

The Location of Theory: A Discussion with Homi Bhabha

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On Friday April 30th, 2010, the noted postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha entered into discussion with Alejandro Haber, Yannis Hamilakis and Uzma Rizvi, as part of the opening plenary session of TAG 2010, the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference at Brown University. The session was moderated by Nick Shepherd, and convened by Ömür Harmansah on behalf of the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World. The theme for the plenary session was The Location of Theory (a full statement of the theme is given below). Haber, Hamilakis and Rizvi were asked to prepare 1000–2000 word statements in response to the theme. These were circulated in the weeks before TAG2010. Homi Bhabha gave a detailed and thoughtful response, in which he addressed each of the statements, and enlarged on the place and meaning of a project of theory in archaeology.

In this issue of *Archaeologies*, we publish the statements by Haber, Hamilakis and Rizvi, produced in response to the session brief. The outline for the plenary session on The Location of Theory was multi-authored, and was workshopped by a group meeting in the Joukowsky Institute in the months leading up to TAG 2010. The full text of this statement follows:

The TAG 2010 meeting at Brown University will open to debate the supposed universal applicability of Archaeological Theory (in the singular), given the emergent reaction and critique from scholars from various localities in the world which have long been generating diverse archaeological practices and theories (in the plural).

Given archaeology's long history and intimate entanglements with imperialist, colonialist and even racist discourses, archaeological practice and theory have always been deeply political as an agent of change in the global scale and within histories of places. In the last few decades, archaeologists and archaeological theorists have been increasingly engaged with tracing the genealogies of the discipline in the colonial modernity and reflecting on its powerfully political status in the postcolonial world (e.g. Hamilakis and Duke 2007; Liebmann and Rizvi 2008).

Archaeological theory itself, with its theories of the center (such as processualism and postprocessualism) arguably has a globalizing tendency to

control the political economy of knowledge production. The theoretical paradigms of the disciplinary metropolises have “landed”, been reinterpreted and hybridized in various regions of the world. They are integrated into locally-situated debates and regionally specific contexts of archaeological practice and theory-making. But then gradually emerging are questions such as, what kinds of debates and theory-making have taken place in response to local priorities, interests, pressures? How do these situate themselves in relation to metropolitan theory: as resistant forms (forms of counter-theory), or as conversations with it?

Archaeological Theory of the center has tended to think of itself as timeless and placeless, a kind of meta-level activity: it posits a homogenization of archaeology, a kind of world archaeology while perhaps implicitly or subtly annihilating territories of difference, silencing place-based expressions. This is itself a characteristic of colonial modernity, as it has long been recognized. Therefore archaeological theory in a way acts like modernity itself in its project of “eating up” locally situated forms of the discipline, subjecting them to a single rationality. Do we think of this as part of a necessary “disciplining” of archaeology, bringing locally-situated forms of archaeology under the sign of a single, dominant genealogy? Or do we think of this differently, as part of a political economy of knowledge production, and a struggle around knowledge and representation? How do we begin to think of theory itself as being located in particular contexts and histories of practice? Is it possible to think of a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” in archaeological practice? (Bhabha 2004).

It is hoped that this debate at TAG 2010’s Plenary and Sub-plenary sessions will provoke new reflections on the political economy of knowledge production in archaeology in the context of rethinking coloniality and modernity. While exposing globalizing theories of the center and its macro-political regimes, the meeting will serve as a platform to reflect upon “hybrid modernities” and place-specific archaeologies as constructive avenues for the future of the discipline. If disciplinary models of center and periphery tend to replicate colonial geographies and power geometries: how do we begin to theorise our diversity of experience as archaeologists without resorting either to notions of colonial difference or nativist essentialism? The involvement of archaeologists in the micro-politics of various localities they work in can offer valuable insights into situated fieldwork practices, while attempts to see the emergent impact of located archaeologies on central disciplinary discourses are encouraged. As Escobar recently put it: “this implies setting place-based and regional processes into conversation with the ever-changing dynamics of capital and culture at many levels... a complex, historically and spatially grounded experience that is negotiated and enacted at every site and region of the world” (Escobar 2008:1).

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