
discussion article

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The end of the essential archaeological subject *Adam T. Smith*

Abstract

Archaeological investigations of identity have successfully challenged traditional accounts of archaeological subjects by splintering social worlds along axes of gender, ethnicity and class. However, in so doing, they have quietly reinscribed an essential archaeological subject as a locus of analysis and as a foundation for contemporary political action. In analytical terms, the crystallization of a limited configuration of social difference constructs archaeological analyses of identity as a tautology in which contemporary configurations are read as universal and enduring rather than as immediate constructions within specific social worlds. In political terms, the tension between a cosmopolitan drive to combat the appropriation of a global human heritage by nationalist interests and an advocative archaeology dedicated to providing subaltern groups with a privileged claim to a sectional past leaves the discipline in an untenable position. The end of the essential archaeological subject requires a closer analytical focus upon the sociopolitical constitution of subjectivity and a stronger resolve to resist all claims to privilege in the present founded upon archaeological pasts. The implications of this move are sketched in relation to the kingdom of Urartu, which ruled the highlands of eastern Anatolia and southern Caucasia during the early 1st millennium B.C.

Keywords

identity; subjectivity; politics; epistemology

In a seminal dissection of the cultural politics of difference that overtook Western liberalism during the 1980s, Stuart Hall challenged the dominant conceptualizations of identity forged upon a stable, historically transcendent subject. Declaring the ‘end of the innocent notion of the essential Black subject’, Hall argued that

the end of the essential Black subject is something which people are increasingly debating, but they may not have fully reckoned with its political consequences. What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black’; that is, the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which has no guarantees in nature (Hall 1996 (1989), 443; emphasis in original).

To generalize Hall's contention, identity is not a foundational category but rather one produced within specific historical and social conditions. As such, politics built exclusively upon simple reversals – predicated upon a privilege of the resistant over the powerful, the heterogeneous over the homogeneous, the feminine over the masculine – must give way to more sophisticated forms of solidarity (a move from what Antonio Gramsci (1971, 238–39) called a war of manoeuvre to a war of position).

Yet as much as any discipline (and arguably more powerfully than most), archaeology has long been committed to the production of essential historical subjects of the very sort that Hall contests: transcendent categories established within homogeneous repertoires of material culture located well beyond the immediate instrumental logics of society and politics. Archaeological research emerged during the late 19th century as a uniquely powerful apparatus of representation that provides contemporary understandings of sociocultural difference with histories of profound depth that manufacture essential subjects – the Native American, the Maya, the Assyrian, the Greek, the Chinese, the Egyptian, the Slav – as sociologically consistent and historically stable (a point that has been made in reference to a wide variety of research locales, including south-west Asia (Abu el-Haj 2001), Europe (Dietler 1994; Kristiansen 1992), and North America (Trigger 1980)). Over the last two decades, the end of the essential archaeological subject has emerged as a subtext for debates over the ontology of historical action (most visible in the rise of the 'agent' as the transformative locus par excellence) and epistemologies of the collective (located in various discussions of 'identity' amongst which class, gender and ethnicity have been the most regularly privileged). However, there remains considerable uncertainty as to the analytic and political consequences of this seminal theoretical development.

Even as class, gender, ethnicity and other forms of difference have splintered traditional representations of historical transformation that were once vested in homogenized systems or culture groups, the essential archaeological subject has been quietly reinscribed as a locus of analysis and, more forcefully, positioned as a foundation for contemporary political action. To clarify, we might pose the question of how is it that during the 1990s the two most prominent political agendas generated within archaeology were a global commitment to cosmopolitanism against nationalist appropriations (particularly in Eastern Europe, the former USSR and south Asia) and a local commitment (most notably in the US and UK) to a recuperative identity politics set against the cosmopolitanism of colonialism? Where the former embraces a sense of the subject unified by a profound commitment to humanity, the latter advocates specific crystallized subjects through the rediscovery of lost or neglected actors, such as African-Americans, women or the working class. Archaeological examinations of identity and difference have thus become caught up within a highly charged politics of reversal rather than staking out the analytical and representational terrain that must follow if the end of the essential archaeological subject is truly at hand.

This paper explores the archaeological subject in reference to two distinct archaeological literatures, the connections between which have been insufficiently explored to date (Meskell 2002 is an important exception). The

first set of writings encompasses the burgeoning literature on identity and the archaeologies of difference. Under this umbrella I include archaeological examinations of ethnicity, gender and class – theoretical perspectives that attempt to describe the sociology of ancient communities in reference to specific axes of difference. The second set of writings at issue here encompasses recent efforts to ground contemporary political action in the archaeological record. Within this literature I include studies advocating both a negative politics of cosmopolitanism (e.g. the anti-nationalists concerned with how the archaeological record should not be used) and a positive politics of advocacy and recuperation. What ties the two literatures together, I argue here, is their mutual interest in founding archaeological representations, and contemporary political action, upon a reconstituted essential subject rather than in locating analysis in enquiries that seek to expose the apparatuses, including archaeological research itself, that create and reproduce difference within specific social and historical configurations.

My thesis, following Hall, is that a simple oppositional politics predicated upon transhistorical subjects that link contemporary interests to homogeneous ancient actors is a highly problematic foundation for accounts of identity in the past and political action in the present. Rather than articulating the reproduction of identity categories within immediate constellations of social and political interests, this form of archaeology presumes a priori the stability of a certain apparatus of difference which segments social worlds along a stable set of social fault lines (most popularly gender, class and ethnicity). Instead of appropriating the power of archaeological representation for a simple oppositional politics, archaeology should investigate the production of social fault lines themselves rather than providing them with the aura of naturalness that comes from deep historicity (e.g. Bernbeck and Pollock 1996). In other words, we must prepare the way for the end of the essential archaeological subject and anticipate the political consequences of such a transformation. In order to ground my general critique of archaeology's account of subjectivity, I use the empire of Urartu, a hotly contested sociopolitical formation within the contemporary politics of Anatolia and Caucasia, as a case study. First, however, it is important that we come to some understanding of the source and character of the essential archaeological subject.

The essential archaeological subject

Where do archaeological interpretations locate the forces of social transformation and how do we differentiate these forces? Who, in other words, is the archaeological subject? We might also phrase this question in more rhetorical terms: who is the first person of archaeological interpretations? That is, archaeology is a field whose representations are almost exclusively framed in the third person (e.g. 'they' made these artefacts, built these sites and so on). But our ability to speak in the third person about the past presumes the existence of a locatable and coherent first-person point of view which constitutes the irreducible centre of both action and value. Archaeology's account of the subject has traditionally shifted in ways that mirror movements in the social sciences as a whole. While it is impossible to

provide a detailed cartography of such broad intellectual trends in the space available here, we can at least develop a sense, to continue the geographic metaphor, of the locations of continents even as the topology of their interiors must remain, for now, unexplored.

The archaeological subject beyond archaeology The traditional archaeological subject has generally emerged as a residual category of contemporary analytical positions that establish the ontology, sociology and historicity of action and difference. Overlapping movements in social thought have bled into archaeological theory to constitute the subject in three critical respects. First, the subject has been grounded within a framework of need allowing an essential materialism to hold the ontological centre. Second, identity has been fixed within a universalized and enduring sociology of difference that allows for a foundational stability in defining the axes of identity formation. Third, the modern self has been divorced from the premodern subject such that the latter is understood to have been almost entirely subsumed in an overwhelming social mass. It is in these overlapping accounts of subjectivity that we can describe the broad outlines of contemporary archaeology's first person formulated within the complex terrain of liberal political economy, Marxism and political sociology.

Archaeology's traditional subject has been most profoundly inscribed as a locus of needs, particularly material needs, that shape and constrain all relationships. We can locate the intellectual foundations for this view within liberal political economy where Adam Smith's (e.g. 1976, i, 18; 1982, 12) self-loving individual provides an early prototype for a universal subject predicated on material requirements. In Smith we find a universalized subject largely exhausted by needs – both biological ('the necessities and conveniences of life' (Smith 1976, i, 1)) and social ('the desire to please' one's peers (Smith 1982, 118 ff)) – but ironically realized most completely in the denial of these needs through frugality (as opposed to prodigality) (Smith 1976, i, 362; 1982, 189–91). It is not difficult to locate in this ontologically needy subject the foundations for various archaeological accounts of human materiality that stake interpretations of historical change in the functional satisfaction of fundamental human requirements.

Furthermore, Smith's subjects move within a highly crystallized socio-economic matrix where the price structure of commodities dissolves into fixed orders of people: landlords (rent), labourers (wage) and employers (profit). Motivations and interests within this social horizon are fixed in place in relation to the generalized account of need. Hence social difference is formulated expressly in reference to the satisfaction of need, providing a robust grounding for the crystallization of general lines of sociological division constitutive of a limited set of subject positions.

In a critique of Smith's formulation, Karl Marx offered a dual understanding of the subject: at once historicized, created within the social relations of production (hence the 'bourgeois subject'), and yet universalized, concealed by estrangement, yet awaiting the moment of realization. The tragedy of the proletarian subject, for Marx, lay in the alienation of labour from the worker such that productive activity is merely a 'means of satisfying

a need – the need to maintain the physical existence’ rather than a more profound expression of humanity’s ‘species being’ (Marx 1978, 75–76). ‘Man’ is not only estranged from his own labor and thus a sense of productivity as an end in and of itself, he is also estranged from others, mistaking himself for isolated and coerced rather than universal and free.¹ Marx’s subject is universalized in reference to a specific relation to the means of production, rather than being a foundational account of human nature. That is, to be proletarian is not an essential enduring position, but rather one open to redefinition as individuals come to a certain understanding of themselves in relation to the forces of history. Here Marx echoes Hegel in arguing that the uniqueness of the individual is made meaningful only in relation to the dialectic. For fascism, the subject is constituted in relation to a fundamental nature played out in history. Hence, in Nazism, Aryans are who they are simply because they are Aryans. Identity exhausts subjectivity. In contrast, Marx’s vision of subjectivity allows for anyone to assume the subjective stance of the proletarian (and indeed his emancipatory moment depends upon the proliferation of this consciousness) (Žižek 1999, 225–28).

The traditional formulation of the essential archaeological subject hinges not solely upon the centrality of material need and the crystallization of an enduring sociological lattice of difference, but also upon a historical distance from modern forms of subjectivity. In Durkheim, for example, we find the groundwork fully established for an explicitly premodern subject, one whose temporal distance allows for a homogenized social world to overwhelm any trace of the self. ‘In the early stage’, Durkheim (1992, 56) argues, referring generally to the ancient world, ‘the individual personality is lost in the depths of the social mass and then later, by its own effort, breaks away’. With this development, the individual achieves new status as an ‘exalted object of moral respect’ able to acquire legal rights over self and property, and history itself becomes an account of the steady flowering of personal dignity, an ‘autonomous centre of activity’ (Durkheim 1992, 57). But with the emergence of the self rendered as historical process, the premodern subject is thrown back into the ‘social mass’, coterminous with a homogenizing order, while the modern subject is highly personal and heterogeneous.

The traditional premodern subject anticipates certain strains of contemporary thinking on historical subjectivity. For example, Bourdieu follows Durkheim in narrating a critical shift in the subject from an ancient world where ‘there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization’ to a more modern epoch when the subject is specified in relation to individual agency negotiated through practices within shifting structural conditions of heterodoxy and orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1977, 164; cf. Smith 2001).

With the ascendancy of constructivism in the social sciences (that is, accounts of the self avowedly hostile to traditional modernist forms of essentialism and historical metanarrative), the autonomous status of the historical subject, so closely tied to the Cartesian *cogito*, was often dismissed as a relic of modernism’s discredited investment in self-transparency. Perhaps the most succinct critique of modernist subjectivity was made by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown in one of postmodern architecture’s founding

texts, *Learning from Las Vegas*. In an iconoclastic attack upon traditional framings of architecture's subject, Venturi and Scott-Brown (Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour 1977 (1972), 118) contrast modernism's ambition to build for Man with a more historically embedded effort to build for men, that is, markets: 'Developers build for markets rather than for Man and probably do less harm than authoritarian architects would do if they had the developers' power' (Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour 1977 (1972), 155).

While the elision of men with markets speaks volumes about postmodernist architecture's reconfiguration of the relationship between art – or perhaps better, tectonics – and society (cf. McLeod 1998), it is the apparent effacement of the Modern subject – universalized and dehistoricized under the weight of the capital 'M' – that lies at the heart of their critique. The discredited modern subject, so totalized under the weight of universalized histories and sociologies of need in the accounts of Smith, Marx and Durkheim, is folded back into a general notion of subjectivity through the decomposition of the 'exalted moral respect' accorded the individual within historical contemplation (a project developed in reference to not only built space but also aesthetics (e.g. Barthes 1982), literature (e.g. Jameson 1991), history (e.g. Foucault 1979), knowledge (e.g. Lyotard 1984) and politics (e.g. Mitchell 1988), to name only the most prominent spheres under examination).

Yet even as the constructivist turn in the social sciences inaugurated a biting attack upon essentialist formulations of subjectivity, the subject itself remained central to enquiry. Michel Foucault, for example, composed histories of subjectivity that, although concerned to document, in Jacques Derrida's terms (in Nancy 1991, 97), 'the effacement of the figure of man', consistently refused to eliminate a stable first person from history. And Jacques Lacan explicitly framed his own investigations as a search for the truth of the subject within the Freudian legacy. Perhaps then it is not surprising that it has been Slavoj Žižek (1999), a self-described Lacanian, who has mounted the most rigorous attack upon late 20th-century decentrings of the subject and a defence of the traditional Cartesian *cogito*.

The most significant achievement of the constructivist turn, from an archaeological perspective, was less an unveiling of the ancient subject than a decentring of the historical modern subject. That is, with the realization of the autonomous self cast in doubt as the *telos* of history, such narratives no longer required that action and value in the more remote past be more shackled by all-encompassing orders than the present (with the exception of Bourdieu's practice theory, as noted above). The effect has been liberating, as archaeology has worked assiduously to redefine the first person of its representations and break away from the intense totalities represented most iconically by systems theory (Brumfiel 1992; Emberling 1997; Gilchrist 1999; Jones 1997; Robb 1994; Robin 2001; Wright 1996). This heavy theoretical work must be credited with providing the discipline with a more robust sense of difference in the past and complicating traditional outlines of social orders. Moreover, a host of critical topics have been set firmly on archaeology's analytical agenda that explore the interdigitation of materiality, aesthetics, technology and self-formation. However, many of these efforts have left archaeology open to the charge that instead of retheorizing the archaeological

subject to take advantage of both the loss of faith in universal humanity and the decentring of modernist privileges, it has embraced traditional formulations of historical transformation that reconstitute identity within a highly crystallized social matrix no less ahistorical than that posed by Smith. In this sense, archaeology's account of the subject has never been constructivist, even though we have embraced its terminology.

The subject within archaeology Various traditions in archaeology have approached the theoretical problems posed by the subject, although only rarely has this generated a substantial discussion about the nature of subjectivity. While this is not the place for an extended survey of archaeology's shifting understanding of the subject, it is worth outlining two key intellectual transformations that catalysed the emergence of the essential archaeological subject at the heart of modernist investigations: depersonalization and dehistoricization. It is important to note at the outset that both moves are negations of bodies and of specificity.

Depersonalization It remains an enduring canard in modern archaeological theory that the very nature of archaeological data creates impediments to visualizing individuals behind their production, as if something inherent in pottery and stone tools restrains our sociological imagination whereas other phenomena – such as works of art or craft, texts or architecture – are not so limiting. As Leonard Barkan's (1999) recent account of the archaeological imagination in the Italian Renaissance illustrates, personalized accounts of archaeological subjects were the foundational epistemological parameters of a recognizable proto-archaeology. As Roman statuary began to erupt from the ground of Rome during the late 15th and early 16th centuries A.D., they were incorporated not within a sociological field of knowledge but within an art historical one. As a result, the act of production was understood in relation to a highly personalized sense of the historical subject.

When major works such as the *Laocoön* were discovered, it was not only the object that was understood as fragmentary, but the subject as well, deprived of physical and historical context. The work of interpretation was thus conceived of as a project of completion. This programme centered on, first, a form of entextualization as Renaissance artists established each work's provenance in relation to the discussion of contemporary art in Pliny's *Natural History*. It was Pliny's text that in essence mediated between the early moderns of the Renaissance and the ancients by providing the sense of context (within the range of ancient visual arts) that was missing from direct encounters with fragmented statuary. Second, Renaissance proto-archaeology established a collaborative relationship with the ancients by according itself the power to intervene on behalf of the subject to overcome the limitation of the fragmentary object. On the one hand, often controversial efforts to restore absent body parts, such as the *Laocoön*'s missing arm, positioned the Renaissance artist as an authoritative interlocutor in an aesthetic project with a long-dead ancient, effectively giving voice and eye to the dead through the medium of an aesthetic absolute. On the other hand, the reuse of ancient renderings of bodies and aesthetics of proportion in Renaissance visual art

testify to a far grander project of recuperation. As Barkan (1999, p. xxiv) writes, ‘the very basis of recuperating ancient sculpture that represented the human form was to endow the object with a voice’. This form of archaeological subject, absent yet empowered to speak, stakes the analytical drive in recapturing the voice and, just as palpably, the eye, of the absent creator (what de Man referred to as the trope of *prosopopoeia*). In attempting to recapture the voice and eye of specific ancients, Barkan’s Renaissance proto-archaeology established an embodied and highly personal sense of the subject founded upon the possibility of transhistorical dialogue – a conversation with the past carried out in the medium of stone.

The shift from a highly aestheticized subject vested in an embodied connection between past (artist) and present (artist) to a more modern, universal account is difficult to locate with any precision as archaeology was only one part of a dramatic tidal shift in the configuration of the human sciences during the 19th century. But one potentially illuminating moment is thoughtfully described in Suzanne Marchand’s (1996) account of the dramatic transition in German archaeology as it moved from the humanism of *Bildung* – in which individual cultivation enabled an understanding of the ancients – towards *Großwissenschaft*, where archaeological knowledge was possible only in the context of large, technically proficient research teams. Ernst Curtius’s excavations at Olympia (1875–81) began with high hopes for recovering the sorts of artistic treasure that had, since the Renaissance, provided the material understanding of the past. Curtius’s ambitions for the project arose less from a personal aesthetic sense of connection between the modern and the ancient subject than from an emergent nationalism that posited a privileged relationship between an increasingly ambitious German nation and the valorized ancient Greeks.

However, despite a number of such finds early on, it was the volume of everyday artefacts and architectural features that most impressed the excavators rather than any individual work. As Curtius himself claimed, ‘The main achievement [of the Olympia excavations] is not the individual pieces, but the whole, the resurrected vista of the whole area of Olympia’ (Curtius quoted in Marchand 1996, 91). Only after the excavations at Olympia had established the parameters for an account of the subject that was not the individual artistry of a great work but a more generalized, depersonalized, categorical subject – e.g. the Greek – could Alexander Conze extend the subject’s expressivity in the material world beyond the particular work of art to encompass the entire range of ‘humbler’ artefacts (Marchand 1996, 97). However, in this view, the subject of history was of necessity depersonalized, vested in ‘the Greeks’ as a generalized subject rather than in specific artists.

Dehistoricization The second major intellectual transformation critical to the emergence of the essential archaeological subject was a move to dehistoricize the parameters of social difference and personal identity. Within the romantic historicist writings that gained intellectual ascendancy in western Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we find subjectivity

confined to specific national identity categories that were historically and geographically stable and psychologically collectivized. That is, groups such as 'the Greeks' or 'the Germans' were unproblematically linked from modern incarnations to ancient textual and archaeological materials through a presumed substantive transhistorical connection, typically referred to as 'genius'.

Leonard Woolley described the essential differences between the Sumerian and the Assyrian genius in reference to their contrasting aesthetics. In his discussion of the Stele of Ur-Namma, a stone carved in low relief to commemorate the exploits of King Ur-Namma of the Third Dynasty of Ur (*ca* 2100 B.C.), Woolley drew a stark contrast between the scenes on this monument that depict the Sumerian King as a sacred builder and the images of cities sacked and rivers choked with bodies familiar from wall-reliefs discovered in Assyrian palaces of the early 1st millennium B.C.: 'to turn from [the stela of Ur-Namma] to the wall-reliefs of [the Assyrian king] Ashur-natsir-pal [*sic*] ... is to understand at a glance the difference between the Sumerian and Assyrian character' (Woolley 1965, 135–36).² In this construction, representational aesthetics directly reflect a highly psychologized description of subjectivity established at the level of ethnic difference. From this perspective, Gustav Kossina's early 20th century settlement archaeology, predicated on the proposition that material culture in all periods correlates with clearly recognizable ethnic differentiations, can be understood as the apotheosis of romantic historicism's attempts to generate dehistoricized ethnic subjects. Archaeology in this mode was a potent tool in the production of representations of essential subjects rooted deep in the world of the antique.

The essential archaeological subject thus emerged by the early 20th century as a representation of a diverse array of real and potential relationships between individual bodies and social institutions that were external to both space and time. The processual archaeology of the 1960s promised a move away from the normative account of culture that provided the totalized subject position for culture-history; however, it instead achieved the complete dehistoricization of the essential archaeological subject as its first person was, in Kent Flannery's (1967, 121) legendary terms, 'the system behind both the Indian and the artifact'. Once constituted, such subjects moved easily outside of the immediate historical and sociological contexts of their production to provide a stable unit for accounts of human action and typologies of difference. There are thus two axes along which we might explore the present status of the essential archaeological subject: as a unit of action and as a pivot for difference. Within current intellectual constellations, these two problems are subsumed under the distinct, yet interrelated, discussions of the agent and of identity. Because my primary concern here is to develop an account of how representations of difference have engendered problematic analytical and political positions, I will set aside the question of agency for another time and focus on issues of identity. I do so here only out of necessity since the subject as a location of action is inextricably intertwined with the subject as demarcated by difference.

Subject and difference Lynn Meskell (2001, 118) illuminates the contemporary archaeological commitment to a depersonalized, dehistoricized subject when she argues that ‘some aspects of our identity are given to us as a starting point – our sex, class, ethnicity, etc.’. Much of archaeology in the 1990s proceeded on similar grounds as contemporary lines of difference – sex, class, ethnicity – were projected into the remote past as constitutive axes of subject formation. There are very persuasive arguments to back up Meskell’s contention. Both Kant and Descartes would certainly agree with her formulation as it provides the epistemological foundation for autonomous selves and thus discrete, individualized first-person positions. Furthermore, the presumption of a stable a-priori matrix within which difference might be calculated and catalysed as a political force is clearly vital to both oppositional movements and nationalism (underneath the ‘etc.’ in Meskell’s phrase we might presumably include ‘nation’ or ‘culture’ and remain consistent with the argument). However, since much of constructivism arrayed itself against linking the constitution of meaning to a-priori positions rather than to specifically negotiated genealogies and biographies, the prevailing mode of delimiting the subject within a restricted sociological field can be contested along (at least) two lines.

The first is to argue the assertion rather directly by pointing out the great degree of plasticity, particularly in class and ethnicity, between generations and within individual biographies. While class in the modern era is often transferred rather immediately from parents to children, it need not be. Indeed, the relation between class and subject has long been identified as a problem of institutional organization – and hence a specific social apparatus – not of inheritance (a point that both Locke and Foucault would certainly agree upon). Ethnicity is similarly plastic in the modern world with specific forms morphing into hyphenated designations (e.g. Italian into Italian-American), old uses into new (e.g., Black into African-American; Indian into Native American). Again, what should be of most vital interest to the social sciences is not the permanence of such markers but rather their constant alteration in relation to shifting sociopolitical contexts. And finally, much of Foucault’s (e.g. 1978) work on pleasure was intended to examine the constitution of gender differences that appear, in the present constellation, so ‘naturally’ determined by the stable foundation of sex difference. Indeed, a great deal of the emergent field of ‘queer theory’ wrestles with the relationships amongst sex, gender and subjectivity in between the biological and the sociological. At their most engaging, these accounts of difference steadfastly refuse to reduce identity to one or the other, negating claims to either form of pure determination.

If the first argument is in effect a move against the depersonalization of the subject through foundational ‘genetic’ categories, a second way to argue with any privileges accorded a limited set of a-priori axes of difference is to contest the implicit dehistoricization of the matrix of difference itself. That is, by establishing sex, class and ethnicity as foundational axes of identity, we construct archaeological analysis as a tautology whereby the discovery of historical modes of constituting subjects is in fact already given by the overly burdensome theoretical apparatus. The current configuration of the essential

archaeological subject in Anglo-American theory thus takes as given what should be the heart of any analysis and in so doing reinscribes the essential archaeological subject. While the contemporary commitment to an essential archaeological subject is troubling as theory, it has raised still more profound uncertainties for the field when mustered as a foundation for political action.

The politics of essential archaeological subjects

In recent years there has been a growing, and well-founded, concern for the appropriation of archaeological interpretation by the various forms of nationalism and ethnic chauvinism that have taken centre stage in global politics since the collapse of the Cold War bipolar order (e.g. Atkinson, Banks and O'Sullivan 1996; Diaz-Andreu García and Champion 1996; Dietler 1994; 1998; Kohl 1998; Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998). Building on critical debates over the role of the ethnic subject in the formation of modern national states (cf. Anderson 1983, Duara 1996; Gellner 1983; Grosby 1995; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Smith 1991), these critiques of 'nationalist' archaeology document the manipulation of archaeological data to forward sectional political agendas in cases both past (e.g. Abdi 2001; Arnold and Hassmann 1995; Lillios 1995; Shnirelman 1995; Silberman 1982; Tong 1995) and present (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996; Brown 1998; Chernykh 1995; Hassan 1998; Knapp and Antoniadou 1998; Kohl and Tsatskheladze 1995; Silberman 1989) and plead for a more cosmopolitan archaeological politics: 'Archaeologists must adopt more universal criteria which emphasize the common cultural heritage of the area in which they work, if not the common cultural evolutionary history of humankind in general' (Kohl and Tsatskheladze 1995, 169).

The politics of archaeological cosmopolitanism is predicated upon a universal subject that mediates between past and present and, in Martha Nussbaum's (1996; 1997) terms, a 'habit of mind' predicated upon loyalty to humanity as a whole in preference to the sectional. In many ways it is hard to argue with the profound moral grounding that the cosmopolitan subject provides. Yet, as David Harvey (2000, 530–32) has pointed out, it is a very short trip from this Kantian global subject to the neo-liberal geopolitics of post-Cold War capitalism where the particular represents an oppressive restraint upon the market. As numerous colleagues in the former Soviet Union have pointed out to me, it is also, needless to say, a similarly short trip from neo-liberal cosmopolitanism back to the ideologies of both Soviet and Western imperialism which ask(ed) the conquered to join a broad state-building project promising the unification of humanity even as specific communities (Russian, English, German, French, American and so on) built their not-so-secret privilege.

Even as cosmopolitanism has come to dominate the political agenda of much Western archaeology abroad, there has been a pronounced movement within Anglo-American archaeology towards a politics of recuperation, where the emancipation of specific communities within Western liberal nation states is founded upon staking out privileged claims to a sectional past (e.g. Hodder 1983; Leone 1981; Shanks and Tilley 1987, 201–8; Tilley 1989; Wilkie and Bartoy 2000; Wurst 1999; Wylie 1992). As Randall McGuire (1994, 182)

has argued, 'If we recognize that the pasts we study are the pasts of living communities, then we must also recognize an obligation to serve the interests of these communities.'

It is again hard to disagree with the ambition to enlist archaeology in emancipatory political actions that promise to illuminate the past of populations traditionally erased from historical narratives. However, a recuperative politics of emancipation stands in considerable tension with anti-nationalist cosmopolitanism as it strives to stake representation in privileged sectional identities rather than in a generalized humanity. Nadia Abu el-Haj has plotted the implications of such sectional political commitments in her study of Israeli archaeology:

Israeli archaeology did far more than dig in search of evidence of an ancient Israelite and Jewish past embedded in the land. It was driven by an epistemology that *assumed* nations, itself embedded in a specific conception of *what history is*, including the significant events of which it is made ... and the relevant historical actors by which it is made (Abu el-Haj 2001, 3; emphasis in original).

A similar charge can be lodged against the analytical foundations of recuperative archaeological politics. That is, its advocates tend to assume that gender, ethnicity, class, nation and/or culture provide enduring a-priori starting points that have always been the vital axes along which subjects understand identity and difference. But archaeology should be engaged in examining exactly how subjects were constituted in the past in relation to specific sociopolitical apparatuses. By presuming the permanence of a few lines along which difference is constituted in our contemporary world, recuperative archaeologies reproduce an essential archaeological subject, one set within a frozen matrix of identity such that a contemporary corporate group can claim a privileged historical connection predicated on direct descent. Of course, such claims are destabilized, as others (cf. Gosden 2001; Meskell 2001) have cogently pointed out, if the stability of identity is itself called into question. That is, if subjectivity is a product of specific sociopolitical apparatuses within immediate historical contexts, then presumably it becomes quite difficult for a contemporary group to claim direct identification, and thus a representational privilege.

The ambitions of the politics of recuperation are quite understandable in relation to a strategic politics of advocacy grounded in strong moral commitments to multiculturalism and the empowerment of subaltern communities. Similarly understandable efforts to construct a stable foundation for political advocacy have led some scholars, mostly outside archaeology, to argue that the 'risk of essence' is worth taking (Fuss 1989, 18–21; Heath 1978, 99; Jardine 1987; Spivak 1987; cf. Derrida 1987; Kamuf 1987). As Fuss (1989, 19–20) points out, the constructionist strategy of specifying subcategories of subjects, replacing, for example, 'the Greek' with 'female non-aristocratic Athenian', reinscribes essentialism by reducing the vectors of difference within a historicist logic. However, the profound contradictions that exist between the subject positions required

by a recuperative identity politics and an anti-nationalist cosmopolitanism suggest that what must be interrogated are not the ends – for both rest upon profoundly moral political imaginaries – but rather the means by which the constitution of archaeological subjects advances or confounds these ends.

I have considerable sympathy for the intentions of both the pluralist commitments of the cosmopolitanists and the ‘emancipatory’ interests of the sectionalists. However, both programmes are ultimately unsatisfying as they hold a greater commitment to depersonalizing and dehistoricizing the subject than to exposing the apparatus that inscribes subjects within a historically created field of difference. Both seem to operate by demanding that subjects identify with an ‘impossible object of an authentic self-identity’ (Povinelli 2002, 6). The recuperation of sectional histories demands that contemporary subjects practice difference in ways that performatively reproduce an authentic past in the present and thus maintain a legitimate hold upon historical privilege recognizable within the framework of multicultural liberalism. Modern subjectivity is thus straitjacketed by an archaeological present. The cosmopolitan self is no less an impossible object as it insists upon identities created in reference to a universalized humanity even as the apparatus of nations, sociality and economy operate to partition peoples and selves. Furthermore, it is difficult for the archaeologist to praise the privileged claim of the subaltern yet reject the claims to privilege of the nationalist.

Stuart Hall’s observation that identity and difference must be described as sociohistorical productions does beg further questions of practice and process. That is, how are lines of difference reproduced and by whom? The answer, after the end of the essential archaeological subject, can only be framed in relation to a specific sociocultural formation and in relation to a particular political apparatus. The politics that follow are therefore hostile to all claims of privilege be they predicated upon the cosmopolitan suppositions of post-Enlightenment continental philosophy or upon the illusions of descent. All claims to privilege, in other words, are at risk.

A view from southern Caucasia³

In detailing an archaeological view upon the problem of the subject from the vantage point of southern Caucasia, I want to examine the transformation of the region under Urartian imperial expansion during the early 1st millennium B.C. This moment is of interest to the present discussion as it provides a fulcrum for an understanding of the archaeological subject in both historical and political terms. In political terms, the expansion of Urartu represents a serious impediment to nationalist efforts to project sectional accounts of the subject – Armenian, Turkish or other – into an indefinite past. As Kohl and Tsetschladze (1995) have pointed out, efforts to claim an ethnic regional history in which any contemporary group can lay claim to a status as primordial indigene face a considerable hurdle in the Urartian kingdom, which ruled the highlands of eastern Anatolia and southern Transcaucasia from the 9th to the 7th centuries B.C. Primordialists must explain why Urartu ‘composed its royal cuneiform inscriptions in Urartian, a non-Indo-European (i.e. non-Armenian) language, related to Hurrian and ancestral to

the Northeastern Caucasian family of languages spoken today by different peoples in Daghestan, Chechenia, and Ingushetia' (Kohl and Tsatskheladze 1995, 157).

Yet having effectively dismissed modern claims to the mantle of Urartu, Kohl and Tsatskheladze appear to reinstantiate the very terms of sectional privilege that generated the problem in the first place by allowing for the permanence of an essential Armenian subject: 'Reasonable historical hypotheses can be advanced for a Proto-Armenian component to [the Urartian] kingdom, and there is a real sense in which the Armenians are the cultural heirs of Urartu' (Kohl and Tsatskheladze 1995, 157).

A cosmopolitanism that strives merely to guard the more remote reaches of the past from sectional claim is an exceedingly frail form of commitment as it ultimately reinforces the historical stability of national communities even as it privileges a universal humanity. Within this cosmopolitan historiography, Urartu constitutes a critical watershed between a sectional historical subject and a universal archaeological subject. However, this account is framed entirely in reference to the contemporary politics of representation; it is not a description of Urartian procedures of subjectivization.

Any consideration of such a profound moment in the historical constitution of the subject cannot be rooted in the problems of contemporary political claims, but rather in the immediate apparatus of subjectivity deployed by the imposition of Urartian authority. Similarly, an account of Urartu within the modern era cannot use vague senses of legacy as a crutch to an explication of the role of archaeology within contemporary constructions of national difference. It is exceedingly difficult to view Urartu as culturally ancestral to any modern claimant since, following its demise, it was entirely forgotten. Moses Khorenats'i, the 8th-century A.D. Armenian historian, attributed the ruins of Urartu's capital at Van to the Assyrians, Urartu's most fearsome geopolitical rival. The recovery of Urartu has thus been a project of late 19th- and 20th-century epigraphy and archaeology, not a desublimation of a deep ethno-historical memory. Given spatial constraints, I will set aside an account of archaeology's apparatus of representation and the recovery of Urartu within a regional politics of identity. Instead, my primary concern here is to refocus accounts of the archaeological subject upon the immediate sociopolitical practices that Urartian rulers employed to re-create subjects of empire out of what had previously been subjects of local polities. While I am most concerned here to detail subjectivity in reference to the polity, politics is only one dimension of the diverse practices and apparatuses involved in the formation of the subject.

An introduction to Urartu The kingdom of Biainili, known to its Assyrian contemporaries (and hence modern scholarship) as Urartu, appears to have emerged in eastern Anatolia from a group of local polities during the late 2nd and early 1st millennia B.C. Between the mid-9th and late 8th centuries B.C. Urartu embarked on a programme of imperial expansion, conquering rivals from the headwaters of the Euphrates to the south shore of Lake Urmia and from the foothills of the Taurus mountains to the intermontane plains of southern Caucasia. It is this northern province of the Urartian kingdom, an

area centred on the Ararat plain in what is today the Republic of Armenia, that provides the primary site for much of the following discussion. Although a presence north of the Araxes river since the reign of King Ishpuini in the late 9th century B.C., the Urartian occupation of southern Caucasia did not begin in earnest until the second decade of the 8th century B.C. when King Argishti I formalized the kingdom's military conquests through an extensive programme of construction focused in the Ararat plain.

The era of high Urartian imperial expansion was brought to a close by a series of military defeats in the late 8th century B.C. Urartian military and diplomatic incursions into the southern Urmia basin of north-western Iran provoked King Sargon II to reassert an Assyrian presence in the region. His campaign climaxed in the defeat of an Urartian army led by King Rusa I (Levine 1977; Zimansky 1990). Assyrian intelligence reports indicate that Urartu was also attacked at this time by Cimmerians crossing into Caucasia from the Eurasian steppe and further destabilized by an insurrection within the Urartian ruling elite which threatened the royal dynasty (Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990, #91, #92). Rusa I succeeded in deflecting the Cimmerians and quelling the rebellion, thus preserving the dynasty, but Urartu's era of expansion came to an end, its imperial designs checked by Assyria in the south and by new populations moving into Caucasia from the north.

The historical record for the succeeding era of Urartian political reconstruction is not as rich as that of the preceding imperial era. But the archaeological record indicates a reconsolidation of much of Urartu's territory, a resurgence of Urartian resolve to challenge Assyrian pretensions in the highlands, and a reinvigoration of the authority of the Urartian regime. The reign of Rusa II represents the apogee of this reconstruction. Thanks to foundation inscriptions, we know that at least five major fortresses, accomplished on a massive scale, are directly attributable to his reign (Zimansky 1995).

Dynastic succession following Rusa II is unclear, leaving some confusion over the last rulers of the empire and the dating of the collapse. The fate of Urartu and its possessions in southern Caucasia during the late 7th century B.C. is not well understood. Boris Piotrovskii has dated the final collapse of Urartu to 590 or 585 B.C. based largely upon a biblical reference, but this chronology is generally thought to be over-extended.⁴ An inscription of Ashurbanipal, dated to 643 B.C., records the submission of the Urartian king 'Ishtar-duri' (Sarduri III or IV) to the Assyrians. Although not an entirely satisfactory date for the end of its imperial power, Urartu was never again a significant force in the geopolitics of south-west Asia.

Urartu and subjectivity In producing the polity of Urartu, the kings of Biainili undertook a broad effort to reformulate the subject, not only as a target of political action but as a constituted self. This effort took its most brutal form in a programme that sought to break pre-existing affective ties between subject and place.

Prior to the arrival of Urartian forces in southern Caucasia, the region appears to have been organized into numerous small political communities. Recent research in the Tsakahovit plain of western Armenia suggests that

by the Late Bronze Age of the mid-2nd millennium B.C. complex polities had emerged in the region, centred in fortified settlements perched atop defensible rock outcrops (Avetisyan, Badalyan and Smith 2000; Badalyan, Smith and Avetisyan 2003; Smith *et al.* 2004). These fortresses were only the most conspicuous element of a broad transformation of the regional landscape that projected far into the hinterlands through new irrigation facilities and mortuary architecture. The vast Late Bronze Age cemeteries of the Tsakahovit plain region may well have marked the territorial boundaries of political sovereignty in the area (Badalyan, Smith and Avetisyan 2003). But perhaps more immediately, the landscape forged between fortress and cemetery appears to have produced an enduring sense of place in which the apparatus of the living regime and burials of dead subjects provided critical points of reference for inscribing and regularizing the territorial polity. Set against the backdrop of Mount Aragats, the combined effect of the confluence of the plain and the massif, of the rolling cemeteries and the towering fortresses, remains powerful. The Late Bronze Age fortresses on the slope of Mount Aragats rose up, in effect, from a vast necropolis. Surrounded by the dead and set at the mountain's edge, the fortresses spatially evoked a sense of mediation between the living and the dead, the immediate and the cosmic, providing a sensuous account of political authority that was strongly rooted in place yet most profoundly about transcendence. Thus current evidence suggests that as early as the mid-2nd millennium B.C. the polities of southern Caucasia were assembled in place within an enduring relationship between regime and subjects that tied both to specific sets of local sites. This was the political landscape that Urartu encountered in its campaigns in southern Caucasia during the early 8th century B.C. and attempted to disassemble as it sought to regularize its governance of the region.

A range of Urartian political practices were dedicated to destroying the commitments of conquered subjects to pre-existing polities. One set of practices centred on obliterating the built environments of prior political communities by demolishing Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age fortresses. The Urartian tendency to raze pre-existing fortresses is well attested in southern Caucasia, at sites such as Metsamor and Horom North (Badaljan *et al.* 1992; Badaljan *et al.* 1993; Badaljan, Kohl and Kroll 1997; Khanzadian, Mkrtchian and Parsamian 1973). In the case of the latter, a preceding Early Iron Age settlement was partially destroyed and the ground scraped so that the succeeding Urartian walls were built atop levels deposited in the 3rd millennium B.C. This practice of scraping a building site is well attested throughout Urartu, where builders typically removed all preceding occupation levels before building directly upon bedrock foundations.

In one sense, this practice of site clearing undoubtedly reflects an approach to construction where well-prepared surfaces provided the foundation of choice for Urartian architects and engineers. But the Urartian penchant for dismantling preceding fortified political centres also reflects a desire to empty conquered regions of the physical vestiges of prior polities – a desire that was also given voice in royal inscriptions that boast of forging a newly ordered landscape out of conquered territories reconfigured as empty wildernesses

(Smith 2000). The lingering traces of pre-Urartian fortresses provided a rival architectural aesthetic that could not only cast doubt upon the Urartian imagined landscape as a political project, but also provide a rival sense of place that might foster an alternative understanding of subjectivity rooted in a now vanquished past. Such an alternative vision was made unthinkable through the obliteration of certain evocative places. In other words, the extirpation of pre-existing political centres was not only a technique of construction but also a technology of political memory and forgetting.

This effort to break the commitments of subjects to pre-existing polities was reinforced by a second, much more brutal, set of Urartian political practices. In addition to removing places of political memory from local landscapes, Urartian regimes also ripped people out of place, severing the ties between subjects and embedded political traditions through forced deportation from one area of the polity to another.⁵ Urartian inscriptions describe systematic programmes of population resettlement that uprooted thousands of subjects from their homelands, resettling them in distant areas of the empire. In response to an apparent uprising in southern Caucasia that followed his initial conquest of the area (*ca* 785 B.C.), King Argishti I claims to have pacified the region, capturing 19,255 boys, 10,140 warriors, and 23,280 women: ‘some of them were killed, others were brought away alive’ (Melikishvili 1960, #127). Groups from other parts of the empire were subsequently relocated into southern Caucasia where they formed the core subject population of the new province. As a result, many subjects under the Urartian regime in the Ararat plain would have had no personal or historical connection to the places and monuments of previous local polities, thereby removing a critical point of resistance to Urartian attempts to establish a reconfigured polity.

Perhaps the best example of large-scale resettlement comes from the fortress of Erebuni, built by Argishti I as the royal Urartian centre in the Ararat plain. In his annals Argishti I described the defeat of the enemy (*Etiuni*), the collection of prisoners, the paradoxical emptiness of the region, the construction of the new fortress of Erebuni and the resettling of prisoners from the Upper Euphrates region:

The god Khaldi appeared (on the campaign) with his weapons (?). He conquered the land of *Etiuni*. [...] Argishti speaks: I destroyed the land of the city Kikhuni, located on the bank of the lake. I came up to the city of Alishtu; I stole away men and women (from there). For the greatness of Khaldi, Argishti, son of Menua, speaks: I built the city of Irpuni [Erebuni] for the might of the land of Biainili (and) for the pacification of enemy lands. The earth was a wilderness (?), nothing had been built there [previously]. [...] I settled there 6600 warriors of the lands of Hatti and Tsupani [and] Supani (Melikishvili 1960, #127).

Altan Çilingiroğlu (1983, 323) suggests that another large group of deportees from the Upper Euphrates area (the lands of Hatti and Melitea) were settled around Erebuni in 783 B.C.

Through draconian programmes of resettlement, the Urartian regime attempted to replace perceptions of a local landscape suffused with meanings

derived from conquered polities with a sense of place entirely organized by the political landscape of Urartu. Urartian deportation programmes were, in their fundamental character, quite similar to those pursued by various 20th-century governments intent on dissolving bonds between people and place, such as the Ottoman Empire against Armenians or Stalinist Russia against Chechens. Like practices of site demolition, Urartian policies of deportation were meant not only to reorder the physical relationship between subjects and polity (for this could be accomplished without resettlement) but also to destroy the affective ties between people and place established by pre-existing political communities.

I have argued elsewhere (Smith 2000, 2003) that the Urartian regime attempted to transform the imagined position of the subject vis-à-vis ruling authority through the deployment of images in various media, including inscriptions and images. Here I extend this argument to suggest that Urartian kings attempted a profound transformation of the subject through a brutal reordering of the cartography of memory achieved in both the destruction of place and the production of forgetting. Alongside this effort to manufacture the polity through a re-formation of the subject, the Urartian regime attempted to shift the terms of subjectivity through a reordering of the experience of landscape. In other words, the Urartian regime did not simply endeavour to rearrange understandings of subjectivity within a permanent lattice of class, gender and ethnicity. They tried to shatter the lattice of difference itself.

Conclusions

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, southern Caucasia has often been presented in Anglo-American media as a region where extraordinary linguistic and ethnic diversity has produced an enduring history of violence and chauvinism. The tropes are not new, having been recycled from other sites of sectional conflict, such as the Balkans and Israel, where essentialized subjects with rival claims to place descend into an endless cycle of political conflict (cf. Goldenberg 1994; Kaplan 1993, 2000). But this perspective, I suggest, inverts the relationship between sociopolitical apparatuses and subjectivity. It is not an essential subjectivity that generates political conflict, but rather politics and conflict that generate essentialist subjectivity. Conflicts in the Caucasus, the Balkans or Israel are not spontaneous expressions of deep-seated subject positions. Rather, contemporary sociopolitical institutions and actors have produced a form of subjectivity that thrives on opposition and chauvinism. The extant political problem is thus an immediate one of the sociopolitical order, not an eternal (and hence unsolvable) one of essential subjectivity.

With the end of the essential archaeological subject, the response to any effort to claim a sectional past must be a close interrogation of claims to stable and historically enduring subjects. The connection between the category 'American' today and 'American' in 1800 is not essential but rather the transparent product of two centuries of social and political action bolstered by routinization in powerful institutions such as schools, museums and the media. In the case of southern Caucasia, the development of a modern sense

of the Armenian subject predicated upon a claim to Urartu is a product of 20th-century archaeology's relentless efforts to establish essential subjects. But the past belongs neither to sectional identities nor to universal Man; it is the domain of immediate subjectivities that have been constantly reshaped in relation to shifting sociopolitical ends. The problem of difference and its representation in archaeology at present is not one of competing politics, but of more deeply embedded theorizations of subjects, selves, and persons constituted within specific social orders, historical moments, and aesthetic commitments (an effort which has already begun in the groundbreaking work of Houston (2001), Houston and Stuart (1998), Kus (1992), Kus and Raharijaona (2000) and Marcus (1993), among others). The end of the essential archaeological subject, if embraced, will force the discipline to account for the production of subjects in immediate sociopolitical contexts. To paraphrase Francisco Gil-White (1999), archaeologists must become analysts of the naturalizers rather than analytical naturalizers.⁶ The political potency of the discipline would then rest not upon generating claims on the past but upon exposing the strategic practices at play in the assertion of all such claims, past and present.

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Notes

¹ I retain the gendered language of the original as it later became critical to late 20th-century feminist critiques of the modern subject (e.g. MacKinnon 1982).

² Woolley (1965, 189) continues later in the book, 'Sumerian genius evolved a civilization which persisted for nearly fifteen hundred years after its authors had vanished'. This heritage lingers today, according to Woolley, in such architectural features as the arch, the dome and the vault – formal and aesthetic innovations derived from Sumerian models expressive of both a native Sumerian genius and that civilization's contribution to humanity.

³ Part of this discussion is drawn from Smith (2003), where the production of Urartian subjects is discussed in reference to broader transformations of the political landscape.

⁴ On the long chronology see Piotrovskii (1959; 1969). The biblical reference which Piotrovskii cites is Jeremiah 51:27. For critiques see Kroll (1984) and Zimansky (1995).

⁵ Deportation was not a uniquely Urartian political-strategy but was also used by Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian rulers to pacify recalcitrant populations (Gallagher 1994; Oded 1979).

⁶ My thanks to my anonymous reviewer for leading me to Gil-White's article.

Comments on Adam T. Smith's 'The end of the essential archaeological subject' Philip L. Kohl

As expected, Adam Smith has written a provocative, intellectually stimulating and demanding article critiquing the re-inscription of 'an essential archaeological subject' as archaeology becomes more explicitly aware of its inevitable political dimensions. I find myself in broad, though not perfect, agreement with his overall argument and concur completely with his concluding sentiments that archaeologists should become 'analysts of the naturalizers rather than analytical naturalizers' and that they should expose the strategic practices at play in the assertion of all such essentialist claims, past and present. My concern is that his prescription for achieving this result may be too mild (i.e. indirect and subtle, if not opaque) to cure the ills of the nationalists who habitually distort archaeological evidence to achieve their often dubious political agendas. In a certain sense, his laudable insistence on focusing on change and the plasticity of markers of identity in relation to specific and always shifting sociopolitical contexts eviscerates the political nature of archaeological enquiry. His recommendation is to go back to interpreting the past on its own terms, void of 'essential subjects'. All right, but not many people will listen and those interested in using the past for contemporary purposes will not be directly confronted. As critical 'analysts of the naturalizers' we perform an essentially negative, though indispensable, role; we point out why the accounts of the naturalizers are ambiguous, distort the record, are untenable and dangerous, and so on. This admittedly negative role is extremely important and should not now be abandoned after so many years of denying it or not recognizing it. It is necessary to add that there is also a positive political approach for interpreting archaeological evidence that Childe (1933) long ago recognized: demonstrate the continuous intercourse and diffusion of ideas and technologies from one culture and people to another throughout prehistoric times and insist that no single group was responsible for this constantly growing and shared history of cultural development.

Clearly my views fall within the gently criticized camp of 'neo-liberal, anti-nationalist cosmopolitanism' which Smith correctly opposes to those advocating a 'recuperative politics of emancipation', enwrapped in fostering 'illusions of descent'. Despite their admirable political or moral intentions, both groups are guilty of dehistoricizing and depersonalizing the 'essential subject'. Smith has caught a fundamental opposition here. I agree with him when he notes that it is difficult 'to praise the privileged claim of the subaltern

yet reject the claims to privilege of the nationalist'. That is the problem with advocating multivocality: whose voices are to be heard and whose contested? How does one even decide – without recourse to certain basic and universal principles? The cosmopolitan camp, on the other hand, harbours illusions of universalism, and it is just 'a very short trip' from this position 'back to the ideologies of both Soviet and Western imperialism'. Fair enough, a warning to be heeded, but this short trip need not be taken. Certain universal values and standards of evidence must be recognized and maintained. One subaltern group's interpretation of the past must be resisted or critically scrutinized when it impinges upon another group's interests in the same or an overlapping past; when, in short, there are dangerous and morally questionable real-life consequences stemming from such contestations.

Smith's case study of the construction of the Urartian state is somewhat disingenuously chosen for the simple reason that – as he himself notes – 'following its demise, it was entirely forgotten'. His example would have been blurrier had he focused on the archaeological record of classical Armenia and the 1st-century B.C. empire of Tigran the Great, the maximal borders of which are claimed by Armenian nationalists today as constituting 'historical Armenia'. Claims to the historically forgotten Urartu are easier to repudiate. Smith's discussion correctly emphasizes change, but minimizes the stability and continuity of collective 'proto-national' groups, the cumbersome term employed by Hobsbawm to deal with this stubborn reality. Armenians (or Georgians, Greeks, Jews and so on) can trace a continuous history back to the Iron Age, but that, of course, does not mean that the pre-Christian Armenians of the Late Iron Age were identical with the Armenians of Medieval times or the post-genocide 20th- and early 21st-century citizens of the Republic of Armenia or of the extended Armenian diaspora today. The ethnogenesis of 'nations' does not mean that they appear as little crystallized homunculi, carrying within them all the features of their later development. The process is historical, not biological, and that means that one must interpret the historical and archaeological record of the Armenians in terms of the specific social and political context that is being analysed. Nevertheless, one can talk about a probable proto-Armenian component within Urartu and, even more assuredly, about pre-Christian Armenian developments, despite the fact that Christianity today is such an integral feature of what it means to be Armenian (Kohl 1996). Continuous change, yes; but also some relatively stable and enduring continuities that also must be recognized and analysed. It is misleading only to focus on the former.

Smith refers repeatedly to the power of archaeological representation. Here I differ and find myself more on the side of the post-processual relativists who emphasize the underdetermined character of archaeological evidence, even confessing to the retrograde belief in increasing scales or levels of reliable archaeological inference, from the technological and subsistence-economic to the ideological, as long ago articulated by C. Hawkes. The record is inherently incomplete and biased, but this unfortunate reality does not mean that anything goes, that any interpretation – from the cries of the subaltern to the aesthetic, imaginative (and text-dependent) analyses of Renaissance proto-archaeologists – is permissible. It is good that the limitations of vulgar

materialism and neo-evolutionary environmentalism have been recognized and successfully overcome. I find Smith's reading of the conscious making of the Urartian state as subtle and persuasive as, and far more convincing than, the more mechanical accounts of state formation so characteristic of the earlier processual archaeological literature. It is a real improvement to return to the 'Indian' directing the cultural system. That said, however, a cautionary note: we are still limited by the nature of the archaeological record and our interpretations – however imaginative and convincing – must still touch base with that record. And that is an argument for more subtle prehistoric accounts that are grounded in the ultimately material nature of archaeological evidence.

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Archaeology and identity politics. A cross-disciplinary perspective
Peter Vermeersch

What scholars are committed to in principle is not always what they are likely to uphold in practice. Adam T. Smith examines – and deplores – the striking discrepancy between the centrality of the constructivist idiom in a variety of disciplines and the tendency of archaeologists to continue to treat archaeological subjects (be they ethnic groups, classes, nations, races, cultures or any other kind of identity group) as given entities and stable units of analysis. Smith's concern is not merely about the consistency of the discipline's theoretical underpinnings. In fact, his greatest worry turns out to be political: an archaeology that reconstitutes, rather than deconstructs, the essential subject may be wrongly used as a foundation for contemporary political action (such as nationalism). Thus he invites archaeologists to revise the relationship between scholarly analysis and political practice. Smith not only suggests taking into full account the malleability of identity groups in relation to changing sociopolitical contexts, but he also incites scholars to bend their minds to the sociopolitical circumstances within which seemingly stable categories of identity are produced. Archaeologists should be careful not to 'essentialize' identities, he concludes, but instead shift their attention to exposing the strategic practices deployed by those who do 'essentialize' identities.

Seen in a broader academic context, Smith is far from alone in making this argument. In many other disciplines authors have since long observed and criticized the tendency to take the existence of stable subjects for granted. Moreover, the incongruity between theoretical principles and analytical practice is a problem that haunts the entire field of identity studies in social science research. And, as in archaeology, progress on how to shape empirical social science analysis in order to overcome this gap has been halting. Nevertheless, I submit that a cross-disciplinary inspection of this topic may be useful. The advance that has been made in other disciplines may point to possible avenues of progress in empirically oriented archaeological

research. It may also throw into sharper relief the complex, far-reaching and sometimes perplexing implications of the task Smith is proposing.

The modest aim of this commentary is to suggest two possible points of departure for such a cross-disciplinary investigation. In particular, I would like to show in brief compass here that there is much to learn from two largely unconnected bodies of literature: the sociological study of ethnicity and the debate in normative political theory on multiculturalism. Although these fields have very different backgrounds, goals and methods, authors in both areas have struggled with the same issue of essentialism. In an endeavour to disclose useful clues on how to avoid essentialism while at the same time pushing empirical work further, recent work in the sociological study of ethnicity has employed perspectives from cognitive sociology. This has been a promising development and may provide scholars in other areas with a new and specific set of analytical tools. Normative theories of multiculturalism, on the other hand, are instructive because they have grappled with the moral commitment of recuperative identity politics. A number of authors have tried to find ways to defend recuperative identity politics while at the same time disproving the essentialist assumptions on which such recuperation appears to be predicated. In their view, advocating the politicization of certain identities without essentializing them is a necessary and normatively defensible response to the societal problems of inequality and oppression.

Ethnicity and cognition

Let me first turn to the way sociology has dealt with the slippery notion of ethnicity. Perusing the literature one can find an increasing number of scholars who have drawn attention to the constructed character of ethnic identities and to the role of political factors and dominant categorization schemes in the process of ethnic identity construction. Such an approach builds on a tradition in social anthropology that understands ethnicity not in terms of group characteristics, but as a form of social organization (Eriksen 2002; Jenkins 1997). The pathbreaker in this field was Fredrik Barth (Barth 1969), who already at the end of the 1960s levelled an outspoken constructivist critique at 'primordialism', the traditional anthropological conceptualization of ethnicity as a given, innate, deep-seated and unchangeable group trait. There is now a growing consensus in the literature that, like all forms of collective identity, ethnic identities are not given; they belong to – as Charles Tilly has formulated it – that 'potent set of social arrangements in which people construct shared stories about who they are, how they are connected, and what has happened to them' (Tilly 2003, 608). Ethnic groups should thus not be understood as natural units that have always been there and therefore automatically constitute the basis for political action; on the contrary, conceptually and empirically, it makes more sense to understand them as the result of social and political processes of categorization.

Unfortunately, this broad theoretical reorientation has not always been effectively endorsed in more descriptive writing on ethnicity. This is, of course, most clearly visible in many popular narratives of ethnic diversity. The metaphors that are commonly used to describe ethnic heterogeneity are telling: they often convey the image of a world resembling a natural mosaic of neatly

segmented and ethnically bounded population groups. Smith's choice of area is apt indeed. *National geographic* once argued that the Caucasus is a volatile area 'because it is dauntingly complex, with 50 ethnic groups and nationalities spread like a crazy quilt across a California-size territory' (Edwards 1996, 126). In this metaphor, ethnic groups appear as static, natural, quantifiable, quasi-territorial entities. They seem independent of political and social factors. *National geographic* even suggests that these entities are responsible for bringing about certain political and social developments; the Caucasus is volatile, it is contended, precisely because there is perplexing ethnic heterogeneity. In other words, the mere existence of ethnic differentiation is viewed as a cause of political mobilization along ethnic lines; ethnic groups are viewed as the 'protagonists' (Brubaker 2002, 164) of mobilization, not as the 'products'. Many scholars in ethnicity studies have warned against such an approach because it precludes research into the role of political actors – state institutions, ethnic activists, organizations, politicians and so forth – in articulating particular identities and suppressing others, and in framing the world in ethnic rather than in other terms.

Although the primordialist position has been widely denounced in the social science community, scholars have been less unanimous on how to unfold the constructivist agenda further. If ethnicity is constructed, what factors, then, are responsible for shaping it? While some focused on the role of a strategic, manipulative elite in forging ethnic attachments for instrumental reasons (instrumentalism), others have paid heed to the influence of widespread, inescapable beliefs and myths about descent, belonging and group divisions (what Clifford Geertz has called the assumed 'givens' of social existence – Geertz 1963, 109). One body of literature that has provided the field of ethnicity studies with a particularly promising set of insights is cognitive sociology (Zerubavel 1997; DiMaggio 1997). Cognitive sociology has pointed to the fact that we do not think just as individuals, but also as the products of particular social environments that affect as well as constrain the way we cognitively interact with the world (Zerubavel 1997, 6). In particular, a perspective on social cognition allows us to focus our attention upon the acts of categorization, classification and interpretation that make people understand the world as they do. The practices of social categorization and classification are crucial in our understanding of ethnicity, because these practices have a 'constitutive significance' (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004, 33). A cognitive perspective allows us to conceptualize ethnicity as not a 'thing *in* the world, but a perspective *on* the world' (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004, 32). It directs our attention to 'socially sanctioned systems, formal or informal, of racial, ethnic and national classification, categorization and identification, as well as the basic psychological processes and mechanisms that underlie such interactional and institutional classificatory practices and routines' (Brubaker 2001, 16).

With regard to disciplines such as history and archaeology, introducing a cognitive perspective into academic enquiry poses a particular challenge. It means shifting the locus of analysis towards social and political arenas, both present and past, in which ethnicities are created. This means first and foremost that the constitutive powers of state practices, authority and

political apparatuses should be analysed, as Smith suggests in his case study. But acknowledging the cognitive practices of state categorization clearly does not exhaust the entire field of ethnic group formation. Although such categorization is likely to be very influential in the construction of ethnic groups because it is directly related to the power structure of a society (Bulmer and Solomos 1998, 823), ethnic identity formation is not influenced by political factors alone. There are various studies in social anthropology, cognitive sociology and social psychology, all of which have fruitfully demonstrated the wide range of circumstances that may produce collective identities as well as internal images of the ethnic self. These circumstances include 'unofficial, informal, "everyday" classification and categorization practices employed by ordinary people' (Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004, 33), such as stereotypes. It also involves, as Smith can only mention in passing, the scholarly practice. Identifying and investigating the identity-producing contexts in all those arenas may ultimately prove to be a more difficult, all-encompassing and far-reaching venture than is suggested by Smith. Researching the underlying cognitive frames that have fixed the way people parse their world is a task that requires research into the whole domain of dominant typologies emerging from both controlled and less-controlled social interaction.

Recuperative archaeology and political theory

The relevance of normative political theory comes into view when Smith discusses advocacy. If we should shift our attention to identity-producing social contexts, have all forms of academic advocacy for oppressed or neglected identity groups then become impossible? Smith's criticism of what he calls 'recuperative archaeology' is based on the argument that by invoking references to new lines of social division and previously neglected groups, archaeology contributes to the reification and crystallization of identity groups. By so doing the archaeological enterprise can be accused of portraying identity groups as implausibly monolithic, homogeneous and unchangeable. I would like to place the discussion into the wider context of debates on culture and inequality in political theory. Multiculturalism in particular has sought to find ways of addressing fairly and effectively the oppression and marginalization of certain cultural minorities without falling into the trap of essentialism (Barry 2002; Tully 2002).

Central to this enquiry has been the question of whether cultural identity groups should be recognized. More precisely, should policies recognize specific cultural groups and offer them special protection? Or should cultural boundaries – which according to the constructivist consensus are not intrinsically linked to specific enduring and stable cultural characteristics – simply be ignored? And if not, will the recognition of ethnic boundaries – which inevitably seems to involve a certain degree of essentializing rhetoric – enhance or undermine stability in a multinational democracy? Some have argued that there is a danger that the institutionalization of cultural boundaries will erode overarching identities and undermine potential cross-cultural solidarities, and may therefore produce ethnic conflict (e.g. Phillips 1999; Gitlin 1995). Some of them strongly believe that liberal–democratic states should therefore

maintain their neutrality with regard to cultural diversity and not fix groups in eternal characteristics (e.g. Barry 2001). In contrast, such authors as Will Kymlicka (1995) believe that classical liberal theory should be open to the accommodation of claims made by specific groups, in particular cultural minorities. Kymlicka has argued that minority rights are needed to help protect cultural minorities from injustices that might arise from the fact that states are never culturally neutral; states always support a particular 'societal culture' that is not shared by everyone within that society. These authors also consider the recognition of the cultural boundaries to be the best choice in terms of political practice. In their view, accommodating subnational cultural identities, rather than subordinating them, is a viable way to promote a sense of solidarity and common purpose in a multinational state (Kymlicka 1995, 189). This view appears to be predicated on essentialist assumptions.

Should any moral attempt at advocating the interest of a particular cultural identity be discarded as inherently essentialist? Should, therefore, states always attempt to be culturally neutral? And should advocates always refrain from protecting cultural identities? From the multiculturalist point of view there are two possible responses. First, some authors believe it is worth 'risking essentialism' in cases where a particular identity has been repressed or devalued (Fuss 1989). Smith calls this option understandable but discards it as an ultimately unsatisfying political basis for archaeological analysis; and I believe that his arguments are convincing.

Yet it might be worth considering a second, more nuanced response, which takes into account insights from the cognitive view on identity groups. The fact that identity groups (such as cultural minorities, gender groups and so on) are a part of our perspective *on* the world, and not a thing *in* the world, does not mean that they are pure matters of fiction. On the contrary, that people act upon the perspectives they hold is exactly what makes these perspectives all the more powerful and real. And the reasoning that supports the idea of political action in the name of an oppressed group is based precisely on the assumption that society is shaped by dominant cognitive arenas. Advocacy in this view does not necessarily require the reconstruction of the essentialist subject. It merely demands recognition of the fact that people are likely to act upon the dominant typologies and social fault lines surrounding them. Some multiculturalists argue that it may be possible to defend the interests of certain identity groups in such a way that it is not tantamount to endorsing the essentializing categorization that has given rise to the existence of these groups. In this view, a satisfying advocacy will have to take into account the social environment as well as the injustices that exist as a result of the way the social environment is organized. One author coined the term 'strategic essentialism' to address the issue (Spivak 1987, 205). It is described as utilizing

specific signifiers of ethnic identity, such as Asian-American, for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourses that exclude Asian-Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of Asian-American so as to insure that such essentialisms will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower (Lowe 1991, quoted in Laitin 1998, 19).

If this line of argument is right, identity politics should always fight a twofold battle. Defending the interests of an oppressed identity group always needs to be accompanied by an interrogation of the categorization schemes that have constructed the very identity group one is defending. In this way, recuperative identity politics and the politics of deconstruction need not be mutually exclusive. The politics of recuperation may avoid the tacit reproduction of essential identities on the condition that the advocacy of specific identities is accompanied by a contestation of the essentializing categorization schemes that lie at the heart of categorized oppression.

I believe that a discussion on this subject is highly relevant for the development of the politics of archaeology. Does, as Smith argues, the political potency of archaeology only lie in its ability to analyse the apparatuses that produce an essentialist understanding of identity groups? I submit that this is a question that can and should be addressed in a sustained cross-disciplinary examination along the lines I have suggested.

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We, they, and I. Politics after the end of essential archaeological subjects *Adam T. Smith*

I recently attended a lecture here in Chicago given by Mkrtich Zardaryan, a colleague of mine from Armenia who specializes in the archaeology of early Armenian kingdoms during the post-Urartian 1st millennium B.C. During the question-and-answer period, a member of the audience posed the following question, which I paraphrase: 'I recognize that we were defeated by the Urartians but what I want to know is where we came from before that? How did we come to that region and when?' Zardaryan paused only briefly before asking, 'Who do you mean by "we"?'. The audience member responded, 'We Armenians, I am Armenian.' To which Zardaryan replied 'So am I, but I wasn't there.'

Aside from being a remarkably adroit and witty reply to a question often encountered by archaeologists who work anywhere in Caucasia, the exchange was a remarkable illustration of two very different senses of the archaeological first person. For the audience member, 'we' constituted a meaningful and historically stable subject position, constituted entirely in the realm of group identity, that moved intact from place to place and perdures across millennia. As a result, Armenians of the present and Armenians of the past are embraced by the community of the first person plural, evacuating sources of difference arising from 2,500 years of religious conversion, linguistic change, and profound sociopolitical transformation.

For Zardaryan, the archaeological subject occupied a far more complicated position. Certainly the 'we' constituted an immediate source of personal identity, but the universal legibility of this 'we' was called into question by the far more restrictive 'I' of the first person singular. Zardaryan's response

undermined the pretensions of an essentialized archaeological subject by effectively introducing limits on the embracing 'we'. That is, I may identify myself as Armenian, and they (note the shift to third person) may have also identified themselves as Armenian in the 6th century B.C., but I do not presume that were we to be placed in the same room, we would recognize ourselves as *confrères*. Indeed, it is likely that a contemporary Armenian would have more in common socially and culturally with a contemporary Georgian, Azeri, Russian or American than they would with the ancient people embraced in the audience member's 'we'.

Philip L. Kohl and Peter Vermeersch raise a number of important issues for the archaeology and politics of identity and I thank them for their cogent and thoughtful responses. Their commentaries raise a number of issues that I would like to briefly address here but certainly warrant, as Vermeersch points out, more sustained cross-disciplinary examination. The most pivotal issue that both Kohl and Vermeersch raise is the fate of a politically aware archaeology after the end of the essential archaeological subject. Both worry that focusing archaeology on the production of identity in context, in Kohl's words, 'eviscerates the political nature of archaeological enquiry', rendering advocate social science untenable. This was a problem that worried me as I worked on the article. I share Kohl's unwillingness to abandon the recent gains archaeology has made in asserting its voice in contemporary politics. However, as the deep opposition of recuperative and cosmopolitan positions suggests, we are not, as yet, particularly good at marshalling archaeology to political action nor are we clear on the agenda.

Both Kohl and Vermeersch suggest that we can retain either position by exercising a greater degree of caution and self-criticism. Kohl rightly points out that the advocative position often depends heavily upon a valorized multivocality that leaves one at a loss as to how we elect certain voices to be heard and others to be contested. As a result, he suggests the need for 'certain universal values and standards of evidence' while simultaneously admitting the need to avoid the pitfalls of imperialist imposition. But this balancing act is quite difficult to accomplish given that the first problem for the cosmopolite is deciding whose values are selected as universal.

Kohl argues that universally recognized values are vital if we are to step in when claims upon the past threaten 'dangerous and morally questionable' consequences. It is hard to disagree. Certainly we deplore the archaeologists who failed to stand up to fascist or Stalinist efforts to oppress the present by rewriting the past. But the categories of 'dangerous' and 'morally questionable' are hardly cross-cultural absolutes. The European Enlightenment tradition (particularly Locke) provides one potential set of practical values for tolerating all readings of the past except for those that are bigoted or intolerant.

But why this set of values? Why not a religious fundamentalist morality that tolerates only those accounts of the past that preserve the community of believers and marginalize infidels and apostates? To those inside the community, such an approach undoubtedly seems profoundly moral, resistant to the eschatological dangers posed by evil in the world. For creationists, who can often boast a unified front that embraces Christian, Jewish

and Muslim fundamentalists, a great deal of archaeological, palaeontological and geological research has promoted dangerous and morally questionable findings. Cosmopolitanism must provide a justification for the values it selects but, in so doing, it immediately admits that the values proclaimed to be universal are in fact highly contingent. Furthermore, the promulgation of liberal Enlightenment values as universals for political engagement is quite difficult to separate from the cultural work that Western imperialism has accomplished. That is, appointing a set of values and standards of evidence as universal will always involve a dynamic of power and imposition structured by the continuing legacies of colonialism and imperialism.

Vermeersch seeks to preserve an advocative politics by restructuring it into a two-dimensional approach. While archaeologists and other social scientists should continue to defend 'the interests of an oppressed identity group' we must simultaneously interrogate the 'categorization schemes' that have reproduced this identity group. Following this strategy, we have the ability to work with identity groups as real perspectives on the world without allowing them to be reified as things in the world. Again, it is hard to disagree in principle with efforts to assist the oppressed. However, it is hard to imagine how this two-pronged strategy would play out within the institutional fora, such as courts, legislatures, international bodies and so on, where subalterns search for rights and recognition.

In testifying for the recognition of lands as the legitimate inheritance of an aboriginal group, for example, archaeologists must assume that opposing counsel will admit into evidence any of their writings that simultaneously deconstruct the very notion of that identity group. Given that such legal claims depend heavily upon a stable, transhistorical 'we', archaeologists who also emphasize the highly constructed nature of group identity would make rather unreliable witnesses. Vermeersch's approach would thus formalize a profound separation between a theoretical agenda focused on the destabilization of group identity and a practical agenda centred on the defence of such groups as coherent legal entities. I worry that the schizophrenic nature of such an approach would leave the social sciences with little credibility in the public realm to make an impact on either project.

As Zardaryan's encounter in Chicago suggests, there are more ways in which the archaeologist can operate politically than simply as advocate or cosmopolite. In calling for the end of the essential archaeological subject, I do not mean to remove archaeology from the political arena. On the contrary, by repositioning claims to 'we' as bracketed by both 'I' and 'they', as Zardaryan accomplished so deftly, the terrain of contestation is itself transformed. The social and political institutions that generate sectional allegiances and muster them to the cause of chauvinism or oppression must become the focus of scrutiny, both theoretical and practical. This is not to argue, as Vermeersch rightly points out, that governmental categorization exhausts the field of ethnic formation. Certainly social traditions of folk or everyday classification must also be examined. But political apparatuses, both governmental and non-governmental, do constitute dominant loci for the most troubling deployments of essentialized subjectivity.

The problem for politics after the end of the essential archaeological subject is not in refereeing rival claims to the past by irreconcilable ethnic groups, but in attacking the sources that instrumentalize ethnic identity in order to accomplish strategic ambitions. When one group asserts a privileged claim to territory based upon an archaeological claim to precedence, our response should not be to investigate which competing transcendent 'we' actually arrived first. Our response should be to investigate the contemporary motivations to such claims and the social, political and legal institutions that seek to wield ethnic identity. In some cases, we may find fault in colonial or imperial power structures that allow subalterns to protest oppression only in so far as they are members of recognized groups. In other cases, it will undoubtedly be demagogues and bigots who seek to use the identity group as a bludgeon for advancing their own interests. But in each case, by keeping our analytical and practical focus on the instrumental deployment of the identity group, we are able simultaneously to expose the constructed nature of ethnicity and to contribute to contemporary political action without recourse to universal principles or sectional allegiances.

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