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Zitiervorschlag

Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis. 2023. Archaeology, Coloniality and Modernity: A Response. In Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis, eds.: Archaeology, Nation, and Race – Critical Responses. Forum Kritische Archäologie 12: 148–153.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41380>
ISSN 2194-346X



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Archaeology, Coloniality and Modernity: A Response

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RG: So, Yannis, having read and reread the essays, I thought we might exchange a few impressions and respond to some of the challenges that have been offered in them, whether directly or indirectly. One of the first things that struck me, both in this set of papers and in other reactions to *ANR* (published, online and in academic settings), is how varied and “undisciplined” they are: each response seems to spin off in a different direction! I know that it was our intent and hope to engage a diverse readership, but I began to wonder whether there is true communication, as Despina Lalaki suggests there should be, or if we are talking to ourselves and past each other. I’m also thinking of the eye-rolling reproach that I often encounter, not least from colleagues within the profession, of those who would prefer that we ‘stay in our lane,’ do what we do best and what we are paid public money to do; that is, dig, publish and tell stories about the past. Why trouble the world with our half-baked meditations? And now we have gone and lured more well-intentioned, mostly young scholars to join us in this pointless exercise!

I think that what does bind these responses – and our own work – together is something that we mention in both the introduction and conclusion to our book, and that is the sense that many of the things that we were born into, whether economically, politically or disciplinarily, have reached a breaking point: we can no longer continue to do whatever it was that we were doing before. Neither our discipline nor any related to it can continue to run along the same tracks, based on an economy of incessant extraction and founded on violence and tremendous imbalances of power and privilege. Moving forward thus calls on each of us to look inward, personally and intellectually, and stake out a position, as each of our interlocutors has done, whether explicitly or implicitly. And by looking inward, each naturally focuses on what is nearest to them or most immediately affects them. So while they are each reacting, knowledgeably and thoughtfully, in a different idiom, they are resonant. More specifically, that resonance is founded on a discomfort with the continuing, troublesome ideological link between self-serving visions of biblical and classical antiquity and Western modernity (Robbins, Reilly, Koch), archaeology and coloniality (Tamur, Lalaki), or disciplinary purity and ethnic/racial supremacy (Mickel, Dodd). Archaeology – and especially that of the two countries that have been so fundamental to the Western world view – has too many real-world consequences to be allowed to preserve the fiction that nothing we say really matters, and that we bear no responsibility for people who are displaced, histories that are ignored, or racial inequalities that are rationalized or naturalized through our complicity. It is completely our business to understand the history of our discipline and the political and intellectual contexts in which it was formed, and we have much to learn from those who join us in this quest.

In the months that have passed since we published *ANR*, the linked political, environmental and ideological crises that were its very prominent accompaniment have only increased, as has the weaponization of “neutral” or “scientific” archaeological discoveries by racist and nationalist actors. Yet many colleagues cling to a belief that they should have no impact on the way we ply our craft. I think what these essays are telling them is that they are in for a rude awakening: the old ways of archaeology will not long be tolerated. Where our interlocutors do not agree – and what might leave any reader at loose ends – is what should be done about it. Lalaki and Tamur seem

to advocate most forcefully for the adoption of “a southern standpoint”, but how far should that affect our praxis? Mickel and Koch (and I think Dodd as well) are suggesting various modes of reform in how we go about our business, with the former pushing for a more radical unlearning (but how radical can it get, without losing sight of our craft?), while Reilly and Robbins perhaps play devil’s advocate by inquiring if there is something to be salvaged – or even unabashedly embraced – in emancipatory aspects of modernity and nation-building.

Getting to the heart of the matter, do you think that we have argued that archaeologists are complicit in some sort of conspiracy that “western modernity” has imposed on the world, and that this requires us to tear down our discipline and condemn all the work that has been – and continues to be – put into the discovery and interpretation of the material past? Or should we in fact cherish aspects of modernity and ‘civilization’, as Robbins suggests, as well as the empowering qualities of post-colonial nation-building, as Reilly implies?

YH: Well, let’s first say how grateful we are for these engaging and deeply insightful responses. They add to the reviews already published (Rizvi 2022; Bowman 2023; Gazi 2023; Havstad 2023; Lambropoulos 2023; Nakassis 2023; Papagiannopoulos 2023) and to the passionate engagement that I have experienced during public presentations of the book in Greece. If, twenty or thirty years ago, a discussion on the politics of our discipline was a niche matter, today, as you say, it is seen as essential and existential not only for archaeology, but well beyond it. Archaeology cannot continue its business as usual, with a few modifications here and there. Neither can it adopt an opportunistic attitude, adapting to the new conditions and benefiting from the current crises, a kind of archaeological disaster capitalism. What is needed is its drastic refoundation as an undisciplined discipline, no longer a servant of colonialist and nationalist narratives and of commodifying practices.

Our book was deliberately broad ranging, and it is no surprise to me that the responses here follow diverse directions. Yet there are certain shared themes that run through them. For example, the theme of purification which is central in Mickel’s piece can be also detected in Dodd’s contribution, when she emphasizes the need to re-establish relational connections with the messy world of non-human beings and entities, and in Tamur’s response reminding us of the need for epistemic justice, also central in Mickel’s article. Tamur problematizes the neat and sanitizing narratives of official archaeology which foreground discovery as a story of adventurous feats of white, western (male) archaeologists. Another example: the themes of polychrony, anachrony or multi-temporality surface in many contributions, notably the ones foregrounding the archaeology of the contemporary (primarily Koch) but also the ones that challenge the highly problematic, arbitrary divisions of time, imposing a time mark on when “real archaeology” starts. I see a real dialogue here, taking different paths but motivated by similar concerns.

As to the points raised by Reilly on the certain benefits of nationalism and the objections posed by Robbins that we present a flattened and rather unfair view of modernity, much can be said. Briefly, I do not deny that in certain contexts nationalist archaeology has fueled anti-colonial struggles. The case of Great Zimbabwe was mentioned. The site became a national symbol, but it mostly served to show that great feats were indeed the work of local, African people, not Mediterranean or European colonists. I see such a narrative, supported as it was by strong empirical evidence, as an example of decolonial archaeology, not so much of a nationalist one, although I would not deny that such narratives could take (and indeed, have taken occasionally) nationalist overtones. The notion of strategic essentialism is often presented as an argument here, the deliberate use, by subaltern groups, of essentialist narratives to describe themselves in order to advance anti-authoritarian or anti-colonial goals. While we all agree that nationalism is an essentialist concept, it can have at times strategic benefits, the argument goes. But even Spivak, who has been the proponent of this concept, has disowned it in an interview as it “simply became the union ticket for essentialism” (Danius et al. 1993: 35). So no, we should insist that nationalism is a derivative concept, sharing the same ontological and epistemic principles with colonialism, they are both different strands of an overarching regime of coloniality. In *ANR* we presented several examples of such a convergence, and we have spoken at length about the colonizing work of nationalism, its violence over bodies, territories, local/indigenous cultures and traditions.

Reilly also urges us to consider the critique of Olúfemi Táíwò (2022) who has argued that, from an African point of view, the recent drive towards decolonization denies African people’s agency, and their ability to creatively adopt institutions and practices of European modernity. There is much to agree with in his book, and we would certainly concur with the thesis that we should not “define the colonised strictly by the colonial experience” (Táíwò 2022: 183). There is also much to disagree with, and while in our book we have engaged in the careful, historically

situated, and contextually specific analysis he is urging us to do, giving due agency to the non-metropolitan cultures we are analyzing, we should rather concur with other African and Africa-based scholars and intellectuals in showing the intricate connection and mutual constitution of western modernity, colonization and racialization (cf. Mbembe 2017).

As for Robbins's strong but fruitful objections to our thesis, I feel that they are partly an outcome of different disciplinary traditions. We never intended to embark on a wholesale assessment of modernity or to produce a balance sheet of its positive and negative qualities. Our critical use of concepts such as progress and civilization was deliberate, as these are some of the most loaded terms in modernist archaeological narratives, often connected to discourses of cultural evolutionism, so popular with much of western archaeology since the 19th century. The critiques of such models, on both empirical and theoretical grounds, have been plentiful and systematic, with the most recent being David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* (2021; for a critique see Hamilakis 2022). I feel that when we utter terms such as progress or civilization, we and Robbins conjure up different images, we hear different things: we have in mind these teleological and hierarchical narratives, often with racist undertones; he perhaps hears a story of gradual improvement, with echoes of the 20th century, political emancipatory narratives. After all, in the political vocabulary of the Left, progress is still a future horizon to be achieved, a path full of possibilities, along the lines of a linear and developmental conception of time.

But beyond these disciplinary misunderstandings, I feel that there are genuine differences of perspective here which we should not attempt to conceal. Let's consider only a couple of points. "[T]he fact that the prestige of the distant past has been weaponized doesn't mean that the distant past doesn't deserve its prestige", he writes, but in our book we wanted to complicate the notion of pastness, arguing that it is inscribed in a specific modernist conception of temporality, while also pointing to the selection process at play, to the insistent foregrounding of certain pasts at the expense of others. Colonialism existed before modernity, he claims, but without wishing to idealize any period, no serious scholar would equate ancient colonization with that of European modernity despite some formal similarities; the latter was grounded on a specific construction of *Anthropos* as a white, male superior human being, entitled to "civilize" the world through conquest and plunder.

Moreover, Robbins seems to adopt here the liberal narrative of continuous progress of "humanity", despite the odds. We take it he does not subscribe to a teleological understanding of progress, and, like us, he would agree that these positive, emancipatory developments (the abolition of transatlantic slavery, the universal right to vote in elections, the right of workers to unionize?) were the outcome of often ferocious and bloody struggles. Nonetheless, Western modernity is worth rescuing, Robbins seems to argue, since, along with its horrors, it left us many good things. As we mentioned already, we are not in the business of producing a balance sheet of modernity but rather examining its specific entanglement with archaeology and with Hellenism and Judaism. And we would concur with scholars such as Lisa Lowe (2015) or Sylvia Wynter (2003), amongst others, that an examination of the emancipatory developments in western or European modernity cannot happen in isolation, since they were often achieved at the expense of the Others of Europe and of the West, at a serious cost for the colonized non-white beings. Can we really afford to discuss the French Revolution without examining and reflecting on the lessons of the Haitian Revolution at the same time? Or can we continue referencing the abolition of the Atlantic slavery without discussing its connection to the mass displacements of the colonized from China and South Asia as indentured labor, due to the associated labor shortage (Lowe 2015: 5)? In other words, to use Robbins's own argument elsewhere (Robbins 2017), we, the privileged of the Global North, need to accept that we are the beneficiaries of the long histories of extractive colonization of the rest of the world.

RG: I think, Yannis, that we can be even more specific: If we allow the methodological and technological advances in archaeology to be wielded without any accounting of the manner in which they are the wages and gratifications of coloniality and whiteness, then we invite not only the continuation of stark global (North-South) disparities in the practice and consumption of archaeological knowledge, but also the naturalization of modern ethnic and cultural categories and the inevitability of the late-modern order in our interpretation. Just as archaeologists universally recognize that using outdated excavation methods will lead to unreliable results, so should they accept that thinking with colonial categories will result in a pervasive, violent structuring ideology that colors every interpretation, beginning with material typologies and ending with "state formation" and "world systems" (Omilade Flewelling et al. 2021; Reilly 2022). It is an ideology that inhibits understanding no less than the crude excavation methods of the colonial looters of the past.

Thinking, along with Mickel, Dodd, and Koch, about what we might need to unlearn in the way we practice archaeology in the field and teach it in universities, we might be hesitant and uncomfortable with, for example, Mickel's call for "messiness." Does this imply relinquishing the care and precision upon which we often pride ourselves in the field? Are we turning our backs on the very nature of our "craft" (*sensu* Shanks and McGuire 1996)? I think not. Just as contemporary medicine has turned away from the absolutes of complete isolation from "germs" or the utter separation of mind and body in achieving physical wellbeing, so do archaeologists need to recognize the advantages of uncertainties and multiplicities, including those which occur at "the trowel's edge." The moment of understanding might not occur in tandem with that of maximum "cleanliness", but perhaps in relation to a failure to distinguish, or to a juxtaposition of incompatible observations (Greenberg 2022), or as Dodd suggests, at the moment of decentering the human agent. In fact, as in the cases both of the Silwan orchard described by Dodd or the hand grenade described by Koch, the "intrusion" of the present can be the moment of the most profound understanding.

Implicit in Koch's program of integration of the study of the contemporary ruin of al-Haditha in what would traditionally be termed a "biblical" excavation is the possibility of radical changes in both research paradigms and teaching curricula in Israeli academia, but we are very far from that objective, which would require a thorough restructuring of archaeological departments and the consequent loss of political clout, prestige and privilege that are attached to "Biblical" and "Near Eastern" archaeology. It will not be enough to merely "add diversity and stir." This is how I read Tamur's contribution as well: once the theme of "discovery" is removed from archaeological narratives (imagine the void in our online feeds, absent "discovery"!), and with it the themes of exploration and adventure that are so central to the current marketing regime of archaeology, what will replace them? I suspect that as the terrible cost of the extractive ideologies of capitalism and colonialism continues to manifest itself in our world, there will be an ever-growing demand for both a deeper understanding of the contemporary condition and the potential histories and political imaginaries encoded in pastness. This is how I understand the reverberation of books like *The Dawn of Everything*, or of our own discussion. Perhaps we are on the threshold of a new archaeological regime of care and healing (hooks 2009).

YH: Your comments, Rafi, bring up an issue which should be central to a discussion such as this one, and to any discussion on the politics of archaeology and of the material past in the present. For some time now, I have been uncomfortable with the compartmentalization of the critical debate in archaeology. It takes place mostly amongst two discrete camps: the "theory crowd" which is currently engaging in debates on ontology, on assemblage thinking, on relationality or the Anthropocene, and the "politics crowd" which is currently dealing with decolonization, whiteness and white supremacy. The two crowds often publish in different fora and go to different meetings, as if the topics are unconnected, while this division also carries implications for teaching. This, of course, is explainable and speaks of the divergent histories in archaeological thinking. It is also related to the political naivety of some of the mainstream archaeological thought, and the philosophical naivety which is often seen in the political discussion in archaeology. In our book, and in previous work, we have tried to bridge this gap, and this set of comments advances this cause further. In several commentaries and most notably in Dodd's, decolonization is also an ontological struggle, a matter of decentering the Anthropos of racialized modernity. Our efforts on decolonization cannot really succeed if they fail to confront not only the colonial conceptual and epistemic regimes but also the colonial bodily and sensorial apparatuses (cf. Hamilakis 2023); the cultural evolutionist thinking was not simply a false narrative on the past and the present, with no empirical grounding but with clear power effects. It was also an anaesthetic regime of panopticism, lacking the sensorially activated affectivity that is central to any relational connection, past and present. In addition, it was a temporal regime of linear progressivism and "development", a mode of thinking that is not unrelated to the current and on-going climate catastrophe.

But to echo your final sentence on care and healing, let's finish on a positive note: there are signs, here and elsewhere, that the landscape of critical archaeological debate is slowly and gradually changing. It is now much more diverse in terms of both practitioners and ideas, it is no longer dominated by a few "big men" of theory (situated in two or three centers in the global and mostly anglophone North), while an activist and openly political archaeology attempts to bridge the ontological, the epistemic and the political terrains, striving towards an affective archaeology of care. We hope to have collectively shown that in this pertinent moment and in this bridging effort, the materially and historiographically rich contexts of Greece and Israel, and the critiques of the foundational narratives of modernity such as Hellenism and Judaism, will need to be prominently present. They offer the potential to dismantle colonial and Eurocentric epistemic and political regimes from within, revealing at the same

time their internal logics. Furthermore the indigenous worlds of the Eastern Mediterranean, issues of potential essentialism and idealization notwithstanding, can teach us much on alternative sensorial and bodily states, on other relational understandings and temporalities.

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