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VANISHED-PEOPLE; IDENTITIES IN A LIMBO

The relationship between Archaeology and Human Rights

*We were living spoils,
Speaking in silence,
crying in silence and looking for children without names,
without knowing their genders,
often without being certain that they had been born (Búsquedas: 15)*

San Vicente, Córdoba, Argentina

As is well known, Argentina had a military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. During this period, it became common that people with different ideas to the regime vanished. The families of all these people (today it is estimated that around 30 000 persons disappeared during the last dictatorship) never knew what really happened to them. It was obvious that they were murdered, but since the state never admitted that they had killed or imprisoned those persons, a category of citizens commonly referred to as *desaparecidos* was created.

Part of a generation disappeared (those who would have been around 50 years old today), either in the hands of the military or because the situation became impossible for them and they moved out from Argentina and migrated to other countries. One banal explanation the military gave during this period was that all these people were in Europe, studying, working or whatever.

After the dictatorship a commission was created to investigate the crimes that the military had perpetrated. This commission was called “Nunca Más” (Never Again), and they documented all the cases and made denouncements against the dictatorial regime.

In the collective mind of the population, it was clear that many of the *desaparecidos* had been buried in mass graves around the country. In the case of Córdoba, people who had been working at one of the city cemeteries in the seventies (San Vicente) remembered burials of NN (No Name) people under strange circumstances, such as without correct papers or during the night.

In 1996 a federal judge from the provincial court in Córdoba, Cristina Garzón, ordered the excavation of NN burials at San Vicente. The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) became involved in this work. The excavations at the cemetery have until now given identity to three persons who disappeared during the last dictatorship in Argentina. The re-encounter between the families of the disappeared persons and their beloved ones took place at the Museum of Anthropology, and the team of anthropologists has been working in the museum’s warehouse.

The Museum of Anthropology is part of the Faculty of Humanities and Arts at the University of Córdoba, and it has a display about the prehistory of the province Córdoba as well as part of the Prehistory and Ethnography of north-western Argentina. The museum also works intensively with the so-called “University Extension to the Community”.

Those excavations have involved me in different ways. As an archaeologist, the idea of working with contemporary issues, involved in the lives of living people, of identifying people who disappeared during the last dictatorship in Argentina, is something that has fascinated me. As a museum worker, the changed role of museums – the need to handle new and acute situations, the problem of representation of these painful social topics (or traumas) – also attracts me. And finally, as a South American living in Sweden, working with this article has signified coming back to events that I left behind when I chose archaeology almost 20 years ago.

Archaeology and the Current World

Commonly, archaeology has been defined as the study of past human cultures by analyzing the material remains (sites and artefacts) that people left behind. One of the common ideas about archaeology is that it is a science which deals with pre-history, with the remote past, with times before writing documents.

Since the 1960's this attitude has been slowly changing, and today archaeologists' work in different situations, even though in popular thinking, archaeology has nothing to do with the present world. For instance, Håkan Karlsson has expressed the view that archaeology is not necessarily only about pre-history but also about the close past. Material culture from XX century could then also be the field of archaeological research. He suggests out that there could be some kind of “Archaeology of the Present” (Karlsson 2005) which could be about; abandoned factories, remains of summer cottages, roads, military vestiges, etc. (Schofield; Buchli and Lucas 2001).

In recent decennia, archaeology has accordingly become more concentrated on the study and interpretation of material culture. Archaeologists have been working with questions not only about the past but also about the behaviour of humans in relation to material objects (consumer society, production of garbage, etc). This definition of archaeology does not make any distinction about periodization, and archaeology can reach the contemporary past. As Miller and Tilley pointed out in 1996, the study of material culture can be defined as the investigation of relations between people and things irrespective of time and space (Miller and Tilley 1996:5). Today, there are many archaeologists who define archaeology not only as a methodology (digging) bound to a period of time, but as the interaction between material culture and human behaviour, regardless of time or space.

Forensic Archaeology

Clyde Snow, the anthropologist, ho is considered one of the most important forensic archaeolo-

gists today, once stated that there is a brief but very useful and informative biography of an individual contained within the skeleton, if you know how to read it (*Current Biography* 52).

Snow brought forensic archaeology to international attention with his work on the disappeared people in Argentina. He worked in Argentina during the 1980's, with disappeared people found in anonymous graves in various places over Argentina. He became also key witness in the trial against the military power. His work brought to the surface the reality of the country during the years of dictatorship. The exhumation of bodies also brought the question to the attention of society and the exhumed bodies needed to be identified. He also trained a group of young Argentinean archaeologists which became an internationally well known team (EAAF).

Sardonically, one of the first and major uses of archaeology for forensic inquiry to establish human rights abuse was undertaken by the Nazis in an effort to demonstrate that the Soviet Union had carried out enormous violations of the laws of war against soldiers and allies from Poland. 15 000 Polish soldiers disappeared during the Second War World. They were killed by the Soviet army, but when faced by questions about where these men were, Stalin answered that they were deserters which had escaped to Manchuria. The second explanation was that Germans had killed them.

Goebbels organized the largest human rights inquiry ever, an investigation that had its roots in nineteenth century German forensic medicine and one whose basic form would echo into the present. International experts were summoned, the Red Cross was called in to witness, field laboratories were set up, bodies were exhumed, locals interviewed, photographs taken, clothes and other material from the mass graves carefully scrutinized, mouldering identity cards removed and matched to lists of the missing, the narrative of death was built up detail by detail (Laqueur: 82)

All this was done to prove that the Soviet Union was responsible.

It is obvious that archaeological methods can be used to excavate and examine the "crime scene" but can archaeological theories also be used? The idea that archaeology is not only the study of the remote past, and that it can contribute to understand the Present, can make archaeology an important tool in Human Rights cases. Graves-Brown (2000) argues for an archaeological practice and theory serving as a critique of the world we ourselves have created. As Karlsson pointed out, contemporary archaeology and its activities in the field is an excellent platform for democratic forms of community archaeology and for a situation where ordinary people participate in the creation of their own cultural heritage, together with archaeologists/ heritage managers. Archaeology together with other disciplines, working with living memories in connection to material culture, can give voices to those silenced by society (Karlsson).

Or as the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) point out as one of their goals: that

archaeology (as a science and in the forensic process), can contribute to the historical reconstruction of the recent past, often distorted or hidden by the parties or government institutions which are themselves implicated in the crimes under investigations.

The Social Role of Museums

There is almost a consensus among museum personnel that museums must be a place for memory, a place for understanding and analysis, a place for sharing knowledge and experiences.

For a long time the museum staff (curators, conservators, designers, etc) have had the floor, the power of interpretation and presentation. The institutions were mostly elitist and rigid, without any dialogue with the original owners of the collections or the communities in the surroundings.

In recent years, the relationship between museums and communities, minorities and aboriginal communities has brought new questions and new ways of communication into focus. Words like participation and inclusion have become part of museum discourse, but the question is how deep this discourse is in reality (Côté; Mullen Kreamer: 367). There is a certain arrogance in museums as institutions, and the liaison between them, as institutions, and the communities is often not easy. Breaking down the barrier between institutions and “the others” is also not easy, and to open national institutions to a political debate without controlling voices is a complicated issue.

These days, museums are probably acquiring a new significance; they can be part of a wider debate and go deeper into the relationships between the society they represent and the communities living in this society. As Lumley (Lumley: 2) pointed out, museums can map out geographies, experiences and values, especially controversial tasks which become a socially potent metaphor.

Identities, memories and representation

Recovering the remains is not enough to erase the pain of the past, but it is a huge part of healing and crucial form of reparations. (Mimi Doretti)

In the Argentinean case, it can be observed that 30 years after the dictatorship collapsed many injuries and sores are still open. Searching for truth and what happened with people, and in many cases their children, who disappeared during the dictatorship, is still a matter for society. A gleam of this situation can be observed in the discussion about the future of the ESMA (ESMA, *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*).

In 2004 Ernesto Kirchner, the current president of Argentina, removed the possessions of the School of Marine Engineering from the Navy. During the dictatorship ESMA, had been one of the largest concentration camps, or better expressed a killing camp, because very few people survived ESMA. When Kirchner expropriated the area of ESMA, the principal idea was to make a place for memory, a museum, a Memory Museum.

Since the expropriation, many voices came up, the voices of the relatives of the people who

died or disappeared in ESMA, the few voices of those who survived, the voice of children who are trying to find their parents and relatives, the voice of the society in general, the government and so on. The debate has been very widespread and general, and this debate may very well be a symptom of a healthy society. The debate has been a healthy way to clear the trauma, to have a voice, to be a social actor.

Many people are for a museum and many are against the idea of a museum in the area of ESMA. In *Página 12* (an Argentinean newspaper) from the 26 March 2006 (30 years anniversary of the beginning of the last dictatorship) Roxana Sandá wrote: “In no way can this place be considered a ‘museum’. This place must exist as a document of the most recent history, a text to read and to decipher as a clear and embarrassing expression of a system. The word ‘museum’ would return it to the past, neutralizing it. The word museum would archive those who went through this place, who disappeared, died or survived. What they suffered here cannot be filed because to archive it is to push back and cover political contradictions that still, and for a long time to come, will have to pierce our society with pain.”

Other voices like Lila Pastoriza de Roisinblit, from Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo wants ESMA to become a place for testimony of what happened; her daughter was kidnapped when she was in her 8th month of pregnancy. Oscar Terán pointed out that a museum of memory is a desirable objective, but it must also be a place for allowing us to debate why we need to remember, what we need to remember, for how long and how. For the psychoanalyst Silvia Bleichman, it is a paradox that horror can become a museum, to make ESMA into a museum does not help us to remember but in some ways it help us to forget.

The museum – memory place – project is growing and there is a web-site posted by the Argentinean government, where society can give ideas to the project. It is a living process with many advances and doubts, the creation of a museum raises many disjunctives, which version of history will be chosen to be shown? Who is going to make those decisions? The state? The victims? The survivors? The relatives? The intellectuals? How can horror be represented, can it be an aesthetic experience?

The representation of Horror

There are many examples around the world of museums and memorial places where horror has been presented and discussed, and where horror and human relations have been explored, not only “scientifically” but also with subjectivity and a multiplicity of voices. In societies where trauma is still an open question, where the past has been isolated, obscured and sequestered from those to whom it belongs, it is important to update and debate the old institutions, which represent the powerful and the elite and have nothing to do with the mosaic of ideas, opinions and values of the community.

Reading Argentinean newspapers from recent years, an interesting viewpoint about the up-

coming memory museum at ESMA has been the opinions of the survivors, sometimes opposed to the views of the relatives of the victims. The relatives have been interested in displaying what happened in ESMA, showing that their relatives are victims of a system. Those who survived ESMA do not want to be exhibited as victims, they argue that this is a way to become a victim twice (first when they were captured and tortured, and secondly when they are presented again as victims). To exemplify this dilemma, I have been thinking about the photographs that we know from the end of the Second World War, when the allies came to the concentration camps, seeing mountains of famished, naked, tortured human bodies, the horror in those eyes, and the dirt of reality.

Another example of making exhibitions about the same period is given by the Foundation Topography of Terror in Berlin. In one of their exhibitions called “The House Prison at Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin. Terror and Resistance 1933–1945,” they have presented the people who were tortured and sometimes murdered at the Gestapo headquarters. They are presented not as victims but as individuals, in some cases in important moments of their life (weddings, having children, etc). In some manner, the victims have become empowered in the exhibition, it is some kind of revenge and reward to the people who died in that prison.

Of course, this discussion is not easy, and almost certainly there is not a simple answer, but the idea of empowering the victims, to give them back a strong voice, to give back control to those that we do not know where they are, is an idea that attracts me.

Epilogue

I need to clarify that the goal of my presentation has not been to make a theoretical approach to the problem of human rights, representation or forensic archaeology. The purpose has been to share the pragmatic experience of working in a museum which deals with these questions, and how as an archaeologist I feel contradictions in daily work.

As the archaeologist Dario Olmo (EAAF) said during an interview with the Argentinean newspaper *Página 12* (September 08, 2007): “the remains told us plenty about the culture, the form in which bodies had been taken from the families, the structure of terror in the society”.

The question is if Archaeology can be a discipline that ignores the present; as Christopher Tilley pointed out in 1998 that “since the beginning of the twentieth century, a hundred million people have died in connection with 160 smaller and 16 larger wars. During thirty-five years since the end of World War II there have only been between twenty-six and thirty days without a war somewhere on the planet [...] Every day 20 000 people die because of lack of clean water... (Tilley: 306). In this context, archaeology can contribute to the understanding of the current world and can have a relevant position in contemporary political and social discussion.

There are many people around the world looking for their beloveds; they don't know where they are, if they are alive or dead. In the Argentinean case the process has been very long, thou-

sands of people have been wondering what happened and why it happened. The Argentinean example is one of many. Today, we can observe similar situations around the world. We are only spectators in many cases, and very few are involved in searching for the truth. Archaeology is trying to leave the privileged place and trying to make a difference involving itself in contemporary issues.

How does reality change for someone who has been searching for a beloved during 27 years, and finds her or him?

What feeds the hope of someone who does not find, but continues searching? Do we still have a place for emotion inside us?

*It is not news, not even a current subject, the search for identity neither in Argentina nor in the current world. Nevertheless, a team of anthropologists dedicates its capacity and work, dedicates itself to an almost impossible task: to find the place of a clandestine burial from the first years of the military dictatorship. To unearth those who were hidden there. To identify them. To give them back their names and family names. And to give back their remains to their relatives. They are looking for them. They are appearing (Documentary film: *El último confin*).*

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