

AUTONOMY AND EPISTEMIC HUMILITY:
REASSEMBLING THE DISCIPLINE*

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Abstract: The enthusiastic acceptance of ways of thinking and doing borrowed from other disciplines and research traditions should be replaced with a thorough examination of what they bring, in order to preserve the capacity of archaeology to set its own research aims and to choose its tools. Instead of using the prestige benefits offered by outside authorities, we should make modesty a central epistemic virtue.

Keywords: archaeology, sociology of knowledge, subaltern status, interdisciplinarity, reflexivity.

My views on a desirable archaeology are the product of attempts to put into writing feelings and thoughts generated during a long contact with a particular tradition of archaeological research, assisted by some knowledge about what happens outside it.

I would like an archaeology closer to what it claims to be, to what archaeology textbooks make us expect. They do not teach submission to what institutionally advantaged archaeologists think and claim that knowledge is attainable by anyone, on common principles of construction and evaluation. The teaching of archaeology is something else, especially when done without textbooks, in a master-apprentice relationship: you can learn how to repress your desires, to abandon what you may think outside the professional box (sometimes a very small box), to accept durable inferiority, to make yourself a victim of symbolic violence. Archaeologists in subaltern positions are institutionally and symbolically discouraged from saying and publishing what they think, or even from thinking what they should not say or publish. Such situations are more frequent than we are accustomed to accept, especially when higher education institutions are plagued by adjunctitis, and more people are torn between revolt against a system that does not allow them to develop their capacities and gratitude for their temporary, low-paid jobs. In 2007, I participated in a conference in Vienna and, during a dinner planned by the organizers, I listened to a 10-minute presentation of views on ethnic phenomena, better than most archaeological writings

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on the subject, made by someone (I do not recall his name) perhaps 40–45 years old. It was excellent and some of the people at the table encouraged him to publish. He was reluctant, telling us that in his position he could not afford to engage in theory, and that some people might resent his involvement in this kind of research. Reliance on reputation and status for the evaluation of scientific knowledge might be rejected even by those who have excellent reputations and positions: it seems equally annoying to have your views admired for who you are perceived to be as it is to have them dismissed for the same reason.

We are all educated inside more or less open traditions of archaeological research and have experienced some degree of local blindness and harmful hierarchical knowledge claims. Some might reasonably expect that the wide world of archaeological knowledge might help them get free from local constraints, but the discipline itself is a subaltern one. It is subjected to other disciplines. To history, as it happens in Romania, where it is labelled an auxiliary discipline, to anthropology, as some people complain happens in the US (*e.g.*, Robert Dunnell, when arguing against one subjection and for another¹), to other disciplines from which it takes ways of reasoning and looking at the world. It is also subjected to cultural heritage and to the state. The prominence of actor-network theory, stable isotopes and DNA in the current international archaeological research agenda confirms our reluctance to impose specific goals. Many discussions about what the archaeology really is revolve around the subordination of archaeology to other disciplines: “archaeology is anthropology or nothing”², “archaeology is history or nothing”. Apparently, without subordination we are nothing.

Subjection is a strong word in our interdisciplinary world, but it has the merit of focusing the attention on the impact of knowledge archaeologists believe useful, but are trained not to produce. It directs our thinking towards its opposite, autonomy, which I understand as the capacity and responsibility to make our own rules, to appropriate whatever theories and analytical devices we think we need for our common goal: the understanding of humanity starting from its artefactual component. This task can be approached in different ways, but all of them have something to do with the study of actual artefacts. In order to do this, archaeologists use ways of thinking and of doing, some invented by them, most invented in other disciplines. Autonomy is made of the persistent use of these and of the persistent

¹ Dunnell 1982.

² See, for instance, Gillespie, Joyce, Nichols 2003. The title and the conclusion of this article, “archaeology is anthropology”, published in *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*, in a special issue titled “Archaeology is Anthropology” give an impression of forceful imposition within a local context oblivious of what is happening with the discipline in other circumstances.

thinking about them³. Although taking knowledge from other disciplines is frequently represented as “borrowings”, in many cases archaeologists have devoted a long time to make them their own and to develop them in directions they need, from statistics to phenomenology. These elaborations are something that only archaeologists can produce and to give them up in favor of a transdisciplinary knowledge which relies on an uneasy combination of good intentions and current politics, ignoring power differences and assuming almost instant comprehension⁴ from people with different interests, backgrounds and educations is a mistake.

“[A]rchaeologists cannot be excused the responsibility for setting our own theoretical and contextually appropriate agenda”⁵, however controversial and difficult to defend that might be. They should resist the imposition from the outside of other things to do under the name of democratic accountability, of reflexivity as “the self-critical awareness of one’s archaeological truth claims as historical and contingent”⁶ or as tools for embedding science in society⁷.

I would like to see the discipline reassembled around the common goal stated above and free from attempts to reduce it to already existing traditions of research or to subordinate it to authoritarian theoretical commitments. As long as we value what we can learn from people who have similar scientific interests, we need to recognize the relevance of their work for what we do and their capacity to support or undermine our research. The main engine for producing an advancement of knowledge is the recognition of quality by competent competitors who, at the same time, have the knowledge needed for accurate assessments and are the least inclined to accept as true other views than their own⁸. The only theoretical commitment we need is that we need theoretical elaborations. Otherwise archaeology would become a craft or a specialized way of doing something else than our common goal. We need to enhance its capacity to generate and protect specific knowledge from the current invasion of

³ See Fish 1994, p. 22: “... autonomy, ... is not a matter of refraining from commerce but of stamping whatever is imported or appropriated with a proprietary imprint. While it is true that disciplines do not originate much of what appears in their operations, it is not the materials they traffic in that makes for their distinctiveness, but the underlying purpose or point in the context of which those materials acquire a disciplinary intelligibility. Autonomy... requires the incorporation of foreign elements, which once incorporated—seen in the light of the discipline’s underlying point or purpose—are no longer foreign. Autonomy is a social and political achievement (rather than something initially given), and it can only maintain itself by reconfiguring itself in the face of the challenges history puts in its way.”

⁴ For the damage done by time constraints in current interdisciplinary projects, see Gosselain 2011, p. 133.

⁵ Yoffee, Sherratt 1993, p. 8.

⁶ Hodder 2003, p. 56.

⁷ Nowotny, Scott, Gibbons 2001, p. 253–254, paraphrased in Trute 2005, p. 55.

⁸ Bourdieu 1975, p. 23: “... the producers tend to have no possible clients other than their competitors... in a highly autonomous scientific field, a particular producer cannot expect recognition of the value of his products (‘reputation’, ‘prestige’, ‘authority’, ‘competence’, etc.) from anyone except other producers, who, being his competitors too, are those least inclined to grant recognition without discussion and scrutiny.”

political interests, local or global, no matter whether we perceive them as good or bad, to preserve its autonomy and to promote that of its inhabitants by encouraging internal subversion as much as the conservation of already established theories and methods. A reassembled archaeology fighting for more autonomy would discourage superficial borrowings and practice radical skepticism against fashionable “turns”, would require thorough examination of anything archaeologists are accustomed to use in the discipline or want to bring from outside, thus enabling its inhabitants to be more than local subalterns of unexamined ways of thinking.

The degradation of autonomy in the name of interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and other ideologies is affecting all disciplines. The autonomous evaluation of research is a target for current influential views on science and society. A group of sociologists, who have proposed “mode 2 knowledge” both as a description and a project for the development of knowledge, present autonomy as something akin to epistemic arrogance, and this is not just an academic opinion, it is the norm for the official policy on “science and society” in Europe⁹. In their view, “to keep insisting upon a separate space for basic research, with autonomous measures for quality control, appears... to be a relic of an earlier era”¹⁰. They claim that we are witnessing a shift from a culture of autonomy to one of accountability, from discipline-based peer review evaluation to one which involves not only “a wider and more eclectic range of ‘producers’, but also orchestrators, brokers, disseminators, and users”. And this is because “scientific ‘peers’ can no longer be reliably identified, because there is no longer a stable taxonomy of codified disciplines from which ‘peers’ can be drawn”, and because “clear and unchallengeable criteria, by which to determine quality, may no longer be available. Instead, we must learn to live with multiple definitions of quality, a fact that seriously complicates (even compromises) the processes of discrimination, prioritization, and selectivity upon which policy-makers and funding agencies have come to rely”¹¹.

The mode 2 perspective, like the mode 1 perspective it declares to be obsolete, is a situated one. One can recognize the dominance of the main problem facing evaluators from outside the disciplines they are evaluating: how can we evaluate research without reading what the researchers write (there is too much to read, we don’t know what to read, and even if we could read and understand everything we would not be able to choose among conflicting views). What is difficult for outside evaluators is also difficult for someone who looks at research from the inside, especially in archaeology, a discipline split into various traditions of research that have distinct criteria of evaluation. What is excellent in them is, or should be, a matter of constant debate with internal outcomes. Interventions from the outside distort that debate, indispensable for the production of scientific knowledge, by introducing criteria of compatibility between political views and scientific views.

⁹ Rabinow, Bennett 2012, p. 54.

¹⁰ Jasanoff 2003, p. 235.

¹¹ Nowotny, Scott, Gibbons 2003, p. 187–188.

We need assessments of what mode 2 thinking can do to a research program in particular circumstances. For instance, if one works as an archaeologist on ancient ethnic phenomena in Romania and in the evaluation of such work are involved “producers” from outside the discipline, that is, in this case, people holding dogmatic, mostly nationalistic, views and “orchestrators, brokers, disseminators, and users”, usually having the same views, occasionally in milder versions, that person will be soon forced to abandon the research suggested as viable by a translocal discipline, because it does not fit the local expectations, *i.e.* the identification of the “true” ancestors of the nation, the task assigned to many archaeologists more than a century ago.

In a world in which we have to decide “whether to be slaves in the empire of the commodity or puppets in the shadow of the state”¹² our autonomy is limited. Our research has to be accepted and appreciated by those who are not archaeologists. Archaeology is expensive. We cannot do without funders, public or private, and they have their views about what is worth knowing, about scientific thinking, disciplines and interdisciplinarity¹³. We should examine such views carefully, not just make virtue of necessity. The funders are entitled to their views, but they have also the right to have access to what we think, something that should be not just what they knew before hearing from us. Therefore, they should defend our right to construct interpretations and we should do the same. Our position of privilege carries the obligation to say what we think to anyone who is interested. This is how I understand “telling truth to power”. Forfeiting this obligation does not help anyone in the long term and does not lead to a democratic participation in the production of knowledge: no matter how many stakeholders are recognized we will never be able to “negotiate” with all of them; they are the whole present and future humanity. This is not about imposing what we think on others, it is about telling them what we think, a basic commitment for a useful conversation.

More autonomy could be gained by belonging to a better integrated discipline. The fierce divisions in archaeology seem to be over and pluralism seems to be the word of the day. Methodological pluralism is necessary, theoretical pluralism desirable, but a world of equally valid approaches we refuse to sort or, as it happens, attempt to incorporate¹⁴ in discourses that will make everybody happy is not a scientific one. This is politics, this is taking the view of the politicians who claim to represent everything that seems worth representing while acting only for themselves. It is also dangerous: if we refrain from evaluating the knowledge claims of our colleagues, evaluators and funding agencies will do that, thus reducing the capacity of the discipline to produce autonomous knowledge. Archaeologists will be tempted to write not for people who are inclined to criticize them, but for outside experts who will value their compliance.

¹² Appadurai 2001, p. 48.

¹³ The link between funding and interdisciplinarity is common knowledge among researchers. For political science, see McKenzie 2007; for interdisciplinarity as ideology, see Rajski 2009.

¹⁴ Hodder 2003, p. 62; Webmoor 2007, p. 228.

Research is based on a paradoxical combination of high expectations and epistemic humility¹⁵. We have to imagine ourselves as having the capacity to get all that there is to know about our subjects and we need not to be over impressed with ourselves in order to understand distant worlds that are easily transformed by our wish to dominate them, especially if we represent them as familiar.

Epistemic humility allows a better understanding of other ways of thinking inside the discipline, enables researchers “to achieve the sympathetic understanding ...necessary for recognizing what is valuable in those views...”¹⁶, while epistemic arrogance tends to isolate the knowing person from the discipline and from the colleagues, making one fit for the position of an expert associated with those who politically dominate scientific research and who usually are arrogant themselves¹⁷. The two attitudes also lead to contrasting evaluations of metanarratives, usually favored by panoptic dispositions cultivated by the political environment, which tend to promote big pictures and to downplay the conflicting results offered by actual archaeological research.

Epistemic humility also helps recognizing the limits of our interpretations by putting what we know into the perspective of our goals, whose origins should be constantly examined, and into the perspective of our means. By assisting reflexivity, it can separate what we can do from what we cannot, at least not at the present time, and in particular conditions, what is desirable from what is imposed as desirable. Knowing what we can do is knowing what our freedom is made of, giving us more chances to do something else than reproducing the world around us in our research¹⁸.

When it goes beyond description and does not subject the powerless archaeological record to some theory, archaeological research solves problems. It is certainly nice to do that, but I would like to see articles which mention what is not supporting their conclusions, fewer problems solved, more problems discarded, more problems identified, more about what can be imagined but cannot be solved. This could enrich archaeological theory by adding to grand frameworks personal, contextual, accounts about what archaeologists “think they are up to”¹⁹ and thus open to examination what goes without saying in archaeological research.

Epistemic humility could also bring our knowledge closer to the public. It is much easier to communicate about knowledge desires than about knowledge

¹⁵ Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992, p. 252: “...the right posture consists of a highly unlikely combination of definite ambition, which leads one to take a broad view (*à voir grand*), and the great modesty indispensable in burying oneself in the fullest detail of the object.”

¹⁶ Sterba 1998, p. 4, quoted by Roberts, Wood 2003, p. 273.

¹⁷ See Sheila Jasanoff’s plea for “technologies of humility” designed for the use of the decision-makers (2003).

¹⁸ See Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992, p. 198: “The true freedom that sociology offers is to give us a small chance of knowing what game we play and of minimizing the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve, as well as by the embodied social forces that operate from within us.”

¹⁹ Geertz 1974, p. 29.

claims. Leaving aside triumphalist attitudes, we should replace a negotiation in which participants try to impose their knowledge with the perspectives opened by discovering common ground in what we would like to know about the past.

My plea for autonomy does not aim at making archaeology a *sui generis* discipline, at equal distance from the others. If we want to go beyond offering archaeological replications of the world around us, we need sociological reflexivity and ethnographic imagination to guide our perceptions of reality and our evaluations of what we take from other disciplines, epistemic conditions for creating distinct archaeological views able compete with those of other historical social sciences. There is much work to be done here.

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AUTONOMIE ȘI MODESTIE EPISTEMICĂ PENTRU REFACEREA DISCIPLINEI

REZUMAT

Acceptarea entuziastă a unor moduri de a gândi și de a face lucruri împrumutate din alte discipline și tradiții de cercetare ar fi bine să fie înlocuită cu examinarea cuprinzătoare a ceea ce aduc acestea, pentru a păstra capacitatea arheologiei de a stabili scopuri și de a alege instrumente de cercetare care să-i aparțină. În loc să folosim prestigiul conferit de autorități din afara disciplinei, ar trebui să facem din modestie o virtute epistemică centrală.

Cuvinte-cheie: arheologie, sociologia cunoașterii, statut subaltern, interdisciplinaritate, reflexivitate.