

The Archaeology of Collective Action

Dean J. Saitta

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index, \$24.95 paper.

Dean Saitta (University of Denver) describes archaeology as a discipline “whose history and perceived status as a middle-class, leisure time activity continually threatens it with irrelevance” (p. 108). To rectify this dilemma, he suggests that archaeology should explore past social injustices that support modern structural inequalities, particularly at sites of collective action. He critically addresses these issues in this first volume from a new series entitled *The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective*, edited by Michael Nassaney.

Perhaps this book’s most important contribution lies in Saitta’s attention to archaeological theory and the future of our discipline. His approach emerges from a number of related themes, such as critical archaeology and the archaeology of capitalism. Straightforward, well-organized writing guides readers through a background on theories of culture and material culture, and leads to a critique of agency theory (for example, as posited by Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens). He faults agency theory for focusing almost exclusively on individuals rather than collective agents, the latter of which are crucial for challenging social inequalities. Instead, he seeks to explore “emancipatory” archaeologies that are rooted in consciousness and group identity (pp. 24–25). He reviews archaeologies of collective action including studies of race, class, and gender. Some examples cited include African ceramic and house forms found in American colonial contexts; women’s ceramic consumption as evidence of their interests in morality and status; and working-class attempts at industrial sabotage. Saitta hopes that attention to collective agency will have broader implications outside historical archaeology, for example, with potential to critically examine struggles of past and present indigenous peoples and issues surrounding Native American Graves

Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) legislation.

As a case study, he summarizes his and others’ work at archaeological sites related to the Colorado Coalfield Strike of 1913 and 1914, in which striking coal miners and their families engaged in deadly conflict with corporate entities and state militia. Official and vernacular versions of history include tales of machine guns, foxholes, and executions. The conflict drew attention from well-known labor activists such as Mary “Mother” Jones and Upton Sinclair, and the nation was shocked when one bloody battle resulted in the deaths of several women and children. Saitta reports on archaeological excavations at the Ludlow tent colony, where a number of strikers and their families lived and died during the conflict. Evidence there suggests that strikers probably did not fire upon militia from purposefully excavated rifle pits, as official accounts declare, but instead defended themselves and their families from cellars and other domestic features. Saitta also provides an interesting overview of excavations in pre- and post-strike contexts in a related coal mining camp. This research suggests that the company tightened regulations on miners’ domestic lives after the strike, increasing regulation of sanitation, limiting alcohol consumption, and restricting women’s rights to take in household boarders. Today, Ludlow in particular serves as a symbolic protest ground for modern labor protests, which are still rampant in such a dangerous industry. To link past and present, Saitta describes how miners across 21st-century America are still striking for many of the same benefits the Ludlow miners did, including an eight-hour workday.

Many of Saitta’s broad assertions about working class relations at the sites would have been strengthened with the addition of more artifact photos and analysis. He notes, however, that at the time of publication artifact analysis was not complete. Instead, the work here should be seen as an overview of research surrounding the strike, and perhaps a hint of what is to come in subsequent publications. Another potential concern is with the author’s tight

focus on class solidarity. On the one hand, his interest in Marxist-inspired domination and resistance studies is certainly an appropriate place to begin with regard to the Ludlow conflict, where violence polarized interests between capital and labor. On the other hand, with any diametrically opposed power construction there is a danger of oversimplification; binary opposition as a hermeneutic category has the potential to constrain interpretation. For example, while Saitta gives admirable attention to issues of gender, he seems to believe that women were as equally vested in class solidarity as their husbands. In one section, he suggests that the decision to go on strike was a family affair, first agreed upon in the kitchen (p. 65). While this vision of democratic gender equality may have been realized in some cases, Saitta does not sufficiently explore the potential complexity of patriarchal household dynamics and how they intersected with class. Again, these criticisms

probably result from the fact that this is a work in progress; he acknowledges the need to further address how solidarity intersects with gender and ethnicity (p. 110). The book appears to be a medium in which Saitta is developing some very interesting ideas that deserve attention and further exploration.

Most importantly, Saitta's impassioned argument that archaeology is inherently political means that archaeology should make itself more socially relevant to today's citizens who are engaged in similar struggles of inequality. The hope is to give voice to the silenced subalterns of the past and work together with today's citizens who are struggling within systems of structural power inherited from previous centuries.

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