

If Not Us – Who? If Not Now – When?

Mobilizing Archaeology to Confront the Wickedness of Our Times

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Marte Spangen’s keynote articulated many of my own sentiments. The ‘wickedness’ of our contemporary times can indeed feel overwhelming, and the urge for archaeology to make a difference, to truly matter, has rarely been greater.

Diverse perspectives, Spangen points out, are essential for tackling wicked problems. However, one issue is that populists are looking for simple solutions. How are we to remain relevant in a society that is reduced to simple binaries?

Spangen identifies a way toward greater social relevance through what she terms participatory archaeology, her preferred label for community-based research. Crucially, she argues for a participatory archaeology that follows self-reflexive principles and is conducted with a clear purpose. Rather than seeking consensus about the past, she proposes an inclusive participatory approach that makes room for opposing views and cultivates discensus. Such open and transparent dialogue between experts and communities, she suggests, may serve as a counterweight to anti-democratic tendencies shaping contemporary society.

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Building on Spangen's point, we cannot expect to 'do good' with archaeology in a purely altruistic sense, but we can mobilize our discipline as a tool for improving sociopolitical conditions and promoting democratic values. Doing so, however, requires deliberate effort (e.g. Samuels 2017).

I agree that we need to let go of the idea of consensus, but even the communities of disagreement that Spangen envisions rely on a commitment to work collaboratively towards a mutual goal. If such communities of disagreement are to function, there must be a basic respect for opposing opinions. Not everyone will participate – authoritarianism, after all, is partly defined by its refusal to tolerate dissent. In a totalitarian regime, there is no space for communities of disagreement.

Given the growing disconnect between research communities and political leadership today, I would argue that an even more explicit stance is necessary. Archaeologists can no longer hide behind claims of neutrality and objectivity. Indeed, the ideal of objectivity is not only unattainable, but may also be damaging. At a time when supporting facts-based statements is perceived as taking a political stance, defending science has itself become a political act (Rekker 2022).

The problem with the past is that what lessons we draw from it are not inherently good. Spangen's 'tangible points of departure' can easily be manipulated for anti-democratic purposes (e.g. Niklasson 2023). Thus, to be an effective counterweight, dialogue may not always be as inclusive and fluid as one would wish, and assigning the professional the role of facilitator and mediator might not be enough. If we are to understand and benefit from oppositions, we as archaeologists must impose directionality and take on a critical role within these communities of disagreement.

Spangen's hope is that engagement, dialogue, and interaction will promote democratic discourse and create 'heritage preparedness' against essentialist and anti-democratic uses of the past. This is where, however, I feel Spangen's call for action falls slightly short. There is a time to be introspective, and there is a time to join the resistance.

Based on my long-term and ongoing collaboration with an Indigenous community in coastal sub-Arctic America, it is clear that climate change represents the most glaringly wicked problem of all (Hillerdal et al. 2025). Its impact is further amplified by a political establishment that prioritizes profit over people, and by ongoing socioeconomic marginalisation and inequity (Chang et al. 2023). Wickedness intersects. I fear that building preparedness for the future does not respond to the violence of the present. In the face of anti-democratic movements, growing fascism, escalating capitalism and climate breakdown – how do we matter?

Indigenous archaeology has the questionable advantage of operating within a morally defined space: working with and for Indigenous groups

to explore and reclaim their past from a Western-dominated history gives it immediate significance (e.g. Nicholas 2025). We can all agree that decolonizing archaeology is important (e.g. Lemos et al. 2025). I have found that working with Indigenous communities necessarily positions me, as an archaeologist, in the contemporary, and, by extension, the political. This, I contend, is one of Indigenous archaeology's strengths.

In their introductory chapter to *Transforming Archaeology* (Atalay et al. 2014), the editors argue that archaeology which aims only to advance the discipline is misguided and potentially harmful. They call for an archaeology that 'at its core, serves communities in the present and with long-term considerations for the future' (Atalay et al. 2014:11). Archaeology then, has the social responsibility to matter.

Transferring this approach to less clearly defined communities and power relations demands a different kind of engagement from archaeologists – one in which we actively take part and introduce, not only clear aims, as Spangen suggests, but also direction to any collaboration. Additionally, it demands that we state our position. Dialogues can be open-ended, but not ambiguous. In successful community-based projects, even if aims are not shared between researcher and community, they can still align, and different knowledge systems can coexist and inform one another. Sonya Atalay (2020) introduces a model of 'braiding knowledge', creating space for multiple, and complementary, ways of knowing. This, she suggests, extends the reach of sciences and strengthens scientific resilience, especially in a contentious political climate. Ultimately, it makes for better science.

We need to remember that collaboration is a practice – not a theory. Community-based projects are always local, embedded and intrinsically contextual. Relevance and success are measured against locally defined needs, and global values are perceived through the local lens. Thus, effective community-based archaeology requires both a defined purpose and a flexible and responsive approach to collaboration. When mutual aims and objectives are agreed, collaboration must allow the community to define the terms of participation in accordance with their expectations. It may not require archaeology to be only self-reflexive but also humble – to listen and to learn. The result is a truly interdisciplinary archaeology that can advance knowledge and strengthen social cohesion based on local values. When properly integrated, archaeology tells richer stories, reaches deeper, and matters more – not as a neutral mediator, but as a mobilizing force capable of using heritage to confront the wicked.

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