

Activism: The End of History – Adjourned

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The editors of *Forum Kritische Archäologie* have asked me to write something on the question of archaeological activism. My question in return – activism for what? – was answered to the effect that the potential of archaeology or archaeologists in the “struggle” for a better world should be discussed in more detail.

What is a better world is answered very differently, especially in intellectual circles, but also in society as a whole. At the same time, the existence of a “bad” world is implied. In my observation, the constants have shifted towards a “better” world in the last twenty years: the clear differentiation of society into rulers and ruled is no longer obvious and decisive, for example, within North American and European late capitalist societies or between the global North and the global South. The structural differentiation into ruling and oppressed classes has given way to a constructivist diversification of issues. The shift of financial resources by the rulers of the South to the North also points to the fact that the global differentiation of power structures no longer corresponds to the classical scheme of “imperialist” exploitation. Overall, we can observe not only an atomisation of individuals, but also an individualisation of resistances against a supposed late capitalist system.

Academic discourses have always been incomprehensible to many and rarely claim to speak a language that everyone understands or to actively engage in social debates. Intellectual debates have often centred on the question of what constitutes social progress in the first place. While a right-wing intellectual “abolition of history” could be observed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such an abolition can now also be observed in left-wing intellectual circles (cf. *The Dawn of Everything*; Graeber and Wengrow 2022).

The aforementioned uncertainties in the assessment of the “world” are joined by a qualitative change in the state of the “world” and thus also in the possibilities of societies to shape their politics. While we assumed, at least until about 30 years ago, that the riches of our world would be sufficient for “everyone” if they were distributed fairly, and that accordingly social models without a domination of one person over another would keep open paradisaical access options to all resources for each and everyone, we know today that this will not be the case. The ecological state of the planet has, through the technical development of industrial societies, led to a situation in which the collapse of the ecosystem “world” is possible. It is not the over-exploitation of resources caused by a ruling class that has produced this state, but the participation of large parts of the societies of the North that is contributing to the current global development.

In this respect, activism can no longer necessarily involve improving the economic situation of large sections of the population in the sense of improving prosperity. Instead, in the highly industrialised countries of the North, it will have to be more about redistribution and, to some extent, de-growth through ecologically compatible technologies.

In this respect, an activist perspective again requires a clear definition of what we mean by progress. If we disregard the liberal-anarchist attempts to end history, i.e. the attempt to see no progress or regress in history, I would like to single out three aspects here that can be determined as “progressive”:

- The improvement of the health situation and the increase in life expectancy. Linked to this are infrastructural changes (e.g., access to clean water, introduction of toilets), improvements in the supply situation (e.g., access to food, basic medical care) and adequate technical development.

- The reduction of ecological contamination at local, regional, and global levels with the development of resilience strategies to deal with anthropogenically-induced climate change.
- The creation of cooperative and truly democratic conditions, i.e. free of domination, which allow the participation of all in a correspondingly resilient handling of the ecological situation on a global scale.

There are numerous social groups that support, sometimes contradictorily, such a progressive development. They range from grassroots activists of variously radical or system-adapted persuasions, NGOs and trade unions or workers' representatives and gender and diversity activists to political institutions and organisations that represent such objectives (e.g., UNESCO).

The contribution of archaeology can be directed at different target groups. If intended, general questions about the development of inequality, the social consequences of technological developments, questions about violence and counter-violence or the emergence of democratic or non-democratic institutions can also be answered archaeologically. For example, one of the main results of the Cluster of Excellence ROOTS is that economic and social inequality above a certain level leads to an increase in intra- and inter-societal conflicts and ultimately to system collapse. Another result demonstrates that high mobility, i.e. a high proportion of not only local but also non-local people, is part of the basic pattern of social relations. It also becomes clear that a democratic social formation without social oppression can exist independently of demographic variables or economic and technological potentials. One of the results of SFB 1266 "Transformation Dimensions – Human-Environment Interactions in Prehistoric and Archaic Societies" is that many prehistoric societies were able to operate sustainably despite climatic changes. It also becomes clear that "open" societies in particular, which absorb impulses from other networks, "cushion" critical ecological or political situations better than those that tend to be closed off from the outside.

What to do with such knowledge? Corresponding research results must be made available to grass roots movements, NGOs, but also political institutions, in order to support the associated political arguments and actions (an example of this is the Kiel Social Archaeology and Climate Change (SACC) Summit, cf. <https://www.jma.uni-kiel.de/en/research-projects/sacc>). Especially the long-term perspective can become an important argumentative aid for local and regional groups. Activism in this sense thus initially involves leaving the academic ivory tower and discussing the results achieved in the appropriate contexts of resistance to ecological and social catastrophe. No more and no less. The perspective of "think global, act local" can thus be extended by a "think long term, act short term."

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