Post-workerism and contemporary archaeology: a case study

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ABSTRACT

Pasolini is well aware of the paradox that capitalism establishes. On the one hand it destroys popular cultures and their sacred, "animist" vision of nature, things and the cosmos. On the other hand, through novel machinic assemblages it creates the conditions for drawing new continuities between subject/object and nature/culture. As Guattari, he understood this contradictory double movement. Firstly, the objectification and rationalization of nature and the cosmos that renders them exploitable and, secondly, the possibility of a "machinic animism" that could "re-sacralise" (Pasolini) or "re-enchant" (Guattari) them. What has been lost with the disappearance of non-anthropomorphic cultures and religions can be reinvented with the non-anthropomorphic machinism of capitalism. Maurizio Lazzarato (forthcoming).

KEYWORDS

Contemporary Archaeology; Post-workerism; Ethnoarchaeology; Ethnography

1. INTRODUCTION

Drawing from the data collected through an ethnoarchaeological research underway since 2006, this article attempts to briefly discuss the most recent changes in the material culture of Val de San Lorenzo (León, Spain). In particular, I would like to relate these transformations with recent transformations in contemporary capitalism. Overall, I argue that material culture has attained a central role in the valorisation processes at work in post-industrial societies, becoming a machine for the extraction of rents and the reification of peasant societies. The aims of this paper are twofold. First, to provide an alternative view to the prevailing “logocentric” paradigm that focuses on the discursive and ideological level of “meanings” and “identity politics”. Second, to show that Contemporary Archaeology can prove useful to document and understand new forms of capitalist exploitation. Many issues have been left behind or oversimplified in my rather schematic presentation due to the brevity of the paper.

2. CONTEXT

Val de San Lorenzo is a village with around 700 inhabitants located in “Maragatería”. The region, which has been until recent times a marginal and underdeveloped area, is known today for its monumental architecture, gastronomy and folklore. The particularity of the area derives from the wealthy “Maragato” social group that shaped the culture of the region thanks to a thriving economy based on mule driving (see Alonso González 2009b). The specific character of Val de San Lorenzo stems from the engagement with textile production of the majority of its population since the modern era. The gradual modernisation of textile machinery during the nineteenth century broke the balance between resources and demography. Consequently, a migratory process started whereby half of the villagers left towards Buenos Aires (Argentina) and to a lesser extent to Cuba and Mexico between 1870 and 1940.

During that period the village negotiated the different possible strategies to enter modernity (see García Canclini 1989). Two clear tendencies emerged. On one side, a group influenced by the ideas coming from the emigrants in Cuba and Mexico developed an individualist and liberal idea of modernity, thus striving to create private textile companies. On the other, most villagers were influenced by the socialist ideas and financial support coming from Buenos Aires. Those established a communal textile company called “Comunal”, which somehow represented a form of continuity with traditional forms of production based on commonality. Despite the Spanish Civil War and the Franco regime meant a shock for the communal form of production, the factory survived until the 1990s, when the private factories decayed as well.

3. MATERIAL CULTURE

The ethnoarchaeological study of the village detected two main historic phases:
a) Productivism: 1900-1980
During this period the village underwent a gradual process of change whereby the traditional Maragato culture vanished. Actually, the Maragato symbolic semiotics underwent a process of reification through industrial textile production. In Maragatería the colour of a part of women’s dress indicated social status: Red meant nobility, green an intermediate status and yellow poverty. Green and red are dominant in almost all textile products and in many house’s doors and windows. The role of the returned emigrants or “indianos” in accelerating social change was huge. In terms of materiality, this can be observed in changes in dressing styles and architectural patterns. Their houses break the homogeneity of the village by employing foreign materials and styles, standing in sharp contrast with the many ruins of abandoned houses that are paradoxically the outcome of mass emigration. The external and internal material analysis of the village’s houses reflected the two differential social groups. The houses of the “liberal entrepreneurs”, that made huge profits during this period, were internally devoid of productive spaces and their new houses conformed to the patterns of “modernity” (see Alonso González 2009a). Externally, bricks and concrete replaced stone, which became a symbol of poverty. In contrast, the houses of the “communal” group grew organically, adding new areas when necessary, either with a productive (i.e., bigger looms) or social function (i.e., bathrooms). Their stone façades were covered with clay or lime and painted, following similar patterns to other Peninsular areas (see González Alvarez 2007; González Ruibal 2003a) . The role of material culture in this context is related to the symbolic or discursive semiotic level. It allows people to express economic power and social prestige or to hide poverty. The house, as a materialization of the familial and social order, allows people to narrate a different story of the past whereby poverty has been overcome by modernity (González Ruibal 2003b). Material culture reflects the increasing social complexity and plays a role in shaping the habitus of the community by establishing hierarchies and differentiations, that is, by materialising the cosmological and ideological order. Without falling into a reductive Marxist reading, it can be said that the productive and the symbolic remain separated fields whereby the symbolic material expression reflects the economic potential of an individual or a group. Stones and bricks have meaning.

b) Post-productivism: 1980 onwards
This phase is characterised by the decline of both the entrepreneurial and the communal industrial traditions. Since then, the village has undergone an attempt to shift from an economic framework based on production to a service-based economy sustained by tourism that aims to attract new potential residents. To facilitate and synthesise the understanding of the process I will focus on three main actors. Clearly, their performances are far from being autonomous: the relations between them are complex and marked by varying situations of cooperation, antagonism and internal dissent.

- The locals. I intentionally refrain from speaking about “the community” to avoid conveying an idea of social homogeneity. The former textile entrepreneurs have played an active role in the “heritagisation” process in the village. With the decline of industry they reinvested their capital in rural guesthouses and restaurants. At the material level, bricks and concrete disappeared from the façades of their businesses and houses. Their new residences are made of bricks but covered by the vernacular stones to resemble the Maragato houses externally. Internally, the houses follow average modern architectural patterns. No objects drawn from the traditional world are exposed. Despite the fact that their houses try to reinstate a formal ideal of community, they are spatially isolated and separated from the centre of the village and break the homogeneity of the urban grid. Instead, restaurants and guesthouses owned by them deploy many traditional objects such as plows, threshers or looms as the expression of the “cultural roots” and the “social progress” undergone in the village. As many other social groups in Spain (see Collier 1997), they have replaced their own tradition by the notions provided by ethnographic discourses: the rational ownership of heritage and memory have become signs of modernity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Instead, many communal workers retired and their sons emigrated. Unsurprisingly, the changes in their houses reflect the will to acquire the formerly inaccessible materials such as concrete, bricks, corrugated iron roofs, etc. Paradoxically, they cannot afford to build with stone now. Clearly, this situation clashes with the will of entrepreneurs and the local council to preserve the formal homogeneity and urban harmony of the village for touristic aims. Finally, most objects they preserved from the traditional world such as plows or wooden looms were burnt or considered as symbols of poverty.

- Newcomers. The heterogeneous group of newcomers normally buys houses as second residences where they spend their holidays. Instead of building houses from the scratch they acquire old houses to restore and enlarge those following vernacular patterns. Internally, the most visible areas of the house display traditional elements ranging from yokes to handcrafted local blankets. Old doors and windows are appreciated as well, but they are grinded to get rid of the traditional blue, green or red colours to expose...
the “purity” of the wood. Every trace of “modern contamination” of the pristine rural past in harmony with nature is removed.

- **City Council.** The consistory aims to re-invent local economy through the heritagisation of the village based on the textile tradition and architecture:
  - New land and architectural planning promote the utilisation of vernacular materials, inducing people to remove lime and paint covering stone façades and synthetic roofs. Also, the consistory forced to remove the traditional stone benches placed next to the main doors.
  - The “Comunal” factory became a museum that works as the backbone of the heritagisation process. The museum presents a collection of objects representing the evolution from artisanal textile production to the modern industrial looms. The narration of technical progress does not refer to issues of emigration, working conditions nor even to the history of the “Comunal”. The museum safeguards the authenticity of the village’s roots and the narration of its historical progress.

4. DISCUSSION

How can we make sense of this new relation between material culture and society? The answer to this question goes beyond the purpose of this brief discussion. I will just point to some issues that require further debate and problematisation, adopting a post-representational approach that moves from classificatory representations and interpretations to concerns of practical effectivity. That is, I do not ask “what does it mean?” but the Deleuzo & Guattarian “how does it work?” (2003).

a) From “symbolic signifying” to “a-signifying” semiotics

Félix Guattari (1984) establishes a distinction between different types of semiotics and relates them to capitalist models of social control. The process of “subjectivation” (asujetissement) works at the discursive level of the symbolic and signifying semiotics. Here, the modern notions and dichotomies that distribute subjectivities and generate identities apply: male-female or subject-object along with familial roles, class status, ethnicity, political stance, etc. These signs act at the representational, conscious level of the subject. Many authors ground their critical accounts at this level (i.e. Žižek, Badiou or Rancière). Less attention has been paid to the process of “machinic enslavement” (asservissement machinique) that works beyond the conscious and logocentric dimensions, not by ideology or the repression of the unconscious, but by the modulation of behaviour: a-signifying semiotics act directly upon material fluxes (computerisation of society, audiovisual information, automatic stock exchange, Google AdSense, etc.). For Maurizio Lazzarato (2002), a-signifying semiotics are becoming central in post-industrial capitalism, functioning as machines of capitalist valorisation that smoothly work regardless of gender, social or ethnic categories.

During the phase of industrial expansion in Val de San Lorenzo, material culture was utilised at a symbolic level, acting upon subjectivation processes: the houses were the expression of an underlying thriving productive economy. Thus, material culture helped to define social class and ideology, contributing to shape the habitus of the village. The post-productive period brought about a re-articulation of the relation between both semiotics. Actually, both ideology and production were embodied in material culture and put to work for the valorisation processes implemented by local entrepreneurs. At the symbolic level, the museum and urban policies endeavour to establish a new ideal of community that aims to recreate a harmonic shared past that never existed. This signifying regime is materialised by stone façades and objects that are assembled into an a-signifying co-functioning system whereby tourists and investments are attracted, generating profits captured by local entrepreneurs through guesthouses, restaurants and the selling of real estate assets.

b) The becoming-rent of profit and the appropriation of the common

Then, rather than a “nostalgic turn” what we are witnessing is the use of past material culture to drive the economy of vast rural areas in developed countries towards a new model based on rent (Harvey 2002; Negri & Vercellone 2007). In classical economy, rent is the income an owner can make by owning an asset, whereas profit is the result of the process of production whereby capital generates and extracts a surplus from workforce exploitation. Matteo Pasquinelli considers that the new forms of rent extraction are parasitic since they do not suck surplus directly but in a furtive way (2009). Examples range from financial speculation to intellectual property rights or patents. In Val de San Lorenzo the rent extracted is based broadly on territorial value and specifically on the appropriation of the common heritage of the village: a pristine textile tradition devoid of conflicts, a characteristic vernacular architecture, etc. This “common value” (sensu Hardt & Negri 2009) is appropriated and reified through material culture, becoming a stable source of rent in the form of tourism or investments.

c) From discipline to control: the retreat of ideologies

Façades imitating vernacular architecture, old machines in the museum and agricultural tools exposed in the houses facilitate the creation of a difference that generates scarcity and value that can be appropriated without any ideological or conscious mediation. Through the concept of “societies of control” Deleuze intended to clarify how novel power configurations strive to control the complexity and creativity of contemporary societies. Accordingly, current rural configurations are becoming places of encounter instead of enduring sites, where newcomers and locals seek forms of “becoming together”
rather than stable “forms of being”. Dwellers are no longer bearers of an internalized habitus but people with situated forms of living. The new regime of control gradually transforms the rural into an artificial space that mirrors the desires of urbanites. This is done with the compliance of the empowered locals, which connect to the touristic flows and deterritorialise themselves from the village as the peripheral spatial configuration of their residences shows. Material culture is used to legitimate the process and to generate value: façades must be made of stone following vernacular patterns to “preserve the tradition” and homogenise the village, impressing tourists and potential investors.

What is left from ideology is a set of “neo-archaisms” that serve to “re-mystify” or “re-enchant” the narrative of the past and legitimate the present order after the in-depth rationalisation of space and social relations implemented by modernity. These neo-archaisms seek to reinstate the “good” ideas of family, nation or community, etc. Accordingly, the signifying, discursive or ideological sphere is reduced to the discussion of the terms of new forms of capitalistic reproduction, but it rarely addresses the underpinnings of these forms. The ban of the traditional benches in Val de San Lorenzo provides a good example of this issue. The banning occurred at the beginning of the implementation of the tourist-based economic model in the village under the government of one of the two major Spanish national parties. When a regionalist party (UPL) took power, the ban was lifted. Since then, to have or not to have a bench in the front door has become a politically charged issue. Political debates revolve around issues of authenticity, attempting to set patterns establishing what “real” tradition is. However, the reason why this debate is being held (i.e., the biopolitical control of what people should do with their houses and their forms of socialisation in order to fit into a new economic scheme that benefits a few families) is not questioned or even discussed.

d) Social desire and the creation of new values

Classical political economy and Marxism set up a clear-cut division between the production of economic values and that of moral values, reducing the latter to the sphere of culture or ideology. To understand the formation of new values it is more useful to follow Gabriel Tarde and understand the deployment of social desire in the terms of invention/imitation (Lazzarato 2002). Indeed, the new socio-economic model whereby past material remains are assembled to fit into a new model is an original invention that is increasingly being imitated and spread because it suits patterns of contemporary social desire. In particular, when societies move from the satisfaction of organic needs to the fulfillment of whimsical and complex desires there is a trend towards an increasing integration between “knowledge”, “aesthetics” and “commodities”. From this point of view, “utility” must be rethought because material culture (past and present) enters into new flows of desire and valorisation that render them useful pragmatically: uncover the bricks lying under the fake layer of stones of many façades of the village and businesses will close.

Thus, new values entail new forms of utilitarianism. But where lie the underpinnings of new values? All values presuppose evaluations and an evaluator, and evaluations presuppose values based on some principles that cannot be objectively grounded on a transcendental notion. Then, as Nietzsche pointed out, all values are sustained by modes of existence that affirm themselves in their evaluations (Deleuze 1983: 3). Accordingly, modes of existence are immanently productive because those create new cultural values that pave the way for new processes of valorisation based on scarcity and difference: the conundrum of contemporary capitalism is how to capture these differences that generate profit (Toscano 2007). Thus, capitalism should be conceived as an emergent, self-organising process instead of as a transcendental top-down ordering of reality.

For urban newcomers to Val de San Lorenzo the possession of a property in the village is attractive. It works as a monumental second residence that links them with a preconceived romantic idea of a “cultural tradition” and a “harmonic community” where peasants live in equilibrium with nature. They restore the buildings according to the “authentic” vernacular custom and display some textile and agricultural tools that materialise their connection with that “community”. These objects are valuable not only for their aesthetic value, but essentially for their connection with a “culture” represented discursively in the museum and in books. Their mode of existence becomes valuable for wealthy locals that try to imitate them. Material differences are clear however: locals do not display past objects for performance and prefer to build isolated new residences resembling vernacular buildings externally. The city council supports the process whereas the rest of villagers oscillate between passivity and the timid implementation of the new urban and architectural planning criteria.

The arrival of new values entails a complete transformation in the relation between material culture, people and their identities. This is related to the intrinsic tendency of capitalism to homogenise the socius as much as possible to avoid anti-market situations. As mentioned above, local people would burn or just cast off old textile and agricultural tools when those were useless. At the beginning of the “heritagisation process” they would happily give away old looms, plows and even old tiles and stone to newcomers, despite interviews showed that the latter would have been willing to pay highly for them. The lack of a set of shared values generated an anti-market situation: locals would never give away a pig or land for instance. Obviously, the situation did not last long and every item started to be priced and sold accordingly. An informal market situation was established along with a novel relation with material culture: people learnt that the value of an object depended upon “knowledge” rather than on “utility”, that is, the more “history” of use an object had, the more valuable it would become. Rather than an essentialist foundation, in this context identity becomes “the infolding of a forcibly regularized outside” (Massumi 1992: 112).
5. CONCLUSION

How to conceptualise the role of material culture in this context? Objects are not being used solely at the signifying or ideological level, but are “put to work”, entering the a-signifying sphere of capitalist reproduction. A Hegelian reading following Kojève or Fukuyama would place the struggle of free subjects for social recognition (lymos as drive for desire) in the centre of the process, relegating the appropriation of objects (and rents) to a peripheral role. The socus cannot be fully structured around a “struggle for prestige” because “prestige” itself is a social construction. In fact, the conquest of prestige is secondary to the conquest of objects; it is a symbolic form of domination. This view is tied to a psychoanalytic conception of social desire that considers it in terms of “lack” and “pleasure”: the unconscious as a “theatre” of significations and meanings. Instead, the study has led me to consider the unconscious social desire as a “factory” (see Deleuze & Guattari 2004) that is essentially productive of novel and increasingly complex connections and forms of valorisation. Accordingly, desire does not stem from transcendent values, but rather value comes immanently from desire and modes of existence. Thus, what Marxism had relegated to the superstructure as ideology must be reintroduced into the domain of economy (Toscano 2007): the parallel processes of “subjectivation” and “enslavement” merge.

From this stance, to speak of “commodification processes” of heritage or culture based on nostalgic drives loses its sense. In contemporary capitalism there is no “external object” set aside à la Kopytoff (see Montenegro 2010) to guarantee the cultural fixity of meanings and values: everything, included human “life” as a whole, is put to work. That is, all ideological or symbolic semiotics are inherently productive. There are no “authentic originals” to be commodified, just new forms of assembling desires and material fluxes that generate value. Also, the processes observed are scarcely related with nostalgia. Quite the contrary: every social investment was conceived as a future-oriented project, either as a novel form of living for newcomers or as a new possibility for investment and profit for wealthy locals.

The ethnoarchaeological study of the village enabled me to trace not only the links between identity and material culture, but also how objects were used by locals and newcomers to enter into a novel socio-economic configuration. This situation entails a twofold oppression. At the discursive level, the whole “communal” past of the village has been consigned to oblivion in the rewriting of the village's history through material culture and museum display. At the pragmatic level, the common value generated by the village and its dwellers (their memories and traditions, their ways of living, etc.) is being appropriated in the form of rent. Whereas during the “productive” period the “Comunal” factory served to reach a balance between commonality and individuality, the “post-industrial” phase has not witnessed the birth of a similar countering entity able to distribute the profits generated by the common value of the village. How could objects be assembled and put to work for the common good?

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FIGURE 1. Map showing the classification of the buildings in Val de San Lorenzo according to their external appearance. Newcomers normally buy and restore buildings in the centre of the village (white) whereas wealthy locals tend to build isolated houses in the periphery, surrounding the village (yellow). The rest of the village presents a heterogeneous character. Traditional buildings (green) are normally abandoned and people leaves in partially modernised houses (dark blue) or modern houses (red) if they can.

FIGURE 2. Picture of one of the houses built by locals to fit the patterns of "vernacular architecture". Once the house is finished it is almost impossible for a foreigner to discern whether it is “authentic” or not. As usual, however, modernity has its leftovers: the stone that is being used for the construction of these houses comes from the traditional “paredes” (walls) that delimited the small areas of land each family owned. The disappearance of these walls is homogenising the landscape and rendering it less valuable for touristic consumption, providing a clear example of a “creative destruction” process.