
JOURNAL OF IBERIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

vol. 13
2010



JOURNAL OF IBERIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Isenta de registo na ERC ao abrigo do decreto regulamentar 8/99, de 9.6, art.º 12º - nº 1-a

Publisher

Association for the Improvement of Cooperation in Iberian Archaeology/
/Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Cooperação em Arqueologia Peninsular (ADECAP)
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Vol. 13 of *JIA* was typeset and printed in Portugal by
Candeias Artes Gráficas - R. Conselheiro Lobato, 179 - 4705-089 Braga. Portugal.
e-mail: geral@candeiasag.com - web page: www.candeiasag.com

Depósito legal n.º 125261/98

ISSN: 0874-2677

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Financial support for this volume has been given by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, Lisbon.

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This edition was two hundred and fifty copies.

Back cover design based on paintings at Fraga d'Aia rockshelter (Paredes da Beira, S. João da Pesqueira, Portugal), used also as the logo of ADECAP.

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF INHERITANCE

by

Sérgio Alexandre Gomes*

Abstract: Archaeology, among other social sciences, has been providing raw materials and contributing to the construction of different kinds of identity and identification strategies. Regarding its importance, archaeologists often discuss their role in this process, and think about their connections with the social context within which they develop their practice. In such discussion, should be highlighted important works on archaeology and nationalism or archaeology and gender, which contribute to our understanding of how prejudices act from the moment we identify, select and interpret materials. In this paper, I aim to focus on these topics, trying to discuss how the idea of inheritance entails a chronological linear sequence that pushes us to reproduce a set of identities that reinforce the hegemonic models that rule contemporary societies. In doing this, I will try to argue that archaeology might have an important role on the invention of new kinds of identity or, at least, could contribute to a better understanding of how complex, and often paradoxical, can be the way people represent themselves and others.

Keywords: Inheritance; Nation-state; identity.

Resumo: A arqueologia, entre outras ciências sociais, tem contribuído para a construção de diferentes tipos de identidade e estratégias de identificação. Existe, no âmbito da literatura arqueológica, textos em que o conhecimento arqueológico é discutido nas suas ligações com o contexto social em que é produzido. Em tal discussão, devem ser destacadas importantes obras sobre a arqueologia e o nacionalismo ou a arqueologia e o género, que contribuem para a compreensão do modo como os preconceitos actuam a partir do momento em que se identifica, selecciona e interpreta materiais arqueológicos. Neste artigo, pretendo visitar estes temas, tentando contribuir para compreender o modo como a prática arqueológica se processa sobre uma pressão de uma política de herança, condicionando o discurso produzido sobre os vestígios materiais do passado.

Palavras-chave: Herança; Estado-nação; identidade.

Introduction

Let's start with identity. In thinking about it, at a first glance, I'm pushed to face an image of unity and continuity. A unity that transfigures itself through time; a life frozen on details, fragments understood as a biography. An idea of rooted essence within the

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tensions of life. These aspects are sometimes so rooted that I may be taken to believe that they can't be seen! It is such a deep part... that most of the time they are covered with all sort of secondary elements that make me believe that I misunderstand the "true identity" of someone, of something or of an episode. In this way, a discourse on identity is always a discourse on revealing it. A demand within we look to erasure all sort of secondary aspects in order to reach an essence which is identity itself.

The point of view used in such view of identity was constructed under the development of a certain kind of subjectivity that makes sense of the world by reducing it into un-divisible unities. Such unities allow us to construct images that we use to act upon the world. With these practices, we tend to naturalize the images we use, i.e., we produce a con-fusion between those images and the world... creating the world where we live in. In this sense, we are taking as intrinsic the matter of historicity. Naturalizing the multiple ways we engage with world and turning it into a crystallized scheme of interpretation. Taking for eternal a product of contingency. A one way direction to the production of world which becomes an authoritarian way to live in it. A one way direction within the multiple possibilities to engage and understand with something taken as exteriority.

In order to discuss the production of this subjectivity I would like to consider the concept of bio-power suggested by Michel Foucault. This concept was used, or constructed, by Foucault on his research about several topics: on the establishment of a new regime of state's governmentality since the XVIII century, in his books *Discipline and Punish* and in the *History of Sexuality*, for example. By bio-power Foucault means the articulation of certain conceptions of body and life that lays to the politics developed by the modern and contemporary net of power. In its basis there is, on one hand, a conception of the body as a machine, allowing the development of a discipline technology. On the other hand, a conception of the body as specie, that allowed the knowledge and management of a community as a population. From discipline technology emerge an anatomical policy used in the production of individuals. From the concept of population, understood as a resource, were built a series of regulatory schemes to drive the community in a particular direction.

In this way, we should ask if identity isn't it itself a biopolitic strategy within the government of life, i.e., the representation of things and peoples through identities isn't it itself "an anatomic and biological, individualizing and specifying" practice whose reproduction is a strategy of hegemonic forms of power? With this question in my mind, and considering the importance of the construction of identity in archaeological practice, I will discuss how it relates to an idea of inheritance that seems to cross both identity and the past. I will try to argue that inheritance entails a hierarchical, vertical and linear scheme that rhizomatically sets in on the ways we produce past and identity discourses. And by this way, archaeologists become agents producing words and materials without resistance to face hegemonic powers.

Inheritance, Nation-Sate and Archaeology

Inheritance is quite a biopolitical concept. On the one hand, there's all the biological aura of it, based on the idea of genome and DNA... a sense of a thing hereditarily reproduced. Life itself! On the other hand, understood as a property, it demands a juridical framework

engaging with state and market politics. Simultaneously, its sociability can manage the feelings of a community, expressing the identity of the community. Through inheritance we reproduce feelings of belonging; feelings that naturalize the way we can see us as a point in time and space in a chart. Points on a timescale constructing a ubiquitous point of view of things. People as heirs of the Past, and producing inheritance for the Future. A blueprint of life explaining the relationships between me and the rest. Points connected with other points with which we compare and classify others and ourselves.

This scheme of making sense of difference is related, among other connections, to nationalism. According to Benedict Anderson, the nation-state is a novelty that emerges in the eighteenth century. Its emergence as a dominant cultural system relates to the failure of multiple structural aspects of pre-modern times. Anderson highlights changes resulting from the replacement of Latin as a “language of truth,” a conceptualization of a horizontal sovereignty as something that is opposed to traditional, centralized and vertical forms of a legitimation of power, and the establishment of a hegemonic temporality based on a linear sequence. These three changes operated in Europe from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, were thus pre-conditions for the emergence of nationality as a new model for the identification or imagination of national communities. Within this scheme, the Past – understood as an inheritance – would have an important role creating a sense of a national family through time. And, archaeology, as a disciple concerned with past material, an active role on the construction of such imagination.

Regarding the relationship between archaeology and the nation-state, I would like to discuss a painting by Louis-François Lejeune titled *The Battle of the Pyramids*. It was used by Margarita Díaz-Andreu in the front cover of her book *A World History of the Nineteenth-Century Archaeology – Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past*. This battle, between the French Napoleonic troops and the Mamluk, rather than just a geopolitical confrontation, is a struggle between the East and West’s eighteenth century system of values. In the horizon of this struggle, as in the horizon of the picture, there are the Pyramids... eternal facing the contingency of the battle. The Napoleonic Empire presented itself as the most civilized Nation in the world. This adjective – civilized - needed legitimation; this adjective produced a narrative that places the Empire in history as an heir of the ancient civilizations. The domain of the pyramids was not just a territorial goal, but a landscape needed in the universality that was proclaimed by the Empire itself. Within this universality, the pyramids become an index setting their place in time; and receive a temporality setting its relationship with time; and so require an archaeology to take care of their timelessness. Through this, they take on an aura where humanity could grasp its genealogy, set it as an inheritance, and imagine them as part of a national family. Creating an Identity for its family. Producing bio-politically the subjectivity needed within its Nation-State project.

As in other projects, the Nation-State project is made by tasks. Each task demands a profile to its development and the practices within it make the individuals needed to the task. This argument is much more complex than this, and it is quite well developed by M. Foucault on his book *Discipline and Punish*. But let us just focus on the idea of individuals made by the specification technology. A series of individuals fabricated under a project; the casting of subjectivities in order to produce different identities, whose sum make the identity of the nation.

The challenge in the sum of identities in order to produce a coherent National identity is on the accuracy of its representation. It’s skill to allow a scheme where all the subjectivities

excluded can interact with it and improve its skill to integrate new ones. Michael Herzfeld, in his book *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, emphasizes the iconicity inherent in the construction of National Identity. According to him, the icon contains a tension between feelings of sameness and otherness which are procedures for the identitization process. An analysis of the social construction of these relations is, therefore, an opportunity to discuss the movement of the construction of National Identity (Ibid.: 49-50). This is a question connected with the tension between essentialism and fluidity, a tension with which fixed categories are constantly reified, how essentialism becomes a widespread practice, and not only a monopoly of the state (Ibid.: 51-53). Thus iconicity is an important aspect in the development of the discussion of gender and identity in archaeology. One of the most important aspects on the icon's efficacy is its naturalization. In the post-war years, or the "glorious thirty years", the state had provided the conditions for the establishment of a normative model of the family. A normative model of family setting individuals in their roles: their identities, their life paths, and, most of all, the relationships that was to exist between them. Relationships based on principles of obedience and homage that should be respected in the name of the family and on the inheritance that the family is and produce, i.e., the state's power working its verticality in the form of the worm and natural intimacy of familiar relationships.

Regarding this question, should be placed emphasis on Joan Gero's studies on what she calls the "women-at-home ideology", and referring to the socio-politics of archaeology in America from the mid 1960's until 1980. Joan Gero argues that the way archaeologists interpret gender in the past and in the sexual division of labour in archaeology we can see a reproduction of the ideology of the state that supports it. Such reproduction, naturalizes in two ways the icons constructed by the state to regulate the population to be governed. On the one hand, on the research made by women in archaeology, Gero highlight its similarities with housework, i.e., in professional contexts there will always be a house and domestic task to be held by women's skills. On the other hand, by reproducing gender prejudices in the interpretation of activities in the Past, archaeologist reinforce the timelessness of this way of being woman or man... making women and men the heirs of their natural skills and tasks! Consequentially, the normative family is projected into the past, presented as an inheritance that should be kept in the Present assuring the construction of more heirs and inheritances for the following generation.

Conclusions

Nation and Gender are examples of nation-state contemporary constructs which, from the desire for identity, mobilize the symbolization of the traces of the past. As contemporary constructs, they privilege a temporal axis, a historical narrative that supports, plays and updates the projects of Modernity. Projects that want all-time achievements. Modernity destroyed the sense of the perfect place that exists as a utopia, privileging the idea of a perfect moment. Here, we should emphasize that identity, as a territorial formation – being a land or a body –, assures the place but asks of time for its full realization. By doing this, timescales become the axis for the modern project's possibilities. On this time axis, the identity's essences can be seen in the Past, the Present and the Future. These ubiquitous substances assure the flourishing of identity's possibilities. Although ubiquitous,

their presence is felt differently in this timeline sequence. In the past is present in a geography of artifacts that allows a history of it. In the Future are the gracious perfections of the project's outcome. In both cases, there's a tension between its presence and absence that empowers the hope to believe on in its existence. It's something hidden whose desire to see turned it into a fantasy. In contrast, in the Present there is the overwhelming and absolute presence that assures our existence. An existence under the conditions of essence's inheritance expressed in the belief that we are an identity: a coherent corpus through life. A desire to concentrate a singularity within the melting waves of time. Receiving, producing and letting inheritances. Being and raising heirs. Enrapturing the world with histories. History erasing the geographies of memory in order to produce a coherent identity.

Geographies spoken by history. Materials caught by narratives. The solidity of identity framing the incoherence of life. Regulating bio-politically people and its fragments. The casting of a subjectivity that desires to be a coherent Identity. Inheritance as a horizon of connections where the unity or the coherence can be built. Identity as if it was a ray of light on contemporary dizzying abysses. Identity as the escape of the astonishment provoked by a glimpse on the incoherence and management of life. A bewilderment that the forged subjectivity can't support, escaping again to the identity frame. Framing again the possibilities. Archaeology might have an important role on the constructing of another subjectivity. A subjectivity that instead of looking for the coherence of a history, privileges the unframed traces of past. Those traces that inheritance couldn't bring into the status of document nor monument. As Hamlet would say, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy". In the same way, there are more sherds than histories can tell.

Acknowledgements

This article is the result of a paper I presented at a TAG session organized "Archaeologists as contemporary critical thinkers" held at Durham in 2010. This session was organized by Vítor Oliveira Jorge, to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude to allow me to participate in session as well to attend his classes on "Critical Thought" at the University of Porto in which I started to think about several topics that I've discussed on the article. I am also grateful to Susana Oliveira Jorge and Ana Vale for their continuous support. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Lesley Mcfadyen for her help with the English editing of this paper and for help me think about it.

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