

# Foundations of an Anarchist Archaeology

## A Community Manifesto

Black Trowel Collective

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An anarchist archaeology embraces considerations of social inequity as a critique of authoritarian forms of power and as a rubric for enabling egalitarian and equitable relationships.

The term *anarchism* derives from *an-* (without) + *arkhos* (ruler), but a better and more active translation of it is perhaps ‘against domination.’ An anarchist archaeology insists on an archaeology that is committed to dismantling single hierarchical models of the past, and in that sense, its core incorporates tenets of a decolonized, indigenous, and feminist archaeology, contesting hegemonic narratives of the past. It is a theory explicitly about human relationships operating without recourse to coercive forms like authoritarianism, hierarchy, or exploitation of other humans. Some anarchists extend this argument further to non-human relationships with objects, other species, and the environment.

In keeping with these principles, there is no orthodox, overarching, uniform version of anarchism. There are multiple approaches to anarchist theory and practice tied together by common threads, and it is these commonalities that inform our anarchist archaeology. Here we outline principles for an anarchist archaeology that can be applied towards studies of the past, toward archaeologically informed examinations of contemporary societies, and to archaeological practices, including professional ethics. We offer this as both a manifesto and as a living document open to constant contextual review and revision.

*Critiquing Power.* We recognize that there are many ways to evaluate and interpret topics like value, domination, coercion, authority, and power. Anarchists, and thus anarchist archaeologists, have long recognized that organizational complexity is not produced simply from elite control, but also forms through heterarchies and networked collaborations. Many anarchist archaeologists strive to uncover lost periods of resistance to domination and exploitation of people by a few elites, which can be termed *vertical power*, or power of some over others. Thus, an anarchist archaeology seeks to examine forms of *horizontal power*, the power of people working to coordinate consensus, often in opposition or parallel to emerging or extant forms of vertical power.

*Recognizing the Arts of Resistance.* Anarchist archaeologists recognize that periods of change, as well as periods where change does not seem to be present, do not require connotative evaluations of either good or bad. An anarchist archaeology does not give preferential treatment to any particular arrangement of ‘civilization.’ In practice and in popular culture, periods of heightened

inequity are often seen as periods of cultural fluorescence or ‘climax.’ Terms such as ‘collapse,’ ‘decline,’ or ‘dissolution’ are often applied by archaeologists and others to describe periods in time in which hierarchies end. Language about cultural ‘climax’ and ‘decline’ retains Victorian notions of progress, identified with the state, as opposed to a more active notion of societies against the state. Alternative perspectives reveal the complex and sometimes conflicted struggles of humanity against entrenched exertions of power in hierarchical societies. Many of the so-called ‘collapses’ of the past were periods of greater assertions of local autonomy in the face of hegemonic centralizations of power. Such times are often the product of unrecognized acts of revolt, resistance, and resurgences of alternative ways of life. Thus, these periods can be successes for the majority of people in terms of increasing self-determination and independence. Anarchist archaeologists are committed to theorizing and identifying the material manifestation of such cultural transformations.

*Embracing Everyday Anarchy.* To understand histories of human resistance, resilience, and maintenance of equity or heterarchy, an anarchist archaeology must also be an archaeology of everyday life, not just elites and monuments. We acknowledge that people operate outside structures of power, even when entangled in strong power structures. Contextualizing a quotidian anarchy allows an interrogation of when different sources of power are in operation and when they are silent/silenced or unused. This is where an anarchist archaeology can build upon an existing strength of the discipline, as archaeologies of non-elites and of resistance movements are already prominent fields of knowledge. The interests of an anarchist archaeology lie in the building of coalitions and consensus, so contexts where we can find alignments with people in the field of archaeology and outside are critical to the development of the movement. The archaeology of everyday anarchy is also a good reminder of the ways we can integrate anarchist practices into our own present, with an eye towards the future. One does not have to self-identify as an anarchist to embrace and contribute to everyday anarchy. Simple, self-confessional acts in the classroom, test pit, and elsewhere provide myriad opportunities to deconstruct hierarchies of power that perpetuate harmful stereotypes in the past, present, and future.

*Visioning Futures.* An anarchist archaeology perceives that vanguardism (i.e., a traditional Marxist revolutionary strategy that attempts to design cultural change with the hope of a predetermined outcome) often represents an extension of present power structures, either intentionally or otherwise, and rarely succeeds in the long term. Instead, anarchist archaeologists examine material culture across time using prefigurative practices as decolonized visioning. This means that they examine the material record and their discipline with the recognition that people who act within the present in ways that create change towards a desired future, are more likely to implement broadly beneficial change (anarchists call this “making a new society in the shell of the old one”). This practice of visioning the future in the present moment aligns an anarchist archaeology with the commitments of a contemporary archaeology, even if the material under investigation is one of the deep past. An anarchist archaeology recognizes that the past can only be investigated within a deep present rife with conflicts, conversations, and politics. This does not repudiate perspectives of archaeology as a science. Instead, it recognizes how culture interacts with and informs scientific analysis. The shedding of hierarchy from scientific practice opens its predictive potential beyond the traditional realm of archaeology (i.e., the past) towards future places.

*Seeking Non-Authoritarian Forms of Organization.* An anarchist archaeology attempts to reimagine, redistribute, and decolonize processes and positions of authority within communities,

the academy and discipline, and its many publics, while doing research, facilitating student learning, and engaging in heritage management. These reconfigurations, though, can only happen in an inclusive environment, and one imbued with recognition of the perils of layering present perspectives uncritically upon the past. This means that an anarchist archaeology is also an archaeology that is committed to community, encompassing multiple voices, and a deep critical engagement with research. Anarchist archaeologists seek alternatives to the traditional hierarchical modes of knowledge production and management of past places and time, in favor of egalitarian ways of bringing people together to learn, to protect places, and to understand the relevance of the past for the present.

*Recognizing the Heterogeneity of Identities.* Anarchist archaeologists understand that people live in many different social spaces. More importantly, they encourage people, including archaeologists, to live in and explore many different positions, worlds, and identities. An anarchist archaeology is necessarily intersectional. It understands that people are not products of one simple form of identity (i.e., not essentialist), nor even one very complex form of identity, but they are created, and continually recreated, by the constant intersection, erasure, and addition of these many different aspects of themselves. In fact, it is this very act of recognizing each other's multi-valent identities/positions/standpoints that offers a powerful method for building equity between individuals, groups, cultures, and other cultural constructs.

*Exposing Multiple Scales from the Bottom Up.* An anarchist archaeology works at many different scales. This means that it works at global, regional, community, and personal levels. Most importantly, an anarchist archaeology recognizes both the roles of assemblages as encompassing individual people, places, materials, and animals, as well as larger collections of those social influences. It is cognizant of the agency of social participants to author how and where they are situated within the scales of the social environment. This contextual, feminist, decolonized, and non-human/humanism integrates with anarchist archaeologies, anchoring it to place. This means that research, interpretation, and advocacy often focus on individuals or localities, and then expand to encompass a more global scale. The grassroots scale of people and lived places provide the critical building blocks for a re-imagining of higher systemic-level changes. This is the space where the scales of archaeological analysis—from the sherd, to the place where it was found, to the regional context—help us to build connections between many scales of order that allow us give voice to the past and present.

*Recognizing Agency in Change and Stability.* An anarchist archaeology is agentic. Anarchist archaeologists understand that if placed in equitable systems, all humans/nonhumans have the ability and capacity to enact change. Most archaeologists recognize that the power of our discipline derives from its understanding of human capacity for shaping the environment, the material world, and spiritual realms through action. Combined, these agents allow archaeologists to add people, instead of only objects, back into the past (and the present). Recognizing that all people are important means that an anarchist archaeology is an archaeology of social relations that uses how people interact to understand the archaeological record. An anarchist archaeology focuses especially on those people who are least likely to have contributed to dominant narratives from the past.

*Valuing the Heritage of State and Non-State Societies.* An anarchist archaeology contests conservation and preservation of heritage by questioning why and how some sites and regions are chosen to be protected while others are not. Anarchist archaeologists understand that preserving sites and communities that only represent states, or what are usually perceived as the precursors

for states (i.e. vertical hierarchies with elites) means that we create a past that sees state and state-like societies as models of success. Societies that are not states, often intentionally preventing the emergence of hierarchy as they evolve, become implicit examples of failure. An anarchist archaeology is asking that we start to change our understanding of what success looks like, and that this theoretical shift is accompanied by action in how we understand whose heritage is deemed significant. This is where an anarchist archaeology can powerfully parallel and support an indigenous archaeology. These biased decisions on what heritage is valued also decrease our historical imagination. Removing or limiting the archaeological, historical, and cultural presence of horizontally organized societies through preservation decisions can have dramatic impacts on the ability of future societies to envisage and enact alternatives to present hierarchies.

*No Paradigms--A Multitude of Views and Voices.* Anarchist archaeology acknowledges that a multiplicity of viewpoints exist, and rejects the false dichotomy that all who promote these ideas must self-identify as an anarchist or archaeologist. Labels limit people's ability to find utility in anarchist theory. For instance, people do not need to call themselves anarchists to promote anarchist ideas and ideals in the same way that people do not need to call themselves archaeologists to promote the use of material culture as a social science and a historical method. This standpoint allows us to be theoretically promiscuous and claim that it is scientifically fruitful to consider alternate theories and methods from the normal paradigm, thus engaging in epistemological anarchism.

*A Heterarchy of Authorities.* As anarchist archaeologists, we do not recognize ourselves as one community. Instead, we recognize ourselves belonging to, and claiming, many connected communities. We support the idea that decentralizing our knowledge and authority does not deny any expertise we may have. We recognize that while we have the skills of our craft and expertise concerning material culture and knowledge about the past, it is an expertise that derives from a certain perspective that is without sole authority. Our knowledge should be open and our expertise should be available so that we do not create a situation in which archaeologists (or historians) alone obtain authority over the past, especially as concerns the heritage of descendant peoples. Further, we recognize that many kinds of expertise exist outside of our discipline, and indeed outside of the realm of 'academic' knowledge. An anarchist archaeology is about respecting the many kinds of experts that can speak to the past and the present.

*Decentering the Human--Recognizing Relationships with Non-Human Entities.* An anarchist archaeology understands and encourages us to examine how non-human agents may create social change. Thus, place, space, the environment, material objects, and the supernatural can all be agents of change. Moreover, the patterns of human behavior may be structured by their relationships with non-human entities, as geontologies, whether it is perceived agents within the landscape, climate, plants, animals, or spirits. We acknowledge that since people in past cultures often saw themselves as equal to or lesser than non-human entities, decentering the human may help us understand how past peoples arranged themselves. Such a stance also helps us to reimagine our own subject positions in relation to the environment, to places, to plants, animals, and spirits.

*An Archaeology of Action.* Anarchist archaeologists recognize that even though our research can often tackle incredibly difficult and sensitive topics, that archaeological research should be pleasant and joyful. Simultaneously, archaeology should be conducted and reported with respect. While our subject matter can be fraught with violence, we look at finding ways to study these topics that are not themselves violent. Following the many successful acts of resistance that use

humor to contest violence, such as marchers protesting injustice armed with puppets, we also think that presentations of difficult topics can be broken up with artistic, poetic, or revolutionary interventions. But most of all, we see an anarchist archaeology as a call to action, and we invite those who are interested to join us. Do research. Write an essay. Compose an epic poem. Contribute song lyrics. Offer a painting or photograph. Do something big, or do something small. Do something different. Write a classic. Do what feels right. Do it for archaeology's potential to help us build a better world. Make it grand. Make it humble. Make it brilliant.

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Simply, we offer an anarchist archaeology as an alternate way to think about the past and to consider our methods and practices in the present. An anarchist approach reminds us to consider relations of power and to question whether those relationships are authoritarian or coercive, whether in past societies we study, among archaeologists as teams in practice, among archaeologists and descendant communities concerning heritage, or in the relationships between archaeology and contemporary nation-states. The vast bulk of societies in the past were anarchic societies, organizing their lives without centralized authorities. This is one primary reason that an anarchist archaeology can be of use for understanding the principles and dynamics of societies without government. Moreover, sustained critique of power can help us better recognize the forms of resistance within centralized societies. Finally, anarchist principles can help us better attain more egalitarian and democratic practices among archaeologists and others with interests in the past. This approach can also engage archaeology to invigorate the historical imagination and present alternatives to contemporary top-down oriented political and economic structures of authority. In short, an anarchist archaeology can help us to expand the realm of the possible, both in relation to our interpretations of the traces of past lives, and in terms of our understandings of what is possible in the future.

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*The Black Trowel Collective:* We come to anarchism and archaeology from many backgrounds, and for varied reasons. Most of this document comes from a conversation started at the Amerind Foundation in April 2016 (made possible by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation), where we began to put the ‘sherds’ of an anarchist archaeology into a coherent framework. Since then, many of us have continued to work together on this and other projects relating to anarchist archaeology, and our circle has widened as the project evolves. We invite you to join us, or to keep up with the work we are doing at <http://www.anarchaeology.org/site-forum/>.

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