

COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

by Jeremy A. Sabloff



[Following are excerpts from a revised text of the Distinguished lecture in Archeology at the 95th Annual Meeting of the AAA, held in San Francisco, California, November, 1996. Sabloff demonstrates the convergence of anthropology's and archeology's concerns with reaching out to the public in general and teachers specifically on the issues of our day.]

In the 19th century, archaeology played an important public and intellectual role in the fledgling United States. Books concerned wholly or in part with archaeology were widely read. Data from empirical archaeological research, which excited public interest and was closely followed by the public, indicated that human activities had considerable antiquity and that archaeological studies of the past could throw considerable light on the development of the modern world.

As is the case in most disciplines, as archaeology became increasingly professionalized throughout the 19th century and as academic archaeology emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the communications gap between professionals and the public grew apace. This gap was particularly felt in archaeology because amateurs had always played an important part in the archaeological enterprise.

The professionalization of archaeology obviously has had innumerable benefits; the discipline has little resemblance to the archaeology of 100 years ago. With all the advances in method, theory, and culture historical knowledge, archaeologists are now in a position to make important and useful statements about cultural adaptation and development that should have broad intellectual appeal. Ironically, though, the professionalization or academization of archaeology is working against broadly disseminating current archaeological understanding of the past.

I am convinced that as archaeology rapidly expanded as an academic subject in U.S. colleges since World War II, the competition for university jobs and the institutional pressures to publish in quantity and in peer reviewed journals has led to the devaluation by

academics of popular writing and public communication. Such activities just do not count, or even worse, count against you.

If some academics frown upon popular writing, even more do they deride popularization in other media, such as television. Consequently too few archaeologists venture into these waters. Why should the best known "archaeologist" to the public be an unrepentant looter like Indiana Jones? Is he the role model we want for our profession? We need more accessible writing, television shows, videos, CD-ROMS, and the like with archaeologists heavily involved in all these enterprises.

It is depressing to note that the academic trend away from public communication appears to be increasing just as public interest in archaeology seems to be reaching new heights. If we abandon much of the popular writing to the fringe, we should not be surprised at all that the public often fails to appreciate the significance of what we do.

How can American archaeologists promote more popular writing by professional scholars? The answer is deceptively simple: we need to change our value system and our reward system within the academy. Just as Margaret Mead and other anthropological popularizers have been sneered at by some cultural anthropologists, so our Brian Fagans are often subject to similar snide comments. We need to celebrate those who successfully communicate with the public, not revile them. Ideally, we should have our leading scholars writing for the public, not only for their colleagues. Some might argue that popular writing would be a waste of their time. To the contrary, I would maintain that such writing is part of their academic responsibility. Who better to explain what is on the cutting edge of archaeological research than the field's leading practitioners? We need to develop a number of our own Stephen Jay Goulds or Stephen Hawkings.

Not only do we need to change our value system so that public communication is perceived in a posi-

tive light, more particularly, we need to change the academic evaluation and reward system for archaeologists (and others!), so that it gives suitable recognition to popular writing and public outreach. Effective writing for general audiences should be subject to the same kind of qualitative academic assessment that ideally goes on today in any academic tenure, promotion, and hiring procedures. However, such a development goes against the current pernicious trend which features the counting of peer reviewed articles and use of citation indices...The whole academic system of evaluation...needs to be rethought...and the growing trend away from qualitative evaluation is especially worrisome.

As a call to action, in order to encourage popular writing among academics, particularly those with tenure, all of us need to lobby university administrators, department chairs, and colleagues about the value and importance of written communication with audiences beyond the academy. Academics should be evaluated on their popular as well as their purely academic writings. Clearly what is needed is a balance between original research and popular communication. In sum, evaluations should be qualitative, not quantitative.

There clearly is a huge irony here. The academic world obviously is becoming increasingly market-oriented with various institutions vying for perceived "stars" in their fields with escalating offers of high salaries, less teaching, better labs, more research funds, and so on. Most academics not only are caught up in this system but have bought into it. At the same time, those scholars who are most successful in the larger market place of popular ideas and the popular media and who make dollars by selling to popular audiences are frequently discounted and denigrated by the self-perceived "true schol-

ars." These latter often have totally bought into the star-centered broad academic market economy and are busy playing this narrower market game!

In order to fulfill what I believe is one of archaeology's major missions, that of public education, we need to make some significant changes in our professional modes of operation. This is a four-field problem with four-field solutions! The Society for American Archaeology has just endorsed public education and outreach as one of the eight principles of archaeological ethics...I strongly believe that we must change our professional value system so that public outreach in all forms, but especially popular writing, is viewed and supported in highly positive terms.

It is my belief that, unfortunately, the bridge to the 21st century will be a shaky one indeed for archaeology and anthropology—perhaps even the proverbial bridge to nowhere unless we tackle the communication problem with the same energy and vigor with which we routinely debate the contentious issues of contemporary archaeological theory. The fruits of our research and analyses have great potential relevance for the public at large. The huge, exciting strides in understanding the past that anthropological archaeology has made in recent years need to be brought to the public's attention both for our sakes and theirs!

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