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DISCUSSION

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Decolonization, Indigeneity, and the Cultural Politics of Race

Ben Pitcher

I am not an archaeologist, but I do know a bit about cultural politics and the ways in which ideas circulate between researchers and the cultures they inhabit. To me, one of the key challenges of decolonization to any field of research is in understanding how this relationship plays out: to develop a better grasp of the two-way traffic of meaning between disciplinary specialists and the wider public as we contend with the ways in which both constituencies express, modify, and contest the ongoing legacies of colonialism. If decolonization is to involve the pursuit of social justice in the present, then it becomes necessary to move beyond the confines of a particular field to trace the ways it is implicated in a wider set of relations over which it will have little or no scholarly jurisdiction. It is little wonder that this is said to be a difficult and unsettling process. It is.

It is to Elliott and Warren's credit that they have sufficient confidence to open up their field and render it vulnerable to its broader cultural contexts. In their reflexive examination of the historical formation of Mesolithic research, the authors address their field's embeddedness in the structures of colonial knowledge production without telling a reductive and one-directional story about causality. Colonial-era Mesolithic scholarship is understood to have both reflected and given shape to teleological, progressivist, and universal stories about Western modernity where racialized others came to stand in for the temporal others of the distant human past. As they trace Mesolithic archaeology's enduring entanglement with colonial ideas and conceptual frameworks, Elliott and Warren retain an understanding of their field as both constituted and constituting. Decolonization is not, therefore, a one-off moment of epistemological cleansing whereby scientific facts are neatly extricated from non-scientific values, but instead a continuous process of reflection and critique. Decolonizing is not about apportioning blame but about establishing ethical research practices that engage the colonial legacy in the cause of social justice.

Of central significance to this ethics is a reconfigured relationship to Indigenous peoples. Given the central and problematic role that ethnographic analogy has long played in their field, Elliott and Warren reconceive of Mesolithic knowledge production as a collaborative process more closely engaged with the interests of contemporary Indigenous communities. While once Indigenous peoples served as the objects of research that consolidated racist typologies of human development, their involvement as subjects provides a way of speaking back to monodirectional knowledge extraction and to the colonial history of Mesolithic research. Conceptually, indigeneity continues to open up a space for knowledge claims generated outside of the categorizing logics of Western science, for fostering

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ontologies or cosmologies that were subjugated and marginalized by colonization, which saw 'an onto-epistemological organization of reality native to Europe […] imposed upon much of the rest of the world' (Clark and Szerszynski 2020, p. 147). Relational, posthuman, and more-than-human approaches may take inspiration from Indigenous thought, and in doing so provide further opportunities for decolonial thinking.

The category of indigeneity does quite a lot of heavy lifting in the European Mesolithic, and I think Eliot and Warren are rightly sceptical of the neat and circular ways in which Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge might be called upon in the service of decolonization, as if colonial knowledge can somehow be reversed, flipped over, or inverted to reform and so redeem a field of research. Not only is there a risk of appropriating diverse Indigenous perspectives in ways that misrepresent or homogenize them, there is also the danger of consolidating a primordial and essentialist understanding of culture or inhabitation where Indigenous societies – with as legitimate a claim to contemporaneity as anyone else – become conceived as the 'remnants of past patterns or "living fossils"' (Widerquist and McCall 2018, p. 18). Alert to such issues, Elliott and Warren use the term 'Indigenous' to describe cultures and communities who have been subjected to the material and symbolic violence of Western colonialism, and not to claim an intrinsic and necessary connection to the distant human past. This is a clear riposte to any scholarly use of the term to posit a meaningful continuity of culture or population between Mesolithic and contemporary Europe, and of course to the opportunism of racists and fascists when they borrow from the language of Indigenous rights to make their own spurious identity claims. It is a clarification that leaves the category of indigeneity open to the Sámi on the basis of the concrete history of Scandinavian colonization, and not as some prehistoric residuum which has itself been defined through colonial relations of power.

Although the ongoing practice of ethnographic analogy means that Mesolithic archaeology retains a specific obligation towards Indigenous peoples that the field must find ways of working through, the logic of Elliott and Warren's argument suggests that the ethics of decolonial practice need to be extended beyond a responsibility to Indigenous peoples alone. As Elliott and Warren themselves ask, what does their field's space of critical engagement look like in contexts 'where there are no Indigenous communities present?' While in settler-colonial contexts like the US it has proven strategically important to insist that decolonization is 'not a metaphor' but necessarily involves 'the repatriation of Indigenous land and life' (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 21), I want to maintain that it remains critically productive to retain the language of decolonization to understand the relationship between Mesolithic archaeology and a more broadly conceived politics of race. To decolonize research on the European Mesolithic is to think about the ethics of research not only in relation to contemporary Indigenous communities, but also towards all of those whose lifeworlds have been shaped by Western colonialism, including those whose ancestors were displaced, enslaved and transported in what we now think of as the global south, as well as those diasporic populations of multicultural European nation states whose status as racialized minorities renders their claim on indigeneity the most tenuous of all. Decolonizing a field of research should not be about its simple and straightforward redemption – involving the reformation of its operating assumptions and its epistemologies in such a way that atones for its colonial histories and somehow neutralizes their continuing legacies – so much as to find ways of understanding the profound ways in which colonialism

continues to shape the world we live in today. Decolonization is about living in the aftermath of colonialism rather than restoring the surviving and uncorrupted remnants of that which came before. For the European Mesolithic, this involves a reckoning with twenty-first century contexts, both local and global, that continue to organize themselves according to the modalities of race.

In my own work on how prehistory is understood in contemporary culture, I have come to understand not only how racialized others stood as proxies for prehistoric humans in colonial modernity, but moreover how popular iterations of the distant human past continue to find expression through the language of race (Pitcher 2022). The racialization of prehistory is, in other words, relevant not only to the professional work of archaeologists and other prehistorians, but to contemporary culture more widely. Ours is a historical moment beset by anxieties about capitalism, technology, and environmental crisis, in which we are increasingly drawn to the distant human past as a resource to build a better human future. We are turning to prehistory to answer existential questions about our identity, origins, and characteristics as a species. And yet our contemporary measure of *Homo sapiens*, formed in the image of colonial modernity, remains inherently racialized. Racial others continue to be caught up in the stories we tell about who we are, where we came from, and what we are like. Insofar as Mesolithic researchers, alongside other archaeologists, have a role in influencing these stories, they have a significant part to play in the project of decolonizing our contemporary understanding of what it means to be human. This is not a contribution that can emerge from an insular research practice, but from one – like that recommended here by Elliott and Warren – that is sufficiently open to dialogue and exchange with other disciplines and the wider world in which it finds itself.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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