ARCHAEOLOGY & NEOLIBERALISM

Pablo Aparicio Resco (Ed.)
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About the authors
Neoliberalism is so ubiquitous that we do not even recognise it as an ideology. Apparently, we have assumed the ideal of its millennial faith as if it was a natural force; a sort of biological law, like Darwin’s theory of evolution. But it was born with the deliberate intention of reshaping human life and changing the centre of power.

George Monbiot (2016)

When we name a concept, idea, or object, we provide it with a real and symbolic existence. We can apprehend, debate, question, and, ultimately, construct certainties around it. On the other hand, when we avoid naming something, we are trying to make it disappear, hide it, and make it invisible. “What has no name does not exist,” as Francis Picabia said.

Clear examples of this can be found in the current Spanish political landscape. In 2014, the phenomenon Podemos (a leftist movement, populist in the Laclauian sense) was born, and the term ‘caste’ began to be used for the enriched minority, to differentiate that group from the ‘people’. In Spain, the term ‘caste’ had never been used before in that way, with the new signifier managing to give real form to an existing but still diffuse collective. Regardless of whether it was successful, it was a very careful strategy to try to bring togeth-
er 99% of the impoverished population, and set them apart from the 1% who accumulate wealth. The word was used to create something that did not previously exist, and in this way, changed reality.

The previous year, the ‘Bárcenas case’ had broken out, an episode of corruption within the ruling party, Partido Popular. President Mariano Rajoy even began to avoid naming his former treasurer—referring to Luis Bárcenas as “that person you are talking to me about,” in an attempt, successful or not, to try and the association with of one the more corrupt figures in the party. In this case, the absence of the word was used to make the referent disappear.

Neoliberalism is, thanks to the power of words, a ghost. As Monbiot (2016) recalls, calling it by its name has been avoided in the past few decades, in that it is not studied in schools, and only a handful know what it refers to. Almost no one declares themselves openly neoliberal, even they practice neoliberal policies and fully commune with neoliberal thinking. Neoliberalism is, for most people, a liquid concept, as Zygmunt Bauman would have understood it, which has allowed it to seep into the soul of society, to the extent that it is complex to delimit, analyse its effects and, in the final analysis, fight against it and propose clear alternatives.

Today, however, the effects of neoliberalism as a global hegemonic ideology in every corner of the planet, and its clearest face is the progressive increase of inequality—a world in which the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, where it is more profitable to speculate in financial markets than to produce real goods, where it seems to matter more that the number of digits in an account grows than the number of poets, film directors or painters who can carry out their works
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without starving. How then can we define an ideology that is causing so many change in society?

Neoliberalism is the economic and political philosophy, that is, ideology, that has dominated Western thought in the past few decades. Its origins can be traced to the philosophy of Friedrich Hayek and the Chicago School of Economics—whose main focus is economist Milton Friedman—and was extensively implemented during the 1980s by the governments of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and of Ronald Reagan in the US (Palley 2005).

It has since continued to spread on all continents, with force, becoming the dominant ideology and, according to many of its followers, the only possible way of being. Liberalism, in theory, advocates limited political power for minimal intervention in the lives of citizens so that the forces of supply and demand can create the necessary conditions for free trade between free and equal people. Neoliberalism, however, advocates the partial strengthening, in an interested way, the machinery of the state to give it greater intervention capacity. This is not to defend citizens, of course, but to create an auspicious framework in which the market—exalted as something almost divine—can be developed without limits (Moreno González 2015).

All this takes place under the premise, at least in the face of the gallery, that the development of the market and its presumed self-regulation will revert to the good of society as a whole. Thus, the market is no longer a natural subject to laissez-faire as the liberals believed, but an artificial entity that must be sustained thanks to policies of strong states, but subject to great corporations dedicated to maintaining this framework of exchange.
1. Preface - Pablo Aparicio Resco

For this, the interconnected concepts of the neoliberal creed are born: the creation of wealth, economic development, competitiveness, budgetary and monetary stability, adjustments, reforms or, directly, cuts—policies of ‘austerity’, etc. Neoliberalism, far from being a logical evolution of liberalism, is a perversion of it and a twist to the most voracious capitalism, which social democracy tried, unsuccessfully, to stop.

In practice, and within the cultural framework, the result of the implantation of neoliberal thinking throughout the planet is the creation of a mentality in which everything revolves around the purchase and sale of products. The world is a great market in which the only necessary profitability is economic, where all our actions must be focused on growth—of course, also exclusively economic—and all this within a framework of competition in which only the strongest survive. Everything is contingent on the growth of markets, which justify any means employed.

This type of thinking, capable of achieving great economic benefits for an already enriched minority, strikes in the face of the development of the humanities, understood as a source of collective social, cultural, historical and, why not, economic values. Putting money and its outrageous acquisition as the only end of a person, a nation or a planet, does not make us better, as Martha C. Nussbaum explains:

*Producing economic growth does not mean producing democracy, nor generating a healthy, committed and trained population that has opportunities for a good quality of life in all social classes.*

(Nussbaum 2010: 36)
Thus, in a moment of strong contrasts and tensions between our humanistic disciplines—and the dominant thought in the world, the present book is born to answer many questions: what is the role of archaeology in the current world? How does neoliberal ideology, today hegemonic, affect archaeology as a discipline? Is it possible to reconcile neoliberal thinking with the development of the humanities? In which direction should the world of archaeology turn to contribute to the value of other returns, beyond the economic? Can archaeology escape the hegemonic dynamics of the neoliberal world? What will archaeology become as a discipline in a world where only economic growth matters?

The answer to these and other questions will not be easy to find, and will have to be found by each reader in the chapters found in this book, which is organised in five parts: first, an introduction by the Greek archaeologist Yannis Hamilakis, a reference for the reflection of archaeology today, so necessary in such an accelerated world, followed by several chapters focusing on the impact of neoliberalism on Spanish archaeology, navigating a sea of confusion between public archaeology and commercial archaeology, between the university and the administrations.

Several chapters also focus Latin American social archaeology and the strong impact that neoliberal policies have had on the sister continent, and whose scars are reflected in Latin American archaeology which, in many ways, is able to mark a way forward. The following section allows us to travel through the archaeology of the rest of the world, from Turkey to the UK, from Poland to Iran, to observe how neoliberal thinking has
affected our discipline in other national contexts, and to better understand a phenomenon that is global.

Lastly, we have the epilogue of the American archaeologist Randall H. McGuire, with a call to build archaeology as a form of political action, always claiming an active and realistic optimism that allows us to keep moving forward to change things from our profession, day by day, and build a different and better world.

As Antonio Gramsci noted in 1916,

*every revolution has been preceded by an intense work of criticism, cultural penetration, permeation of ideas. The bayonets of Napoleon’s army found the way already paved by an invisible army of books, of pamphlets, poured from Paris from the first half of the eighteenth century and which had prepared men and institutions for the necessary renewal.* (Gramsci 2013: 22-3)

Now is our time to build spaces for reading, reflection, debate and criticism that allow us to cement a cultural revolution aimed at changing the world, making it more humane, supportive, collective and formed. To build spaces of coexistence where the collaboration is more important than competition, where sometimes decrease is positive, where it is understood that many returns are equally necessary, and where adjustments are made by always looking at people and not at the stock exchange.

Archaeology, as a tool to understand our present thanks to the past, as an instrument to build identity and as a mortar to strengthen human relations, has much to say when it comes to changing the future. I hope that this book is among the hundreds of thousands of little grains of sand, that will, as with words, cause a change in reality.