



disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory

Volume 27 Archives

Article 6

7-2018

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.27.03>

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Recommended Citation

Cañizares-Esguerra, Jorge; Bazile, Sophonie; Fernandez Cantero, Juan; and Linz, Jess (2018) "Categories as Archives: From Silence to Social Justice: An Interview with Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 27 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.27.03>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol27/iss1/6>

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Categories as Archives: From Silence to Social Justice

An Interview with Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra

Interviewers: Sophonie Bazile, Juan Fernandez-Cantero, and Jess Linz

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Dr. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra is the Alice Drysdale Sheffield Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of several books, including How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-century Atlantic World (2001), Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700 (2006), and Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World (2007). Cañizares-Esguerra is currently working on two book-length projects: Categories as Prisons, which explores how historiographical categories organize what questions about the past are permissible and therefore how archives and narratives are organized; and The Radical Spanish Empire, coauthored with Adrian Masters, which challenges the Anglo-American liberal notion that parliamentary democracy, humanitarianism, print culture, and the public sphere were the crucibles of modernity, arguing that sixteenth-century Spanish America witnessed massive popular participation in the creation of new laws and radical forms of antislavery and abolitionism, as well as the creation of vast archives of new social and natural knowledge and the rise of systematic skepticism and philosophical pragmatism in governance.

Sophonie Bazile (SB): How do you define archives or the archive, particularly in your own work?

Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (Cañizares-Esguerra): Well, there's the traditional answer: a building which contains documentation about different topics. Archives are often documentation about bureaucracy. They are spaces that document the workings of the state, by and large, but not only the state. Local communities can also have their own archives.

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Archives are supposed to be—allegedly—spaces to keep collected memory. They are, in other words, the institutionalization of memorialization. Archives are not only associated with the everyday functioning of the state but also with the legitimization of bureaucracies, of government, of authority. Early-modern archives (the subject of my own work) tend to store petitions and the legislation and resolutions triggered by these petitions. The archive, itself, therefore, documents the very source of legitimacy of states, namely, receptivity to petitioners. What's interesting about the way most societies worked in the past is that legislation was created through petitioning. The largest archive in the world, I believe, is the Vatican, which stores millions of petitions over millennia since the bureaucratization of the Vatican as a state. The laws, at the time, in most states in the world, came from below. A student of mine, Adrian Masters, has shown that 99% of the hundreds of thousands of sixteenth-century royal decrees in the Indies were verbatim copies of petitions. Individuals petitioned to the state and then the monarchs and other institutions turned those petitions into laws. Eventually, the laws were compiled and codified. The Justinian Code would be the best example of the codification of petitioning from below and the legal codes themselves are archives.

The paperwork around petitions constitutes the bulk of the premodern and early modern archives. But there's more to the archive than paper. Anything that holds and keeps traces of the past and allows for the interpretation of those traces is an archive. For example, landscape, in the case of geography, can be an archive. There are traces of changes in the way that space is organized. Different parts of the city are archives themselves because they show different understandings of space over time. Maps, of course, are archives. As they change, they document the materiality of space that might be long gone. Materials and objects can also be archives. The distillery we visited today would be, in a way, an archive of different eras. The tourist guide showed us this small house near the distillery where a federal employee used to live. In 1933, after prohibition, all distillers were required to house a federal employee on the premises. The distillery had to provide him with food in addition to shelter. The guide explained to us that the buildings where federal employees used to live had no bathrooms. Although the distillery was required by law to feed and shelter the federal employee, the law did not specify that the premises had to have a bathroom. So, the employee would have had to relieve himself outside! The house, on the premise of the distillery, documents the materiality of an ongoing conflict between the federal government and local communities in Kentucky bourbon country. Ultimately, anything can be an archive.

SB: If everything can be an archive, then how are you configuring the archive/archives within your own work?

Cañizares-Esguerra: I'm very interested in two aspects of the archive. First, is the way that categories frame understandings of the past and frames the materiality of memorialization. The materiality of *how* information is kept and *what* information is kept, ultimately. Archives are organized around narratives. Documents are not filed randomly. There are principles that organize the way information is kept, namely, what's remembered and what's deliberately forgotten. Archives are just as much about remembering as they are about forgetting. The writing of the past is 50 percent remembering, retracing, interpreting traces. The other half is about what is forgotten, silenced, and implicitly left out. So, one has these two dimensions to any archive and one must constantly keep them in mind. I'm particularly interested in

the role historiographical categories play in the organization of archives, both in the positive sense of what is kept and in the negative sense of what is what's not kept and silenced. I'm interested in how historiographical categories, such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Protestantism, and the Reformation, organize archives. Namely, I'm interested in categories that deeply affect what is remembered and forgotten by curating the questions we are allowed to pose. These categories are productive in that they generate narratives and accounts but also silences. I find these categories to be complicit in the making of Trump's wall. The bricks of Trump's wall were baked in the ovens of historiography.

Why is México seen as this "other" in the south rather than Canada in the north? Why is it that western Europeans or members of the European Union do not need visas but one needs a wall south of the United States? If you think about the history of this continent, you have to agree that the history of México and the history of the United States resemble each other much more than they resemble the history of western Europe. If there's any country that's historically close to the United States, then it would be México and, yet, we have a wall. Why do we have a wall? There are historiographical categories to blame: The Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment, among many others.

Jess Linz (JL): Do you mean the similarities between the two countries?

Cañizares-Esguerra: Yes, the processes of obliterating similarities and common origins. I have a book in which I argue that the Iberian and, in many cases, Mexican, foundation of 17th century Puritan theology is something that kids in high school in this country never come to see or to even imagine because it's an assumption that seems absurd. It's impossible to imagine. Historiographical categories as archives frame what is intelligible and what is unintelligible. If I were to say that the best way to understand Shakespeare's *The Tempest* [(c. 1610)] is understanding Our Lady of Guadalupe, you would most likely reply: "You're nuts! One has absolutely nothing to do with the other." Yet Shakespeare's *Tempest* and the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe are two peas of the same pod. They emerged in the same period. Both seek to answer questions about the New World in similar ways and they engage with demonology in the same ways. The Elizabethan, the *Tempest*, and the Mexican Our Lady of Guadalupe are remarkably similar ways of understanding the role of angelic and evil intelligences over the preternatural and the peculiar occult forces shaping the Americas. Similarly, if I were to tell you that Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an epic in which the devil has the standing of a hero, is very much a derivative of traditions of the Spanish-American epic that preceded *Paradise Lost* by at least a century at least, then you would say, "Well, that's nonsense!" That's the function of a category like the Reformation: by exaggerating the differences between Puritan and Spanish colonization of the Americas, it obfuscates cultural resemblances and common cultural origins. Categories obfuscate to make it difficult for you to see these connections and the origins of institutions because the origin of institutions need to be cleansed for difference to be justified and for walls to be built.

JL: In that case, where do you see the archive or archives intersecting with social justice?

Cañizares-Esguerra: Social justice means the redistribution of wealth to secure access to sufficient resources among marginalized populations. But social justice can also mean equal

access to the framing of historical narratives. The politics of the archives today, for me, is the struggle over the power of historiographical categories to organize archives, to determine what aspects of the past are selected and chosen in narratives, collections, and memorializations. Ideas that are embodied in institutions are deeply complicit in what's happening in this country today. The Left is as complicit as universities and academic institutions through the uncritical consumption of foundational historiographical early-modern archives, which in turn yield such narratives as "western civilization." Courses and museums on "western civilization" educate us daily on ontological differences between the global north and the global south. These categories and these narratives are the clay that makes the bricks in Trump's wall. One does not need to support Trump to justify cultural walls.

JL: Are there any scholars or theories whose work informs yours on the archive or archives?

Cañizares-Esguerra: I'm not a specialist on archives, so my understanding of the archive and the role of historical categories in the organization of memorialization and silence comes from angles that are not necessarily based on the literature on archives. I would say the Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* [(1995)] is one work that was influential. There's also Neil Safier's work [*Measuring the New World: Enlightenment Science and South America* (2008)] on eighteenth-century expeditions to the New World and how those expeditions got to be remembered once they got back in France. Safier's work describes the expedition of Charles Marie de La Condamine who went to Peru in the New World to measure the arc of the Meridian to determine whether the Earth was flat on the equator or not. It was part of the debate between Cartesians and Newtonians in France. The Newtonians won the dispute. As part of that debate in the French academy, expeditions were sent to the north to Lapland and expeditions were sent to the equator to measure the shape of the Earth to determine whether it was gravitation à la Newton or gravitation à la Descartes. The expedition sent to the tropical equator in South America, however, was not led by La Condamine. La Condamine soon came to dominate the memorialization of the expedition. He alone became famous. His fame came from the breadth of his writings. Yet, his writings were not original. He claimed empirical originality, but his writings were derivatives and even plagiarized. La Condamine drew in a large local archive compiled by local intellectual communities of Indians, blacks, creoles, and Jesuits.

La Condamine achieved a reputation as an extraordinary philosophical traveler and as a person who wrote from first-hand experience. Yet, he was recycling things he didn't see and presented them as if he had witnessed them. He managed to create a narrative about himself of empirical innovation and philosophical interpretation. How did that happen? Where is that authority coming from? Safier describes how the printing press and public sphere work to memorialize and create the persona of the academician who is objective and authoritative. The book therefore makes explicit how memorialization through print and academies works. My emphasis, however, lies somewhere else. Unlike Safier, I seek to understand how categories of historical analysis work. How memorialization works through historiographical categories themselves, not print culture or academies.

SB: What has been your experiences visiting an archive? Or, do you remember the first time you ever visited an archive?

Cañizares-Esguerra: Well, again, it depends on how you define an archive. I mean, a book can be an archive and a china set can be an archive. But I would say that the institutional archive was exciting and humbling. It was irritating in that the places I visited did not work the way I expected them to work and I had issues of time, resources, and money. Some archives were very bureaucratic and slow and the staff were not interested in serving those who were using the archive. They were officers of the civil bureaucracy who were more interested in watching soccer games. It was a mixture of frustration and excitement with the findings, expectations, and irritations. And adventure!

SB: What were you researching?

Cañizares-Esguerra: I was researching my first book *How to Write the History of the World* [(2002)]. I visited many archives and I spent a year in Madrid, Spain. I went to Valencia, I went to Seville, and I went to México, too. I spent 6 months there working in México City, in the national archive.

Juan Fernandez-Cantero (JF): In those institutional archives, what was your approach for reading those silences that you discussed previously?

Cañizares-Esguerra: There are things that are kept and things that are not kept. There are things, however, that cannot be recorded because they cannot be imagined. The things that can be imagined and recorded leave traces in documents, manuscripts, notarial records, etc. So, the fact that the archive is silent about certain aspects does not mean that it cannot yield the information about silences. It all depends on the questions you bring to bear and the assumptions you have. Historiographical categories prompt historians to pose certain questions to the archive. Other questions cannot be imagined within the boundaries of the possible. The archive is organized in a certain way that can yield predictable answers. On the other hand, if you bring to bear questions and assumptions that are not built into the archive, one could have that archive speak and yield information that it wasn't supposed to record.

JF: How do you see your work in making visible different epistemologies within academia?

Cañizares-Esguerra: Academia is organized on the assumption that you must constantly challenge paradigms and create new ones. If one is not breaking new ground, then one will be unemployed. So that's the dynamic implicit in the system. There's a large marketplace of new and challenging interpretations all the time but it doesn't mean that all these new interpretations and perspectives aren't complicit with the structures of historiographical discrimination I have sketched here. What appear to be new and liberating paradigms can, in fact, be reinforcing old walls or creating new ones.

JL: I wonder if you want to keep talking about that and how you conceptualize that changing. Is there a way to dismantle those walls? How do you conceptualize changes to that kind of oppressive imperial categorization?

Cañizares-Esguerra: Well, I'm preoccupied with how a region is defined in the United States. How Latin America, México, is conceptualized in the Anglo-American imagination and why it is imagined and conceptualized the way it is. Not only in the Anglo-American imagination, but in the Latino imagination as well, which conceptualizes the region within the same discursive rules. I think there are very deep epistemological foundations that since the Reformation have framed how the region has been understood. This way of knowing, seeing, and interpreting evidence has yielded a number of categories that are the foundation of area studies in general and Latin American studies in particular. There are a number of assumptions that organize the study of Latin America in this country. When I ask my students on the first day of class, "what is the first thing that comes to mind when they think about México?" their answer is usually, "conquistadors," "Indians," "poverty," "corruption," "violence," "drugs," and "pyramids." Why are these ideas so dominant? How did they get there? Which historiographical categories shaped the students' common sense? So, how to break such narratives? I tell my students that I'm offering them a class on Latin American colonial history that is about the origins of scientific revolution, the origins of democracy, the origins of globalization, capitalism, industrialization, and modernity. All the things that students see originating in Western Europe and in the United States I argue first originated in the "Mexican" south. I use the same archives that have produced overly tragic, negative narratives of absences and failures to tell a radically different story. I pose different questions to the same archive and in doing so, I'm laying the groundwork for the possible constitution of new collections of papers and objects to archive.