Multiculturalism and Theoretical Archaeology: an Avocation of Critical Engagement. The "Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) Annual Conference", St. Katherine's College, University of Oxford, 16th-18th December 2000

Fiona Handley

Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

Do you remember your early experiences of TAG? Did it strike a note of intimidation - or maybe envy - when you heard of the ideas discussed there? Did you agree with their politics? Did you *understand* their politics? But what about now? TAG's purpose revolved around introducing theory from outside the discipline, developing a specifically archaeological body of theory and disseminating the notion that archaeology was a political discipline. Its success is hard to judge, but from a British perspective theoretical archaeology is on syllabuses, and love it or hate it, it's on the agenda. If archaeologists now approach their work with an eye on their discipline's past, or an idea of the wider consequences of what they do, that's theoretical archaeology. Isn't it? And maybe a half hearted attempt at theorising is better than none at all,... Is that how theoretical archaeologists want to see a theoretical engagement to spread through the discipline? Because given the session on multicultural heritage at the TAG 2000 Conference, this is precisely the future that TAG is facing.

My research interests focus on how people today use the past, and so I think a lot about the way history is presented to the public and the reasons why the past is so important to contemporary Western society. In particular I'm interested in what kinds of pasts are remembered by which people, and how different versions of the past could or should be remembered. These ideas, as well as being thought provoking concepts in themselves, are all the more interesting because they have been incompletely absorbed into thinking about contemporary society in the 'globalised' world. From the presumption that modern society has 'lost touch' with its past through the geographical break-up of communities, it follows that a reconnection with that past would revive the communal 'glue' that holds societies together. But whilst globalisation has moved communities around the world, it has also re-emphasised origins as a source of identity leading to a shift in how society is structured. By the late 20th century ethnicity had become the focus of understanding contemporary societies. In Europe and North America, this marked a change in the understanding of how the communities that make up the nation state relate to each other. In very general terms, there was a move away from an expectation that minority and immigrant communities should assimilate into the cultural norm of dominant group in society - the so-called melting-pot society - to a situation where ethnic differences could be expressed and valued by the wider community.

This acknowledgement that communities have cultural rights that need to be recognised and protected led to a vision of communities within a state working side by

side and sharing the benefits of their different lifestyles. Canada and Australia were the first to develop these concepts, calling them multiculturalism, as a response to incorporating but not subsuming indigenous and linguistic minorities. As a model of society this was taken up by other nations, particularly those in North America and Europe, as a way of dealing with the post-colonial ethnic mix of their populations, and has entered public consciousness as a way of describing society. But the term has not been without controversy on both sides of the Atlantic since the early 1990s (Gordon and Newfield 1996b; Taylor 1994), and has more recently been in the British headlines over discussions of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry (MacPherson 1999; Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000) and the identity of 'the British' (Dodd 1995; Leonard 1997).

With this background of international and national debate informed by academic research, media coverage and international hyperbole, the inclusion of the session "Addressing Multicultural Heritage: Historical Interaction and Contemporary Practice" at TAG 2000 seemed extremely timely and potentially very illuminating. The appearance of 'multicultural' and 'multiculturalism' in media discussions, in contrast to the extensive criticisms of the concept in cultural and ethnicity studies, seemed ripe for an assault by TAG. So what followed during the course of the day was at the least a disappointment, if not a serious reminder that TAG, even with its history of a distinct and critical engagement with political issues, can harbour debate with no theoretical content. What happened? The circulated abstracts began on the right note, pointing out that the definition of multicultural heritage had been receiving increasing attention in the UK and the USA over recent years and stating that one of the principle aims of the session was to ask "How can we define 'multicultural heritage'?". But this question was never answered. Rather what followed was an interesting series of case studies that attempted to illuminate the concept through example, but which, despite being at a theory conference, made no attempt to deconstruct it.

Judging from the papers given, what is multicultural heritage? First, it seems to be about involving people who have previously been excluded from the archaeology or heritage of the area where they live, due either to archaeological disinterest or to social or political restrictions. There were papers covering a community archaeology project in St Eustatius in the Caribbean, a project with the Bangladeshi community in East London and the presentation of Robben Island (where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned) to the public. A second theme was the investigation of Britain's multicultural past, and its international links, with papers on an excavation in a predominantly Huguenot area of Spitalfields, the presentation of Naven fort in Northern Island (a site of mythology for both Nationalists and Loyalists) to the public, a consideration of the heritage links between Bristol and St Kitts, and a brief look at issues surrounding the discovery of the bones found at the Rapparee Cave, Devon, which were claimed to be those of Caribbean slaves. Other papers covered a comparison of ceramics across the Atlantic, multicultural projects supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and equal opportunities policy at English Heritage.

These case studies reflect the popular perception of 'multicultural' as a social description which includes people who are not of white, European origin. Practising

multicultural heritage thus appears to be both the search for multiculturalism in the past and an acknowledgement of multiculturalism in society today. But are these the same kinds of multiculturalism? For example suggesting that Britain has always been multicultural frames the discussion of contemporary multicultural society, yet it is not clear whether this relation really exists, or if it does what its implications are. This neatly sums up one of the confusions surrounding the concept of multicultural-ism. It is unclear whether 'multicultural' is an ahistorical description of a type of society which is ethnically mixed, or whether it is a description of society today where ethnic identities are emphasised, sometimes celebrated, and recognised to a certain extent through legislation, or whether it describes the type of society that we would *like* to live in, where people are free to express their own cultural identity and racism doesn't exist. In Britain, this confusion has been exacerbated by the way the concept has entered into public debate, as the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain has it "multicultural Britain... has evolved as an unplanned, incre-mental process- a matter of multicultural drift, not of conscious policy" (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000, 14). The blurring of the concept has caused confusion (for instance with political correctness), and allowed it to be used in media spin, and has contributed to its application in corporate policy as an exer-cise in equal opportunities (Gordon and Newfield 1996a).

However, the concept of multiculturalism is neither straightforward nor problem free. Whilst archaeologists and heritage practitioners have embraced it because it rejects the nationalist narratives that have beleaguered their disciplines, a closer in-spection reveals it to be on a continuum with essentialist cultural thinking rather than a breaking from it. Multiculturalism as an attempt to reconcile the end of imperial-ism with a future where the rulers and the ruled must live and work side by side is still embedded in cultural categorisations of colonialism. As Hesse (1999, 207) points out "multiculturalism [is]... discursively organised around the various dis-crepancies that circulate within the cultural afterlife of modern Europe's imperial-isms". The realisation that multiculturalism is the successor to colonialism alerts us that this categorisation has a history, which is relived in the relationship between the defined groups. Britain's imperial and nationalist past is built in to British society; no longer being proud of it does not mean it has gone away.

Multiculturalism replaces one essential identity based on the nation with a series of equally essential ethnic identities. But what both national, and now multicultural, discourse ignores is that these categories are artificially imposed and are continually being negotiated and transgressed by people. Immigrant and minority communities cannot be reduced to a list of cultural characteristics or 'differences' because they are not sealed off from the rest of society, and because their communities are socially and historically positioned within British society. The East End's Bangladeshi com-munity are *not* Bangladeshi - but nor are they British. This phenomenon, of belong-ing to two cultures simultaneously, has a long intellectual tradition culminating in the work of Paul Gilroy who described it, after Frederick Douglass, as "double con-sciousness" (Gilroy 1993). This social model contrasts with today's "overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'black' and 'white' people" (Gilroy 1993, 2). In contrast, the more difficult option is to consider theories of creolisation and

hybridity, routed through historical experience and movement of people.

Has the focus on multiculturalism made our society a better one? There is probably a greater awareness of other cultures, though it is difficult to judge what this means and how far this penetrates. But the emphasis on 'celebrating diversity' has not protected one particular section of society who are not part of a distinct ethnic group yet have been framed as a threat by the media— refugees and asylum seekers. What this serves to show is that for all the efforts of multiculturalism to educate the British population into accepting people from different cultures, it has not even succeeded in making people *tolerant* to those that Britain is obliged to protect under international law. Moreover multiculturalism is charged with obscuring other relations of power controlling communities, such as poverty, under a mantle of difference and ultimately doing little to alleviate discrimination, because "collectively, people of color aren't necessarily empowered by multiculturalism. Rather, an ambience of cultural diversity (a subaltern mise-en-scène, if you will) can serve to obscure the fact that nothing at all has changed for the diverse populations in question" (Wallace 1994, 259).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of multiculturalism, and once again one with a colonial precedent, is the way that it organises the presentation of a community's culture around a set of criteria imposed by the white majority. Previously cultures were expected to assimilate to gain the benefits of wider society, now they must display and explain their differences. Wallace's "subaltern mise-en-scène" (*ibid.*) suggests a cultural landscape where ethnic differences are demarcated for the pleasure and knowledge of those in power. But what of those communities who do not want to open themselves for inspection? As Davis (1996, 45) succinctly puts it: "Multiculturalism has acquired a quality akin to spectacle. The metaphor that has displaced the melting pot is the salad. A salad consisting of may ingredients is colourful and beautiful, and it is to be consumed by someone. Who consumes multiculturalism is the question begging to be asked".

But it wasn't asked at TAG. Apart from a brief mention of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, none of these issues were discussed, yet this was at a conference that prides itself on rigorous political engagement. Why then, did none of the participants feel that this concept was problematic? I suspect it is because multiculturalism has been packaged in a way that is especially attractive to those involved in heritage because it provides an immediate and obvious counter to the accusations that the past can only be of service to the nationalist myth of Great Britain. Whilst this has been discussed in the discipline, it has also been key in the approach to heritage by the present Government, who have been keen to break from Britain's traditional image of pageantry and nostalgia. Heritage practitioners as a body are eager to absorb the concept of multiculturalism and the atmosphere at the session was of enthusiasm that heritage was at last moving in the right direction. But there is nothing like self-congratulation to disguise huge pitfalls, especially when it is fed by public debate. Remember that, as one author put it "in investing in multiculturalism, we cannot buy the sales talk without reading the small print, too" (Baumann 1999, 98). What TAG used to excel at was using theory as a way of interrogating the discipline as a whole. Now that the early 1990's have gone is TAG becoming complacent? This session suggests that

the days of minimal theoretical engagement are not behind us, rather, we are living them now. Can archaeology *yet again* fall into a trap of a half-hearted, common-sense approach to theory? It is - and its happening right under the nose of TAG.

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