

Ethical Archaeologies: The Politics of Social Justice 1

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# Ethics and Archaeological Praxis



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## Chapter 4

# Against Global Archaeological Ethics: Critical Views from South America

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Archaeology as a discipline has been largely formed as a nation-state's biopolitical device generating narratives and actions of control, management, classification, and ordering of people and objects, pasts and presents, their stories, relationships, and spaces from an Anglo-Saxon modern way of knowledge production. In this sense, hegemonic archaeology bears its colonial imprint and exhibits the principles of universality, objectivity, and rationalism that characterize modern Western science. Thus, archaeology has developed and expanded in close partnership with capitalism, generating a true industry and mercantilization of the past (Hamilakis 2007). Simultaneously, an attempt to globalize the vision of Western archeology and to install a monoculture of knowledge has been made in order to disqualify others' worldviews, reducing and contracting the present as well as eliminating those conceptions that do not fit with the scientific canons and principles (Santos 2006). The ideal of knowledge in modernity, also characterized by its objectivity and universality, is predefined as disembodied and ahistorical and by its atopy, namely by its possibility to ignore and transcend subjects, times, and places. This is linked to the ontological rupture between body and mind, the initial separation of the modern Western tradition, which places human beings in an external and instrumental position in relation to their environment (Lander 2003). This reinforces abstraction and detachment as main heuristics elements in the construction of knowledge. According to Maldonado-Torres, given the priority to scientific knowledge as the only model of knowing, the cognitive abilities in racialized subjects (the "other" colonized) are simultaneously denied, which provides the basis for their ontological negation and epistemic disqualification (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

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In its disciplinary history, much of South American archaeology has developed behind closed doors privileging a construction of knowledge from a modern “us,” Western and white, based on evaluative neutrality, distancing, and objectivity. One could argue that this way of looking at archaeological practice in much of South America is a result of the theoretical and methodological influences of the historical-cultural school and processualism that predominated and still influence in this part of the Americas (Politis 2003). But not all is homogeneous in South American archaeology. Some complexities and differences characterize the practice of the discipline at continental level and even within each country. In the current scenario, the politics of knowledge in archaeology have begun to be subverted and thought from other horizons. Thus, it is possible to propose the timid, embryonic emergence of actions of reformulation or questioning of the modern Eurocentric colonial matrix of knowledge production and the beginnings of localized forms of considering the practice and generation of knowledge. Now, some of these initiatives have been framed within the multicultural and intercultural logic of knowledge production and management and others have begun different processes of reconfiguration of the archaeological practice from localized and multivocal areas (Gnecco and Ayala 2010; Jofré 2010; Haber 2009, 2011).

In general, discussions on the ethical dimensions of archaeological practice have been activated indirectly through the ideas of multivocality, multiculturalism, and related issues such as repatriation, cultural resource management, impact assessments, mercantilization of knowledge, and so on and so forth. Thus, demands concerning participation and involvement of the indigenous peoples in archaeological research projects (understood in multiple ways) are now being presented by local groups, such as indigenous and peasants, in specialized congresses. Conflicts arising from territorial dispossession, encroachments of sacred places, destruction of sites, and claims for restitution of human remains and associated materials are being dealt with. However, although these minority trends are emerging, they have failed to overcome the multicultural rhetoric and thus continue reproducing conditions of epistemic control, distance, and inhibition of politics. Therefore, the uncritical applications of the Anglo-Saxon idea of “multivocality” imply the consideration that the “academics” should provide a wider vision among many possibilities and, in most cases, adopt a stance of self-suspension of judgment so as not to confront or contradict the voices of the “other”. The criterion of allowing it to flow, the idea that we are all equal, and the absence of criticisms implicit in the notion of “multivocality” approach it to the multicultural ideal declared as a constitutive principle of the modern nation-state (Gnecco 1999; González-Ruibal 2010). Advocates of “multivocality” reproduce the attitude of “*époche*” of the Greek skeptics, namely suspension of judgment, neither denying nor affirming anything, thus activating the “*ataraxia*” or imperturbability and indifference to everything (Curtoni and Chaparro 2008). Hence, the inhibition of political questioning and the lack of criticism to the power structures (e.g., multinational companies, agricultural pools, hegemonic science, editorials, political systems, and so on), and the possibilities of contradicting the narratives of the “others,” tend to neutralize the transformative potentiality and subversion inherent in the situated praxis committed with local

interests (Curtoni and Paredes Mosquera 2012). By contrast, archaeologists that support the idea of “multivocality” have been concerned with the integration of different viewpoints in disagreement proposing a reflexive and symmetrical dialogue but taking as reference the disciplinary standards and practice forms of archaeological ethic committed with global heritage (Silberman 1995; Hodder 1999; Webmoor 2005). Consequently, some have argued that engagement and participation of local communities revolve around their visits to the archaeological sites, for some interventions in academic events and for partial control in the steps of the research (Marshall 2002; McNiven and Russell 2005). At this point, it is appropriate to question the usefulness of the concept of “multivocality” or rather, who benefits from it. Undoubtedly, these stances reproduce disciplinary power relations which tend to neutralize the implications of others’ voices and their interests, subjecting and controlling them under structures of academic power-knowledge, predefined and globalized.

Also, the formal adoption in different South American countries of codes of ethics that seek to regulate the practice of archaeology reflects, in some way, the neo-colonial global logic that characterizes modern scientific production. That is the idea of the professionalized individual, apolitical and constrained by disciplinary practices and subjected to conditions of productivity, efficiency, and rationality. In most South American countries, there have been reflections over the ethical turn occurred in the 1990s in the Anglo-Saxon hegemonic archaeology that displaced the concerns about the political issues and minority rights characteristic of the 1980s towards ethical issues related to the regulation of the professional practice and global heritage (Hamilakis 2007). In that turn, in South America a scientific archaeological ethic could emerge primarily concerned with defining the professional performance in the light of scientific standards and rules. In most of the codes of ethics of the South American countries the concerns have revolved around codifying and regulating archaeological practices, establishing duties and obligations in relation to the profession, to the archaeological heritage, with colleagues, with citizenship, with publishing, and with local communities. In this sense, encoding archaeological practices through codes of ethics has contributed to deepening scientific internalization given that disciplinary criteria of rigor and professionalism were the most developed. By contrast, the social and political interests of local communities (e.g., indigenous, rural) are not enough contemplated in the codes of ethics, having just statements of intention such as promoting positive interactions and respect to their concerns, customs, beliefs, and values. Neither are specifics criterions’ serving as guidance for professional action in conflicting situations or encroachments on the rights of local people founds in ethical codes (Endere and Ayala 2011). For instance, in recent decades and in various South American countries, the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the brutal deforestation of native forests, the usurpation and violent occupation of large areas previously considered marginal and unproductive land due to the action of agricultural consortia, mining, and the development of tourism have been activated (Tortorolo 2005). These situations generated the dispossession and violent expulsion of indigenous groups and peasants who had occupied these ancestral lands for generations. The sale, of questionable legality, of



thousands of state hectares to private hands and the absolute commodification of land, its products, and people, implies an inexorable process of dehumanization and destruction of landscapes, identities, and human lives. The complicity of the state or its inefficiency and, in some cases, its absolute absence contribute to the lack of commitment and the demarcation of responsibilities that legally belong to it.

All these processes and phenomena are not only negatively impacting in the livelihood of peasants and indigenous peoples from diverse regions, but they are also putting into question the role of science and professionals (specially considering the claims to participate carried out by indigenous people involving their interests and the deterioration of the "landscapes" in areas of archaeological research). This situation expresses, in general, some tension within the social sciences between those who postulate a necessary involvement with the actors and daily problems and those who maintain academic distance. Thus, archaeology as a modern discipline and its practice always carry its inherently political mark and reflect in very different ways and intensities the complex and dynamic relationships between interest groups, archaeologists, and sociopolitical contexts. In this sense, one might ask how the continuous claims made by indigenous groups and the daily problems that rural communities face are academically considered. Also, is it possible to find complete disengagement, disinterest, and imperturbability (ataraxia) in these problems daily faced by the actors living in landscapes chosen as research areas? Is it possible to neglect the direct claims of interest groups (whether indigenous or peasant) in relation to their land and/or in relation to their need to participate in research programs? In South America, the cases of participation and involvement of local nonacademic actors (indigenous and/or peasants) in archaeological projects have not been very numerous in the history of the discipline. In this decade it seems that this trend is reversing due mainly to the increased presence of archaeologists concerned about their relationships with the communities of reference. However, considering the long-term projects, the proposed opening of archaeology, and the effective participation of other stakeholders in research, it seems to be the exception rather than the rule (Gnecco and Ayala 2010, Jofré 2010).

In the present context, it is possible to suggest that in South American archaeology, at a discursive level, a multicultural ethic prevails that promotes disciplinary openness, participation, and involvement of local actors; encourages multivocal developments; and enables discussion and returning of human remains and associated materials. In practice and represented through the codification of professional conduct, the scientific ethic emerges as part of the multicultural rhetoric that not only reproduces relations of knowledge-power but simultaneously inhibits any assessment and emission of judgment by the archaeologist and thereby overrides any political project of social critique and emancipation. It is also reflected by the maintenance of the narrative control (oral, textual, and enunciative locus) of archaeology, which supports the belief in the preeminence of archaeological discourse as a product of scientific knowledge above other different ways of doing and knowing such as the so-called epistemologies "others." Furthermore, one consequence of the above is the limited presence and representation of nonacademic voices, including indigenous and peasants, both in archaeological textuality and in specific areas of

discussion (e.g., conferences, workshops, and meetings). The scientific ethic encodes the behavior of archaeologists in order to guide and to evaluate their performance in relation to the profession and to establish one's responsibility of ensuring the conservation and protection of the archaeological heritage. It further states that scientific studies of the past are of interest to all mankind, regardless of nationality, origin, and religion, thereby establishing the right and legitimacy to carry out research elsewhere. Thus, scientific ethics constitutes an expression of multiculturalism; on the one hand, it declares the obligation of scientists to obtain the free and informed consent from indigenous peoples, and their rights to participate in research projects and to decide on the management of heritage; and on the other, it defines the role of the professional under scientific standards that predefine evaluative neutrality, distance, and exclusivity. Scientific ethics contributes to deepen the disciplinary self and hence excludes professionals from their social context, exempting them from the vicissitudes and external concerns which are not part of the academic agenda. Thus, scientific ethics reflects the sense of coloniality of archaeology as discipline which leads to different strategies of knowledge construction such as the separation between fact and value, the "denial of contemporaneity," the primacy of the object, the objectification, and externality in the definition of its subject of study. These aspects are consequences of the configuration and development of archaeology under the principles and canons of the modern Western science. Therefore, archaeology as discipline can be characterized as part of a technology of power or hegemonic biopolitical device whose narratives construct and control histories, places, subjects, and their social relationships and materiality from a modern and Eurocentric way of knowledge production. The disciplinary structure of archaeology presupposes objectivity, universality, and disincorporated ways of knowing that tend to place human beings in an external and instrumental position with their surrounding. Furthermore, archaeology as a modern discipline defines its own standards of validation and legitimization that tends to regulate and structure the right ways of practice, prescribing in that process all the external views and meaningful opinions.

Thus, as far as we are not able to overcome the sense of coloniality of knowledge as the main model of science and the coloniality of archaeology, it will not be possible to generate knowledge "others" coproduced and sustained in ways of knowing which are located and plural. This involves promoting actions that tend towards decolonization of archaeology as a scientific discipline and contribute to "expand the present" (Santos 2006). In this context, there is no doubt that archaeology is politics and its disciplinary practices inscribe relations of power-knowledge both at micro- and macro-political levels. Similarly, dealing with ethics means dealing with politics; and therefore, the discussion on ethics cannot be conceived without referring to its political implications. That leads directly to the location of the political dimensions of ethics and their temporary space contextualization, revealing the contingent and situated nature of the political aspects. This position contradicts the idea of global archaeological ethics, which by definition disables the political and contributes to replace specific problems by abstract axioms. By contrast, this chapter proposes that the ethical discussions about archaeological practices must be considered from an ethics of relationships, which is basically sociopolitical, localized, and

positioned in line with the needs of the interest groups involved in investigations. Thinking about an ethics of relationships in its sociopolitical dimension means that the criteria of regulation of archaeological practice will be the emergent of an inter-relation horizon of interests activated by the involvement of local actors, popular knowledge, the community, and archaeologists. The ethics of relationships implies the acceptance that in sociopolitical relatedness there is no place for neutrality, since that engaging through praxis contributes to activate specific interests, conflicts, critical positions, differences, and negotiations. At this point it is clear that the situated relatedness does not mean that there should be symmetry and equality of conditions. On the contrary, the social encountering tends to activate the emergence of the valuations and interests of each actor and the possibilities of antagonisms. Such an ethics of relationships is dynamic, participative, changing, and subject to the problems and conflicts that arise, so it is contingent, open, and always susceptible to transformation and redefinition. Assuming a localized ethics of relationships generates implications related to academic decentralization; the denaturalization of canonical and disciplinary forms of knowledge; the staging of our own interests, scopes, and limitations; and the understanding of the historical nature of knowledge and the plurality of voices. Thus, the exchange of opinions and valuations contributes both to the encounter of knowledge and interests in common, encouraging the ethical discussions about situated archaeological practices from and with the difference and from alternative geo-chrono-political positions.

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