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ABSTRACT

This brief commentary shows how chronic problems of academic praxis come to the fore in times of major political crises. The areas of popularisation, education and fieldwork are used as examples to highlight the weaknesses and failures of scholarly routines. As a consequence of these difficulties, a fundamental re-conceptualisation of the boundaries of the academic sphere is required.

As I write, US troops besiege Baghdad. I try to work on grading course papers and preparing classes, but am attracted by the February 2003 issue of the *Smithsonian Magazine*, entitled 'The splendors of Afghanistan'. A photograph shows a barefooted woman in white burqa approaching the entrance to a mosque, intricately decorated with openwork tiles in all shades of blue, tan and green (Schultheis and Wald, 2003). Also looking at me is a Binghamton University student newspaper, announcing in huge letters, 'Anti-war protest rebuffed by professor' and displaying a picture of a small student group with a sign reading 'No war on Iraq' (Chayes, 2003; Ronas, 2003). And then there is the 'Open declaration on cultural heritage at risk in Iraq' by the American Institute of Archaeology, which I downloaded from the web (Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), 2003).

These few items, and similar ones, pass across my desk daily, but academic pressures don't really allow me to pause and assess my professional life as an anthropologist and archaeologist working in the Near East. They are all part of my academic world: the popularising journal, the local students' product and the short text plus long list of signatures distributed in virtual space. I read

similar pieces *en masse*: almost each one I take a closer look at makes me want to respond.

CRUSADING VOYAGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In the *Smithsonian Magazine*, the cover photograph is accompanied on the inside by another beautiful depiction of the mosque of Hazrat Ali. That photo, with a group of people walking away from the building, tells me on its dark blue sky in white enlightening letters: 'Here at Hazrat Ali you feel the real meaning of Islam: submission to faith, tolerance, peace, balance and tranquillity'. Did an Afghan make this comment to the journalists? Probably not, and more doubt is sown: 'to many Westerners', I am told on the same page, 'even the word "Islam" evokes images of rage, swords, war' (apparently referring to such works as Huntington's inflammatory *Clash of Civilizations* thesis (1996; cf. also Rashid, 1997)). So where do the authors of this paper stand? A close reading reveals a complex construction.

Firstly, in both images, people are literally depicted from the back, imagined as 'backward'. By the same token, they are turned into faceless

figures that bring only minor disturbance to the otherwise quiescent and serene scenery. Tolerance, peace, balance emanate from buildings, not people: the *Smithsonian Magazine* aestheticises and sanitises Islam by focusing on its material culture and by de-emphasising the peopled foreground.

A second dimension is displayed by the women in burqas. Two years ago, when Afghanistan was still under Taliban rule, images identical to these would not have been published under the banner of 'splendour', nor would they have aroused a feeling of tolerance and balance but would have provoked outrage over bigotry and fanaticism. Again, the actual continuity of the situation of women in Afghanistan is papered over by their visual excision through an accompanying text.

Thirdly, Afghanistan was 'liberated' from the barbarism of the Taliban by the massive onslaught of a combined Western military machine against a country that had been at war for over 20 years. This change is apparent in the fact that journalists travel in a once forbidden country, their descriptions of monuments or archaeological sites illustrated with tasteful photographs. They are at the forefront of another wave of Western self-invention. The Occident produces itself constantly through its 'Other', as Edward Said has so eloquently elaborated (1979; 1993). The victory in Afghanistan is just that: regaining the endangered means of self-production through access to one's mirror-image, the Orient. Now the West can again imagine the Orient in new forms; it can contemplate this legendary land in Middle Asia as if it were undisturbed and refer once more to Lord Byron's romantic poetry on the Orient, or at least to what remains from those monuments he once admired.

The mosque, the burqa-clad women, the rage, swords and war of 'Islam' are contradictory and coherent at the same time. The reader is led to believe that the 'Splendours of Afghanistan', whatever that term denotes, have either survived largely unscathed or urgently need reconstruction. These splendours are still unfortunately inhabited by backward people who lack Western individuality – indeed, a proper face – and who need education in order to make the crucial transition from barbarism to civilisation. Modernity will save them,

bringing an effective administration, schools, universities, a 'reliable' government. Barbarism, however, is not only a lack of civilisation and education. The authors leave conspicuously open a space for anti-modern, irrational people whose 'untrue' Islam is characterised by a deficiency of reason and by a concurrent resort to violence and brutality. Modernising one part of barbarism and eliminating another will bring 'our Orient' back, that untroubled filigree of shiny tiles and intricate architectural forms that makes for such mysterious, exotic poems, posters and photographs.

The *Smithsonian Magazine*'s fancy presentation hides quite well its complicity with President Bush's 'crusades' against one of the major religions of the world. As if to make the point, opposite the page with the picture of the mosque at Mazar-i Sharif is an advertisement that states in big letters at the top: 'American Values'. The peanut butter sandwich, which is the value, is worth a crusade against those barbarians at the gates.

MAD MATHS PROFESSORS

Pipe Dream is the name of the student newspaper whose reports on anti-war protests at Binghamton University sit on my desk. The motto of this paper, 'The Free Word on Campus', ironically (and unintentionally?) relates to its name. To conclude from the front page articles from the 25 March 2003 issue, however, some words on campus are freer than others. According to one article, students as part of their anti-war protests tried more or less successfully to interrupt teaching and exam-taking. They wanted expressly to disrupt 'business as usual', arguing that 'lives of human beings are a lot more important than grades and getting into grad school and crap like that'. The protesters went into a lecture hall where a maths professor was administering an exam and insisted on displaying and proclaiming their anti-war message to the 400 exam-takers. The professor is quoted as addressing these students as 'scum', and as wanting to press charges against them. His basic arguments stem from an evolutionist metaphor: 'We live in a civilized society ... These people [i.e., the protesting students] are barbarians. They are uncivilized. They don't belong in a university. I'm not sure where they belong'. A second article

on the same page states that another maths professor physically assaulted a student in a similar incident.

The scholastic environment, the ivory tower in which I work, reveals itself as far less subtle and sophisticated in its messages than the popularising journal from the Smithsonian. While academia, on both left and right, frequently moans that professors have lost their authority *vis-à-vis* students (Sacks, 1996), it becomes clear from the incidents related above how deeply engrained the assumptions of that authority have become. Professors' aspirations to manage and control student behaviour at least in classrooms have turned into unquestioned and unquestionable rights, an ideology of the sovereign teacher, garnished in the humanities and some social sciences by an attempt to instil critical thinking towards the non-academic world (Bourdieu, 1997).

When someone shakes this inbuilt discipline of the ivory tower, however, its self-declared civilised guards lash out. Those 'barbarians' are so outrageous that only one thing is clear. 'They need to be put out of here', one professor says. 'I'm not sure where they belong' is the academic, somewhat diplomatic way of expressing feelings similar to those of downtown Binghamtonians who scream at peace demonstrators: 'Go to Saddam!'. Only people who continue their daily routine in times of war are considered to form part of a civilised world, those who have internalised the state's perspective and use the discourse of 'we who fight Iraq'. Protesters, especially those who disrupt others' routines, are apparently just as barbarian as those Afghans who so much need 'our' help and education. Worse, though, such students had the opportunity to discipline themselves and did not do so. The palpable desire to extradite unpatriotic 'elements' to a netherworld permeates this society from its top governmental representatives through academia down to the ordinary citizens.

THE CONCERNED INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

Scholars do not resort to inflammatory language in their efforts to deal with practical matters of field research. Rather, they tend to be overly

cautious in order not to jeopardise their further opportunities for work in a particular place. What is to be done when a small country, famous for its antiquities but weakened by two wars in the last 20 years as well as by 10 years of sanctions, is apparently about to be attacked by the only superpower in the world?

When I received a letter recently from the American Institute of Archaeology asking me to financially support efforts to save Iraqi antiquities, I checked the web page mentioned in the letter (AIA, 2003). From there, I was drawn to a page with a Declaration on Cultural Heritage in Iraq that was signed by institutions and a long list of researchers. The statement is formally impeccable. It refers to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property and urges governments involved in the event of an armed conflict to ensure that Iraqi antiquities from all periods be secured and that Iraq's strong antiquities laws be upheld. The declaration requests that 'the staff of the Department of Antiquities must be returned to pre-Embargo numbers', particularly site guards. Signatories also indicate that they are willing to play a role in assessing damage, whether from illicit digging or warfare.

But upon closer inspection, the statement reveals a disturbing understanding of the praxis of archaeology and related fields of research in Iraq. In a less than diplomatic way, the statement, written before the beginning of the war, assumes not only that war will probably occur but that it will end in victory for the 'Allied Forces'. To speak of a return to pre-Embargo times can only mean the removal of Saddam Hussein, and thus the installation of a new government. This is reconfirmed by the vague mention of 'numbers' of employees in the Department of Antiquities, rather than actual people. The assumption seems to be that there will be a complete turnover in people holding positions in this institution.

And why is there such an emphasis on the number of site guards? Here, an old colonialist *continuo* underlies the sounds of the war drum. The declaration implies that the most important employees of the Iraqi antiquities department are unskilled labourers, readily serving the (future) foreign researchers, and expressing their willingness to help them. Contrary to the Afghan situa-

tion, the Iraqi institutions of research are described as thoroughly modern, needing only restoration to their former strength. Indeed, they served the interests of Western archaeologists and historians from colonial times on, some minor problematic periods excepted.

Apart from those guards and the 'numbers' in the Department of Antiquities, the declaration of the American Institute of Archaeology does not mention people. Apparently, the social context of research, the multiple relations to local people, to workmen or -women (other than the guards), to cooks and other service people or to businessmen in nearby towns and elsewhere do not play any role in the minds of the authors of the statement. Research is objectified as a laboratory situation in which Western specialists attempt to unravel the past from the Iraqi soil, where local co-operation is at best a means to reach an end. The declaration's attitude (and that of other similar statements) shows its inhuman character by what it does *not* bother to mention: that victims of war are to a large extent civilians – and that these are the people with whom we normally work in our projects. War has an impact not just on antiquities. Its first and existential impact is on living people, and any declaration by researchers of the Iraqi past that does not acknowledge our indebtedness to them and the greatest concern for their lives is, to put it mildly, a moral failure.

ACADEMIA'S BLINDNESS

My three examples show the great variety of intersections where war, academia and social environment meet. In less troubled times, academics have drawn strict boundaries around themselves, avoiding involvement in the messiness of 'real life' outside the proverbial ivory tower.

Popularisation, this annoying task of reaching beyond our cosy community of navel-gazers, forces us to transmit research to a larger public. Luckily, these days we have 'experts' for this task in the form of science journalists. They transfer academic prejudices to the larger public. Academics have largely failed to ensure that such writings contain an element of critique and questioning. To my knowledge, the relationship between academics and science journalists is largely a one-way

street with virtually no direct feedback from the academic community (Gugliotta, 2003). Instead, the end product, an interplay between attractive imagery and easy-going text, glosses over the complexities of the real world by decontextualising academic knowledge and research from their social conditions of production. As my two other examples of textual products show, this same excision of social conditions is found in academic praxis itself.

Academic routines are contradictory and paradoxical: while we embrace the faculty of critical thinking as the foundation of theoretical innovations and celebrate our reflexive capacities, we habitually deny or minimise critical investigation into those more practical aspects of our own work, i.e., teaching and fieldwork/laboratory work. This paradoxical scholasticism cannot persist without problems in times of major crises outside the ivory tower.

Unfortunately, we still live with an academic ideology that does not want to recognise the arbitrariness of its self-defined framework. This lack of reflexivity acquires tragic traits in such cases as the recent war against Iraq, where scholars inexcusably forget people's existential sufferings and instead focus on cherished research into past material culture. The consequence of the present situation must be to reconsider how and why we accord boundaries to academic fields. We need to examine the biases that come with such boundaries and to critically evaluate the social contexts of our practical work both in academic settings and in fieldwork, and also in communicating that work to a larger public.

We behave like people who hang out a 'Do Not Disturb' sign in a burning hotel.

POSTSCRIPT

Before I finished writing this piece, Baghdad was occupied and the celebrated treasures of the Iraq Museum looted. The *New York Times* reported this horrible event on its first page, – 36 hours of almost unlimited vandalism and destruction (Burns, 2003). The reporting and the extraordinary amount of attention that Near Eastern archaeologists suddenly enjoyed are a macabre reconfirmation of my argument. Where were the voices that condemned and deplored the simultaneous looting of

39 of the 40 Baghdad hospitals? Newspapers reported these deeply disturbing incidents of people deliberately damaging the lives of those in greatest need somewhere inside the paper. Not a few archaeologists whose comments I read and heard in the media bemoaned the loss of gold helmets, tablets, lyres and broken pots without even mentioning the harm that looting did to sick, needy and injured Baghdadis.

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