

Archaeology of the Contemporary Past:
An Interview with Alfredo González-Ruibal, Thomas Kersting and Laurent Olivier

Alfredo González-Ruibal, Thomas Kersting, Laurent Olivier and the Editorial Collective of *Forum Kritische Archäologie*

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Prologue

Some time ago, Laurent Olivier sent a request to *Forum Kritische Archäologie*, asking if we would be willing to review a book he and his colleagues had edited. *Clashes of Time* (2017) is a collection on the theme of archaeology of modern times. Since we do not publish book reviews, we came up with the idea of interviewing him and the editors of two other books on similar topics: Thomas Kersting from the Brandenburg State Heritage Office who co-edited the book *Archäologie und Gedächtnis. NS Lagerstandorte Erforschen – Bewahren – Vermitteln* (2016) and Alfredo González-Ruibal from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the editor of *Rethinking Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity* (2013). This approach seemed attractive to us because the three interviewees work in different intellectual and disciplinary cultures. Thankfully, all three agreed to respond to a series of seven identical interview questions that we posed to them in writing. Following their answers, we have added a short commentary by the FKA editorial collective.

Reference volumes

Blaising, Jean-Marie, Jan Driessen, Jean-Pierre Legendre, and Laurent Olivier (eds.). 2017. *Clashes of Time: The Contemporary Past as a Challenge for Archaeology*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain.

González-Ruibal, Alfredo (ed.). 2013. *Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity*. London, New York: Routledge.

Kersting, Thomas, Claudia Theune, Axel Drieschner, Astrid Ley and Thomas Lutz (eds.). 2016. *Archäologie und Gedächtnis. NS-Lagerstandorte Erforschen – Bewahren – Vermitteln* (Denkmalpflege in Berlin und Brandenburg, Arbeitsheft 4/2016). Petersberg: Imhof Verlag.

We ask you to briefly introduce your book. What were the reasons for soliciting these contributions? Which are the guiding ideas in the collected papers?

Laurent Olivier:

As shown in our last book, *Clashes of Time. The Contemporary Past as a Challenge for Archaeology*, the archaeology of contemporary times is an expanding field of research throughout the western world. For the last ten to fifteen years, a large number of books and papers have been published, mainly in the English-speaking countries and above all in the U.S. This growing production is dominated by speculative approaches, which are focused on more philosophical issues than archaeological ones, such as those addressing the so-called “ontological” nature of contemporary archaeological remains. But if one looks at the events that have dramatically changed the course of human history during the last century, continental Europe is certainly one of the very best spots to excavate. The last World Wars took place primarily there and have left – especially in France and Germany – extensive remains that are now excavated by archaeologists in the frame of rescue operations (Schnitzler and Landolt 2013; Bernbeck 2017). This is not the case elsewhere, even in Britain for instance. What kind of archaeological knowledge does such research bring concerning historical facts that seem to be well enough known through a variety of archives and stories? Does it bring any? These are the first legitimate questions to address.

Then, you have in Europe, and especially in France and Germany, people who have been thinking about the deep changes that have transformed – and are still altering – the relationship of the present with the past: Reinhard Koselleck, François Hartog (2003), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2013), and many others, including Ulrich Beck (1992)

and Bruno Latour (2015). People are still arguing when this “new regime of historicity” began – after 1945 or much earlier? – and how to call it – presentism? Anthropocene? – but, for sure, the conventional boundaries between the various fields of historical enquiry are cracking. The rise of contemporary archaeology is a symptom of these “tectonic” movements, which are bringing in the present as the ground for any approach to the past – as the Italian historian Benedetto Croce wrote, “all history is contemporary history” (Croce 1949: 110). So we may say in the same way that any archaeology is an archaeology of the contemporary.

So, to answer to the question posed, we editors wanted to bring all of this together, in order to show to the Anglophone audience that research carried out in continental Europe bears both a great deal of potential and diversity, no matter what the ancient field boundaries were, as long as people are looking at their subject from the perspective offered by the present: archaeology of WW I and WW II, archaeology of the most recent past, archaeology of the landscape – what the French school calls “archéogéographie” (Chouquer 2008) – ethno-archaeology, study of presentism, etc.

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

Reclaiming Archaeology intends to do exactly that: to reclaim the intellectual relevance of archaeology on an equal footing with other social sciences. Since the nineteenth century, the discipline has basically foraged ideas in other fields and has been slow at developing its own theories, that is, theories that are strictly archaeological and not derived from anthropology, philosophy or the natural sciences. This explains why archaeologists have had, until very recently, very little influence in other disciplines. And ours is still a marginal field in the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, archaeology has fascinated philosophers, artists and writers, who at times have been able to do more interesting stuff with our materials than we have ourselves (like Freud or Benjamin). Yet the archaeological tropes that other practitioners use tend to be very narrow and revolve around a few ideas which are often very modernist.

Thus, the contributors to the volume were asked to do two things: first, to criticize the prevalent tropes that shape the image of the archaeological, outside and inside the discipline, and second, to show how archaeology can be reshaped and pushed forward using its own intellectual resources – although always in dialogue with other fields of knowledge. Some authors focused more on the productive side (Olivier, Witmore, Olsen, Shanks and Svabo), others on the critical (Gnecco, Haber, Hernando), but I think they complement each other nicely. A third group of contributors were people from outside the discipline (an artist, an anthropologist, a documentary photographer), whose work evinces a strong archaeological sensibility, some consciously (Fluxá), others less so (Gordillo, Vergara). They are proof that archaeology can give and not just take.

It is important to bear in mind that this is not a volume about the archaeology of the contemporary past, but the subfield figures very prominently in it. It is difficult to reclaim archaeology if archaeology keeps detaching the past from the present and producing historicist narratives about the more or less remote past. The contemporary plays a crucial role in *Reclaiming Archaeology*, because it expands the field to encompass the present, because it dissolves the past/present divide, and because it asks the past questions that are relevant to the present.

Thomas Kersting:

Among the editors of the book *Archäologie und Gedächtnis. NS Lagerstandorte Erforschen – Bewahren – Vermitteln (Archaeology and Memory. Nazi Camps – Research – Preservation – Presentation)*, I am the person who represents the archaeological heritage preservation sector. My co-editors from the fields of university research and teaching, from the staff of memorial sites, and from specialist firms working in historic preservation would certainly offer quite different responses. My approach to the topic you ask about is decidedly the highly pragmatic and rather “theory-distant” one of archaeological heritage preservation.

Our volume is the result of a conference with the same name held in September 2015. The research field often referred to in practice as the “archaeology of camps” represents the interface between archaeology, historic preservation, and memorial sites, with their respective perspectives and approaches. This was also reflected in the conference, which brought together speakers from those three sectors of heritage. A conference on this uncomfortable

topic would have been unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago, but the response from the more than 120 guests from seven nations demonstrated that the time was ripe.

After almost 20 years of excavations of sites from the Nazi years, it was time to try to draw results together. We asked for problem-oriented, synthetic contributions that would reflect the current state of research and treatment of original, architectural monuments and their presentation to the public. The conference targeted colleagues working at the interfaces of archaeology, architectural research, history, and commemoration. In view of the enormous increase in the number of archaeological projects and the advances in knowledge in recent years, we wished to highlight the impact on the handling of monuments and further effects of this growth in the public sphere. The focus was on the remnants of the Nazi camp system, and especially on forced labor performed by concentration camp inmates, foreign civilians, and prisoners of war, which are omnipresent evidence of Nazi tyranny, not only in the German state of Brandenburg. Brandenburg¹ was not the center of attention at the conference; the emphasis went well beyond, with contributions from Thuringia, Saxony, Lower Saxony, Bavaria, Austria, and Poland.

From the beginning it was planned to publish the conference proceedings in a publication of the Brandenburg State Office for Preservation of Archaeological Heritage and the State Archaeological Museum (*Brandenburgisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologisches Landesmuseum*). We thank the EVZ Foundation, the foundations of Brandenburg Memorials and of the Topography of Terror, the University of Vienna and the Archaeological Society in Berlin and Brandenburg e.V. for their generous support.

An archaeology of the contemporary past in the hands of its various practitioners emphasizes, albeit in different ways, issues of memory, present-past relations, and multi-temporalities. What are the implications of these topics for archaeologists' understandings of the relationship between past and present? Is it enough to say that material remains incorporate the traces of memories that are constantly reworked in the (changing) present? Or is there still a place for investigating the lives of people in the past, however recent that past is?

Thomas Kersting:

The theme of memory is reflected in our conference proceedings. We purposely used the ambivalent word *Gedächtnis* in the title in order to draw attention to its broad semantic field, which includes both (collective or individual) memory and remembrance.

In the archaeological heritage protection sector, the decisive factor in order for material remains to be considered heritage is that they tell us something about the “history of humanity”, as it is usually formulated in historic preservation laws. Among historic monuments are the so-called authentic places of the Nazi dictatorship, which are bestowed with a high status in historical presentations and in the culture of remembrance. In addition to eyewitnesses – and in the future as substitutes for them, as only a few are still alive – these places authenticate and illustrate historical events based on their materiality. In order, however, to access the meaningfulness of things that do not by themselves speak to us, we need further evaluation of such sources. Likewise, it is necessary to speculate on the various possible meanings inscribed in material things and to interpret them. Sources must always be critically questioned, and this process of critical reflection must also be laid open to visitors to memorial sites and to the recipients of our research. With respect to the questions, “what do we preserve? what do we convey? what do the material remains tell us?” and thus also indirectly the question “what is at the core of our research?”, the aspect of a narrative should be foregrounded. One cannot leave visitors alone with the task of making sense of and interpreting what they see. Reconstructed elements are often found next to (or on top of) original architectural remains, leading to a patchwork of temporal windows and traces. When it comes to conservation and presentation, all temporal layers of a place must be shown. An open-ended interpretation is indispensable from the perspective of heritage preservation: the current interpretations – themselves temporally bound – must always be characterized as the result of unfinished process. In this sense, archaeology can definitely approach the task of tracing lives and fates.

¹ Since 1990 the so-called capital region around Berlin is in the middle of the „new federal states“ as well as the core of the old political structure of Prussia.

Laurent Olivier:

This is indeed a key issue. What is being asked about is the archaeological knowledge that can be extracted from the archaeological evidence – a knowledge that would not be shared by other disciplines, such as history or sociology, but would come entirely out of the field as such. I would say that what such an archaeology brings to light is the “real stuff”; I mean the materiality of historical contexts that do not exist anymore around us: when you dig WW I trenches, for instance, what you find is what the soldiers – whether German, French, British, Canadian, etc. – used, wore, made, transformed, and finally lost or threw away. And this is not what is directly described by the military sources or people’s memory. That is something peculiar, something that documents daily life. Their waste, for instance, is amazing: what you find tells you about the beginnings of industrial mass consumption, providing you with archaeological contexts of that time that you would not find elsewhere.

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

That the present incorporates traces of the past continuously reworked in the present was first proposed by post-processual archaeologists in the 1980s. This realization led to the development of the very productive field of the sociopolitics of the discipline, which was crucial to do a more self-reflective and critical archaeology, as it made clear that we could no longer hold to the idea that our research as archaeologists in the present working with remains in the past had no consequence whatsoever in the present. After three and a half decades of sociopolitical critique, however, I have the impression that there are not many new ideas coming up from that direction. Now under the banner of heritage studies, people keep repeating the mantra that such or such monument or ruin or archaeological site is manipulated by nationalism, the State, neocolonialism, elites, interest groups, etc. One can write the conclusions of these papers after only reading the title. I do not mean that disciplinary critique is no longer needed. It is, but we need more imagination, more political radicalism, and new ideas. These are coming mostly from the South, as proven by some of the contributors to *Reclaiming Archaeology* (Haber, Gnecco).

It is also worrying that heritage studies and sociopolitical critique have occupied a large part of the space of archaeology. It is the triumph of metadiscourse: there is a proliferation of discourses on discourses. It is all about representation. How people in the present regard, rework, reject the past. That was the move, in fact, of the linguistic turn: from fact to representation. It seems so very old fashioned to be interested in the past qua past. Thus, more and more people are abandoning archaeology for heritage studies because they find them more interesting and more in tune with present concerns and social demands. Of course, scholars are also interested in them (not necessarily consciously) because there is more to be gained in academic terms (positions, prestige, grants, networking, policy-making) in the field of heritage than in the field of archaeology. We should ask ourselves why: *cui bono*?

I find the move from past to present (which is the move from archaeology to heritage) dangerous for ethical and political reasons. It is morally wrong to be concerned only with ourselves, with our era. This collective narcissism is but another symptom of the excessive and troubled ego of supermodernity, as Marc Augé (2002) noted.

To focus only on the present is also politically wrong: the proliferation of studies about the effects of the past on the present is a symptom of the triumph of presentism, which is the temporal regime of neoliberalism (Hartog 2003). The only time that matters is now. Archaeology can offer a counterbalance to this situation and show that the past matters, too. *Reclaiming Archaeology* is also about the politics of temporality, about the relevance of an archaeological take on time: this is very clear in the chapters by Olivier, Witmore and Verdesio. What I am saying now probably seems contradictory with what I said before about the relevance of the archaeology of the contemporary past. The subdiscipline, indeed, can become another ally of presentism. But it can be just the opposite: its fiercest enemy. To challenge presentism, it has to make the most of the temporal regime of archaeology at large and reclaim the long-term, the blurring of the present-past divide, the notion of heterochrony, of open pasts, etc. (as shown by the contributors to the volume mentioned above).

I particularly like the paper of Mark Leone and his students in the book because it is precisely about this: they are profoundly interested in the people of the past, in the slaves who lived in Wye House in the 18th and 19th century, but it is this concern for the past qua past that makes it absolutely relevant for the present. Because the traumas and hopes that they investigate archaeologically still resonate in the 21st century.

What is the role of methodology in an archaeology of the contemporary past? Does such an archaeology require new or different methods, for example, those from other disciplines such as forensics? Is an apparent preoccupation with methods part of a perception that archaeology of the recent past requires special legitimation? And if so, does this necessity for legitimation emerge from an insecurity within the discipline, or is it a reaction to how other disciplines perceive such an archaeology?

Laurent Olivier:

This is precisely the question we wanted to target and to look at carefully in the book. There is a basic fact, regarding archaeology: when you excavate sites of ancient periods – such as those of the Neolithic for instance – you have no idea of what this remote past really looked like, what happened in, let's say, the 20th century BCE, and so what people were confronted with. You know all of that when you are digging a 20th century CE site – very often, you even know what this site was about, who was living there, and what they were doing. But in a very disturbing way, knowing that story, you soon realize that you would be absolutely unable to deduce it from the evidence you have recovered from the ground (Bonnichsen 1973). The gap between what you find and what has happened there is widening incredibly depending on the preservation of organic remains – fabric, paper, cardboard. They disappear, and the site tells you quite a different story. In other words, the archaeology of the contemporary past may work as a lab, in which one can test and observe the relationship between activity or occupation and the production of remains as well as their transformation over time. This is what makes it special and unique.

So, the idea of the book was to take the present – in which we are standing – as a starting point from which to look at archaeological evidence, I mean the materiality of human activity. This is the reason why we have included the so-called ethnoarchaeology in our survey of contemporary archaeologies: ethnoarchaeology being the contemporary archaeology of “non-industrial” or so-called “archaic” societies. And here again, you realize in a quite painful way that what the use or the identity is of what you see is not what you would have deduced from that kind of feature if you would have found it at home in similar kind of sites – such as those of the Bronze Age, for instance. Again, there is a huge gap between what looks basically alike – similar kinds of long houses, for instance – and the interpretation we usually attribute to such sorts of features, when they belong to remote periods of our own prehistory. To put it otherwise, the “contemporary past” may be used as an arena in which our conventional interpretation of the past may be constructively challenged.

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

Archaeological methodology is crucial. It is one of the tropes of the discipline, which might seem a drawback but is actually an advantage. We have a fascinating methodology and people from other fields love it. They have often appropriated it metaphorically. What I suggest in *Reclaiming Archaeology* is that we reappropriate our own tropes, that we push forward the potential of our methods to do things that we have never done before or to come up with radically new ideas. This is what Douglass Bailey does in the volume, for instance. He reappropriates the trope of cutting the earth, which is something we routinely do in our fieldwork, to explore the symbolic ramifications of such an act.

As for using methods from outside archaeology, I think that this is often a question of convergence with other sciences, as happens with forensics. We both resort to the natural sciences to interpret what happened in the past, for example. But archaeology was using palynology decades before forensic palynology developed. So it is not necessarily that we have to learn from others, but rather to look at the past of our own discipline. In fact, excavation was borrowed by forensic science from archaeology, rather than the other way around. This is something that is usually forgotten but should be emphasized. It is one of the few cases when a hard science takes a very specialized technique from a humanistic discipline.

For me the issue of methodology is not so much about legitimation but about doing something that is both interesting and unique to our discipline. Some people have criticized the use of archaeological techniques as restrictive and prefer to use psychogeography, ethnography or other approaches. As for psychogeography, you can call it as you wish, but it is pretty much what antiquarians and later landscape archaeologies have been doing for centuries (Shanks 2012). Ethnography, in turn, is often presented as a panacea, the ultimate solution for doing a more ethical

and radical form of research. My position in this is that anthropologists are better at ethnography than we are, whereas they do not do field survey, geochemical analyses or stratigraphic sondages. I do not find it very useful to have yet another practitioner doing (often bad) ethnography. There is a plethora of researchers doing that already, coming from anthropology, sociology, urban studies, cultural studies, human geography, performance studies, oral history, etc. Only we, archaeologists, do archaeology. It would be ill-advised, I think, to squander all the creative and radical potential of archaeological techniques. Instead of saying that excavation is old-fashioned, let us reinvent archaeological excavation! Let us reimagine field walking or isotopic analyses! The advantage of the archaeology of the contemporary past is that one often only needs to apply the usual methodology to modern stuff to see anew both methodology and stuff. You take a side scraper, put a scale next to it, and take a photo, and it is boring. You pick up a rusty hand grenade, put a scale next to it, and take a photo, and then it is uncanny: both the grenade and the archaeological act. And you can take this further: put together a side scraper and a hand grenade, put in a scale, take a photo. This is what is called parataxis in art theory, and it works. Reclaiming archaeology, then, means first of all reclaiming confidence in our own discipline – which does not mean that we have to reject other methodologies, of course. Our methods should not be taken as a defensive shield against other disciplines or as a way of policing academic limits, but rather as a creative and powerful way of engaging with the past and the present, as a point of departure as well to start productive dialogues with other fields – from genetics to music.

Thomas Kersting:

As already mentioned, archaeological heritage preservation is not much concerned with methodology, because it is its job to protect existing monuments, which have first to be known. Heritage preservation offices are responsible for them. The impetus for our reactive activities usually comes from the outside: construction plans at locations of former camps often become known only at the moment when they are being realized; changes in museal (and ideological) conceptions of memorial places “require” new designs, usually involving breaking ground in one or another way; work camps with the best pedagogical objectives engage in excavations; illegal excavations at scenes of crimes (for example, Carinhall, the former manor of Hitler’s deputy Hermann Goering, who collected stolen art from all over the world; after the war – and even up to today – some people still suspect that treasures may be found there, and illegal searches for them still occur); clarification of facts at Nazi crime scenes; private parties request the right to search war-related hide-outs; local initiatives want to research and excavate, etc. Ultimately, compiling a list of protected monuments is a task of systematic inventory for which heritage preservation offices are responsible.

In Brandenburg, in the immediate vicinity of Berlin, the capital of the former “Reich”, the density of material traces of the recent past that are protected monuments is extraordinarily high. Only since the beginning of the 1990s have the legacies of the Nazi era moved into the purview of heritage protection – first, because of the definition of below-ground monuments as having no age limit “upwards” according to the Brandenburg Monument Protection Act of 1991, and secondly due to the changed conception of memorial sites at former concentration camps. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of divided Germany – before which the “Iron Curtain” between capitalism and communism ran through the middle of Germany – a change in the focus of memorialization was inevitable. After all, this was a profound political change that ultimately had ideological consequences. It was a change that understandably manifested itself immediately in construction work and therefore went hand in hand with breaking ground. In this context, the then state archaeologist, Jürgen Kunow, remarked: “We first had to understand that up until then only the 1950s memorial design of the GDR was under heritage protection, but not the original remains of the camps in the ground” (oral quote from a departmental discussion in the 1990s).

Gradually, heritage preservation offices were able to sensitize other players engaged in this field to the importance of ephemeral structures and to convince them to expand their methodological framework. The Brandenburg archaeological heritage offices faced up to a completely new type of responsibility and took on a kind of pioneering role in the particular treatment of these kinds of monuments in Germany (Kunow 2001). Even though methodological experience in dealing with recent monuments has further developed, the efforts to protect, preserve, and exhibit them continue to raise questions. A central aspect is the “mass problem”: how are we to deal with the large number of sites and finds? In continuous dialogue between memorial sites and archaeological specialists, practical standards for the exposure and preservation of archaeological monuments must be developed, with the involvement of lay people anchored in the work of communication and presentation. In the long run, continuous archaeological care of memorial sites is indispensable, especially if those working in pedagogical sectors of these

sites plan to excavate archaeological structures and their associated finds in order to make history literally “comprehensible” – something that runs counter to any concept of heritage protection!

It is common to emphasize that the archaeology of the Nazi era has to deal with so-called atypical sources (which, when we look closely, are actually quite typical): “Wherever rules are violated, where something illegal happens, there are gaps in the documentation” (Oebbecke 1995, transl. FKA). There is no doubt about the scientific value (along with a protection value) of buried remains due to “documentation gaps”: from non-archaeological sources, hardly any further increase in evidence can be expected (although, given all of the unexamined archival materials, this is difficult to judge). Additional value accrues to archaeological findings as documentation because of war losses and deliberate destruction of files and maps. For this reason, archaeological information attains the status of a primary source that supplements knowledge from other sources and leads to completely new questions.

From a conservationist point of view, a fundamental methodological question arises: (how) can one preserve sites? Primary protection means preservation in situ. Remains can be made “visible”, resulting in the problem of presentation and preservation after excavation. Or they can stay “invisible” as permanently preserved structures, often located just below the surface. In the latter case, refraining from exposure of the original architectural or other substance can be replaced by markings on the surface. Archaeological findings often provide data relevant for ensuring primary protection. Secondary protection means preservation in the form of documentation and finds, but sacrificing of the original substance. Previously unknown kinds of finds are recovered, some of them even involving new materials, in an unusually narrow dating framework for archaeological objects, a short “lifetime”. In addition, we encounter problems of restoration and conservation. However, preservation and storage of mass finds must not be thought about “in anticipatory obedience” in terms of the limited capacities of state offices.

The analysis of the finds is difficult given the gaping absence of archaeologists specializing in this field, although first approaches employing standard archaeological methods on these materials exist (asking when and where objects appear for the first time). However, in this case, we do not deal with centuries or decades, but with an exactness at the level of a year or an even finer dating. Accurate dating can in some circumstances be decisive for the identification of a location as a Nazi camp. The goal is to clarify the questions: what were specific places used for, how are they to be interpreted? Here the problem of *Nachnutzung* or “post-use” often arises, especially by the Allied (or, in our case in Brandenburg, Soviet) military that demolished or destroyed the camps and built new military facilities on top of them. In some locations, this led to the emergence of new perpetrator-victim constellations (so-called Soviet “NKVD special camps”), which produce their own commemoration problems (a “double history”, as this is called in German).

These circumstances can ultimately add up to the status of a place as an official heritage monument. To put places of collective suffering under archaeological heritage protection is no longer met with opposition in Germany. No one wants to be suspected of sympathy with the erstwhile perpetrators; there is, of course, no category of “victims’ places” in heritage protection law. So-called “perpetrator sites” – for example, the sectors in camps where guards lived – were, for racist reasons, usually better built and are therefore better preserved. Such remains can also have heritage character and value. But they are problematic as places for general display since there is less acceptance among the public, as that would imply a kind of solidarity with perpetrators. To what extent this situation may change in the future remains to be seen, as new political parties that relativize Nazi history enter the stage in Germany.

Before the start of any excavation involving modern remains, methodological concepts for future handling of the features and objects that may be discovered, including mass finds, must be worked out. Excavations for pedagogical or pure research reasons should be avoided in the future, leaving only those that must be realized for purposes of heritage protection. This precept also applies to the selection of objects for conservation and restoration. There are still no general agreements about rules for dealing with objects of mass culture, although a consensus has emerged that choices must be carefully documented when deciding to dispose of excessive finds. Excavations of recent forced labor camps have to be expertly supervised, but at present only very few archaeologists, especially in the regional offices, specialize in the archaeology of the contemporary past. In memorial places as well, trained personnel are necessary to convey the value of such remains in a professional fashion. However, since the initial fieldwork in “forgotten” camps, heritage preservation services in Brandenburg no longer have a problem of legitimacy.

An archaeology of the contemporary past is for many of those who practice it heavily focused on the material, whether conceived as material traces of memory, “things,” or features and mobile finds. Where does this leave people, a question that is particularly pressing in light of the “closeness to us” of the “object” of research in an archaeology of the contemporary past?

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

I am not so sure about the relevance of things in contemporary archaeology. It depends on the tradition. There is the neomaterialist school, with Bjørnar Olsen, Christopher Witmore (both of whom contributed to *Reclaiming Archaeology*) and Þóra Pétursdóttir, where materiality does have a very prominent place. It can also be argued that things are important for practical reasons in rescue or preventive archaeology. Grey literature has not much time for people, and most emphasis is put on descriptions of artefacts, features and sites. Yet the opposite problem is also true. In the Anglo-American tradition objects are often (but by no means always!) just a backdrop that you could even remove without noticing it (as Olsen criticizes in his chapter). In the case of the US this is something that comes from historical archaeology, where there is a tendency to produce very lengthy descriptions of historical events, using documentary evidence, including names of people and lots of biographic detail, and then a couple of paragraphs describing a few artefacts. Historical and contemporary archaeology face the challenge of too much and too good written and oral information. It is simply too tempting to forget being an archaeologist and become a historian or an anthropologist (or a philosopher) instead. I see this in an area to which I have devoted quite a lot of time, the archaeology of the Spanish Civil War. People start talking about the soldiers or the military operations using the available documentary evidence and archaeological remains virtually disappear from sight. Archaeology in this way becomes the handmaiden of history again. The difficulty is not so much to strike a balance between things and people, but rather to produce an account where something deep about humanity is revealed in things – I am not interested in things per se, otherwise I would have studied geology or engineering. To mention again the work of Leone and collaborators: they got to the people through the pollen. They are not interested in the biography of pollen or its material qualities. But they do not disregard it, either. It is the foundation of their work, that makes it particularly valuable. They end up telling a very moving, very powerful story of resistance and survival that could not have been told with written documents alone. The fact that we do not see people in an image or a narrative does not mean that they have been disregarded. Consider the case of Camilo José Vergara’s photographs. At some point he stopped taking photos of people, and he focused on the materiality of derelict ghettos. Does this mean that he is interested more in the architecture than in the people? Of course not. He has found a powerful way to expose the situation of the people (their oppression, but also their struggle) without making them the object of his gaze (something which lends itself easily to voyeurism, by the way). However, it is also possible to find an interest in people in more conventional kinds of archaeological research. I am thinking about the work carried out by German, Austrian and French colleagues in sites of violence (e.g. Schnitzler and Landolt 2013; Theune 2018). They also reach people through things, often in very poignant ways.

Laurent Olivier:

This is a very deep question, since it addresses the relationship we enjoy with “things” and more generally the material environment of our “culture” or “civilization”. In other words, the archaeology of the contemporary past basically deals with that question: what is the archaeological identity of our present times (González-Ruibal 2008; Olivier 2013)? Is it something special – a complete turn compared to previous periods of time? And what kind of archaeological processes are at work today, right in front of our eyes? Is, for instance, the spread of urbanization all over the world an irreversible movement, such as that of “Neolithization”?

Thomas Kersting:

Archaeology inevitably deals with material remains. This corresponds to its disciplinary definition, and archaeology does not need a “material turn” in order to engage in historical research. It has been emphasized sufficiently that our topic is “the people and not the pots”. The fact that we, as archaeologists of the contemporary world, know the fate of our “research objects” (i.e. subjects of the 20th century) can be emotionally stressful for some people,

but it is a great opportunity for heritage preservation, especially in terms of the public's perception. Archaeological heritage preservation takes place in the public interest in a purely legal sense, but the interest of the public in the subject of contemporary archaeology is quite different from topics offered by conventional archaeology, at least if it is not a matter of a proverbial treasure trove (gold always draws attention, Nazi gold is best).

Material remains are always directly linked to people and their destinies. This is not only true for an archaeology of the contemporary past, but in this field one knows the precise context of the material. Forced laborers, separated into groups by political and racist criteria, spent a significant part of their daily lives in the camps. The built environment, the fittings, and the organization of the camps had a direct bearing on their chances of survival. Therefore, the camps' structures, spatial arrangement, and internal functional differentiation must be examined. The finds themselves are emotionally loaded to a degree highly unusual for archaeology, and in many cases they are even personalized (i.e., with etched names) and thereby assignable to individuals and their fates. Until recently, they could even be relevant for compensation claims, something that unfortunately will no longer be the case in the near future. Things do not speak to us "on their own". To access their significance, we will need, as already mentioned, to evaluate additional sources.

Archaeologists tend to rely quite heavily on illustrations, both drawings and photographs, in the presentations and interpretations of their work. The existing, often unspoken conventions almost always result in photos that are highly aestheticized. But in the case of an archaeology of the contemporary past, is the dissemination of "intimate imagery" and aestheticized pictures of contexts of crimes and cruelty – especially of mass graves or of individual corpses – or of the details of known persons' lives justifiable? Should limits be set, and if so, on what basis? Should there be a right to intransparency, meaning the right to refuse intrusion into the particulars of someone's life or death?

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

There is the idea that aesthetics and trauma should not go together, as if the former trivialized the latter. But artists do create art on trauma. Indeed, it is one of the most productive lines in contemporary art and it has done a lot to create a critical consciousness in relation to crimes against humanity and despotic regimes. Forensic Architecture (Weizman and Franke 2014) for instance produces highly aestheticized work which is at the same time very political and very radical. The art of trauma is in no way a banalization of evil. Quite the opposite, they force us to see evil in a new way, and the most powerful works do stick in our minds. And this is something that predates the Holocaust: consider Agee and Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which is a powerful statement on the situation of poor sharecroppers in the American south. Aesthetics and politics are not at odds. In fact, aesthetics, and the aesthetical regime of art, as Jacques Rancière (2013) has described it, can be extremely radical. Aesthetics are about everything that affects the senses. The effects that they elicit can be positive or negative: it can be shame, fear or horror, or it can be empathy and love. The great photos (and great writing) in Jason de León's book forces one to empathize with undocumented immigrants (de León 2015). If he had chosen to write in a more report-like way and use more neutral photographs, the message of the book would probably not have been so powerful.

There should definitely be a right to intransparency, but we have to be very cautious with this. It is a right, not an obligation. The problem with ethics is that rights often become universal norms, with no sensitivity to context. The universal rejection of the Nazi regime, which has been elevated to the quintessential definition of evil, would have not been so strong if the images of corpses and emaciated bodies in extermination camps had not been widely circulated. The statement that six million people were murdered is less powerful than a single photo of a *Muselmann*. I feel that the rejection of seeing abject images has less to do with higher ethical concerns than with new sensibilities that abhor everything that is abject and crude (and real: no problem with dramatized violence in film or videogames). But we have the obligation to see. We owe it to the victims of history. Of course, the victims of history have the right to refuse our gaze, to remain anonymous and invisible. But we cannot impose invisibility as an ethical rule. In Spain, relatives of those killed during the Civil War and after by right-wing militia or the dictatorship *demand* that their remains be publicly shown. It was the dictatorship that wanted the bodies to be concealed. The circulation of forensic images has done more to change the preconceptions of many Spaniards as to the supposed leniency of the Franco regime than many history books. And we have to remember that the mother of Emmett Till,

a fourteen-year old killed in a racist crime, wanted the disfigured body of her son to be shown in an open casket so that the world would bear witness to racist brutality. This was crucial in changing political sensibilities (Harold and DeLuca 2015).

Should there be limits to visualization? Definitely. I would point out three simple limits: first, the wishes of the victims or their relatives; second, images should not be exploitative, they should not emphasize gruesome details for their own sake; third, we have to be cautious to not saturate the public with images of violence; anything that we show has to have a very clear purpose.

Now, the first point is more complicated than it seems and brings us back to the issue of our concern for the people of the past. Because the wishes of the victims and their living relatives do not have to coincide necessarily. We see this all the time in the archaeology of the contemporary past: rabbis who ban the exhumation of Jews in extermination camps, even if we know that many Jews were secular and in all probability would have desired an exhumation and proper reburial, or relatives who give a Catholic funeral to militant atheists killed during the Spanish Civil War. So, who decides whether images can be shown or not?

Thomas Kersting:

Decisions about using imagery in archaeology – whether of features or of objects – must focus on the purpose of documentation. Imagery must first and foremost be correct and detailed, plain and neutral. Scenes of crime – and most of the places where we work include such elements – are also meticulously documented. This does not mean that all of the images we produce have to be made accessible to the public.

The same also applies to finds, especially skeletal remains. A major exhibition on a mass grave of the Thirty Years' War ("1636 – Their Last Battle") focused on the results of physical anthropological investigations. Even so, the State Archaeological Museum explicitly refrained almost entirely from presenting skeletal remains.

Scientists must not and cannot express in their every statement their disapproval of the crimes committed in the past or their sympathy with the victims. Such a positioning goes without saying. A concentration on the fates of those individuals one can identify does not automatically mean that one loses sight of the much more numerous other cases or suppresses the memory of them. Limits of representation are ultimately only defined by the rights of the individual, which can also apply to anonymous persons. This issue also arises for personal data of members of the perpetrators, as evident, for example, for identifiers from engineering firms once involved in the war industry (finds of ADREMA plates and company identifications of the "*Gefolgschaft*").

The administration of the companies to which camps were assigned usually recorded all of the workers – the complete workforce, in today's parlance, and in the hierarchizing diction of the time, including the "*Gefolgschaft*" (with reference to a "leader principle") – on identification plates of sheet metal such as the ADREMA ("addressograph") ones. Whether these were forced laborers or party members, Hitler Youth or female "war emergency helpers" made no administrative difference, and these data are often preserved, similarly to the only recently discovered finds of factory ID cards of the ARADO aircraft plants, including those of both involuntary and regular members of the workforce.

Laurent Olivier:

Ethics are indeed playing a crucial role here. This is the very reason why such research cannot be undertaken without the agreement, but also the active support of families and relatives, as we show in the book. What we experienced on such occasions – when we suddenly brought to light the body of someone who was a grandfather, an uncle, or just a close friend – was unexpected, at least for us: people were just grateful. They were relieved that we brought the solution to an enigma – where had they disappeared? Moreover, the uncovering allowed the mourning process to be achieved. The body of their relative had finally been found and was soon to be properly buried, with the family they belong to. That is the best tribute we can get, I believe, the one that comes from people: archaeology uncovers what was hidden, lost, and forgotten. This is the main thing we do, by the way, and this is our very social role.

Archaeologies of the recent past – or more specifically recent violence and war – seem to be a “hip” new field that captures attention in the media and from the public. Is the growing number of archaeological studies of recent violence and war simply an opportunistic move because it promises attention and reputation, or does it point towards deeper changes within the self-understanding of archaeology, in particular in regard to its temporal scope and its relation to other humanities?

Thomas Kersting:

Archaeology (as well as the discipline of history) has always been concerned with testimonies of war and violence, simply because in (almost?) all ancient societies this sphere of life played such an important role, e.g. in the form of warrior elites that immortalized themselves in tombs and fortifications. Such material remains have met with the full and unquestioned interest of older generations of researchers who were used to the same issues of violence in their own political and social structures. Such topics have only lately become taboo, because of the abuse of archaeology in recent German history and the experiences of World War II in particular, that were incomparable to any previous “normal” wars.

Fortunately, today we approach the topic with a different set of conceptions, of admonition and reflection. The archaeology of the recent past seems at present to be limited to the topic of war, violence, Nazi domination, and in Germany sometimes also to the time of the dictatorship thereafter in the GDR. However, there is no reason why we could not mobilize archaeological means to explore other aspects of the 20th century.

From the viewpoint of heritage preservation, material remains must be present in an area in order for the offices to act – according to the historical monument protection law in Brandenburg, they must be covered by soil or water – and they must have an historical and scientific value in order to be deemed worthy of protection. This applies, for example, to camps for refugees and persons displaced after the Second World War, but also to abandoned industrial relics of a bygone era such as the GDR regime.

For the heritage preservation office in Brandenburg, the objects of the war and the Nazi period lead to practical action insofar as they can (finally) be researched, excavated, and placed under protection without public resistance. Not only does the legal side of a formalized “public interest” – as a kind of commissioning agent – mandate such research, but also a real public interest exists. This interest may also include a certain creepiness attraction: as I mentioned, for the press, “gold is good, but Nazi gold is even better.”

The so-called “authentic places” and their material legacies are indispensable mediators in the political (and indeed human) education of future generations, precisely because of their connections to violent crimes and associated suffering. The desire for a direct, perceptible material presence has led to the “rediscovery” of a large number of hitherto neglected places. Local community initiatives have contributed to a significant extent to this search for material traces. The literal, but also the social function and effect of archaeology consist precisely and above all in making hidden things once again visible and recognizable. Locations of camps and their history(ies) are thereby re-anchored in public consciousness. The value of visualization and “graspability” of original camp remains has been successfully functionalized in the context of work camps as an entry point into the subject for young people. From my point of view, therefore, archaeology does not just contribute to a fashionable boom in the history of war and violence, but addresses (at last!) real social concerns.

Laurent Olivier:

It is true that a lot of archaeological studies of the contemporary past are presently focused on traumatic and violent events, such as, of course, those caused by the Nazi regime, the Spanish Civil War, or even more recent mass murders. I do not think this is because these events are spectacular and quite shocking. I rather believe it is answering a social demand – a demand for truth and justice, since these terrible events have not only strongly affected collective memory, but they have also been kept hidden for a long time. And on the other hand, one also has the arrival of a new generation of people, the first ones to have nothing to do with those events, which was not the case for their parents or grandparents. They want to know what happened at that time and to understand objectively why, in an historic perspective. This is what happened in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the Nazi period, and this

is what is happening with the fascist Spanish regime that lasted until the 1970s. So again, such an archaeology of the recent past cannot be separated from its historical conditions – this is what makes it highly political, in the best way: enquiring about the collective traumas of society and contributing to care and healing.

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

Again, I think that there are regional differences here. In my opinion, the interest in the traumatic past in countries like Germany, Spain or Argentina has deep historical and political motivations, and many young practitioners enter this field not because of the practical opportunities that it may offer (none in the case of Spain!), but out of a genuine interest and political commitment. In the UK conflict archaeology is more associated with warfare and military history, which have a long tradition in the country. War and violence have always fascinated the public (particularly men) as seen in the tens of thousands of popular books, films, and documentaries on the Second World War. Conflict archaeology brings together two issues that attract people: modern warfare and archaeological research.

I do think that the increasing concern with modern conflict in archaeology is indicative of deeper changes within the discipline. It indicates a greater willingness among archaeologists to engage with issues that are of contemporary relevance, which is in the last instance an echo of the post-processual critique that started in the 1980s. It also indicates a greater willingness to break the boundaries of archaeology and work with other fields, not just the natural sciences, but also literature, cultural studies, theater or the visual arts. All of these are fields concerned with memory, temporality, presence, and traumatic pasts.

I also believe that conflict has a lot of potential for rethinking the social and the political in archaeology, but for that we have to see conflict not so much as an anomaly but as constitutive of human society.

Do the lessons of an archaeology of the contemporary past have implications – and if so, which ones – for archaeologies that focus on the more distant past? To what extent is an archaeology of the 20th/ 21st century political, and perhaps more politicized than other kinds of archaeology? What is its relation to general “activist” tendencies in archaeology? Should politicization be restrained, avoided, or promoted, and why?

Laurent Olivier:

There are three different questions here. What does the archaeology of the contemporary past bring to archaeologies of the more distant past? Something enormous that surely a lot of us do not wish to acknowledge: we can't really reconstruct “what happened there” and “what people were doing there” from the archaeological remains we find in the ground. So what is it that we can do? A *memory*, the material memory of the past, which is not the *account* of the past (Olivier 2011). This is a huge difference. Second, is it normal that the archaeology of the contemporary past is so politicized? Yes, and it is basically unavoidable: when history recalls “what has happened,” archaeology brings to light what people have experienced in their own life – it is the voice of the “voiceless of history,” as Walter Benjamin would have said. And third, what should we do about that? Well, what can you do about something that is inescapable? Stay fair and decent, as much as you can. The ideological exploitation of archaeological data, which was undertaken by the Nazis, for instance, taught us that the past may be used as a weapon of mass destruction. We are somewhat like the nuclear physicists: we cannot pretend we have nothing to do with that and are just doing science. But what we can say is that, as much as we can, we will not contribute to anything that could harm anyone. It is an ethical issue, a matter of personal and collective consciousness. Perhaps is this the very definition of activism, isn't it?

Thomas Kersting:

Of course, the archaeology of the 20th and 21st centuries is more aware of its political implications than other archaeologies: it knows the political contexts and personal destinies of its research “objects” and can provide

reflections on them in terms of current issues (war crimes, marginalization and exclusion, camps, mass graves all over the world).

Against the background of this knowledge, the archaeologies of older periods have long since extended their principal (obsessive?) fixation on antiquarian analyses – required by the kinds of evidence they deal with – and try to take the possible fates of “their” people into consideration. Flint daggers and bronze swords are not only symbols of power, but real tools of murder.

When archaeology in the Nazi period or in the GDR positioned itself politically, that often happened in anticipatory obedience, whether voluntary or forced, in submission to the existing system. Today, in the field of archaeology of the contemporary past, heritage preservation has the opportunity to take up and support citizens’ initiatives. Often, even usually, especially in Brandenburg, these initiatives work in the broadest sense against the political right. Municipalities with sites of former camps and potential memorial sites in their jurisdiction also come under increasing pressure, if attention has been drawn to them because of activities of right-wing extremists. Whether matters will continue to develop in this way is questionable, given the changes in the spectrum of today’s political parties.

I see and welcome the politicization of archaeology, especially of heritage preservation, if this happens within the framework and in the service of political education.

There is widespread agreement that memorial sites as providers of political education on this subject as well as state archaeology share a common interest in conservation and presentation of remains; they also agree that interdisciplinary cooperation and the strengthening of archaeology at memorial sites are indispensable. However, there cannot and should not be a hierarchy of interests. On the one hand, the memorial sites should not “use up” their original resources – the authentic remains of the past – in day-to-day activities, jeopardizing them through “educational” exposure and excavations in the framework of workcamps. For its part, state archaeology must also take into account the special status of these “non-normal” buried features. Archaeology benefits from the emotional quality of these remains – the direct relation of archaeology to social realities with regard to political education is new and valuable. A new and successful path is being taken in Brandenburg in the cooperation between memorial sites and the heritage monuments office.

Finally, politicization has a positive effect on the perception of archaeology, which has, as a rule, only the status of a cultural curiosity, mentioned “before the weather report”. If there has been up to now consensus that conflicts should be resolved peacefully, that marginalization is bad and integration good, an archaeological contribution to preserving these traditional values would be welcome.

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

The issue of politics is complicated. Not all the archaeology of the contemporary past is political or has political implications. This is all right. It does not have to be. Although I do not usually find such kinds of work interesting, it does not mean that I find it worthless. We need a diverse and rich contemporary archaeology that explores a variety of themes from a variety of angles. Now the problem comes when we try to define what is political and what is activism in archaeology. Are they the same, are they different? Is political and politicized archaeology the same thing? For me archaeology becomes political when it deals consciously with an issue that is controversial – because politics is about conflict and disagreement (Mouffe 2013) – and takes a stance, it refuses to be neutral. Simply by choosing a specific topic of research we adopt a political stance. Thus, when I study a concentration camp of the Spanish Civil War instead of, say, a Roman villa, I am making a political statement. What makes the work political is not so much the excavation itself, but the decision to make the excavation. If I am a contract archaeologist and I am commissioned by the local heritage authorities to do the excavation, the work is no longer necessarily political, it can even be antipolitical – the aim of the authorities may be to neutralize the potential of the site by transforming it into a bland heritage display. Many of the contributors to *Reclaiming Archaeology* take an overt political perspective by selecting certain themes and by asking political questions: interestingly, these include all the contributors from Latin America and Spain (Haber, Gnecco, Verdesio, Gordillo and Hernando) and North American historical archaeologists (Leone et al., Orser).

I think that politicization has to be restrained, if for that we understand the incorporation of the field of scientific practice into the field of party politics. Politically-committed archaeology, in turn, has to be expanded, that is, the

archaeology concerned with the political. I am using here the distinction between politics and the political as outlined by Chantal Mouffe (2005). If we employed these conceptual apparatuses more in archaeology there would be less risk of conflating true politics and post-politics or even simple policy.

I see a politically-motivated archaeology and an activist archaeology as different things. I do archaeology of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. I do this as a choice and I have selected this field of research for political as much as for scientific reasons. I find it unbearable that distorted, authoritarian visions of the war and the dictatorship still prevail in my country. I want to contribute to construct a new master narrative about the past that has political effects in the present. But I am not an activist. I am a scientist. I say this not because I do not like activism, but because I respect it too much. Because activists are killed in Brazil and Mexico, because they go to jail or are fined in Spain. Because they devote their lives to activism. It is a full-time job. I know very few scholars who can be properly described as activists, and none is an academic archaeologist. Committed scholars – archaeologists who are politically engaged and want to effect a change in the world – should, as I see it, produce work that can be used by both activists and politically-mobilized citizens in their struggles. A good example is provided by one of the contributors to *Reclaiming Archaeology*, Almudena Hernando. I would not consider her a feminist activist and do not think that she sees herself as such. Yet her intellectual work has been of enormous importance in the feminist movement in South America and Spain. She develops complex ideas in a plain style, which has allowed people outside academia to appropriate her ideas for their own struggles.

Whatever our choice, I believe that it is crucial to distinguish the internal and external discourses of the discipline. It is all right to write in an academic journal that the archaeology of the contemporary past has to be political, activist, committed, or what have you, but it is not a good idea to say so in public (or in certain public arenas), because the statement “all archaeology is/should be political” requires a lot of explanation and nuance. Most people outside academia will understand that you are defending a partisan archaeology that abides by a specific party politics and is not interested in truth. When you are dealing with neonazis or neofascists, it is not a good idea to say that you do activist science or that truth is relative and everything is political. You better present yourself as a scientist with hard facts. Here lies part of the success of Forensic Architecture (Weizman and Franke 2014). They have a clear political agenda, but they emphasize methods and facts. These are their strongest weapons.

Comment by the FKA Editorial Collective²

We are pleased that the three book editors have responded to our questions in such detail. Their contributions inspired us to engage in our own intensive discussions, which we continue here briefly in written form. We note that we are in agreement with much of what our three respondents have written. Archaeology of the contemporary past poses a multitude of new questions and challenges which our interviewees as well as the other authors in the three edited books address. Our brief statement here comments on three themes in the field of contemporary archaeology that appear as central elements in all three responses, and which we think merit further discussion. These are issues of the self-understanding of an archaeology of the contemporary past, the relevance of sources used, and the political dimensions of this disciplinary direction.

On the self-understanding of contemporary archaeology

Our three colleagues present their understandings of contemporary archaeology without an apparent desire for binding definitions. All are of the opinion that the aim of such an archaeology is not to explore the materiality of a specific time period; rather, it is ultimately about the fates of people in the past. In this way, the authors position themselves clearly in an anthropocentric context. Contemporary archaeology operates in a chronological horizon in which the constellation of specific social groups is to a significant extent known, making it possible to engage with individual as well as group fates.

² Reinhard Bernbeck, Stefan Burmeister, Christoph Forster, Johannes Greger, Barbara Hausmair, Barbara Huber, Susan Pollock and Stefan Schreiber.

However, the reasons our respondents cite for dealing with the materiality of recent times diverge to a considerable extent. Laurent Olivier sees contemporary archaeology as a way to provide aids to memory and an opportunity for affected individuals to have a personal access to past events. Thomas Kersting – surely due in part to the specific way of dealing with archaeology in the context of historic preservation – highlights the safeguarding of existing archaeological remains as well as pedagogical work involving this evidence: materiality stands for past events, above all for crimes against humanity. Kersting's aim is to protect this materiality from destruction and transformation through rebuilding, in order to preserve it as a testimony of past injustice and as a means for political education. Alfredo González-Ruibal rightly writes against the instrumentalization of the past in the present when he sharply criticizes heritage studies. At the same time, he argues that references to the past are an acceptable political means of mobilizing scholarly arguments to intervene in current discourses.

Particularly in González-Ruibal's response and to a lesser extent in Olivier's, there are repeated reflections on disciplinary boundaries that to some extent sound defensive. Why should archaeology, especially contemporary archaeology, not draw on other academic disciplines, from philosophy to art history and geology, to reach its goal of critically engaging with the recent past? We are of the opinion that archaeology should not and need not be limited to a systematic survey and interpretation of material culture. Archaeology has indeed the potential to open up past material worlds by recovering physical remains. But materiality alone does not yield any interpretation that transcends itself. That emerges only from the reconstruction of specific social contexts. For this reason, archaeology is neither methodologically nor theoretically sufficient in and of itself but relies on an integrative approach, an inter- or a transdisciplinarity. This brings us to the second topic, the evidence.

What kinds of data exist for a contemporary archaeology?

The relevance of evidence in general and written documents in particular is treated differently by our interviewees. Thomas Kersting points – rightly, in our opinion – to the gaps in archives and the false impression of factuality of written documents. He calls for a comparison between sources that are traditionally divided into historical (written) and archaeological (objects) ones. On the other hand, Laurent Olivier is concerned mainly about the effects of selective decay of material remnants. He focuses on erroneous historical reconstructions that result from these natural processes. Alfredo González-Ruibal draws on a very different kind of source for historiography – traditionally not regarded as such – when he considers that intellectual resources have not been fully exploited.

We are astonished that the significance of traditional sources used to write contemporary history is only marginally discussed in the responses. Apart from official written documents, they include private archives, collections of photographs, and, above all, oral history. Why should a contemporary archaeology be methodologically limited to the world of things and examine only marginally a wealth of other available information – or even suppress other sources for methodological reasons?

Clear differences were evident in our own discussions of the importance of different kinds of evidence. While some members of the FKA editorial board see the focus of contemporary archaeology as directed toward material remains and consider this to be the core of this branch of archaeology, for others the material is less central: the origin and kind of evidence do not matter for research on the recent past. Rather, everything can be included that proves valuable for the matter at hand. However, we all agreed that for the reconstruction of an individual issue or locally specific conditions, a sustained critique of ideology that scrutinizes all types of sources is more important than a simple assembling of many different kinds of evidence. How did this evidence – except for oral history, invariably with a material component – come into being, how did it survive up to the present? More importantly, which material remains that must once have existed are no longer available, and why not? Careless discard, barely reconstructible dispersal among diverse administrative institutions, the suppression of remembrance, but also cunning hiding or deliberate destruction of evidence must be taken into account. Here is a difference between traditional and critical archaeology, to apply Horkheimer's well-known scholarly distinction to archaeology. Rather than investing in positivist data collection, a critical archaeology or historical discipline must analyze relevant material remains of all kinds in terms of the politics of their genesis. Again, we as editors are not all of the same opinion: some of us consider the field of archaeology as primarily (cultural) anthropological, others as material history. In any case, a critique of ideology investigates how in concrete cases specific, often individual interests have been (and are) transformed into those of a larger group and how intentions and antagonisms have structured the body of evidence with which we work. There are no "innocent" contexts from which material remains emerge.

The Political

Our remarks on sources and evidence as well as their political constitution lead directly into the wider field of the political dimensions of contemporary archaeology. Here, too, we encountered differences of opinion in our own circle. On the one hand, some of us did not think that, as Alfredo González-Ruibal put it, a single photograph of an emaciated prisoner in a concentration camp might be more effective than the statement that six million people were murdered. Others amongst us argued that while single images and individual stories are much better suited than abstract numbers to arouse empathy and convey the core of the Shoah as profound suffering, a metonymic approach is first and foremost an ethical issue, not one of emotion or of the capacity of the human mind to grasp quantities. Metonymic thinking is incompatible with a history of injustice, mass crime, and repression – the legacies of which are undoubtedly the main areas of concern of a contemporary archaeology.

Following Walter Benjamin, the unfulfilled desires and longings of every single historical person must be integrated into a real history. Accordingly, there are no *pars pro toto* solutions. In the case of the Nazi period, this could be used to derive the – purely hypothetical – demand for a systematic evaluation of all still existing features and finds, even if there were once more than 40,000 Nazi camps throughout Europe.

We end up with a paradox: The memory that comes along with the frequently murderous elements in contemporary archaeology requires an illustrative reduction for purposes of presentation, but doing so destroys one of its basic principles, namely that the remembrance of suffering cannot be satisfied with a *pars pro toto* solution.

This problem reveals the dual character of contemporary archaeology. On the one hand, a part of the repertoire of contemporary history is its investigation and sometimes establishment of facts that broaden our knowledge of the past. An archaeological approach allows us to obtain information on specific contexts, such as individual camps, which are often not known from historical documents or statements by eyewitnesses. But on the other hand, when we engage with the crimes of the last century, we are confronted with another dimension of history that is far less relevant for other periods: that of indictment, not in the legal but in the moral sense. Contemporary archaeology is directly concerned with crimes against humanity, most of which have remained unpunished. They have a significant ethical dimension, and they are of immense political importance in contemporary society. Even if an indictment is not pronounced by archaeologists and historians, they gather the necessary data for it and are thus inevitably part of the process.

Olivier and Kersting see the tasks of a contemporary archaeology mainly in the context of remembrance, one at the individual level, the other at the level of a societal “political education”. Since this kind of memory is less a personal matter and more a social remembrance, a commemorative and therefore a political dimension is always present. Remembering, however, cannot be so easily confined to a positive realm because every memory, even of specific victims of a war crime or genocide, brings with it a forgetting of others. There is no memory without the shadow of its negation. The confident affirmative consensus about the political influence of an archaeology of the contemporary past need not end in another aporia. It could be one of its primary tasks – just as it is for the history of contemporary times – to expose the buried, the repressed, and the forgotten.

Forgetting penetrates into this archaeology at other points as well. Kersting remarks that everyday relationships have thus far hardly been of any concern. Contemporary archaeology in continental Europe is fixated on a few manifestations of violent events and relations, on detention facilities of all kinds and battlefields. Other areas that contribute to what Johan Galtung called structural violence are left out. Are not excessive material consumption and the discard of undamaged things part of a violent system? Doesn't this desire for “up-to-date” styles that is propagated by capitalism lead to tremendous suffering, for example among those who work on huge garbage dumps? Contemporary archaeology is already dealing with industrial plants the vast scale of which exceeds anything known from earlier periods, rendering traditional archaeological methods completely inadequate. And what about the political dimension of a temporality that intertwines the future and the past? The increased stream of goods since the industrial revolution, reaching unprecedented dimensions since the 1920s as part of a strategy of planned obsolescence, should also be incorporated into an archaeology of the contemporary past, as these conditions threaten the future of humanity as a whole (Edgeworth et al. 2014).

A final aspect raised in the interviews concerns the question of whether the political character of this kind of archaeology should be discussed in the same way within and outside the academy. We agree with González-Ruibal that the discourses oriented towards a larger public need not precisely mirror specialized internal ones. Apart from

the self-evident issue of a technical, discipline-specific vocabulary that is partly obscure to laypeople, the main problem lies in the extent to which we assert truth claims. Since the linguistic turn, language and persuasiveness, detached from any factuality, have been considered responsible for the acceptance (or rejection) of truth claims. In view of the current public discourse, which often seems to distance itself from the factual, we argue for an “evidential turn”, based among other things on material evidence. This applies equally to an archaeology of the contemporary past.

Objects are inevitably evidence of past conditions. The narrative that can be woven around them is by no means arbitrary, as Alison Wylie makes clear in many of her papers (e.g., Wylie 1992). Nevertheless, as scholars, we know quite well how we draw narrative connections that are assumed but not documented. Every historical-anthropological debate consists of networks of factual elements, the “mute things,” as Kersting calls them. Nevertheless, we believe that it is also important in public discourse to make the process of knowledge production transparent as a dynamic one that turns facticity and inferred relationships into a narrative.

Responses from the Interviewees

Alfredo González-Ruibal:

I would like to thank the editors for the opportunity to discuss with them matters of shared concern, for their thoughtful comments, and for the opportunity to read the equally thought-provoking replies of the other interviewees, Laurent Olivier and Thomas Kersting. While we disagree in some points, I do believe that we coincide more than it might seem in others.

Thus, I totally agree with the editors that archaeology “should not and need not be limited to a systematic survey and interpretation of material culture” and in my work I have never limited myself to just excavate and interpret stuff. Neither have I defended that we have to disregard or even suppress other sources or not engage with other disciplines. My writings are full of references to sociologists, historians, art historians, anthropologists, philosophers and political scientists. My point is that we have to engage with other disciplines and other sources on an equal footing. Archaeology is not the handmaiden of history. And this is true whether we talk about the Late Iron Age or the 21st century.

My emphasis on the material is only because this is what makes archaeology unique and therefore this is where the most original contribution from archaeology can come from, in my opinion. It is not that I believe that things are the panacea or superior to other sources. I am painfully aware of their limitations. But things are what define archaeology, as opposed to history or sociology. There are many colleagues already working primarily (or solely) with documents and oral or audiovisual sources. There are none, outside archaeology, that work on the archaeological record of the recent past.

I am concerned with the fact that archaeologists working on the contemporary era or even historical periods are often so fascinated by the rich sources at their disposal and with the possibility of being able to talk to living people, that they end up forgetting about the potential of material culture. I am tired of reading papers where things are a mere illustration of an argument that is 95 % based on oral and written sources. We can become historians, for sure. But there are plenty of marvelous contemporary historians already out there. My interest in discerning the realm of the archaeological is not driven by a desire of policing the field or establishing boundaries. The question is: what can we specifically contribute to debates of general interest?

As for the critique of ideology with respect to extant evidence I agree that this is definitely an important task of a critical archaeology, especially for those of us who work on the remnants of political violence. Nevertheless, I do not see this task as incompatible with a focus on materiality. In fact, working on the material traces of victims is a way of denouncing their violent suppression from documented history.

Regarding the politics of suffering, this is again not an issue of either/or nor am I espousing a *pars pro toto* approach to crimes against humanity. For me, it is not about either discussing numbers or showing single individuals as representatives of the whole. We need both and they serve different, though related, ethical, political and

epistemic purposes. From a pedagogical point of view, it is easier to empathize with specific people who suffer than with statistics. We should be wary of trusting that numbers or historical explanations alone will have a critical political effect in society. Numbers can be described as exaggerations (as denialists do) and historical explanations distorted, opposed or ridiculed. But few people would make fun of the image of a raped woman after a pogrom. This is why Holocaust museums and memorials have these kinds of images and exhibits. This is why the shoes of Auschwitz are so powerful and have such an enormous pedagogical value. In my view, they are not incompatible with a history of injustice, as the editors argue. They are *essential* for a history of injustice. Totalitarian regimes tried to erase anything that was human in their victims. They preferred to deal with statistics through the bureaucratization of death. We need to bring the specifically, uniquely human back into the history of political violence. And this has to be done, needless to say, along with reasoned, empirical arguments (historical explanations and quantitative history).

Finally, I totally agree with the editors in that we have to expand the notion of violence. By focusing only on war or overt forms of political repression (camps, mass graves), we run the risk of considering conflict as something somewhat exceptional and forgetting that capitalism is structurally violent. Indeed, this is for me one of the main issues that we have to address: the making visible and the rematerialization of the continuum of violence in which our societies are based, a violence that more often than not happens in places remote from Western consumers (the sweatshops of Bangladesh, the coltan mines of Congo or the devastated Gran Chaco in South America). Consumption studies in anthropology have tended to produce a blissful, colorful image of capitalism. By considering the archaeology of capitalism as part of a wider archaeology of violence, we can do much to change this view.

Thomas Kersting:

The editors' statement explores the self-understanding and the sources of an archaeology of the recent past. The two aspects are closely linked: archaeology of the recent past is an independent discipline as long as it deals with sources for which it is "responsible," – that is, with material culture. In an overall assessment of sources, archaeology becomes a partner science for all other disciplines working in this field. Regarding the political connotation of an archaeology of the recent past, heritage management and protection always has to operate within the legal framework prescribed by heritage legislation and thus mandated by "public interest", as it is legally defined by law. From a purely scientific point of view, many everyday things outside camp contexts may provide information about relations of (political) power and violence when evaluated archaeologically. However, researching such contexts and relationships is beyond the scope of heritage offices as long as they have not (yet) been declared "worthy of heritage protection" in a legal sense. The same holds true for the things with which we engage today – they first had to be recognized as relevant heritage. Maybe we just need to wait and see.

Laurent Olivier:

It is amazing to see how these comments from the FKA editorial board reveal, once again, the "great fault" which appeared clearly among the speakers during the Metz conference. What is it about? On the one hand, some of us consider that the Archaeology of the Contemporary Past opens a new area of field research, previously almost unexplored: our first task should therefore be to analyze and interpret the innumerable new material remains with which this most recent period of the past provides us. This is, roughly, the position of most of our French – or French-speaking – colleagues. They believe that theory and knowledge are going to emerge out of practice and experience in a quasi-natural way. Of course, the risk is that nothing of that is really going to happen; reducing the Archaeology of the Contemporary Past to a poor material illustration of a past far better known by history or sociology. On the other hand, there are some other people among us who consider that theory and knowledge should come first, in order to give a proper and sharp interpretation of what the Archaeology of the Contemporary Past is bringing to light. This is, approximatively, the position of most of our American – or English-speaking – colleagues. And here again, the risk is that this won't really happen, shrinking the theoretical debates of this new field in the discipline of archaeology to a dull sub-product of a poor philosophy or anthropology.

Obviously, this "fault line" runs as well through the FKA editorial board, as it appears in the comments on our discussion. So what to do? I believe that the balance lies between these two opposing approaches. I don't mean mixing a bit of this with a bit of that – a handful of rigorous field practice plus a handful of creative theoretical

thinking. Everybody knows that it doesn't work like that. Following Gadamer, I mean that any serious approach to the past – even the most immediate – should take into account its own historical background or, to put it differently, its own “conditions of knowability” as Michel Foucault would have said. In other words, what does the Archaeology of the Contemporary Past do? How does it challenge the practice and thought of archaeology, as we tried to investigate in *Clashes of Time*? What does it do to us, as archaeologists and as people, and what does it do to the entire society? This is the kind of approach that I share, together with the other editors of the book, with Alfredo González-Ruibal. I am very surprised to discover that the question of the present ideological framework of the Archaeology of the Contemporary Past hasn't been seriously addressed in any of the comments of the FKA editorial board – as if such a thing has never existed.

Yes, our own ideological implication as archaeologists: We aren't the good guys, shaking our heads responsibly, when unearthing all that evidence of the horrors committed during the previous century, including industrial war, extermination camps, genocides and city bombings. Let's try not to forget that nothing would be worse than converting all these sufferings into some inoffensive academic discourse. Yes, this is political, but political right now. Where do we stand? As Europeans, we enjoy the privilege of knowing how deep ideology could penetrate the archaeological discipline: you Germans had Hitler, we had the Vichy Regime, the Spaniards had Franco and the Italians Mussolini. Further East, they had Stalin. We should remember that if archaeology may so easily be manipulated by ideology, it is also because archaeology is a social product; that is to say it is fully impregnated with ideology. What do we want, as a collective fate? What do we have in common, what do we share with each other? These are political questions, but also ideological ones that directly address the issue of the building of a European archaeological thought. Obviously, a long way has still to be walked. And perhaps it is already too late.

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