of the material world (Thomas 2004, 202–250).

A second route of inquiry, still within the realm of philosophy but from a perspective which is closer to the history of science, is to reflect on the changing conceptions of material culture within the very field of archaeological science. This choice can be understood based on the authority exerted by archaeological discourses over analyses of material culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As part of a process of constituting and consolidating sciences, history was granted dominion over the analyses of written texts, anthropology dealt preferentially with certain specific cultures, and archaeology remained in charge of ordering, describing, and explaining what we call materiality. Therefore, the underlying question for this second route of inquiry would be how archaeology – perceived as the realm of material culture – understands its own object of study.

It must be highlighted, however, that the very basis of archaeological science allocated the materiality that archaeologists ought to study to past times. Therefore, the science that studied the human past was named archaeology (in Greek, “knowledge of the origins” or “account of things old” (Funari 2003, 10)). Although this definition was outlined throughout the nineteenth century, a significant proportion of scholars define their area as aiming to understand past human times through the analysis of material artifacts. In a recent edition of the book, Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice (2008), British archaeologists Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn present archaeology as:

Archaeology is the ‘past tense of cultural anthropology’. Whereas cultural anthropologists will often base their conclusions on the experience of actually living within contemporary communities, archaeologists study past humans and societies primarily through their material remains – the buildings, tools, and other artifacts that constitute what is known as the material culture left over from former societies. (Renfrew and Bahn 2008, 12)

Archaeology, as presented by Renfrew and Bahn, is constructed from the context of cultural anthropology. With its focus upon the past, the discipline turns material culture into a gateway into human history. Objects are subject to rescue and reconstruction and apt to reveal certain past events or mechanisms of past cultures. This perception of material culture as revealing is only plausible within a certain theoretical discourse about archaeology. Still, as we stated above, it is not the only way to understand materiality or even archaeological science.

Although material culture is enmeshed in human history, it was only in the nineteenth century that it was born as a concept within the studies of prehistory. The French geologist Boucher de Perthes was among the first to use the concept to analyze objects produced by humans during prehistory in his works Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes (1847) and De l’homme antédiluvien (1860). In his analyses, material culture enabled him to make assertions about a human past which had remained unrecorded in writing.

In over 150 years of existence, the term, which has become central to archaeological studies, has been given many different meanings. Archaeological practices of the cultural-historic strand, with their strong nationalist heritage, understood material culture as specific evidence of what humans built and therefore as artifacts. From such vestiges we can elucidate the way certain cultures work. Culture, in this view, is defined as the sum total of all ideas, activities, and materials that characterize
the nature of a certain human group (Jones 1997, 17). It would therefore constitute a social legacy of certain shared traditions, institutions, and ways of life, among other elements (Childe 1974).

Within the cultural-historic theoretical universe, artifacts are configured as cultural indicators. Gordon Childe, the Australian archaeologist who laid the foundations of this theory, asserts that artifacts, through the knowledge they allow, are formative of cultures in an archaeological format. It is through the analysis of archaeological culture that one could understand, for example, how:

(…) even in prehistoric times barbarian European societies behaved in a distinctively European way, very vaguely anticipating the contrast which over the past thousand years became flagrant, with African and Asian societies. (Childe 1974, 13)

Within an imperialist mind-set and context, Childe puts forth that artifact assemblages would bear the characteristics of the cultures where they are produced. Therefore, even prehistoric Europeans would have been “superior” to the prehistoric men of Africa and Asia, as they were, after all, already European. A direct correspondence is established between a presupposed cultural group and the sets of materiality produced by it.

Whereas the continuators of the cultural-historic traditions perceived archaeological cultures as bearing explicit and therefore incontrovertible truths, Childe warned his readers:

The reader must understand the hypothetical character of most archaeological conclusions. We can only ask for him to accept the most likely and most generally admitted deductions although these are still only probable. It is to prevent boredom that question marks are omitted, which otherwise might as well accompany most assertions. (Childe 1974, 19)

Despite the warnings about the hypothetical character of material culture, artifacts were still understood as objective providers of “correct data” about certain cultures in several theoretical quarters.

Processual archaeology, as inaugurated by the work Method and Theory in American Archaeology (1958), by the archaeologists Gordon R. Willey and Philip Phillips, questioned the effectiveness of cultural-historic studies and proposed new analyses that would focus on understanding the uses of artifacts by human beings. According to Phillips and Willey, cultural-historic archaeology had delved into the artifact form and the development of grand timelines which afforded little information about the actual cultures which had produced the artifacts under scrutiny.

Influenced by theories of cultural evolution and in an open dialogue with cultural ecology, processual archaeologists opened new lines of inquiry into how certain cultures lived and used their artifacts. In this new view, archaeology became a science without boundaries. According to the French anthropologist and archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan, material culture and the objectivity which it granted to archaeology allowed the discipline to surpass spatial and chronological boundaries and elaborate syntheses of the general and the particular in reconstructing the objects studied (Leroi-Gourhan 1945).

The access to certain cultures that was enabled by this specific way of recording, as well as its objectivity, began to be challenged, particularly from the 1980s onward, with the birth of postprocessual archaeology and the strengthening of postmodernist theories.

The humanities in general and archaeology in particular sought to redefine the concept of culture and the objectivity of the researcher. In this new light, the idea of identifying cultures through archaeological artifacts as espoused by both the cultural-historic and the processual trend became a harder equation to solve.

The difficulties met when defining cultural boundaries among human groups would stem from the sheer impossibility of ascribing clear-cut identities to groups or even individual people. In this scope identity is understood as a series of fluid processes of constructs that answer such questions as “Who am I?” or “What groups do I belong to?” Archaeologies linked to postprocessualism answer these questions in multiple ways which vary depending on individual and group engagements in time and space. According
to the Jamaican-British researcher Stuart Hall, identity is configured as:

(...) something formed overtime through unconscious processes and not something innate, existing in conscience at the time of birth. There is always something ‘imagined’ or fantasised about its unity. It is always incomplete, always ‘in the process of’, always ‘in the making.’ (Hall 2005, 38–39)

The unstability of identities is accompanied by the mutability of the various images of culture. If within certain theories it would be possible to work with fixed and predetermined cultural categories which condition identities in the post-processual and postmodern view, “culture” doesn’t exist as a solid, homogenous, and single category. On the contrary, it is understood as a fluid process which always varies depending on the interlocutor’s view. The latter may or may not share the ethnicities, that is, “practices and cultural visions of a certain community of people which differentiate them from others” (Giddens 2005, 206).

It must be stressed that all the theoretical currents outlined here are subject to many nuances. Even within processualism there is no consensus about authors’ autonomous existence in relation to certain power discourses (Zarankin and Senatore 2002). In this case material culture can take on different roles in mediating the relationships between discourses or between discourses and subjects (Shanks and Tilley 1982; Hodder 1999). In order to understand the role of material culture within these theoretical stances, one must use the teaching tool of highlighting the different intersection points between them as theoretical lines to form a general framework of the ways in which these theories read the world, in terms of both material and intangible culture. This allows us to use them as tools to think about learning processes. André Leroi-Gourhan, for example, fuses biology, genetics, anatomy, material culture, and social life in a beautiful narrative about the innate and the learned. On aesthetics he says:

These levels, the physiological, technical, social and figurative will here represent the great clusters into which feelings are ordered. In man, references to aesthetic sensibility are rooted in the deepest visceral and muscular sensibility, in dermic sensibility in the senses of smell, taste, hearing and vision; thus, the intellectual image, symbolic reflection of the tissues of sensibility in their entirety. (Leroi-Gourhan 1971, 268)

To outline all aspects surrounding gesture in their organic and artificial paths is archaeology’s basic proposal. Reflections on day-to-day social life, practices, and ideas cannot lose sight of the ways in which this knowledge is transmitted and how it expresses human relations.

Gordon Childe’s Europeanizing identification of material culture seeks to highlight the tangent points between technical know-how, ethnic expression, and the symbolic feedback of social identity. Tracing the evolution line of European civilization also means a search for the didactic path through which symbols are transmitted as well as recognizing their impact on the day-to-day tangible past and present. What processes are involved in the constitution of the European? How can the right steps toward civilization be taught?

Andrés Zarankin elaborates on the central tenet that materiality, a product of human intention, not only responds to but also configures learning mechanisms in Western society (Zarankin 2001). Far from being built randomly, school space operates within a panoptic logic of control and arranging of ideas, repressing subversive qualities, and defining misbehavior. Walls erected by the state, behind often templelike facades, domesticate the minds of its pupils into sacred and unquestionable dogmas.

According to Andrea Lisset Pérez (2007, 228), education is of paramount importance to understand the socialization processes which reproduce and update different cultural traditions. Although overlooked by anthropology for an important part of its history, the works by Marcel Mauss and Émile Durkheim between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century operated “a fundamental epistemological rupture to understand the educational phenomenon” (Pérez 2007, 228).

In his work Transmission of social cohesion: tradition, education (1969), Marcel Mauss sees education as a traditional obligation to socialize new generations (Pérez 2007). Within this mechanism of transmission of cultural habit,
corporality, sex, age, and social differentiation are combined into discrete learning phases. Still, new generations are not mere imitators of adults. The fact that their spaces are not clearly defined enables them to cross boundaries that adults no longer challenge. New generations observe the interconnections between practices and knowledge and may refuse to hand them down, bringing about a fresh novelty that may reformulate social processes. Their actions—e.g., games—are not mere reproductions, but creative constructions of the social world’s meanings.

It is in this contest that new proposals mobilize contemporary archeologists to perceive themselves not only as interpreters of the materiality produced by past bodies and the past bodies produced by materiality but also their own present socialized body. While the scrutiny of the discourse outlined the biopolitics involved in the construction of truth, the real effects of these strategies on everyday life were lost—the bodies and identities made by discourses became secondary. And by doing so, we ended up maintaining the old proposition of a single universal knowledge, “the discourse,” whose intelligibility was the privilege of a few initiates: academic intellectuals. In the words of Danna Haraway, “Who wouldn’t grow up warped? Gender, race, the world itself—all seem the effects of warp speeds in the play of signifiers in a cosmic force field” (Haraway 1988, 566–577).

Questioning the excesses of the discursive paradigm, the author seeks a return to objectivity that is not positivist but which is capable of taking a further step toward the creation of truths that allow us to live:

Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see. (Haraway 1988, 583)

Responsibility is a key word that has occupied international archaeology since the creation of the WAC in the 1980s. A self-awareness also came from social movements against the excesses of totalitarian, colonialist, and imperialist states (and their scientists) around the world. A feminist objectivity, for example, means accepting the limits of one’s methods, questions, and self, allowing the emergence of questions and methods of others and their own different knowledges. We can only answer for our responsibilities. No science is done apart from scientists.

Central Questions
Material culture, as we have seen so far, has never failed to be a fundamental element in the development of social relations and identities. Its role in the learning processes of social habitus declares the undeniable alliance between education and archaeology. The question is exactly what such an alliance’s powers could be. Both elements have been used to demolish human creativity and impose a massified and eliticized proposal for collective behavior. How should we practice archaeology and education to ensure that they are not “Just another brick in the wall?”

Future Directions
When addressing material culture, we are dealing with physical, materialized constructions. But that material world is still not detached from the intangible contexts which inform these constructions. These correlations—dynamic, fluid, and extremely delicate—can still be grasped when reflecting on the very concept of culture.

Criticisms of normative identities as put forth by civil movements after 1945 allowed for the elaboration of new theoretical proposals for the concept of culture, expressed both in the postwar historic-cultural archaeological trend and in the processualist and post-processualist scopes. As well as the changes in the field of archaeology, multiple perspectives on culture signaled the need to consider the immaterial as a realm worthy of attention from the political sphere.

In this new context, UNESCO’s 2003 “Convention for the Safeguard of Intangible Heritage” was formulated with a view to guiding discussion within this new institutional field of research. This “recognizes a deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage” (UNESCO 2003). For UNESCO, dealing with intangible heritage would be an important way of dealing with
materiality itself and valuing human diversity (UNESCO 2005).

Analyzing perceptions about material culture in archaeology, we find it impossible to define material culture without considering its connections with the intangible world, especially if we lose sight of the political consequences of the theoretical models deployed to study materiality. Archaeology deals with material culture, but the basis of its objects of study, the concept of culture, refers to both the material and the spiritual world, so “there is no opposition between the two that can justify a study of ‘things’ alone (Funari 2003, 10).” Archaeologists’ attention must be brought to this correlation between the material and immaterial, and they must also perceive the political consequences of our research.

Among the crisscrossing paths and meanders of new proposals, we believe that the relations between archaeology and education, considering both their material conditions and immaterial impacts, delineate three paths that deserve our attention:

The first of these would be learning relations between professionals and civil society starting from the professionals’ point of view. Regarding that relationship we find that it has been concerns about the preservation of material heritage that have attracted most attention. The effervescence devoted to legal issues and conservationist social engagement are still considered key aims in the eyes of professionals seeking to engage with the lay public.

What we call Public Archaeology today would have emerged from that moment of valuing historic national heritage (Funari and Carvalho 2009). Despite the great value of that struggle and its frequent successes in impeding the excessive penetration of capitalism into places of memory and shared cultural life, we cannot deprive ourselves of a critical awareness of our own interests and practices. Archaeology was, as we have seen, born in the context of both European imperialism and ethnic nationalism; its logic promoted both the ideology of the dominant class and the activities of colonial power (Trigger 1984; Funari and Carvalho 2009).

The varied modes of public coexistence outside archaeology often go beyond our expectations. Over the past 40 years, they have been bravely fighting colonial realities and the normatizations of capitalist society (Funari and Carvalho 2009). Therefore we can’t imagine state-sponsored policies of management of this heritage as representing the social totality (Merriman 2004). As well as this, it is fundamental to reflect on the several ways in which learning occurs within these different groups. In this light we must stop considering gaps between our way of imagining the past and local ways of doing so as a deficit on their part that we should somehow compensate (Merriman 2004; Gomes 2006; Holtorf 2007). All societies have their own ways of knowledge and educational practices independent of the existence of schools (Pérez 2007), and it is just as important for cultural differences to be taught as it is for conflicts of interest to be negotiated. We therefore don’t believe heritage education to be a way of becoming “culturally literate” (Horta et al. 1999; Bastos 2006), as we don’t believe in the existence of cultural illiterates but in several cultural literacies.

This brings us to our second learning relationship between professionals and civil society from the standpoint of civil society. It is exactly at the point when we see ourselves as the teaching elders and devote ourselves to cultivating the immature that new paths come to shake off our most set in beliefs, the time when the educator becomes educated (Freire 1980).

Whether it be in classrooms, fieldwork, or TV broadcasts, extra-academic media that contribute to circulate our work offer us a point of view that lacks scientific parsimony (Taylor 2007) and which is therefore free of our prejudices and obstinacies. As part of the learning process about society, we must bid farewell to our scientific authority, pry open our Pandora’s box (Latour 2000), and place our practice at the center of a discussion with those who are its public, consumers and appreciators.

From the 1970s, archaeologists influenced by Marxist or postmodernist theories began to question themselves about the social role of archaeology and especially the bases of the relationships
between academics, their research, and society as a whole. The work Public Archaeology by US archaeologist Charles Robert McGimsey, professor of anthropology at the University of Louisiana, is considered a landmark on the route to establishing this new field of archaeology (Merriman 2004, 3). What later became known as Public Archaeology is therefore an area of archaeology which focuses on public interest in general and which developed in order to respond to that very need of dealing with dissonances and conflicts of interest (Merriman 2004, 2).

During the last Meeting of the Brazilian Archaeology Society, in Goiânia/GO, September 2016, Alfredo González-Ruibal presented some thought on archaeology’s social and political responsibility in public conflict scenarios. The “public” we work with is a rough definition for anyone who is not an archaeologist; we should remember that there are many “others” outside our disciplinary milieu. On that account, González-Ruibal makes a crucial question: should we really support everyone’s claims? In 2016, Brazilian democracy was mined by a parliamentary coup that gave way to even more elitist and conservative politics, which also gave way to ultraright and pseudo-fascist movements. Ironically, they claim the right to openly speak against immigrants, native peoples, marooners, LGBTQ+, black, women, and laborers. And here the question above falls: should we support racist, sexist, elitist, fascist public claims?

We face still threats against diversity, democracy, and freedom, which must be faced conscious of our situated knowledge. This is the moment to reassemble the bodies disintegrated by postmodernity and carry on a critical and ethical archaeology. We must ask questions that take us toward the respect for diverse ways of living. And our stance is clear: no fascism!

Finally, the third learning relation can be seen internally within the very field of teaching archaeology in higher education. In Brazil the field’s growing social importance can be seen particularly clear when we look at the 13 graduate courses that emerged over the past 10 years. But great powers bring great responsibilities, as we argued. In another paper (Ribeiro et al. 2017), we found that important themes such as gender and feminist studies are barely mentioned on the political and educational programs of said courses. The expansion of work markets and training in higher education places the difficult task that we have just outlined in the hands of the old guard, to cultivate unripe fruits while allowing oneself to be reformulated by their novelties and to hand down a discipline that will be ethical, socially responsible, self-critical, passionate about its practice, and conscious of its force. This is the only way we can provide a truly liberating education (Freire 1980).

Cross-References

▶ “Public” and Archaeology
▶ Activism and Archaeology
▶ Archaeological Ethics, Interdisciplinary Contributions to
▶ Archaeological Pedagogy, Decolonization of
▶ Archaeological Resource Management: The Changing Role of the State
▶ Archaeology: Why It Matters
▶ Brazil: Cultural Heritage Management Education
▶ Community and Archaeology
▶ Community Archaeology
▶ Cultural Heritage and Communities
▶ Cultural Heritage Management and Native Americans
▶ Educational Tools and Techniques in Archaeology: Overview
▶ Ethics in Teaching and Archaeological Education
▶ Ethics of Commercial Archaeology: Brazil
▶ Formal Education for Undergraduate and Graduate Students, Archaeology in
▶ Heritage and Public Policy
▶ Indigenous Archaeologies
▶ Intangible Cultural Heritage
▶ Materiality in Archaeological Theory
▶ Minority Heritage
▶ Narrative and Storytelling for Archaeological Education
▶ Power and Knowledge in Archaeology
▶ Public Archaeology, The Move Towards
Material Culture and Education in Archaeology

- Social Movements and Archaeology
- Symmetrical Archaeology

References


