

# Toward a political historical archaeology: a sight from Colombia

## Abstract

In this paper I want to offer some kind of ideas about what it's possible to call historical political archaeology. In its outline, this form of archaeology pretends apply archaeological methods and theories to understand the impact of colonialism in the configuration of the world's present.

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## Introduction

If we look inside the history of archaeology in Colombia, it's wide clear that the beginnings of the discipline were attached to the development of colonial expansions of United States. In the beginning of the XX century, a lot of archaeologist came from United States in order to gather antiquities from pre-Columbian cultures. Through this process many pre-Columbian collections were made in the most important museums of New York and Boston. This archaeological policy had been established by many American archaeologists that thought that Latin America and its treasures could bring them the prestige that Egypt and Greek brought to Europeans. For this reason, the main worry in archaeological agenda of those times was to find monumental traces of the tribes that were described by Spaniards in the colonial documentation. Even in the 1960 decade an American archaeologist had written that in Colombia the colonial archaeological record was simply denied from the field research. The American archaeologist had not written exaggerations. Some archaeologists who did researchers in the Andean area and in the Caribbean region of Colombia described colonial pottery as "miscellaneous" and in some cases threw away the historical record to the trash.

The academic landscape seemed to change in the decade of 1990 about the practice of historical archaeology in Colombia. As a result of neoliberal reforms many capitals arrived to Colombia and many companies needed buildings for its offices. Given this situation many historical downtowns were intervened. The buildings were reconditionated and local authorities required concepts from experts as archaeologist in order to given the permissions. With the new political constitution of 1991, and by the force of global pressures, that decade saw to emerge a lot of reglamentations about cultural heritage. The practice of historical archaeology in Colombia, without mistake, has been marked by the pressure of the market forces a not a result of a scientific agenda. Despite this, there are some great exceptions, as the work of Monika Therrien and her team of archaeologist that have been exploring covered faces of Colombian past through the analysis of colonial archaeological record different from central buildings or structures in historical downtowns.

In particular, my own research it has been oriented to understand the ways as, in the colonial times, landscapes, inside and outside house, materialized social distinctions based on gender, age, kinship, but example that allow a kind of recognition of the social structure of

the society in material terms. Through this materiality was possible to the colonial subjects to see the racial differentiations as real, as something that has colors, dimensions, taste and smell. The colonial elite, in the main parts of the colonial lands, made buildings with two floors that had some kind of functions. In the first floor it's supposed to be inhabited by servitude; the second floor were used by the family. As the kitchen were in the first floor, there was a lot of interaction between this two social classes, as related to feed and other daily topics as the concepts of health and disease. In many books of the XIX century and even in the colonial literature, this interaction between the slaves and master and servants and masters shows how the colonial social relationships were determined by some kind of areas that no were exclusively under the control of established power. Other social spheres as the academic landscape were used only for the elite and many criollos were excluded to access to University. The indigenous were prohibited to access to the universities and in the XVIII century all their diets were intervened through the evangelization process. As colonial power built these spaces for the elite, a lot of effort was made in order to make these spaces worthy. In the case of the churches, those were built with ornamentation brought from Europe. Crystals, plates, glasses, needles, lace, buttons and porcelain, all were objects that were imported for the religious orders of Dominicans, Capuchins, Franciscans and Jesuits. Majolica plates and bowls, porcelain from china, Dutch crockery, Spaniards amphoras, all some elements that could be find in the archaeological excavation inside a colonial house or building in a colonial downtown in Colombia. In addition, it's possible to find local pottery that shows that the alimentation process was linked to the local gastronomical traditions despite those was intervened.

Inside the archaeological record of the indigenous village, off course, it's possible to find only local pottery. One thing that it's amazing of the colonial material culture is that local pottery from indigenous tradition was de common denominator both, in the elite's houses, and in the Indians villages. All this characteristics of the archaeological colonial record show us that space and material culture played an important role in the configuration process of to construct a mestizo identity that was neither indigenous, less African and a lot from Europeans. This process configures what Michel Foucault called properly a biopolitics. A handful of principles that regulates, configure the space, the time and the body. In sum, a historical archaeology that search deep into the logics of the society and the forces that configure

history, should consider how space, time and body allow some kind of cultural conscious that permits the self recognitions of us as subjects and the same time produce in ourselves a limitation in the perception of the world.

Related with the arguments presented above it's clear that historical archaeology, as a field of the archaeology, has been an important tool to understand historic periods, not only from the point of view of the history based on written documents, but as a way to understand the past from de point of view of the archaeological record. However, historical archaeology it's not limited to this function; it's possible for the historical archaeology to be some kind of tool that could bring us new sights of the past. But example, historical archaeological studies could help us to understand how modernity not was just a philosophical o political discourse but a political way to construct spaces, shape time and bodies. In Colombia, but example, indigenous people was recognized as an integral part of the Colombian identity. This recognition was given in the political constitution of Colombia in 1991. There were many constitutional articles that emphasize the central role of indigenous into de Colombian's development. Despite that, the recognition it's only in the text and in the practice today already exists material mechanisms that exclude indigenous people from equalitarian conditions. In regions with a lot of indigenous population, and despite the constitutional background, native languages aren't recognized by the State as their first language; Spanish is considered the official language of the country so indigenous people has to know very well Spanish in order to access to the university. As well, in many regions with indigenous people there aren't public policies that help to implant local ventures that increase local levels of life and guarantee access to education, healthcare and cultural development.

Currently the State and its agents see indigenous people as a problem instead as a solution. For the landowners the claims of the indigenous about their land are untimely and for that reason they bet in the elections period for right wing parties that doesn't allow a rural reform that redistribute the land. This is a problematic topic if we take into account that Colombia is one of the most inequality countries around the world. The inequality begins in the land tenure because many of the cruel conflicts in the second part of the XX century were turning around the policy of the land dispossession to peasant, afro-Colombians and indigenous communities. The archaeologists have a lot to say about these issues. Their methodologies, their strategies of data recovering, their uses of spatial and temporal information could help many communities in their work of produce an archive about the ways through which land was taken by making divisions with material things as fences, walls, paths, etc. It's widely known in archaeology that centralization is one of the conditions of social complexity, so archaeologists could understand, by their methods and theories, that the land tenure in hands of landowners implied some kind of centralization that it's possible to see in the emergence of bureaucratic tools as norms about land surveying. So in this way it's possible to understand the history, at least, of Latin America as a process of land robbery to non modern people, and spatial centralization that it's evident in the historical downtowns with its enormous building that serve as space of the law, the bureaucracy, and the religion.

From a certain point of view, an archaeology that is part of a political project of political equality should have an agenda based on the possibility of show how certain kind of people were located on the base of a pyramid of inequality. The commerce of slaves from Africa to America, the slavery in the cotton, tobacco and sugar cane plantation in the Caribbean, that robbery of the land by the project of banana production, all are elements that put these regions in a level of

subordination that is presented in the literature and in the film industry as innate values that are responsible of the underdevelopment. But not, all these people were abruptly separated from their lands and relatives and used as merchandise. In a proper way Karl Marx said that the wealthy of many England cities were possible by the primogenital capital accumulation through the appropriation of the wealth that the slaves produce with their work. Following Marx's description of the economic political history it's possible to argue that wealth was produced by subordinate social classes and appropriate by familiar clans that with the time were transform into anonimal corporations.

But a big amount of archaeologist is far away of to be criticism. This political tendency it's possible to appreciate in the current debate about San José Galleon, an ancient Spaniard ship that was sunken in the Cartagena de India coasts by British ships in the XVIII century. This shipwreck has awakened an unusual interest because this *pecto* has a lot of wealthy in rocks and metal precious. In the public sphere, many archaeologists have showed their worries about the way how Colombian government pretends to allow treasure hunters to intervene the San José's remains. The debate has become in a juridical dispute in which some archaeologist has present allegations against the authorities in charge of cultural management resources. The debate has been merely technical. Who can recover the shipwreck? There are the scientific conditions in the country in order recover the San José or we need international support? Everyone, however, has forgotten that the wealth inside the San José is part of the tribute that the Crown required to many indigenous communities from all the Andes. Evidently the ship's cargo is archaeological remains that shows the way how Europe, through its military advantage, subordinated others in an unacceptable manner. In such a way the discussions that are missing about San José's debate is who is the owner of all the gold and silver that is in the bottom of the sea. Neither the governmental authorities nor the archaeological associations have opened the debate about the allegations that were made by some indigenous leaders from Ecuador and Bolivia about their property of the San José's wealth.

But no only in terms of the analysis of the colonial times it's possible to use the historical archaeology as a political tool. In the contemporary world archaeology as a discipline in charge of understand spatial relationships, demographic movements, and use of the space, could show us how in the contemporary world exclude people make their settlements with urban and industrial trash. In the city of Santa Marta, in northern of Colombia where I live, one of each two persons belongs to the communities' victims of paramilitaries. Many of these populations made its neighborhoods in the hills that surround the city. To get access to the top of the hills many persons built stairs with car tires that were recycled for this use. Even the walls of many houses were made with rest of industrial cans. As those parts of the city doesn't have water or electricity, less drains, all those citizens that inhabit the surrounding hills of Santa Marta has produce imaginative form to access electricity and potable water. This implies to learn how to make connections to the potable water system and to the electrical systems. The result of this is a kind of posapocalyptic landscape that is not inhabited by zombies but men and women that, despite their inhuman conditions wants to recreate an urban civil life without any support of the State. If we do an analysis of this situation we are in some way allow affirming that these societies represent forms of social configuration outside the government planning; in a certain way those are post-state societies or post-state forms of citizenship. It's important to emphasize that this contemporary landscapes aren't yet describing by archaeological methods and less has begun a discussion about what this landscapes can tell us about the society that we are.

There are, at least, three elements that could be used as a result of what a historical archaeological agenda oriented by a political vision can show us. The first element is that archaeology has a lot to say about how the world of the inequality is, not from the point of view of the discourse but a material point of view. Archaeologists are in debt with society because there are few descriptions about how people gather their food from cans of thrash or how they wander in the city because their household doesn't exist anymore. If there are so many populations living under inhuman conditions, what kind of society we are? Archaeology could show us this measure. The second element is that archaeology needs to build an agenda that help to understand to the society what modernity is and which is its relationship with colonialism. So, we don't need an archaeology that shows the past but an archaeology that help us to understand why the world is in

the way it is in the present. Finally, archaeology has a lot to say about important philosophical questions as evolution and the human development. The discourse that marks modernity as the final link in history is untenable. Humanity needs new discourses to pass from the Anthropogenic to a new era of ecological responsibility. This is what many call the ecozoic. Sooner or later we should make this turn to this political agenda because of that depends the humankind future.

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### Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.