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Public archaeology from a Latin American perspective

FUNARI¹, P.P.A.

What is the epistemological statute of public archaeology in general and in Latin America in particular? Perhaps the simplest answer is return to a classic *cui bono* question. Archaeology was traditionally a discipline unconcerned with mundane implications of its practice, as if the scientific endeavour could be disentangled from the interests of states, groups and individuals. This naive understanding has been challenged in the past decades from several quarters. From outside archaeology, post-modernism has been a potent tool for deconstructing supposedly neutral scientific discourses. Inside archaeology, a semantic turning point can be spotted in Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley's re-interpretation of the word itself archaeology: "the study of power", not an elusive and detached "study of the past" (Shanks and Tilley 1987). This was in 1987 and in these thirteen years or so, there has been a burgeoning corpus of literature devoted to ethnicity, nationalism, cultural identity and politics, with a clear impact in archaeology (Kohl and Fawcett 1995). Archaeology has been under fire, *cui bono*, who benefits with archaeology?

Archaeological and historical narratives are deeply imbricated within sociopolitical realities and archaeology matters in very tangible ways. Archaeology was born out of the ideological relationships between exploration, mercantilism, colonialism, primitivism (Meskell 1998). In this context, public archaeology is here understood as more than the traditional "public outreach" understanding. In a critical way, it is understood as an enquiry: *cui bono*, "who benefits" from archaeological practice and theory, from archaeological discourse? Originally, *cui bono* is a Roman legal phrase intended to identifying the personal motivations of litigants, but we can also apply it to collective endeavours, such as archaeology (Ascherson 2000; Storey 2000). Public archaeology then moves into the real world of economic conflict and political struggle. Archaeology confronts thus ethics. There are several issues relating to interest and archaeology, but one of the most important is relating to the position of human rights in archaeology and particularly the rights of indigenous populations to take part or at least share in decisions on the management of their sites and material heritage. This is particularly important in Latin America, a continent originally inhabited by millions of natives decimated by the European colonisers and whose descendants are most of the time exploited and excluded from power. Their exclusion is also ideological, in the quest by nation states to "civilise", that is, to assimilate them, destroying their self identity (Patterson 1997).

This paper deals with only this aspect of public archaeology in the region. Several other aspects are also important, as the sale of looted antiquities, the representation of archaeology in the media and ordinary people (mis)handling by archaeology (Funari 2000a). Indigenous rights are however a most ubiquitous issue and in a way it is the intrinsic issue for archaeology in Latin America. Archaeology was introduced in Latin America already in the nineteenth century as the study of the other, the native. First by foreigners and then by locals (Politis 1995: 200). Archaeologists were in tune with the anthropological prejudices of those

¹ Departamento de História, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, C.Postal 6110, Campinas, 13081-970, SP, Brazil, fax 55 19 289 33 27, pedrofunari@sti.com.br.

days, considering natives as primitive barbarians with no rights whatsoever (Patterson 1997). Until the after the second world war, it was common to find scholars actively proposing the extermination of Indians (Funari 1999) or, at least, its acculturation into oblivion. The elites of some countries, like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, built their national identities as European cultures in South America. Natives were considered as non-existent, in Argentina and Uruguay, or as marginal minorities, in Chile. The elites in Brazil, where a third of the population has some kind of Indian ancestry (Funari 2000b), forged a national identity which excluded barbarian Indians from the Brazilian national mix. Brazilians may have Indian blood, but are no longer natives, if “civilised”. Other countries with large Indian populations have been subjected to a contradictory policy by the elites. Self-styled white Iberian ruling elites, Spanish speaking, idealised natives in the so-called *Indigenismo* ideology. This movement developed mostly in Peru and Mexico during the 1920s. It was a major manifestation of nationalism, glorifying the pre-colonial empires in order to legitimise the modern nation states. As there were states in the past, with rulers and ruled, now the modern nation states were also characterised by this dichotomy. Archaeology played an important ideological role in legitimising the exclusion of real life natives. Several countries have very large native populations, but only Paraguay allowed the use of native language in the media. Nationalism was grounded on homogeneity (Jones 1997) and the principle of only one language (that is, Spanish or Portuguese) has been very strongly enforced.

In this overall context, in the last two decades archaeology has changed radically in Latin America. Until the 1980s, several countries lived under dictatorships and freedom of expression was exceptional. Counter-discourses however have been proposed from the 1980s in society at large and in archaeology as a consequence. When in the 1980s the World Archaeological Congress passed its Code of Ethics relating to natives rights, there was a widespread surprise in Latin America, for most archaeologists had never confronted the issue and were ready to discard it. After all, there were no indigenous groups...there were only nationals! Furthermore, the supposedly few indigenous groups lived in isolated areas, and were studied by anthropologists, not by archaeologists, concerned with science. In several archaeological conferences, it has been quite common to witness discussions between astonished archaeologists and anthropologists, the former arguing that they own archaeological material, the latter stressing that there are native communities contesting the ownership. It is rarer to see natives themselves in archaeological conferences.

Contract archaeology has further complicated the situation. A good example comes from southern Brazil, but it is emblematic of a common situation. Three young scholars, Kimiye Tommasino, anthropologist, Francisco Silva Noelli, archaeologist, and Lúcio Tadeu Mota, historian, produced the following protest letter:

“IS THERE A MARKET PRICE FOR ETHNIC CLEANSING AND ENVIRONMENT DAMAGE?”

As scholars in touch with the indigenous population in the Tibagi area, we have been paying attention to the plans to build Cebolão and São Jerônimo dams, both of which will flood native lands. We have been working in these lands for quite some years and we have been publicizing our research in different scholarly and lay forums. The dam builders hired Cecília Maria Vieira Helm, Cláudia Inês Parellada, Maria Fernanda Maranhão Kluge and Oldemar Blasi to report on the anthropological and archaeological implications of the dam project. They ignored our previous surveys in the area, as well as the evidence of dozens of archaeological sites, and produced reports with reference to only a few sites. Furthermore, our

work with the communities revealed that the Kaingans and Guaranis use large areas to be flooded. In the official report, there is scant reference to previous literature and the result is an explicit support to the construction of the dams. The destruction of the traditional environment menaces destroying the Kaingang and Guarani peoples. The official reports do not take this into account and even consider that the assimilation of the natives in the national Brazilian culture is a good move, supported by the misleading idea that every Indian will have “electric power, health assistance, roads and vehicles”.

We strongly oppose the construction, considering the lack of scientific data supporting this move and we call for the respect of the following ethical standards: 1. The Code of Ethics of the Brazilian Anthropological Association; 2. The Brazilian constitution and the “Indian Rights” clauses (article 231); 3. The respect to the 3924/1961 Bill; 4. The Society for Brazilian Archaeology statute on heritage protection; 5. The Code of Ethics of the Society for Brazilian Archaeology; 6. International conventions on archaeological work; 7. Environment bills. We thus call for stopping the construction of the dams and for a discussion of the scholarly ethics involved in the official reports”.

Indigenous groups are thus more often than not subjected to restriction with the assistance of archaeology, a discipline which could decisively contribute to upholding their rights. The example from Brazil is not different from what happens elsewhere in Latin America. Contract archaeology is thus a major challenge for public archaeology. Contract archaeology in itself is a positive result of the decline of dictatorships in the region, for it is a very important and effective way of preserving heritage for future generations. Several countries, provinces and municipalities introduced legislation protecting archaeological remains and enforcing salvage and rescue activities (Goodby 1994; Caldarelli and Santos 2000). However, contract archaeology is not usually linked to an active engagement with native communities. In countries with impressive pre-Columbian remains, like Mexico (Díaz-Polanco 1989; Bate 1998; Fahmel-Beyer 1999), Peru (Lumbreras 1981), Colombia (Gnecco n.d; Gnecco 1999), Guatemala (Mendoza 1996), Venezuela (Vargas 1990; Vargas and Sanoja 1994) and Ecuador (Adoum 1986/7), tourism is linked to native heritage, from pre-colonial native cities to museums collecting native material culture. In these countries, there are several archaeologists challenging traditional oppressive discourses on Indigenous societies, from different perspectives. In the 1970s, self-styled Latin American Social Archaeology proposed a critical understanding of the past, aiming at unmasking the exploitation of natives (Fournier 1999). Several other archaeologists have been keen to interact with indigenous people, living with natives, studying their material culture, but also actively interacting with them in order to further their rights. This has been the case in several countries, like Colombia (Politis 1996) and Brazil (Oliveira 1996; Noelli 2000; Soares 1997; Garlet and Soares 1999; Baeta 2000; Silva 2000). Other interesting avenues are the study of indigenous perceptions of the world in Latin America in general (Brotherston 1992) and archaeology, education and the construction of the “barbarian native” in Argentina (Podgorny 1999).

At the World Archaeological Congress 4, in South Africa (1999), a native representative from Uruguay joined his counterparts from countries around the world to discuss the relationship between archaeology and native peoples. In Latin America this is a particularly important ethical aspect of the archaeological endeavour and the collaboration between indigenous peoples and archaeologists is still in its infancy. However, a growing number of archaeologists are interested in exploring this path. Public archaeology is not only related to native matters, but it increasingly is an important concern for archaeologists aware of their social responsibilities. Returning to the beginning of this paper: *cui bono?* There is no neutral

archaeology and public archaeology is more and more popular in Latin America. It is still a minority concern, but there is a clear trend towards social engagement within the discipline.

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