STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE?



Catholic University, Washington DC

World Archaeology Congress

Hundreds of archaeologists gathering for the globalism-aware and politically-aware conference.

Our session – a bunch of us from Stanford, Doug Bailey from Cardiff, Jonna Hansson and Fiona Campbell from Gothenburg – was the latest in our *creative heresies* series to explore the edges of archaeology. It didn't go too well – a dreadfully depressing room at the edge of the campus, no access to the room till 15 minutes before the session, technical hitches. Excellent material though!

I have been doing this stuff for ten years and really wonder now whether its worth trying multimedia at this kind of meeting. Academics are supposed to be professional communicators, but that's not how it often is. And the equipment is never available with out a struggle (I always take my own).

I was discussant in a long and good session about politics and ethics. Never mind a professional code of ethics – like an archaeological hippocratic oath – what is at stake when archaeologists get involved in defining people's sense of who they are.

Otherwise the meetings had little attraction. Am I just getting old? – the talk goes round in circles and there is so little originality.

Randy McGuire made a comment to me that sums up the state of archaeology. The edge has gone. The radical thinking that turned the discipline round in the 70s and 80s has been absorbed and neutralized.

And did anyone outside of archaeology ever notice?



Randy bases his thinking in grand Marxist theory. We could do with some grand and bold thinking again in archaeology.

So while WAC was founded as a gesture that celebrated the place of archaeology in the contemporary world and foregrounded its sensitive cultural politics (just think of the Bamiyan Buddhas or Ayodhya), after 15 years we are left, I think, with a tired discourse that has developed little beyond the realization that material histories do matter to a lot of people, and in different ways.

What does WAC have to say beyond this? The main web site has a pop-up about the Gulf saying that humanity's cultural heritage is being damaged. Yes, right. Surely we can do better than this?

Now I am going to have to come clean and say just what I mean here – this can wait for a few days.