ARCHAEOLOGY NEEDS BOLD SCIENCE

A seminar with Bjørnar Olsen and and Chris Witmore at Stanford Archaeology Center.

Our title
Innocence regained? Is there a new consensus in archaeology? An alternative case for bold thinking.

I wrote *Social Theory in Archaeology* and *Reconstructing Archaeology* back in the 1980s partly because I was so disenchanted with archaeological thinking – we wanted to raise the level of debate about archaeological accounts of the past – from our point of view then the discipline was so naive and woolly in its thinking. So we got into Marxism and post-structuralism, whatever helped us think through what it is that archaeologists do and how they think about the societies they dig up.

To Chris, Bjørnar and me, archaeology doesn't look much different now. There are many new text books and readers that proclaim a mature discipline, but we judge their quality of thinking to be dire. We hear colleagues saying that the old vigorous debates (reconciling economic factors with ideological in the emergence of complex society, arguing over the case for values and commitment in scientific research, whatever) are resolved in a new consensus of pluralism. No – we see the consensus, if there is one, as spurious and based upon a lack of serious debate, little close reading, superficiality.

So tonight we made an argument for bold science rooted in a commitment to serious scholarship. And we tried to show how much archaeology is way wide of this mark.

Specifically it sounded quite conservative really – we want an archaeology based upon …

1. scholarship – source criticism, close reading, argument, critique
2. with the archaeologist as cultural critic
3. with the archaeologist as cultural producer – not discovering the past, but simply working with what is left of the past

4. in a pluralist discipline and public sphere (characterized not by consensus but real difference of opinion and judgement)
5. where our laboratories are not factories of facts but sites of experiment, risk, and collaboration
6. and where the academy is not a place where we train archaeologists (as fieldworkers and cultural resource managers), but where we explore big bold and awkward archaeological questions (the ones that make the discipline so fascinating) and give students the chance to do just the same
7. and where we cherish bold broad thinking that runs against the grain – for where else is it to happen?

   The responses

8. a relativist response – this is only your view of things (whatever the evidence you submit) and others think the discipline is in a fine shape – "I choose to side with those who I agree with and I don't have to abide by these standards – they are simply your subjective opinion"
9. you are elitists – to define standards is to exclude some, maybe even the majority, and is an arrogant assumption of authority
10. academics have always complained like this – what alternative is there?
11. change only comes from outside a discipline, or at least the fringes, so you are wasting your time and just sound like carping elitists who can't deal with pluralism and are actually reducing the chances of bold thinking.

    A visitor from our Humanities Center came up to me afterwards and, in a complete abrogation of responsibility for the working of our discipline, said she thought that archaeologists simply deal in what happened in the past – and why had we not talked about the past. I suppose most people take to archaeology because they like the adventure of what they see as discovering the past. They are not really after an intellectual experience – all this awkward questioning. And I do fear that maybe too many of our students at Stanford really just want to hang out in the Mediterranean on some romantic or adventurous field project.