''Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind'': Archaeology and Construction of Memory of Military Repression in South America (1960–1980)

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ABSTRACT

During the era of dictatorships in Latin America, opposition was controlled by different methods—such as exile, detention, and murder. Repressive devices were reinforced by means of limiting information to ordinary people. Written sources on clandestine repression are scarce and fragmentary. As a matter of fact, most documents on the subject were destroyed by military regimes in recent past. Therefore, archaeological analyses might help us to shed light on repressive mechanisms, recovering missing people's history and remains.

Résumé: Lors de la dictature en Amérique Latine, l'opposition était contrôlée par différents moyens dont l'exil, la détention et l'assassinat. Les moyens de répression étaient renforcés en limitant l'information destinée au grand public. Les sources imprimées de la répression clandestine sont rares et fragmentaires. En fait, la plupart des documents traitant du sujet ont été détruits par les régimes militaires. Ainsi, des analyses archéologiques peuvent nous aider à apporter de la lumière sur les mécanismes répressifs en accédant à l'histoire et aux restes des personnes disparues.

Resumen: Durante la era de las dictaduras en Latinoamérica, se utilizaban diversos métodospara controlar a la oposición, como el exilio, el encarcelamiento y el asesinato. Las medidas represivas se reforzaron limitando la información que llegabaa la gente corriente. Los documentos

escritos de que disponemos sobre la represión clandestina son muy escasos y fragmentarios, debido a que la mayoría de ellos fueron destruidos por los regímenes militares en el pasado reciente. Por este motivo, los estudios arqueológicos podrían ayudarnos a arrogar algo de luz sobre los mecanismos más representativos, y permitirnos recuperar la historia y los restos de las personas desaparecidas.

Introduction

Archaeology in America has traditionally focused on the study of "prehistoric" societies. How ancient people lived, what they ate, and what they produced are some of the topics generally addressed by specialized books. These subjects attract everybody's attention. Nevertheless, there is a gap between the exotic and distant past that archaeologists analyze, and the present world where we live. It sometimes seems they represent completely different realities.

Archaeology is connected to adventure, mystery, danger, and fantasy in the public imagination. Indiana Jones represents the social paradigm of the archaeologist. From this point of view, it is difficult to conceive archaeology as a discipline interested in analyzing our own society.

Luckily, some years ago archaeologists started questioning the nature of the knowledge they produced, as well as its consequences on people (Shanks and Tilley 1987; Hodder et al. 1995; Senatore and Zarankin 2002; Funari et al. 2005). From these perspective Archaeology become a useful political tools for transforming society (Shanks and Tilley 1987).

Taking these ideas into account, postmodern archaeology has opened new lines of inquiry regarding "marginal" groups "without history" (Wolf 1982). Slaves, women, children, gays, lesbians, workers, aboriginals, prisoners, elderly and black people are nowadays "officially accepted" subjects of study (Diaz Andreu and Sorensen 1998; Dowson 2000; Politis 2005). In this way, the critical discussion of past domination, exploitation, and resistance might lead archaeologists to present political action (Funari et al. 1999).

Archaeology has the potential to be "democratic", as it analyzes things everybody produces: "material remains" usually called "garbage" (Rathje and McCarthy 1982). As a consequence, it creates alternative stories, giving

voice to invisible, minority, and oppressed groups. In this context, archaeology gives researchers the opportunity to build a ''history of the people without history'' (Wolf 1982).

Archaeologists have recently explored the social consequences of military dictatorships in Latin America between the 1960s and 1980s (Belleli and Tobin 1985; EAAF 1992; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001; Funari and Zarankin 2006). Their investigations have usually discussed different aspects of this period, when critical ideas were destroyed and thousands of people were killed. Nowadays, archaeology seeks to understand the way repressive political mechanisms worked, finding the remains of *desaparecidos* (missing people) and constructing a material memory of state terrorism.

In this paper, we analyze the basis upon which an ''archaeology of repression'' is being shaped. We consider the search and recovery of *desaparecidos*' remains, as well as the excavations conducted at clandestine centres of detention (concentration camps designed by military dictatorships) the primary examples of this endeavour.

The Theoretical Setting: A Brief Overview

Archaeology on the world stage has changed a lot in the last decades. From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, Archaeology was linked to repression and exploitation. Archaeology started in the wake of imperial adventures leaded by colonial powers, and it was part of the imperialist conquest of the world. Bruce Trigger (1899) identified three political contexts for archaeological praxis: nationalism, colonialism and imperialism (Gamble 2001:2–4; 189–218). By the same reason, archaeology was taken most naturally as a military enterprise, so much so that for several decades the most distinguished archaeologists were military officials and/or spies. As stresses Bahrani (1998:160), ''archaeology and its practices provided a way of charting the past of colonised lands'' Exceptions—even though very important, as in the case of V. Gordon Childe (Manacorda 2004:153)—confirm the overall picture of a science in tune with an imperial project. There was a *mission civilisatrice* and even when archaeological interpretations emphasised pacification and the establishment of law and order, it was essential to stress dominant civilisation. Local elites' own sense of categorical superiority and the acceptance of the European cultural dominance was key to imperialist archaeology (Bernal 1994:126).

The traditional archaeological practice has undergone an *aggiornamento* since the 1960s, due to several reasons—not least as a result of social agitation. The civil rights movement in the United States, the struggle for colonial independence, the feminist movement, and the university student revolts

were part of a much wider trend towards social criticism, participation and diversity (Patterson 2001:103–134). The first contradictory move within the discipline was the so-called New Archaeology approach, aiming at excluding archaeology from the social and political environment. The real blow came later, as a rejection of the positivist response to social challenges. Instead, since the late 1980s archaeology has been in touch with a plethora of social theory frameworks, challenging neutrality and asking for social and political engagement (Gamble 2001:2).

In this context, the World Archaeological Congress was founded in 1986 as a clear challenge to traditional, reactionary or (at best) neutral archaeology, in favour of a committed social science. Archaeologists were understood as political actors, responsible for their acts, in close touch with natives and local people, as well as with other social scientists—such as geographers, historians and linguists, to name but a few. Archaeology was redefined not as the study of "old peoples and places"—to refer to a most famous book collection—but of power relations today. As emphasises Manacorda (2004): *l' archeologia si nutre del pluralismo delle idée. Perché l'archeologia del futuro sia un'archeologia del dialogo, occorre innanzitutto produrre le idee sulle quali dialogare.* ("Archaeology springs from pluralism. The future of archaeology depends on dialogue, as dialogue depends on the production of ideas"). At the same time this move was taking place worldwide, Latin America was freeing itself from dictatorships (Funari 2002, 2006).

Different countries suffered discretionary rule during various periods until its gradual demise in the 1980s (Funari 2000a, 2000b). We are now commemorating twenty or so years of civilian rule in many different countries. As a result of the typical gradual transition from authoritarian to civilian and democratic rule, the critical discussion of dictatorship has been stifled, but over time there has been a growing interest in discussing repression and archaeology that was finally put in action to contribute to this endeavour (Fournier and Martínez Herrera 2006). Latin American archaeology took part in the World Archaeological Congress project and several archaeologists were interested both in social theory and interaction with society (Funari 2001). All this led to the development of an archaeology of repression and to the renewed interest in using material culture to foster freedom in society (Funari and Zarakin 2006).

In sum, the origins of modern archaeology are intimately bound to the development of theoretical explanations that justify the exploitation and repression of some societies by others. However, new conceptual frameworks have arisen to shape an archaeology of repression, showing the diversity of mechanisms used to wield power over people.

Repression in Latin America During the Last Decades

The history of military repression in Latin America provides an example of a case in which more than thirty years have been erased from memory. As a matter of fact, there is a blank in official history books concerning this period.

Latin American dictatorships emerged in the particular political context of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution (1959). Military regimes remained in power for decades, until internal and international changes allowed democracy to become established and consolidate. During repression, opposition was controlled by extreme methods including exile, detention, and murder. These strategies were reinforced by limiting public access to information.

Written information regarding clandestine repression is scarce and fragmentary. Most documents on the subject have been destroyed by military regimes in the recent past. Archaeological analyses might shed light on repressive mechanisms, recovering *desaparecidos*' stories and remains. *Desaparecidos* are people without history, whose lives were sadly interrupted by kidnapping. From that moment on, they were neither alive nor dead. They simply were missing persons.

We know dictatorial authorities had the power to make people, justice and history disappear. However, no matter how powerful they were, they could not erase the past. From this perspective, archaeology has a lot to offer, assuming a socio-political commitment on the side of ordinary people to rebuild their neglected stories.

Archaeological Studies of Repression in Latin America

South America suffered the socio-political consequences of dictatorial governments from the 1960s to the 1980s. Dominant and official discourses attempted to erase and distort the memory of repressive mechanisms—including the murder and disappearance of people. The return of democracy to the region during the mid-1980s allowed new generations of archaeologists to make substantial contributions to the study of dictatorships (Belleli and Tobin 1985).

Investigations in the archaeology of repression articulate multiple and intimately entwined objectives. On the one hand, some colleagues focus their attention on the epistemological, conceptual and methodological bases of this kind of archaeology (Funari and Vieira 2006; Haber 2006; López Mazz 2006; Langebaek 2006). In the case of Brazil, Pedro Funari and Nanci Vieira discuss the reasons why investigations on repression are almost nonexistent. The authors consider that these circumstances relate to the fact that people who were in positions of power during military

dictatorship usually kept their authority during the shift to democracy (Funari and Vieira 2006).

Other researchers search for, locate and identify the remains of murdered people. (EAAF 1991, 1992, 1993; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001; Fournier and Martínez Herrera 2006; Salerno 2006; Suarez 2006, among others). The Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF, Argentinean Forensic Anthropology Team) represents a good example of this type of project. By excavating mass graves in cemeteries and military bases in Argentina and other South American countries, this group sheds light on the killing of thousands of people during militaristic political regimes, returning the remains to their families (EAAF 1991, 1992, 1993; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001).

Recently archaeologists have begun to excavate clandestine centers of detention. They seek to construct a ''material memory'' of genocide, analyze repressive strategies expressed in spatial organization (Bozzuto et al. 2004; Zarankin and Niro 2006), and study unnoticed practices of resistance (López Mazz 2006; Navarrete and López 2006). In a similar trend, Salerno studies the way military regimes in Argentina constructed the identity category of ''subversivo'' (meaning political opponent), pointing out its associated material elements.

"Desaparecidos" and Clandestine Detention Centers in Latin American

Repression in South America was developed by clandestine government paramilitary group to destroy opposition. It included the secret collaboration of different military regimes of the region (*Plan Cóndor*[1]) and the use of secret centers of detention where political opponents, after being kidnapped, were tortured and held captive before being killed.

"Desaparecidos"

This sort of ''disappearance'' was one of the most common means used by dictatorial governments to eliminate opposition. Disappearance also included dropping people from airplanes or helicopters into the ocean, or shooting and burying them in unidentified common graves (Belleli and Tobin 1985; EAAF 1992; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001). As International Amnesty states in its report on missing people: *''Due to its nature, disappearance hides the author's identity. If there is no prisoner, corpse or victim, nobody is presumably accused of anything''.* For that reason, thousands of people of all ages and occupations were kidnapped and still remain missing—30,000 people in Argentina; 5,800 in Peru; 3,000 in Chile; 1,500 in Brazil.

Since 1984, interdisciplinary projects (including archaeologists, anthropologists, physicians, and lawyers) have exhumed and identified hundreds of NN^2 bodies. The first project in Latin America was created by the Argentinean Team of Forensic Anthropology. Their pioneering work and experience transformed the project into one of the most outstanding forensic projects in the world (EAAF 1991, 1992, 1993; Doretti and Fondebrider 2001).

The Argentinean Team of Forensic Anthropology's works began with the return of democracy to Argentina in 1983, when various groups and government institutions decided to look for the remains of missing people. At that moment, there were no specialists in the country who could lead such a project. For that reason, Madres de Plaza de Mayo and others human rights associations requested help from the Science and Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in Washington DC. In 1984, the program sent a group of scientists, including Dr. Clyde Snow—one of the most important forensic anthropologists in the world. He pioneered several procedures to "read" information hidden in skeletons. Dr. Snow trained the archaeological students and young graduates who ultimately constituted the Argentinean Team of Forensic Anthropology.

The Argentinean Team of Forensic Anthropology's work has contributed to understand the criminal strategies of dictatorship. Cemetery records usually point out the location of graves where people killed in armed clashes were buried. However, these graves often contain the bodies of people murdered simply in cold blood (including men, women, and children), often with their ands or feet tied, and shot in the head or back. This evidence is still used to judge the military responsible of the killings. At the same time, hundreds of *desaparecidos'* remains were recognized and returned to the families in order to bury them in a proper way. The history of every identified person up to the time of their disappearance was finally revealed.

In recent decades, several Latin American countries have included forensic anthropologists in their medico-legal services at a judicial or police level. Their expert opinions and analysis are usually respected and taken into account. In 2003, the creation of the Latin American Association of Forensic Anthropology (Asociación Latinoamericana de Antropología Forense, ALAF) contributed to the consolidation of this field of study. It represented a new way of working in archaeology and forensic anthropology which included: (a) an interdisciplinary relationship with other fields of anthropology—meaning cultural, archaeological, and biological, (b) a social bias—acknowledging the relatives' cultural and religious values, as well as their right to know (Fondebrider 2006).

Details of EAAF works at a Cemetery at Buenos Aires (Photo courtesy EAAF)

Detail of the EAAF works at a Common grave in Cordoba, Argentina (Photo courtesy EAAF)

Clandestine Centers of Detention

There are few investigations which analyze clandestine detention centers—CCDs (Conadep 1984; Calveiro 2001; Barrera 2002; Di Ciano et al. 2001; Benítez et al. 2001; Daleo 2002; Calvo 2002; Bozzuto, Di Vruno, Dolce and Vázquez 2004; Zarankin and Niro 2006). As part of an extended list of punitive institutions, their origin dates back to the eighteenth century (Foucault 1976). Clandestine detention centers were specially developed during the military government in Argentina (from 1976 to 1983). They combined and maximized the worst features of all preceding punitive institutions. Their function was not to keep people captive, but to destroy and eliminate them.

> entering them (CCDs) implied in all cases STOP BEING. With that aim in mind, it was important to erase captives' identities, affect their temporal and spatial references, and torture their bodies and souls beyond imagination (Conadep 1984:55)

What models inspired CCDs? Calveiro (2001) argues that Argentinean military forces did not intentionally employ Nazi or Stalinist methods, but that their repressive regime reproduced totalitarian practices which included concentration camps (2001:40). We consider it relevant to explore the models used by the French army in Argelia, which included several structures architecturally similar to Argentinean CCDs. It is not a coincidence that several Argentinean military officers received training in that country.

CCDs expressed some of the practices employed in nineteenth-century prisons, such as the isolation of inmates (both from the outside world and from other prisoners). According to Foucault, *"loneliness is the first condition for total submission… isolation assures the colloquium between the prisoner and the power which is exercised over him"* (1976:240). CCDs did resemble concentration camps in that they were used to gather, isolate and keep prisoners captive, but concentration camps are "places" ruled by a series of international laws which guarantee some kind of respect to prisoners. CCDs had no such regulation because they simply "did not officially exist". Secrecy offered these "no-places" invisibility and impunityas they transformed prisoners into *desaparecidos* (Zarankin and Niro 2006).

In Argentina, CCDs' invisibility usually depended on the fact that they operated inside pre-existing buildings (Conadep 1984:58). One of the things that most affected the Argentinean population after the dictatorship ended was finding out that in "neighboring" buildings thousands of people had been tortured and killed, although nobody had been aware of what was happening.

CCDs represent power devices used to destroy bodies and souls, as well as material metaphors that codify authoritarian discourses. Their analysis reveals a systematic plan used to annihilate all forms of dissidence. As a consequence, the study of CCDs' materiality can serve as a tool to build the neglected history of this dark period.

The Case of the "Athletic Club" Detention Center

At the start of 2002, a scholarly archaeological proposal was set up to rescue and dig one of the most important clandestine detention centers in Argentina, the Athletic Club (Club Atlético). The Secretariat for Human Rights of the Buenos Aires City Council sponsored the project and a steering committee was set up, including survivors of the Athletic Club ordeal and the relatives of missing people, including children, parents, other relatives and friends. The project also included architects, anthropologists, engineers, and archaeologists, not to mention civil servants. It was a most interesting experience, for the archaeologists, used to direct so-called scientific endeavors, were now part of a collective effort to bring to light the most obscure aspects of repression. It was a scholarly, but also a social activity, with a collective decision making process, knowing with the people, as proposed Latin American humanist and educator, Paulo Freire (cf. Funari 2000a, 2000b).

The so-called Athletic Club was so known for its acronym, CA, whose real meaning was Anti-subversive Center (Centro Antisubversivo, in Spanish, or CA). Thus it had two different names, one for the use of officials linked to repression and another, clean one, for external use. It worked for several months in 1977, from January to late December, inside a storehouse controlled by the Federal Police, at Buenos Aires, located at the intersection of the streets of Paseo Colón, Cochabamba, San Juan and Juan de Garay. Around 1,500 individuals are estimated to have stayed on the premises, most of them missing. CA was capable of dealing with two hundred prisoners at a given time. The building was demolished at the end of 1977 and its prisoners were transferred to another concentration camp, The Olympus ("El Olimpo").

The archaeological field research was designed to reconstruct a material memory of repression in Argentina and also to study the spatial and architectural organization of the place (Bianchi Villelli and Zarankin 2003a, 2003b). Archaeological remains open to the public raise awareness about what went on in such a clandestine detention center.

Excavations in the Club Atlético Clandestine Centre of Detention—Buenos Aires, Argentina (Photo by Zarankin 2003)

Furthermore working with survivors is powerful a way of producing knowledge and social action at the same time (cf. Funari 2001). For example, in the first season, a ping-pong ball was found that from a strictly archaeological or ''scientific'' viewpoint, was just another item of the material culture. However, when survivors were told that a ping-pong ball had been found, they considered it the most important artifact. The archaeologists were surprisedto learn that the torturers used to play ping-pong as a way of entertaining themselves, when they were not torturing the prisoners. The detained were kept blindfolded[3] but were aware their captors were playing, as they heard ping-pong sounds coming from somewhere nearby. When they heard the sound they were able to relax, knowing that their captors' were busy entertaining themselves. The unpretentious ping pong ball has proven to be a powerful symbol of the whole detention camp system.

> What will those torturers think who used to play ping-pong in the detention camps, when they realize we found the very ball they used so many years ago, while we were tortured?

Delia Barrera (2002:4), Athletic Club survivor. Analysis of materials recovered at Club Atlético Clandestine Centre of Detention—Buenos Aires, Argentina (Photo by Zarankin 2003)

This archaeological research has enabled us to rethink the interpretive models used to understand the workings of CCds, including its functional and symbolic aspects (Zarankin and Niro 2006). A case in point is the torture chambers at the center of the building, positioned to ease the task of bringing the prisoners to be tortured and also to allow the other detainees to hear the screams and realize their own pitiful situation, which added another layer of psychological torture. All these torture techniques show
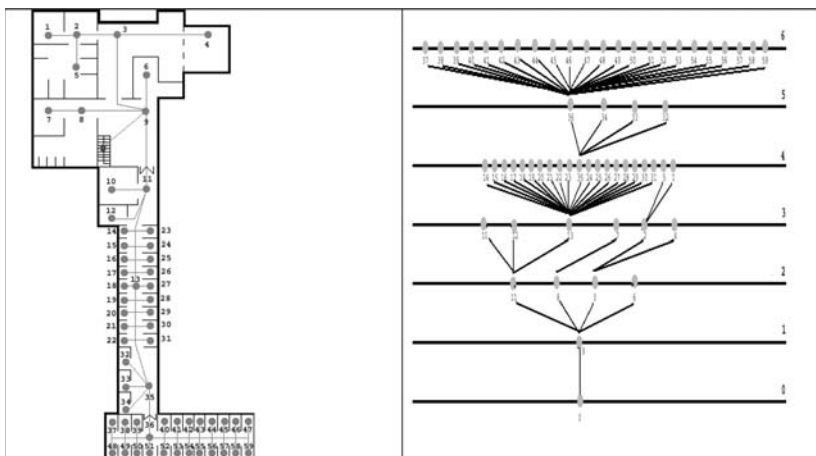
Plant of the "Club Altético" and the analysis by the application of the Hillier and Hanson (1984) Gamma map (Zarankin and Niro 2006:177)

that the CCDs were a powerful machine of identity destruction, in which people became objects to be manipulated by powerful agents of law and order. The CCD machine drained the prisoners of both physical and symbolic strength, transforming them into *desaparecidos*.

Conclusions

Since the return of democracies to the region in the 1980́s, there have been demands from society to find out the fate of thousands of people who were made "missing" by the military governments. There have also been demands for justice and for the guilty to pay for their crimes. Archaeology, on the side of common people, has become an important tool to help answer both demands.

By studying the sadistic logic of the military governments used to plan and put together the repressive CCD machine, and by reconstructing the experience of the missing and when possible even finding their remains, archaeology becomes meaningful to ordinary people. keeping a memory of the past (both recent and distant) is fundamental for building a better society, and archaeologists must accept the responsibility, and the privilege to help.

It is clear that the study of repression under South American military governments should not be a neutral scientific exercise, but a political commitment we assume as professionals. Archaeological research allows us to recover both large and small stories that were erased under these horrific regimes in order to bring back the memory of ordinary people whose aspirations for a better society cost them their lives.

> Every time we identify the remains of a missing person, he or she stops being a dead body to become a story. Jorge Herbstein (EAAF)

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Plan Cóndor represented a repressive and extra-frontier intelligence operative developed in southernmost Latin American dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s.
2. NN means person whose true identity is unknown (equivalent to ''John Doe'' in English).
3. In the clandestine detention centers, the prisoners were kept all the timeblindfolded for, days, weeks or even months, blindfolded, as a way of demoralizing them but also so they would not be able to identify the torturers.

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