Cheques and balances

Professor John Waddell of University College Galway offers some views on the role of academic archaeology and the problems faced in a society increasingly dominated by commercial and political concerns.

As the European Commission seeks to initiate a debate on the role of universities in the knowledge society and economy in Europe, it may be time to examine the demands that collaboration with the commercial world exercise on the universities and on the archaeological profession in Ireland.

We are happily still some distance from the enormous pressures already apparent in some areas of the life sciences. In biotechnical research, for instance, collaboration with major corporations, and with the pharmaceutical industry in particular, means that normal academic scepticism and caution, as well as research directions, have to give way to the demands of the marketplace. We have also been spared—so far—the 'grade inflation' that has plagued some American universities. When an institution needs to attract and retain students in a competitive market, intellectual standards are likely to be compromised. The production of high grades because of market forces is a form of academic prostitution and neatly illustrates the fact that these forces are not always a benign influence. In this commodification of knowledge the market can decide what constitutes scholarship.

There is a pressing need to establish and maintain a clear balance between the pursuit of learning (the generation and dissemination of knowledge that is the role of the university) and the obligation to provide a service to society and the economy.

Just as the traditional universities' collegial approach to management is often perceived as alien to industry and government, the traditional pursuit of truth and knowledge as an essential contribution to contemporary society is often considered an expensive luxury today. The agenda of scholarship is increasingly set not by the collegiate academy but by the political establishment (and their academic supporters) in the name of the marketplace. In this situation fundamental principles are easily forgotten and that essential balance between scholarship within the university and engagement with economic and social forces without is not easily maintained.

This is evident in the recent draft report prepared by a group in University College Dublin representing some elements of the archaeological profession and other bodies. This report contains many sensible suggestions for the future development of archaeology in Ireland but starts from a premise that is as banal as it is unacceptable: 'Today archaeology [in Ireland] is predominantly a business domain, operating in a competitive economic climate radically different from the research ethos which characterised earlier decades'.

It must be emphatically emphasised that the practice of archaeology, whether it takes place in the commercial sector, in the university, in museums or other milieux, can never be, as the report declares, just a business or a service. If there are those who see archaeology as a service industry, then we must ask them the question, 'In whose service?'

It is necessary to reiterate some of those fundamental principles. Archaeology is an intellectual discipline that studies the evidence of past human behaviour. It attempts to understand the processes that determined this activity using a variety of approaches, methodologies and theoretical perceptions. Its more immediate roots lie in the philosophical liberation of the Enlightenment, and its theoretical and methodological elements began to develop, along with those of many other disciplines, in the nineteenth century. Archaeology still has the goal of illuminating aspects of our common humanity. This objective is just one of many links between its various practitioners, whether in the library or in the field. Though rarely articulated, it is shared by archaeologists in both the university world and in the commercial sphere. These links are immeasurably more important than the differences—sometimes irreconcilable—that do occur from time to time.

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One important strand in these linkages is the fact that most archaeologists share a university education which, one hopes, has alerted them to the philosophical significance and scholarly limitations of what they do. Whatever mechanisms they use, whatever theoretical stance they adopt, they share an appreciation that they are in the privileged position of being able to investigate a socially constructed past. They share a commitment to undertake this work of creating knowledge in a responsible and professional fashion with a determination to achieve the best interpretative results.

Therefore the dumbing down of archaeological practice does everyone a disservice. This happens when university teaching and research fail to attain the highest standards, or when academic fatalism produces an unquestioning acceptance of the contemporary condition. It occurs when 'reformed' university management structures permit senior management to promote academic advancement on a grace-and-favour basis, dispensing with the traditional and cumbersome, but equitable, procedures of peer review. It happens when the State regulatory body decides that the assessment of academic qualifications should no longer be a part of the excavation licensing process and thereby reduces the complex challenge of systematic excavation to a routine craft. Excavation is not just the acquisition of data; it is—or

should be—an analytical programme that from beginning to end is a part of a considered research strategy. There is no way that an individual's competence to formulate this sort of strategy—from the identification of initial research problems to the interpretation and dissemination of the results—can be assessed without analysing the calibre of their professional education. This diminution also happens when archaeologists adopt the euphemism 'preservation by record' for rescue excavation, even though they know there is no such thing and that excavation is controlled clinical destruction rather than a mere recording exercise.

The same reductionist approach to a complex issue is apparent in the growing advocacy—under the inevitable pressures of market forces—for the grading of archaeological sites and monuments in terms of assumed importance. The daft supposition here is that these sites are the same as architectural remains, readily understood and objectively classified. They are not, and most archaeological classifications are little more than convenient labels of limited value concealing enormous gaps in our knowledge on both a regional and a national level.

The pressures of the marketplace cannot be ignored, of course, and archaeological practice has to accept some limitations. These limitations, however, should be defined by professionally aware archaeologists, not by developers or road-builders. Such pressures are not new. When it was planned to plunder the great mound at Newgrange for road-making material in 1844, Thomas Davis called (in the pages of *The Nation*, in an article entitled 'Irish Antiquities and Irish Savages') for the protection of antiquities 'from fellows like the Meath road-workers'. The modern counterparts of those Meath road-workers continue to wreak havoc in certain quarters today.

A strong professional ethic and a clear understanding of the intellectual basis of the discipline are needed to counter the perception that archaeology is just another service industry with malleable principles. This is required in both the commercial and university sectors, for both face pressures undreamt of a decade ago. The demands in the former are well known, though much of the evidence is anecdotal. The difficulties in university archaeology have yet to be explored; for instance, the degree to which the acceptance of consultancy work or research contracts from commercial concerns may compromise academic freedoms, including freedom of speech, is unknown. Indeed, the problem may be very limited, but the ethical issues are worth discussing.

Though in the news of late, the question of the treatment of human remains is by no means the only ethical problem the profession has to face. Just as some senior university administrators need to disabuse themselves of the notion that management structures derived from the corporate area (and cloaked in the trite mantra of reform) are inevitably appropriate to the world of teaching, learning and research, so too university archaeologists need to maintain a critical capacity when engaging with this sector. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of their obligation to pursue an independent and disinterested path. This was the argument of the French philosopher Julien Benda, who in his polemical work *La Trahison des Clercs* (translated as 'the betrayal of the intellectuals') trenchantly opposed the academic's subservience of rational thought to the interests of the political passions of the early twentieth century. Today's pressures are very different—they are perhaps more commercial than political—but they still demand a professional distance and a critical balance. ■