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Degrowth in development-led archaeology and opportunities for change. A comment on Zorzin

Sadie Watson

Museum of London Archaeology, UK
Email: swatson@mola.org.uk

Zorzin's paper offers compelling discussion surrounding the various issues that face the practice of archaeology today. I would like to take some aspects of his paper and dive deeper into the implications for myself and my colleagues working within development-led archaeology in the UK and elsewhere. My own career has not been framed within a theoretical or academic sphere so my opinions about this topic will be accordingly pragmatic – although like many, I alternate between desiring a complete destruction of the existing structures within which I have been forced to operate and taking a more measured consideration of how to approach the revolutionizing of those current structures, which (currently anyway) seem intractable. My knowledge of degrowth as a concept has been expanded by Zorzin's paper, which provides a coherent and relevant introduction to the subject. Ironically, as a post-doctoral researcher without a university account, I am not able to refer to the list of references in Flexner or Zorzin's papers, so found myself on the back foot slightly, although entering fully into the competitive and expensive world of academic publishing is not an attractive proposition in many ways, and like others I would prefer open access of everything, for everybody.

First, I have to confess to some personal disquiet about the concept of degrowth when my own livelihood and capacity to care for my family (rent, food, school uniforms) have depended entirely on a salary from development-led archaeology and I am therefore an established participant in the neo-liberalism Zorzin describes. I was also a senior member of the field team described in Zorzin (2016b), although I did not work on the specific project he discusses in that paper. I have some issues with Zorzin's (2016b) approach to participant observation, which was undertaken without informing some of the participants, and also with the publication of clearly identifiable photographs of the site team and project. The concluding remarks about sabotaging the project are unnecessarily provocative, in my opinion; this would merely increase pressure on the supervisory staff, which is hardly in the spirit of solidarity. I agree with most of the rest of the content, (particularly the idea that we have been instrumentalized by developers), bar the idea that early professional archaeology was somehow a 'better environment', given that it developed within a conservative class-based patriarchy. I should also confront the reality that, despite my efforts at activism (union activity, lobbying our professional body and other organizations), there have been few significant improvements in the living and working conditions of archaeologists over recent years and the profession of archaeology remains exclusionary and predominantly open only to those who have come from a white, abled, economically secure background. Here my own position as one of those woolly liberals who is wholly embedded in capitalist structures is clear; I reluctantly nailed my colours to that mast when I committed to work on road schemes rather than protest against them back in the mid-1990s.[1] I have operated as an archaeologist within the rules and time frames of the construction industry ever since and fully accept Zorzin's critique that my adherence to the structures means I have bought into the idea that working within them is my sole option.

With these various caveats out of the way, certainly have no argument with Flexner's statement that there is something wrong with capitalism (Flexner 2020, 159), but I would take issue with the

idea that the problem is not with archaeologists, as we have consistently proved ourselves to be conservative in method and practice, restrictive when thinking about true innovation, and exclusionary. Certainly in my corner of the UK sector we measure our success in terms of income, rather than in terms of impact (Aitchison and Rocks Mcqueen 2020, 5) and the short-termism of our business models embedded within the construction cycles of boom and bust does not readily enable investment in truly socially responsible activities.

However, Flexner's claim (2020, 167) that we can choose how our practice develops is worthy of serious consideration, and I would take his idea of pursuing social and environmental justice through archaeology seriously. Our profession is still relatively young and there are opportunities for reconsideration of our fundamental purpose. That this will require small acts of resistance and innovation rather than waiting for a wholescale reorganization is clear to me, though; the profession of archaeology remains stacked with gatekeepers and our existence is owed to developers seeking to get the best result for their shareholders. However, if we deliberately take a local perspective on ensuring scalable sustainability and justice for each project we can move towards the ideal – an archaeology that provides benefit in myriad ways for myriad people. Of course we also should acknowledge that not everyone can be beneficiaries of every project we undertake, but an honest appraisal of our fundamental aims will reveal this and illuminate who should benefit.

In the UK, we have persisted in the belief that we do not need to acknowledge our impact on local communities, perhaps because UK archaeologists tend to believe that we operate in an egalitarian environment. In fact, the opposite is true, and with the larger contracting organizations working nationally and sending staff to excavate development-led projects far away from their own home areas, we in fact operate what is an invasive system, on a colonial model. Urban development is often the source of destructive violence against local communities, and people of colour are less likely to be beneficiaries. For archaeology to tackle these inequalities we need to think carefully about parachuting teams into areas, working behind hoardings, removing artefacts and data away to be assessed elsewhere and presenting the results in ways that are exclusionary. If we operated a more collaborative (or cooperative) system of employment, whereby staff were shared between operators, enabling local people to be engaged, there would be more opportunities to better embed a public-facing approach, with meaningful relationships established. These relationships are notoriously hard to forge and maintaining them over time is crucial but rarely managed. This would also encourage inclusive procurement systems, investing time and money in businesses with local foci, providing sustainable employment and economic opportunities. Ironically, this had been proposed as a solution to issues surrounding the impact of Brexit on our labour market, whereby we will see a decline in European archaeologists moving to work in our development-led system. We need to tackle this problem by reinventing our business models, and I think that a more flexible approach towards 'employees' would also encourage a more open approach to involvement by non-employees, in its traditional sense. It would also go part of the way towards establishing a more cooperative system, as espoused by Flexner (2020, 165). I do think, however, that true cooperatives are most effective when small (e.g. Picea Kulturav (2020), which works pragmatically within the structures of larger bodies and collaboratively on larger projects), and I would also add that calling yourself a cooperative does not necessarily or automatically ensure that your business practices are equitable (this is meant not as a criticism aimed at Kulturav – only for clarity). For this to take place a range of diversity of thought is required, but perhaps most of all during times of strategic decision making. We should aim to decolonize and diversify our teams, and the most senior levels in terms of boards and governing bodies, through inviting and including new voices.

I can find nothing to disagree with within the Black Trowel Collective's approach, as outlined in Flexner's paper, aimed at removing central control and dominance by the self-appointed leaders of our activity.[2] The mission to explore horizontal power is something I support and see the provision of spaces where this can be explored to be critical to my own work.[3] This opens up the potential for altering my own position, of course, but this is part of the process of

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decolonization – we must be open to our own situation and privilege and move aside to give others opportunities. My own work in this sphere is aiming to identify areas within our existing structures whereby we can share, or cede, responsibility for research aims or working practices to external actors such as local communities, in order that the archaeology we create (although 'produce' is also an appropriate term here) takes a more horizontal approach. This need not worry the business managers; there will still be funds incoming from developers, but we must use them more responsibly.

The emphasis Zorzin places on civil disobedience and disrupting the status quo comes from a position of relative privilege and although his intentions are clearly honourable it would not be within my gift to provide precarious colleagues and those from less privileged backgrounds than my own with a safety net from the consequences of such actions. If we leave rebellion and upsetting capitalist structures to those who would more easily navigate disruption it will inevitably result in inequalities in whatever movement takes over. It is better, perhaps, to approach a redistribution of archaeological wealth (both money and information) by paying participants appropriately, whether they are professionals or not. Nor do I anticipate that the future would necessarily be eco-feminist or decolonized without much effort being directed in these directions by a few; progress in these directions has been glacial due to the persistence of our self-appointed leaders (gatekeepers) and the innate conservatism within our sector.

It is tempting during this discussion to take issue with the term 'commercial archaeology' as few archaeologists make significant profits; there are charitable orgs who of course shouldn't make a profit in the traditional sense, and our rationale for existing within the planning framework is justified under a dichotomous mix of legal frameworks and public-benefit provision. This is not to say that the term doesn't apply, however, just that it doesn't sit well with many of us, who might prefer contracting archaeology or archaeological practice, but these could rightly be described as masking the reality – that we are all contracted by our employers to provide a service which adheres to externally set time and budget restrictions. This speaks to my interpretation of the central discussion, of whether we trust the market to be responsible; whether we need state regulation that requires certain behaviours and standards from our work; or, indeed, whether Zorzin's degrowth approach would provide the change we need. As a member of the aforementioned woolly liberal constituency I support the idea of state regulation as the only (current) possible alternative to market-driven economics, which have not served archaeologists well in the past, failing to provide wage uplift, job security or flexible working approaches. Even in times of economic boom the response to the fabled skills shortage has been to provide entry-level training rather than to increase opportunities for bright, brilliant people to stay in the sector. It is also worth noting that these times of boom have often been as the result of publicly funded projects (e.g. transport infrastructure) where an onus could have been placed on investing in people. Zorzin points out that the impact of neo-liberalism (which I am conflating with the market, as discussed above) is competition throughout society, and I would agree with him that archaeology has become fully embedded in this to the extent of encouraging short-termism and client-led approaches, although I also agree that this was both pragmatic and well-meaning. The urgent question is what to do.

To conclude, the suggestion that we should expect contracting archaeology to lever a democratic response to archaeology through meaningful co-production (Flexner 2020, 164) is where I think our primary opportunity to disrupt current practice lies. As Zorzin indicates, a move towards degrowth would incorporate a transitional phase and we should act as conduits for the introduction of new ways of working, including tackling the decolonization debate forcefully within a social-justice framework. Our structures need to be examined in reference to exclusionary practice and this should extend to our political, legal and professional frameworks as well as our business models. The market-driven constraints can be pushed against from within.

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Notes

1 When employed by Oxford Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology) on the Swindon–Gloucester road scheme (1996) we were required to sign a disclaimer against road protests. This was after the Newbury bypass and M3 Winchester protests where archaeologists had been active dissenting voices. Now we found ourselves working for the road builders, who did not consider this dichotomy to be appropriate.

2 See https://blacktrowelcollective.wordpress.com.

3 See www.mola.org.uk/archaeology-and-public-benefit-ukri-future-leaders-fellowship.

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Degrowth, anti-capitalism or post-archaeology? A response to Nicolas Zorzin

LouAnn Wurst

Department of Social Sciences, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, Michigan, USA
Email: lwurst@mtu.edu

I am very sympathetic to Zorzin's larger aims in this article and believe we share many common goals. Even so, there are aspects of this paper that I find a bit unsettling, suggesting that we come at these issues from very different theoretical perspectives that have implications for the way we use terminology and think about implications for archaeology and the future.

Terminology

This paper calls for a new paradigm for archaeology that focuses on and works toward 'degrowth'. The argument is framed in the context of and in reaction to neo-liberalism, which Zorzin notes is a concept that resists definition. Even so, he presents it mainly in idealist terms, and actual material conditions are barely visible in Zorzin's discussion. 'It' is described as a 'doctrine,' 'ideology' and 'mindset'. Zorzin posits degrowth as a concept to replace 'the dogmatic neo-liberal imaginary based on growth' (p. 5).

I personally have a lot of problems with the term 'degrowth' and find the emphasis on degrowth as a radical action unfortunate. To be fair, my reaction is to this whole body of literature and not simply to Zorzin's contribution. A quick Google Books Ngram Viewer for degrowth shows an explosion in the use of the term in about 2007. This literature, emerging from political-ecology and ecosocialist concerns, defines the problem as growth and is largely framed in the context of fossil-fuel-driven industrialization and the environmental devastation wrought by it. Framed this way, the concept has fostered its own growth industry in academic wrangling. Scholars have been arguing whether the problem is really the abstract concept of economic growth or the concrete reality of capital accumulation (Foster 2011, 30). Others recognize that economic growth and its environmental devastation have equally characterized the capitalist West and the Soviet Bloc countries of the East (I cannot bring myself to refer to them as socialist!). Thus, if the problem is growth as surplus production in general rather than capitalism itself, burning issues become whether socialism is possible without growth (Kallis 2019; Andreucci and Engel-Di Mauri 2019). Others have argued that the focus on growth sidesteps other equally vital issues, such as labour, work and alienation (Barca 2019a; Brownhill, Turner and Kaara 2012). Vergara-Camus (2019, 226) argues that we need to move beyond our obsession with growth and realize