Think Globally, Dig Locally: Archaeology and Social Justice

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In 2008 my mind was opened to a very different understanding of what archaeology could be. I had just sat through a session of the Northeast Anthropological Association meeting held at UMass Amherst. The talks provided a retrospective on archaeological studies conducted through UMass Amherst over the past three decades, with a traditional UMass perspective emphasizing issues of colonialism, gender and social inequality. They had all been interesting, but UMass Anthropology faculty member Arthur Keene stole the show with a retrospective of his own career path, emphasizing his increasing dissatisfaction with his practice of archaeology through the 1980s that ultimately resulted in his shift toward developing a Service Learning program in order to engage students more directly with issues of social justice. Rather than being defeatist, his talk was inspiring, and he closed by challenging the audience to develop an archaeology of social justice for a new generation of students, scholars and activists. In short, he recommended that archaeology should be used as a tool to make the world a better place.

Public Archaeology, aimed largely at increasing the public awareness of history, had been going on since the 1970s. This movement matured through the 1980s and 90s toward more socially active approaches intended to bring voices to those of the past, largely through working with local and often descendent communities. The 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act for the first time gave a legally powerful voice to Native Americans in the way federally-funded projects were conducted and established a process for the repatriation of human remains and sacred items to descendent communities. In the 2000s, Community -Based archaeology, that is research conducted by and for local, often indigenous communities was becoming a specialized practice within archaeology. So in many ways, Keene's challenge to us a decade ago was in step with much broader changes in the field that had begun to consider how an archaeology of social justice could be conducted. So where do we stand today as a discipline? The idea for this essay was inspired in part by listening to a "Women in Archaeology Podcast" on a recent commute. The discussion focused on high points from the 2017 American Anthropology Association meeting held recently in Washington, D.C., in particular a session titled "Teaching Archaeology as Social Justice". One of the topics covered in that session included the use of Service Learning in the study of a Texas pauper cemetery. In this case, students worked closely with the community and living descendants to relocate unmarked burials and associate plots with the names of the deceased. Other talks emphasized issues of archaeological ethics, critical pedagogy, and the importance of local knowledge production.

Logo credit: Heidi Nielsen and Bonnie Plourde

For those further interested in the social justice movement in archaeology, a conference titled "Archaeology and Social Justice" will be held on March 2nd and 3rd at the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. The description of the meeting states: "Within the context of archaeology, we conceive of social justice as pertaining to issues of privilege and opportunity that affect the makeup of scholars in the field, efforts among archaeologists to engage with the public and with broader social and political discussions, and the degree to which archaeological scholarship and pedagogy intersect with or impact these issues. It also refers to the asymmetries of power and structural inequalities in society at large" (http://blogs.brown.edu/archaeology/workshops/sotf2018/).

As the State Archaeologist, and as part of the Office of Public Engagement, I find myself challenged to develop practical ways of conducting an archaeology of social justice. Some goals are relatively straightforward, such as attempting to reach out to a broader section of the community when developing archaeological programs. Finding locations to study that better reflect the diversity of Connecticut's past and present populations is also an important goal. But both of these efforts are top-down approaches. It is more challenging, and more important, to engage directly with socially and economically marginalized communities to better understand the types of research they themselves want to see conducted. This is the first step toward developing local knowledge production that actually benefits communities in ways that make sense to them. As historical archaeologist Charles Orser said in 1996 "think globally, dig locally." Ultimately I think this is exactly what Art Keene was challenging us to do that day my eyes were opened to a new direction for my work.