

Archaeology of the contemporary past

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Introduction

The archaeology of the contemporary past is a new and interdisciplinary field of research that intersects with heritage studies, art, ethnography and modern history. This kind of archaeology, as it is practised today, was born in the late 1990s. However, its intellectual roots go further back (Harrison 2011: 144-149). While “archaeology” literally means the study of ancient things, archaeologists have always been concerned with the present, although in very different ways. During the nineteenth century, there was no clear-cut division between present and past, archaeology and anthropology, and prehistory books regularly included living societies (but always non-industrial). This perspective soon fell into disrepute, due to its inherent racism and simplistic evolutionism. From the late 1950s onwards, archaeologists renewed their interest in the contemporary world through a new method—ethnoarchaeology—and a new theory—processualism. As in the previous century, it was traditional groups that were targeted: other societies were not studied. This is because ethnoarchaeology was conducted for the sake of developing analogies to understand the past, not as an end in itself to understand the present.

Historical Background

Despite their lack of concern for contemporary communities, processual archaeologists, like Lewis Binford, paved the way for an archaeological study of the present. On the one hand, unlike culture-historical archaeologists, processualists were not concerned with particular periods and cultures, but with understanding human behavior and social processes in general—and this could include the present. On the other hand, processual archaeologists who decided to do ethnographic work with living communities did so because many issues in which they were interested were usually overlooked by ethnographers (garbage, abandonment, recycling, settlement patterns,

technology, etc). With their detailed archaeological documentation, ethnoarchaeologists did prove the relevance of archaeological method to see the present differently.

There was only one further step to be taken: to study the present for its own sake. This occurred in the mid-1970s in the United States. Instead of looking at non-modern communities, a group of archaeologists decided to focus on their own culture and in this way inaugurated a new field: the “archaeology of us”. Its leading proponents were William Rathje, Richard Gould and Michael Schiffer (Gould and Schiffer 1981), who went on to produce influential work on garbage, modern technology and contemporary disasters. Despite this promising start, archaeological studies of the present did not take root. A similar interest in modern material culture developed in the early 1980s in the United Kingdom, with the emergent post-processual archaeology. Although some archaeologists engaged with contemporary things, the field was mostly taken over by anthropologists and lost much of its archaeological edge.

It can be argued that the archaeology of the contemporary past was reborn again in 2001 when the seminal book *Archaeologies of the contemporary past* (Buchli and Lucas 2001a), was published. The introductory chapters by the editors provided, for the first time, a strong theoretical background to the archaeological study of the recent past, which still grounds in one way or the other the large majority of the research. Other events in the United Kingdom explain the consolidation of the subdiscipline: the establishment of the Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT) annual conferences in 2003; the work of English Heritage, which has been faced with the task of managing the unwieldy remnants of the twentieth century and the publication of the first handbook on the archaeology of the contemporary past (Harrison & Schofield 2010). The archaeology of the contemporary past, however, has not only developed in the Anglo-Saxon world. Often simultaneously, archaeologies of the present time have emerged in Argentina, Chile, Iran, Spain, France and the Scandinavian countries.

Definition

The proliferation of archaeologies of the recent past has produced a diversity of definitions for the subfield. One of the main issues is time. In the United Kingdom, the archaeology of the contemporary past tends to focus on the last fifty years (Harrison & Schofield 2010). From this point of view, the goal of the archaeology of the contemporary would be the study of our present society in the strict sense, following

one of the definitions of “contemporary” as that which exists synchronically. It also fits a period that has been characterized as postmodern or high modern. For the study of a longer period, the term “archaeology of the recent past” is preferred. The problem with this approach is that, on the one hand, it privileges a period defined by theorists and culture critics which is not necessarily relevant archaeologically. On the other hand, the division may hamper an adequate comprehension of the present time within longer historical trends. There are two ways in which this problem has been dealt with: some archaeologists prefer to dissolve the uniqueness of late modernity and of modernity in general (Dawdy 2010), whereas others have tried to characterize the late modern phase archaeologically within the trajectories of modernity (González-Ruibal 2008; Olivier 2008). In the latter case, the move implies an extension of the boundaries of the contemporary past beyond what is strictly contemporary. With this definition another meaning of “contemporary” is privileged—what belongs to the same period of time. From this perspective, we can say that we are contemporaries of First World War soldiers, even if no one is alive anymore, because we live in the same historical phase. In a similar vein, some archaeologists project the contemporary even further back in time to the mid-nineteenth century, both for historical and methodological reasons. This might be helpful to fill the gap left by historical archaeology, which tends to focus primarily on the period before the late nineteenth century, while simultaneously forces us to see connections between present processes and those of the recent past. Other authors explicitly reject the phase approach and instead consider the archaeology of the contemporary past as the study of all relations between past and present (Holtorf & Piccini 2009). In any case, all authors agree that in approaching the most recent past from an archaeological point of view forces us to rethink modernist temporalities and transgress the well-ordered time-frames of conventional archaeology (González-Ruibal 2008; Olivier 2008; Holtorf & Piccini 2009; Harrison 2011).

A lingering problem with the definition of the archaeology of the contemporary past is its equation with the “archaeology of us” (Gould & Schiffer 1981), this “us” being equated to “Western”. It is true that late modern societies present problems of their own and deserve to be studied specifically. Yet this should not lead us to reduce the archaeology of the contemporary past to one kind of societies only (reversing the discrimination of ethnoarchaeologists). Although some practitioners have worked in both Western and non-Western contexts there is still an important unbalance with the geographic scope of the subdiscipline and the amount of non-Western archaeologists

working on the recent past is still limited. What do not seem to have limits are the topics explored by this archaeology: a few of them will be described in the following sections.

Key Issues/Current Debates

Everyday life

Everyday life is the main concern of what could be called the British school of archaeology of the contemporary past which revolves around CHAT. Archaeologists associated with this school have cast their archaeological gaze on the world that surrounds them and have investigated furniture, graffiti, highways, malls, zoos and even virtual worlds, to mention but a few things (cf. Holtorf & Piccini 2009; Harrison & Schofield 2010). One of the most controversial projects in this line was the archaeological excavation of a van from 1991 that had been used by an archaeological team for about 15 years. The evidence was analyzed through a combination of customary archaeometric methods (Bailey et al. 2009) and an object-biography approach, which has been consistently applied to prehistoric and ancient contexts during the last two decades¹. As it happens with much of this kind of work, the conclusions were not precisely counterintuitive, but this was probably not the point. What the van excavation and similar projects do is allowing us to look at our world (and archaeology) in a different way. It is more a creative engagement with ordinary materiality than an interpretative work (cf. Harrison 2011).

However, archaeology can also allow us to go deeper and in more detail into other people's lives and reveal something of them. This is the case with abandoned houses where everything has been left behind. The objects that have been abandoned following a catastrophic event can tell intimate stories about ordinary women and men. Thus, Dezharkhooy and Papoli Yazdi (2010) excavated several houses in Bam (Iran) that collapsed following a major earthquake in 2003. In their powerful work, they introduce us to six Iranian families through the objects left in their destroyed homes. In this way, archaeology manages to keep alive something of those persons and becomes a poetical memory practice. A similar work was undertaken by Buchli and Lucas (2001b) in a council house in the UK that had been recently abandoned by its occupiers: a young unmarried woman and her two children. The study documented many intimate details of the woman's sad life story: the archaeologists suggest that the house was abandoned in

¹ <http://www.archaeologychannel.org/content/film/festival2008/InTransit.htm>

the wake of a relationship breakdown with a heroin-addict partner. Similar intimate stories can be documented in the rural houses that were abandoned during the second half of the twentieth century in Galicia (Spain) (González-Ruibal 2005). Due to a desire to break with a peasant past that was perceived as shameful, the owners of many of these houses decided never to return to them and often abandoned many personal objects behind, such as photographs and letters, which allow us to piece together personal stories, often tragic (FIGURE 1). This kind of work confronts the archaeologist with an ethical dilemma: is it legitimate to break into other people's life? Although the identity of the people is not revealed, we get to know too much about them, things that the subjects would probably not like to be disclosed. It can be argued, however, that archaeology can become a sort of memory work for the people without history and, in fact, most of the situations studied by archaeologists have to do with anonymous, often humble, people that rarely make it into history books.

Indeed, a concern with the less gentle side of everyday life has characterized the archaeology of the contemporary. This includes analyses of the "microphysics of power", such as the studies carried out on school and domestic architecture, or on the destructive operations that sustain consumption in the Western world. The asymmetries and inequalities within the West are also being addressed by archaeologists interested in homelessness. Some projects in the UK and the US are conducted as community archaeology, with an active involvement of homeless people. Other subaltern groups have attracted the attention of archaeologists, too, such as migrant laborers and miners in the United States.

Conflict

The archaeological study of modern conflict has grown exponentially in recent years. Starting from battlefield archaeology, archaeologists of modern conflict are now covering wider ground (cf. Schofield et al. 2002). The archaeology of the First World War has been relevant in the development of the subfield. Archaeologists and amateurs, as in other areas, have worked closely together and they have mostly focused on the experiences of common soldiers fighting in the trenches of the Western Front. Researchers have also studied memorials, graffiti, and trench-art. More recently, the field has expanded geographically and thematically, to include other scenarios and topics, such as the Great Arab Revolt and POW camps. Comparatively, the other major conflict of the twentieth century, the Second World War, has received little attention.

An important part of the work conducted so far has been carried out as part of heritage management programs (CRM). Interestingly, archaeological research on the Second World War is far from being centered on conventional battlefields. The British Home Front and the Blitz, for instance, have been thoroughly studied by Gabriel Moshenska (e.g. 2009), who has looked at air raid shelters, shrapnel collecting by children, and bombed out civilian houses. He has excavated the latter in the context of innovative projects of community archaeology. Something that characterizes twentieth century conflicts is precisely the blurring between combatants and non-combatants. This can be seen materially in the destruction of cities (FIGURE 2), but also in concentration camps: similar technologies of repression were used to control civilians and military personnel—see examples in Myers and Moshenska (2011). Another aspect of the war to which archaeology can contribute is its impact on non-Western societies: in places like Ethiopia some indigenous groups were first exposed to modernity through the war machinery of Italy and the Allies.

Paradoxically, more archaeological work has been produced on the Cold War than on the other conflicts, despite being a more recent conflict and not having many proper battlefields. Again, research has often been driven by heritage concerns. Most endeavors have focused on the UK and the US, where nuclear silos, military factories and bases have been catalogued, studied and, sometimes, opened to the public. The material effects of the Cold War in communist countries have been less studied (with the exception of East Germany), but some initiatives have already been undertaken, in places like Cuba and Ethiopia. Countries in Africa and Asia often suffered the hottest side of the Cold War and their lands became the testing grounds of war machinery, which was then left to rust. This provides a significant area of research for archaeologists.

The last global war, the so-called “War on Terror”, is also being scrutinized by archaeologists. Archaeologists have been working on detention camps, the destructive effects of terrorism in New York and its memorialization. Finally, the archaeology of local (or rather glocal) wars is also contributing to the wider debate. This is the case with the Spanish Civil War. Although mass graves have been the main goal of researchers and grassroots associations, other initiatives have aimed at landscapes of conflict more generally, including battlefields, concentration camps and prisons.

Dictatorship and human rights violations

One of the phenomena that have characterized the last hundred years of global history is dictatorship. The study of this political phenomenon could be considered part of conflict archaeology, but in fact it goes well beyond it and intersects with other areas of study, such as everyday life and industry. Archaeological work on this issue has a triple purpose: throwing light on the material strategies that made those regimes work (and fail); providing incriminating evidence for the courts (such as the ICC), and helping the mourning process of victims and relatives. The archaeology of human rights violations is usually associated to the exhumation of mass graves. Archaeologists have participated in the recovery of bodies of victims of eliminationism in almost every continent and the recovered evidence has often played an important role in incriminating perpetrators. One of the problems with this work is that since it is used in court, as in the former Yugoslavia, it is confidential and cannot be published. This is not a problem when perpetrators will not be taken to justice, as in Spain.

The archaeology of dictatorship cannot be reduced to mass graves, though. Researchers also investigate strategies of social engineering, control and punishment. One of the most promising fields of research is the archaeology of concentration camps (Myers & Moshenska 2011). It is there where the horror of totalitarianism can be better grasped, by revealing the work of repressive technologies and recovering the traces of the individual lives that were shattered. The personal objects housed in the Museum of Auschwitz are a well-known testimony to Nazi barbarity. Similar evidence has been recovered during excavations at other camps and provides a unique corpus of data on the Jewish communities of Central Europe before their extermination.

Nevertheless, dictatorships cannot be based on systematic terror alone. They also rely on the seduction of the masses. Practices aimed at attaining hegemony are often material: architecture and landscape are two of the areas where totalitarianism strove to impress the masses (FIGURE 3).

Archaeologists, however, have paid more attention to openly repressive practices than to the construction of totalitarian order. An exception is the study of the Bückeberg arena, where the Nazis celebrated a Harvest Festival which summoned hundreds of thousands of people every year. The scenario was cleverly devised to cause the highest impact on the masses: a 600 meter-long alley (*Führerweg*) flanked by flagpoles was laid out for Hitler to “walk through the people” before reaching the tribune (Burström & Gelderblom 2011). Fascist Italian colonialism used space to imprint in the local

population the idea of the colonizers' racial superiority and Soviet urbanism resorted to large avenues and plazas to create dramatic scenarios of power (Andreassen et al. 2010). Apart from studying how these strategies work, archaeology can also explore the ways in which people survived totalitarianism. In the Soviet town of Pyramiden, Andreassen et al. (2010) have documented the "customization" of domestic space, but they found no open criticisms to the regime, in the shape of graffiti, vandalism or similar. Due to its rigidity and disregard for actual human needs, totalitarian dreams often fail. The abandoned farms planned by Mussolini's regime in Sicily are proof of fascism's inability to adapt to local necessities.

While social repression and violence are immediately associated with dictatorship, democratic regimes can also employ them. During the first third of the twentieth century, for instance, the labor movement suffered bloody attacks at the hands of liberal governments. Archaeologists have excavated the remains of the mining camp of Ludlow (Colorado), where striking miners and their families were killed by the US army (Larkin & McGuire 2009). Another case of a totalitarian strategy deployed by a democratic regime is that of Delta Camp in Guantanamo, where prisoners of war are held in contravention of international treaties.

Industry

Industrial archaeology was one of the first archaeologies of the recent past to appear and is now a well-established field in itself. The industrial ruins of the last hundred years, however, have received less attention than older ones. Efforts have been devoted recently to document the changing industrial landscape of the United Kingdom: new phenomena such as nuclear power, renewable energy and shopping malls have substantially changed the cultural landscape here. Apart from chronology, there is another bias in industrial archaeology that has to be overcome: its focus on Euro-American countries. The effects of industrialization in other continents have been less studied, although there is a plethora of themes worth exploring: development projects in the Third World (FIGURE 4), outsourcing, and industrialization in former communist nations. Regarding industrialization beyond the West, an interesting case is Flora Vilches' study of the nitrate mining town of Chacabuco (Chile) (Vilches 2011). After mining stopped in 1938, the place was abandoned only to be reoccupied as an internment camp during the Pinochet regime. Vilches shows the connections and continuities between a regimented working space under a liberal government and a

disciplinary surveillance space under dictatorship. An example of communist industrialization is the aforementioned study conducted by Andreassen et al. (2010) in the ruins of the Soviet mining town of Pyramiden. The place was not vacated until 1998 and everything was left in place then, a phenomenon that allowed the researchers to have a glimpse into a vanished era. While archaeologists have been much concerned with the archaeology of industry, they have been less interested in processes of deindustrialization, despite the many ruins that they leave behind.

A kind of industry that is specific of the last half century is the one related to space technology. Archaeologists have explored issues related to space junk, rocket ranges, landing sites and the way in which this particular heritage is managed, appropriated and contested.

Ruins and garbage

Modern ruins and garbage are both the raw material and a theme of study for the archaeologists of the recent past. The interest in ruination is shared with scholars from other disciplines. In fact, archaeologists have discovered paradoxically late that ruins are an interesting phenomenon per se (FIGURE 5), not just a medium to obtain other information (cf. González-Ruibal 2005; Dawdy 2010; Andreassen et al. 2011). Geographers, anthropologists, and cultural historians have also offered important insights which are relevant for archaeology. Ruination itself is the focus of Andreassen et al. (2011), who have combined both art and archaeology to produce a powerful account of Pyramiden. It is at the same time an intimate exploration of the abandoned settlement and a reflection on the nature of ruins.

Modern ruins produce a fascination that goes well beyond the limits of academia, as shown by the proliferation of coffee-table books with impressive photographs of abandoned places and derelict buildings and the emergence of a singular phenomenon: urban exploration. Archaeologists have yet to engage in a dialogue with these new participants. Their explorations and the often extraordinary documentation that they produce also challenge professionals: in which sense is an archaeological take on ruins different from that of amateurs? What can archaeologists add? The same questions are pertinent for the relationship between archaeological research and that conducted by scholars from other disciplines. It can be argued, on the one hand, that archaeologists have a unique methodology, which allows them to produce richly-textured narratives. On the other hand, as social scientists, we can contextualize the phenomenon of

ruination within long-term material processes and combine the micro-history of particular ruins with the macro-history of modernity.

Regarding garbage, its “discovery” was partly due to the New Archaeology’s concern with formation processes: discard, recycling and refuse were central concepts in ethnoarchaeology and behavioral archaeology. William Rathje went a step forward when he decided to study garbage in an industrial society as a means to understand social issues related to that society, not in an analogical way (Rathje and Murphy 1992). Rathje proved that discarded objects can tell a story wildly different from the one reported by consumers. Apart from the sociological interest, garbology has had an important practical role in raising awareness among Americans of the importance of recycling and the repercussions of unbridled consumerism.

Future Directions

The archaeology of the contemporary past has progressed much during the last decade. Although it is true that the subdiscipline—as Harrison (2011) has argued—has been more welcomed than criticized by other archaeologists, the truth is that it runs the risk of becoming ghettoized, as another area of expertise within the wider discipline. This would be regrettable, because the archaeology of the contemporary world is in a privileged position to address in novel ways crucial archaeological concerns, such as rhetoric, materiality, politics and memory (González-Ruibal 2008). It can also actively contribute to problematize concepts of heritage and time (Olivier 2008; Harrison & Schofield 2010; Harrison 2011). In addition, due to its hybrid character and its focus on issues of current relevance, this archaeology can be a way of starting fruitful dialogues with other disciplines, not in a subordinate role, as has often been the case, but in equal terms. Finally, the archaeology of recent phenomena easily engages a wide public and allows people to rethink critically their own society. To avoid turning it into a scholarly exercise, archaeologists have to keep imagining ways in which their work can be relevant for other archaeologists, other researchers and society as a whole.

In fact, there are some promising areas of research that may help establish bridges with other disciplines and with society: as it has been pointed out, there is a disproportion of studies between the West (and particularly the Anglo-Saxon world) and the rest. Besides, those that have worked in non-Western contexts have often emphasized poverty and violence. While this is a fundamental part of life for many people in Africa, Asia or Latin America, there are many aspects of daily life that would

benefit from an archaeological approach, such as the construction and use of domestic space or the appropriation of foreign technologies. In fact, the material creativity of shanty towns that is so important for the social life of their inhabitants has been largely disregarded: an archaeological gaze has much to offer.

Perhaps the most important challenge for an archaeology of the contemporary past, however, lies in producing ambitious works. So far, this subfield has been mostly concerned with offering commentary on contemporary life. It has engaged in micronarratives, often forgetting the larger picture. Along with micronarratives and creative interventions, the archaeology of the contemporary past should also construct elaborate accounts of complex issues—with an archaeological perspective: some themes that deserve monographic treatment are the postindustrial metropolis, urban poverty, political resistance and revolution, decolonization, global economic crises, the effects of climate change, and migration, to mention but a few. The idea is not just to engage in specific case studies, but, as archaeologists of other periods do, develop coherent, synthetic approaches to those large-scale phenomena. Starting from essentially archaeological topics such as materiality, ruins, fragmentation, and time, archaeology should be able to craft rich, alternative visions to those proposed by history, sociology or anthropology.

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Cross References

Applied Archaeology; Archaeology and Modernity; Archaeology of Consumption; Buchli, Victor; Industrial Archaeology; Capitalism, Historical Archaeology of; Change and Creation; Chronopolitics; Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT); Critical Historical Archaeology; Engaged Archaeology; English Heritage; Garbology; Gould, Richard (Modern World); Greenham Common; Historical Archaeology; Internment and Prisoners of War in Historical Archaeology; Modern Material Culture; Modern Ruins/Ruins of Capitalism; Modernity and Supermodernity; Modern World, Historical Archaeology of the; Modernity and Supermodernity; Poverty and Urban Slum Archaeology; Rathje, Bill; Schiffer, Michael Brian.

Captions.

Figure 1. A house abandoned in Galicia (Spain) during the 1960s.

Figure 2. The facade of a civilian building in Sarajevo riddled with bullet holes during the Bosnian War (1992-1995).

Figure 3. Seducing the masses: a communist-period mural in Berlin.

Figure 4. An abandoned gas station belonging to a ruined industrial complex from the late 1980s. Metekel (Ethiopia).

Figure 5. Ruins of an unfinished resort on the island of Corisco (Equatorial Guinea).
Early 21st century.