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ISSN 1469-6053 Vol 4(2): 200–213 DOI: 10.1177/1469605304041075

Is all archaeology at present a postcolonial one?

Constructive answers from an eccentric point of view

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ABSTRACT

In this short reflective paper, I stress the importance of situating the multiple archaeological practices of Latin America in their particular contexts, in reaction to the so-called 'globalized' and/or 'postcolonial' archaeologies practiced today. I argue that the different processes that give rise to the many ways of practicing our discipline around the world are embedded in multiple and divergent dynamics of socio-cultural and political interactions. I suggest that rather than simply adopting new forms of theorization imported from the usual theoretical production centers, we need to open new, dialectical and parallel channels of communication to articulate more balanced characterizations of the world's archaeological practices. Examining and understanding the many places (and circumstances) of action of the different archaeological practices (i.e. analyzing the multiple archaeological practices in their own context) allows a more coherent flow and linkage of information between praxis and theories inherent in particular socio-political contexts.

KEYWORDS

colonialism • Latin America • postcolonialism • Puerto Rico • social context of archaeological practice

■ INTRODUCTION

Initially, I must respond negatively to the title of this paper; not all of today's archaeology is postcolonial. At least, it is not so in Latin America and some of the Caribbean Islands (e.g. Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, British Virgin Islands, Aruba, Barbados). It is necessary to begin revising certain particularities of what some scholars call 'global' in today's archaeology. This must be done independently from the generalizing scenarios that determine the setting for today's archaeology, supposedly confined to postcolonial processes in one or another way (Gosden, 2001). Here, I focus grosso modo on Latin America, an extensive geopolitical area, which has been the arena of multiple archaeologies (in terms of trends) executed over many years by archaeologists from Europe and the USA, as well as by those from the region.

I should clarify that I do not wish to discuss here the main postcolonial works developed by ethnic minorities or subalterns at the centers of theory production (Bhabha, 1994; Chatterjee, 1993; Spivak, 1985). I refer the readers elsewhere to learn the contributions and the critiques directed toward these lines of thought (Castro-Gómez, 1998; Fabelo, 1999; Gosden, 2001; Mignolo, 1997; Moore, 2001; Moraña, 1998; Moreiras, 1998; Toro, 1997). Evidently, postcolonial studies are important for the different configurations of contemporary theorization in archaeology. However, the dimensions and consequences that these studies may have in peripheral countries like those of Latin America must be analyzed with a greater level of detail. In Latin America – as a possible consequence of the dynamic processes that have taken place under the burden of Spanish-Portuguese and now American imperialism – parallel alternative forms of action–reaction have been developed against the ways of representing the ethnic, the national and the historical. Consequently, I do not agree with the uncritical application in anthropology of theories that are prepared and transmitted principally from the centers of theory production, as has been the tradition. Instead, I propose to investigate which of the elements of the postcolonial theories produced in the center are shared with the eccentric theories¹ produced in Latin America and which of the elements are dissimilar (see Cardoso, 2003, and Medina, 1996 for a detailed discussion about the eccentric anthropologies or anthropologies in the peripheries).

The 'Third World', the periphery of the 'First World', the group



of 'developing' countries, the hinterland etc., has been subject to undetermined and perhaps indecipherable processes of negotiation – contra-negotiation, imposition – resistance between colonized and colonizers, consumers and transnational agencies; this has promoted the creation of divergent forms of valuing and comprehending the world in the many 'Third Worlds' that exist. Therefore, I propose that not all of today's archaeology falls within the parameters of the postcolonial condition (as has been argued by Gosden, 2001 and Hodder, 2002). On the contrary, many peripheral archaeologies have been framed by dissimilar socio-political environments as the product of their own historical particularities. Hence, I argue that rather than simply taking and applying postcolonial theories in different contexts, each archaeology must establish channels of communication with other archaeologies, without refusing or ignoring its own auto-generated form of practicing the discipline. The expected consequence, concomitant with this proposed action, is the feasibility to break up with the existing schemes of unilateralism even perceived today in the theoretical production of knowledge. I should point out, however, that I merely wish to comment on and situate these issues in their proper geopolitical contexts, with the explicit intention of encouraging further and much needed profound analysis and discussions about these topics. In this endeavor I do not ask for goodwill or affinity in the centers of theory production (i.e. to its participants); instead, I suggest that if we want to talk about a global context for today's archaeological theory and practice, we must have a coherent and informed notion about the many archaeologies that are developed in Latin America and in other parts in the world. Thus, I aim to propose a more effective and uncentered characterization of today's archaeologies in the context of a world called by many 'globalized'.

■ PARALLEL AND DIVERGENT ROOTS: A BRIEF SURVEY ON THE GEOPOLITICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE REGION

As has been discussed in other works (Medina, 1996; Pagán-Jiménez, 2000), Puerto Rico and other 'ex-colonies' in Latin America share an eccentric position in relation to the vanguard centers of capitalist development. In addition, to reproduce the globalizing tendencies that impose themselves at present, on a small scale, the geopolitical regions aforementioned make possible, by means of multiple factors, that these tendencies prevail and recreate themselves. This paper is not focused on an analysis of the political economy, or on the psychology of the distinct entities that make up Latin America. It is important to remember that Latin America, like other geopolitical regions of the world (e.g. Africa or Asia), has been, in different

epochs, the core (at least in terms of raw material) of the actual 'world order'. This premise hardly requires further elaboration; much has been discussed about this in the academy, especially from the Latin American point of view (Bonfil Batalla, 1987; Galeano, 1971 and Ribeiro, 1971 are divergent but representative examples of this theme).

Trees in growth: the creation of local multi-histories

Latin America and its geopolitical regions in different scales have been, nowadays, created as multiple forms of dealing with their history and present. Clearly, at different moments, the academic world and the state apparatus worked together to configure a 'national being' in these respective countries. National cultures, in general terms, were constructed at the start of the nineteenth century, where wars and movements of independence and a posteriori continued to be glorified. In practice, however, in the daily lives of people in distinct sectors of the new nations, an oligarchical² order was reproduced, or rather maintained, which never intended to release control of the nation's political and economical power. Latin America has created and shared the same homogeneous oligarchic class since the moment when the actual national borders started to be configured. The social inequality that rules today in the majority of Latin American countries started to take place and to be legitimized with the construction of an official past. For good or bad, it has always been the Latin American oligarchy that has invested the greatest efforts to maintain these conditions with changing facades and new masks.

In this context, history, anthropology and archaeology were effective instruments to mold national consciousness and to justify the homogenization projects in those countries that are multicultural. Obviously, the children of the proletariat or the poor sectors were not the ones who studied in the universities or reproduced the first world methods and social science theories of the first half of the twentieth century. A clear interrelationship existed between the Latin American intelligentsia and the state. It is not uncommon that those individuals coming from the same social sector shared a similar outlook and mindset. The oligarchy, then, not only governed and governs in Latin America, it also writes its history and dictates the rules that must be articulated in all social contexts. In this sense, it is clear that the oligarchy, as colonizer (after Memmi, 1966: 'the colonizer who accepts'), needed and still needs others to maintain its status and to reproduce itself.

The spaces of interaction of the oligarchy were not only circumscribed to the typical national boundaries existing during the twentieth century. From that time onwards, various old European economic empires and a very young political entity that we today recognize as the USA fought during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to gain economic control,



evolving into several wars. The Hispanic-American war of 1898, the First and Second World Wars, the Latin American revolutions and the years of military governments in most parts of Latin America modified the geopolitical panorama of the region. Moreover, later these events led to the institution of the bases and rules of the game for the establishment or imposition of the epi-modern³ world with its characteristic consequences (Lyotard, 1979; Patterson, 1995, give a characterization of the modern-‘postmodern’ conditions in other parts of the world).

(Epi)modernity in Latin America, like in many parts of the world, was centered principally on the circles of political and economic power. Obviously there were great transformations, but always there was and there will be, altern (not subaltern) forms of living and thinking, which modernity dictated. The altern condition, in contrast to the subaltern, must be considered with caution because we know that the whip of modernity was never homogeneous on a regional scale nor on a national scale. Each culture (a concept which I will not debate here) developed (and continues to develop) different forms of acting in relation to modernity and in many cases these cultures were never conceived as ‘subalterns’.

Particularities within Latin America

Puerto Rico, in contrast to the rest of Latin America, never enjoyed its political sovereignty. As a result, the consolidation of a ‘Puertorican identity’ did not take root in the late Spanish-colonial period. During the mid-nineteenth century, through a complex and difficult process, there emerged an independence movement concomitant with the genesis of a Puertorican identity. This appears to have been restricted at first to a part of the bourgeois sector – sugar and coffee producers – of the island, who beyond defending their new ideals (they saw themselves as Puertorican creoles), disputed an economic relationship with the Spanish ‘businessmen’, owners of the import and export agencies. This process was important because while the Spanish businessmen subjugated the creole agricultural producers, the creoles had their own (black) slave class and day laborers (marginal creoles). Consequently, they constructed alternative discourses (some with greater diffusion than others) that in some way or another persisted and took root in the different sectors of the Puertorican population.

However, with the Hispanic-American war of 1898 Puerto Rico, like other territories, came to be the spoil of war of the US, after the military invasion. In this context anthropology, and in particular archaeology, began to develop as ‘professional’ disciplines in Puertorican territory. There were local anthropological and archaeological investigations influenced principally by the European tendencies within the disciplines before the arrival of the American researchers (Brau, 1894; Stahl, 1889). Concomitantly, with war followed by military invasion, professional anthropology (as it was

characterized by the leading centers in that period) arrived in our territory. Researchers from the USA performed the most influential anthropological works during the first decades of the twentieth century. There was no clearly opened space in that period for the works developed by Puerto Rican researchers in the anthropological academy in spite of the fact that there were many important local researchers (Coll y Toste, 1897; Hostos, 1941). From that moment on, archaeology, a sub-discipline of anthropology that is most represented on the island, began to consolidate itself as an instrument of formal investigation and construction of the Puerto Rican past (see Pagán, 2000, for a more profound discussion).

Returning to the regional scale exposed earlier in this reflective paper, it could be said that Latin America did not remain at the margins of the events occurring at the end of the nineteenth century, while the USA expanded its continental borders towards the west, participated in wars and acquired as spoils of war overseas territories. The USA further maintained a growing rhythm of economic and political expansion during most of the twentieth century (and the current century, remembering Afghanistan and Iraq) with the explicit intent of maintaining a ruling economic and political order. In the American continent, the US tried to assure and guarantee in whatever way possible its hegemony (i.e. secretly sustaining military or civil dictatorships in countries like Cuba, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Haiti or demolishing governments that were against American interests in other peripheral countries).⁴

Facing the events that occurred between the 1950s and 1980s, Latin America did not react approvingly. I refer to indigenous Latin America, to black, to creole and finally to hybrid America (not subaltern), as some authors explain (Ribeiro, 1970, 1971). New politically left projects emerged, many times motivated by the social ideals that had taken hold in portions of the privileged classes and the marginal sectors. Individuals also emerged from those sectors that obtained access to university education and later constituted an intellectual class in their respective countries. These formative influences enabled the development of a Latin American academic class that was more or less committed to itself socially during the 1960s and 1970s and maintained itself parallel to its politically right counterpart. As early as the 1960s there were intellectuals that questioned the lack of 'a general theory, which would explain our reality in its own terms, founded in our historical experience. Theories originating from other contexts were too Eurocentric and hence unusable to us [as Latin Americans] to be intelligible' (Ribeiro, 1968; 1995: 11).

From the above, it is clear that Puerto Rico, other Caribbean islands and many of the Latin American countries have been and continue to be colonies in the classic sense of the concept (retaking again the now 'old' concept of Memmi). Though we can talk here of the actual existence of a



neocolonial and global condition derived from the economic transnational consumption (irruption), one cannot deny that the Latin American nation-states have constructed myths from the nationalistic theaters to demonstrate before their citizens a different socio-political condition in relation to the world's economic powers. We must remember that Latin America is rooted in multiple national projects that appeal to political sovereignty, among other things, for which they have organized festivities, calamities and other types of rituals to maintain the order and equilibrium of national unity. Now, hegemonic political and economic order does not exclusively require the use of arms to impose power and desires; the governors and their particular projects appear to be strung together under the pretext of 'national security' (e.g. secret weapons treaties between the USA and Latin America). It is unnecessary to elaborate more; it is evident that the new-old world order (which appears to have started to fracture in recent years) still requires exploited colonies in the old sense of the word for the same interests (political and economic control), but maintained under new schemes and bilateral discourses (the now common 'free trade agreements').

■ THE DILEMMA

Basing on the aforementioned, why do I maintain that a postcolonial condition does not exist either in the archaeology of Latin America, or in Puerto Rico or any other Caribbean islands if we consider the work of researchers like Lilley (2000), Gosden (2001) and Hodder (2002)? In part, people lived the processes of colonization, decolonization and/or neo-colonization differently in India and other peripheral countries when compared to Latin America. Further, the medieval and modern colonialism created in Europe (and fabricated, reinterpreted and utilized by the USA) was applied and received differently in regions overseas made up by culturally plural people. Thus, by a logical connection, that which is post-colonial in India (and now by extension internally in the USA, e.g. Latin American Subaltern Studies Group) is neocolonial in many other parts and intra or autocolonial in yet others (where they still conserve classic colonies like Puerto Rico). I agree that it is not sufficient to join or modify a prefix to the concept 'colonial' to try to characterize the multiple practical and theoretical contexts of today's archaeologies in Latin America. However, it is not sufficient to say either that all archaeology today is 'postcolonial' (Gosden, 2001) or that we live in a 'postcolonial' world (Hodder, 2002; Lilley, 2000).

On the one hand, arguing based on a sense of chronology, Gosden (2001: 241) states 'that most former colonies have become independent and we

live in a world coping with the consequences of colonialism'. On the other hand, arguing based mainly on a political sense, Hodder (2002) suggests that we live in a postcolonial world. I believe that his suggestion is based on a previous statement: 'the decentering of authority has also been part of the widespread emergence of articulated postcolonial voices' (Hodder, 1999: 208). Unfortunately, this statement only measures an exceptional context: the situation of the typically ex-colonized actors (in a political sense) who in one way or another use their ex-colonizer setting to enunciate their now free (emancipatory) intellectual actions. In contrast, the many local or 'atypical' places of socio-political action have been pushed to new obscure margins, traced now by the multicultural, multi-ideological scenarios which I have called the 'first order pluri-ethnic and intellectual networks'.

Postcolonial theories have certainly arrived in Latin America, but these are considered as they project themselves, like theories, studies or discussions that can be effective in any level in the particular socio-cultural context in which they were generated. Likewise, these tendencies are examined with caution and have produced questions such as those asked by Fabelo (1999): 'Is postcolonialism a solution to the Latin American case', which is a heterogeneous, multicultural region, a product of diverging socio-cultural dynamics over the time of its development? Writers and researchers are further debating from different perspectives the impacts and consequences of the postcolonial theories in the diverse Latin American academic and daily contexts (Castro-Gómez, 1998; Moraña, 1998; Moreiras, 1998).

In general terms, there are some visible similarities between the main objectives of the 'Euro-American' postcolonial theories with those works produced in the 1960s in Latin America. The differences are also notorious in terms of the treatment and specificities of the themes that are discussed. Undoubtedly, Marxist theory strongly influenced the actual positions toward history and the Latin American anthropologies. Many scholars began to realize the weaknesses and the small extent to which the oppressed classes were represented: the indigenous, the mestizos, the black, the mulattos and the creoles, in contrast to the greatness and the multiple virtues of our pre-Hispanic and Latino pasts.

Latin American social archaeology positioned itself against the official histories and archaeologies. It attempted to offer a new form to interpret the Latin American past in order to bring to light the contradictions and conflicts that from these early periods impeded the oppressed classes from confronting the present and the future equitably. Not a second was wasted in using archaeology as a weapon to vindicate and liberate the oppressed Latin American classes (Lumbreras, 1974). This project, for good or ill, has not received acceptance as expected.

Before the merging of Latin American social archaeology, other forms



of dealing with the past were important in the entire region. The American historical-cultural school, for example, experimented a great deal in Latin America (see Politis, 1995 and 2001 for the South American case). Other academic tendencies influenced the archaeological practices in the region as well, those that translated themselves in 'new' forms of dealing with our own pasts. If in the beginning of the 1960s the token was the search for answers to the Latin American crises from a Marxist perspective, the ways to diminish (and cover) the oppressed peoples and the conditions of the national cultures of the region were 'new'.

Starting from the influence of Marxism, of other theoretical/philosophical currents (evidently imported from Europe and the USA) and of the production of knowledge generated in the Latin American academy, the following questions arise: How are forms of doing and understanding the (ancient) history of Latin America produced and generated? Where are these histories produced and what elements make the production and generation of knowledge possible? I do not pretend to enter into concrete examples here, because I understand that each Latin American geopolitical entity has generated its own forms of knowledge production. In fact, we must remember that each geopolitical region features internally different socio-cultural matrices. Dynamic processes of interaction and historical transfiguration have produced both national entities (social, political and religious) and regional ones that often manifest dissimilar ways of acting and understanding the world. Thus, in general terms, the production of 'official' knowledge derived from the archaeological and historical practices can have similar roots in the region owing to the place where it is usually generated (e.g. the academy) and to the external theoretical influences that are disseminated at the interior of universities and other sectors of society. On the one hand, the Latin American academy searches, analyzes and produces knowledge as in other academies. Theories and methods generated in the centers are re-created, but also hybrids and reinterpretations are based on imported elements; further new foci and theoretical postures are created, which are totally Latin American. On the other hand, and taken here as an example, the Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous peoples of Chiapas, Mexico, have started to write their own histories, without intellectual pretensions, with their own way of seeing the world, reinterpreting that which they find pertinent, to reconsider national, regional and local events. They nowadays narrate their history by means of drawings and texts (Page et al., 1997); they have always talked and constructed their own history by means of oral and artistic traditions. Many actual indigenous communities always had a voice and among themselves and to others recounted their multiple histories. The problem appears to have been perhaps that we never wanted to listen to them or we were never interested in the form in which they spoke to us. Communication incompetence, one might say.

No cultural homogeneity exists inside the Latin American national borders in spite of the official discourses of national effervescence (Bartolomé, 1998). Neither do they exist in the current academic situation with identical forms of being and thinking. I am not suggesting that the 'pure' cultural matrices themselves have been preserved in Latin America; in fact, 'pure' ethnicity has never existed. Rather, these processes of interaction between several differentiable matrices have generated and continue to generate new forms of assigning value and meaning of those elements that they consider important. This way, although universities and Latin American academies have been strongly influenced by foreign intellectual processes, elements are generated and valued that they consider transcendental in certain moments and for different socio-cultural-political or individual motivations. The Latin American Marxist focus, for example, varies from one nation to another, among social sectors, on a regional scale at the interior of a republic and even on a local scale inside the municipality.

I can only argue here that the theories, the methods and the diverse forms of generating and transmitting knowledge from the archaeological or other social science points of view can be feasible in any context, but always maintaining the proposed perspective, so that each socio-cultural group learns, rejects, or reinterprets what is useful to develop or perform as varied actions in their own setting. As many have already emphasized, there are multiple ways of reading and understanding the same social facts, the same text. Finally, intellectuals and other individuals or social groups of Latin America produce knowledge from their own worlds, in contrast to the many prominent postcolonial theorists who produce theories principally in Europe and the USA.⁵ This situation makes a relationship possible between that which is lived in the flesh and that which is written. In that sense, I believe that it is not necessary to give voice to the alterns of Latin America.⁶ We have always had a voice, had a literature, but also we have constructed our own channels of interaction, which are different and in a minor predominant scale in relation to those at the centers, but adjacent in one or another way to our distinct experiences as Latin Americans.

I consider, therefore, that rather than trying to characterize from the academic centers the 'global' context in which today's world archaeology develops and generates (i.e. if archaeology is produced in a global/colonial, postcolonial, neocolonial, intracolonyal setting, etc.), we must share mutually from our respective spaces (with our respective languages) the divergent forms in which we live, act, think in the world and practice archaeology. On the contrary, if one accepts that we actually live in a post-colonial world, or that one must take a postcolonial position in one's works, one would have to admit that one is unfamiliar with that which has been produced for the eccentric academics and social groups of Latin America; we must recognize that even today with so many interpretations about the framework and the situation of the current archaeology, we unconsciously



or consciously legitimate the new faces of a supramodern 'globalizing' colonialism.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Gillian E. Newell (University of Arizona) and Carlos Melo (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Colegio de México) for their suggestions and for the English translation of this reflective paper. I would like to thank Reniel Rodríguez Ramos (University of Gainesville) too, for his helpful observations on this final version, and the four anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions. Finally, special thanks go to Simone Thomas Giraud (Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia) and to Tania Hélène Campos Thomas, César Villalobos Acosta, Dr Andrés Medina and Dr Yoko Sugiura Yamamoto (from the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, UNAM) for the thoughtful discussions they constantly develop about the social-cultural world that is always beyond our disciplinary practices.

Notes

- 1 The concepts centric and eccentric are used here only to place in perspective the singularities 'x' produced in some countries with respect to others. Center and periphery (i.e. the eccentric) must not be understood as opposites, rather as complements given the dynamic interactions between both analytic categories that permit the existence of each one. The center is the center and the eccentric is outside the center, at least physically speaking, although with or without influences of the former. The categories of theories and eccentric anthropologies have been suggested previously by Andrés Medina (1996) in the context of Mexican anthropology.
- 2 I use the term oligarchic and oligarchy to refer generally to a socially, politically and economically privileged sector in different nation-states or Latin American republics. I do not wish to say that these social sectors are homogeneous, as new and at times contradictory political and ideological postures may emerge.
- 3 With epi-modern, I refer here to a temporal context and not to an underlying condition of the social environment behind the political, social and economical actors of the distinct cultural matrices in whatever geographical position. In this sense, epi-modern is used to characterize a period in which the political, economic and social changes between the 1940s and 1980s affected in some way Latin America in general and some countries in particular. Examples of certain events and their effects in the region are the creation of the United Nations (UN), the colonial re-definition of Puerto Rico, the Cuban revolution, the Latin American student protests and the emergence of militarist and dictatorial states aided by the USA.
- 4 As a point of interest, it is clear what is actually happening in relation to other difficult territories: the hegemony of the USA has been threatened by the majority of the world civil society and by the majority of nations affiliated to the UN. Without the power to maintain their typical hegemonic status, the US

government produces a new socio-political discourse in which their current lonely political actions are justified in terms of an eternal ideological paradox: the battle between Good and Evil!

- 5 The 'United States' has, in historical terms, been a postcolonial entity since the eighteenth century. Ironically, now an indistinct dichotomy exists (i.e. a postcolonial – procolonial condition) if we see, for example, the political dilemma between Puerto Rico and the USA. In the case of some modern European nations, there will be similar historical contradictions, but at the interior of countries like Spain (e.g. the Basque conflict), Great Britain (e.g. the Irish dilemma) and so on. Why identify postcolonial theories with the center(s)? Basically, because a great part of the postcolonial theories produced by South Asian and African intellectuals (for example) have been produced from the recognized universities located in the big theoretical production centers. Those reputable writers (Appadurai, Bhabha, Chatterjee, Mbembe, Spivak, etc.) need sometimes to enunciate their critiques and contributions essentially with the support of the center's universities apparatus (e.g. globally prominent academic publishing companies).
- 6 For me, the concepts center and periphery continue to be meaningful, given the immense quantity of socially, economically, politically and culturally divergent elements that characterize both categories.

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