

## **Heritage politics, state and trauma: An interview with Ermengol Gassiot Ballbè at the Institute of Heritage Sciences - Incipit / CSIC**

In the framework of CHEurope, Ermengol Gassiot Ballbè visited host institution Incipit - Institute of Heritage Sciences in Santiago de Compostela, to present his research on forensic archaeology of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, discussing the relations between State, communities and our political action.

CHEurope researchers Márcia Lika Hattori, Anne Beeksma and Nevena Markovic sat down with him to have a conversation about his perspective on heritage, communities and the role of the researchers in promoting other forms of “*asociativismo*” and collaboration within the heritage field.

**Your work often deals with what we might call ‘negative heritage’ or heritage related to trauma and conflict. How do you conceptualize, in this regard, spaces that are created to commemorate negative heritage?**

Well, I should start by saying that the very existence of heritage is a consequence of political action. Human activity on earth generates a lot of references, such as waste and material impact, and the accumulation of experiences that might be valued or kept restricted to individual lives. So what is recognized as heritage implies socializing something that has to do with human experience and is therefore a political decision. With which I believe that any heritage policy is political. Every action taken in this regard dealing with negative heritage implies a political positioning on that conflict whether that be the neglect or rather the monumentalisation of mass graves, for example. This implies that, as archeologists, we cannot be ‘neutral’ towards heritage. We have to choose how we position ourselves.

I think that the characteristics of the state include political monopoly, as well as the control and regulation of collective action. It also includes the monopoly on the official past; having a hegemonic position in the construction of the vision that a society has of itself. In cases of forced disappearances for example, it's clear that the state creates their own vision of the course of events; denying fact or denying reality, silencing it or restricting it to a solely private experience. This is where, as archaeologists, we have the capacity to uncover evidence that contradicts this vision, this political construction that the state has created. However, we run into a contradiction here: archaeology is an activity that is heavily regulated by the state. Proof of this is that as an archaeologist you have to ask for authorizations and follow public protocols. So our work can imply a conflict with the state.

So, somehow we are workers who depend on the public sphere to recognize the relevance of what we do. Our work aims to overturn public discourse on certain realities and bring to light alternative discourses, which at times means nothing more and nothing less than finding evidence to support an individualized, private, memory, for example by working with family members of a disappeared victim, who know perfectly well that their family member was abducted. That is my idea of archaeological praxis. However, these are contexts that involve political risks, very diffuse and silent risks, negatively affecting the possibilities, such as consolidation and promotion, of practitioners.

**Do you think all of archeology is in fact public archeology?**

I believe that the primary responsibility of archaeologists implies how we situate ourselves in the world. And yes, all archaeology should be public. But then we have to rethink what is public, right? And to rethink the public is to rethink collectively how we construct the collective space. And that implies rethinking democracy as such. Do we seek to delegate the definition of the public to a state administration or do we seek to open collective spaces and open up the definition of the public, such as groups of neighbors, etc. I believe that, in many cases, the exhumation of mass graves is an example of that process, mobilizing the collective desire to generate dialogue, and seek and generate consensus about an otherwise controlled reality.

**Do you have any tips about how to organize these collective spaces, for example within the context of heritage related projects?**

In order to comprehend the 'collective space', I think that we, as archaeologists, or heritage practitioners, have to accept that our work is political and that we are part of a political society. It's important that political agency isn't restricted to the monopoly the state offers to determined spaces. But, this would imply the political ideological revolution of the people involved. If the people who are feel like a cog in the machine, we're not going to achieve this, ever. Knowing this, we have to reflect on what world we want, and how we position ourselves. On the other hand, this means we have to change the public perception of the role we play as "scientists". For example, if a resident of a town delegates researching a megalith (or any other heritage element) to someone who comes from the university, it implies that he dissociates himself from the creation of a narrative based on a certain element. He or she will say to the expert: "I have found something; is it important or not?" Who has the right to define what is important or not? How is this process established? Maybe, for the neighbors, a stone that signifies a point of encounter between properties, might be relevant as an element that objectivizes a collective experience.

How I see it is that, likewise as what we do as individuals, we do as academics: we leave our autonomic ability for political action to the State.

I remember encountering many kilometers of rock art, together with the inhabitants of a Pyrenees village. And they asked me, “Now what to do with this?”, and I responded by saying, look, why don't we start by sitting down together, to talk about what you would like to do? So, what I mean is, it's not just about us archaeologists changing the system, but that society changes the system, so that they can see themselves as protagonists in the creation of narratives about themselves.

Furthermore, the state has determined the dynamics of delegating who decides, defines, and who does the management, and we must fight against that. Finally, we have to establish a dialogue. Part of our work, as archaeologists, or as heritage practitioners, must be the result of a dialogue. And this dialogue has to be extended to research. What is important to study? Who defines what is important?

Any person has the capacity to voice what he or she thinks is interesting to study. Heritage, as something public, like public discourse, responds to a monopoly. So, our responsibility, as archaeologists - as we have an ability to influence that- is how we collectivize that process. However, we must raise the following question: how to create participatory heritage processes in an individualized society, where participation mechanisms are anecdotal?

From the experiences that I have had, the best examples I know are those where there was a collective organization active at the local level. In Nicaragua for example people self-organize and take part in cooperatives, deciding together about production, on where they will sell, etc. If you do this and connect this to heritage, surely the success rate will be much higher than where there is no collective space. And that implies that the best way is to increase spaces of participation.

**Nevertheless, often archaeological research that seeks out participation or hopes to collectivize the research process doesn't work.**

I agree. In that sense, when we talk about the construction of a discourse with the community, the important thing is to know: does the community produce the discourse or consume it?

In addition, with regard to the financing of archaeological projects - who defines what will be financed? In program H2020, for example, a series of financial aspects are defined, and research is oriented in a certain way, with a series of criteria.

How to turn that around? Ideally, each community has its archaeologists to begin with. We started working in 1996 in Nicaragua, when there was no archaeologist in all of Nicaragua. Teams were arriving mainly from North America to do research that resulted in theses in English and defended in the United States or France. And that did not help at all Nicaragua, especially the local communities there. Well, what we did at that time was to organise a collaborative project with the university to promote a career in archaeology.

The project initially took place in collaboration with volunteer archaeologists giving the classes in a center. We obtained funds that never came from the academic sphere, but from the sphere of cooperations. The idea was to do this formation for 5 years. But what model of archeology do we want to transmit to the people who are following the archaeological career? That is also important.

In the case of countries where access to archaeological sites is restricted (ie, accessible only to specific countries, or groups of researchers), the interesting thing would be to apply social pressure to change this policy.

Also important is that as archaeologists we can explain that this situation is not normal, and that it reflects colonialism. If there is oppression, aligned by the past, perhaps it is best to say that this does not have to be normal. That someone 200 years ago started digging a deposit to take everything to the British Museum or the Louvre, in according with his canon. That is not normal. That is normalizing an oppression, and I think that to address this could be a first step.

And, as we say, no heritage policy is neutral. That means that heritage policies do not depend solely on technical requirements. Archaeologists are not just simple managers of techniques. No, whatever we say is political.

So, the best thing is to explain that. And to work towards a collective consciousness of that. And then to try to get this collective consciousness involved in defining how politics should be. Which is very complicated, but the whistleblower phase is easier.

**Ermengol Gassiot Ballbè** is an archaeologist with a PhD in Prehistory and a professor at the UAB (Autonomous University of Barcelona). His main lines of research are the "Archaeology of the tropical forest of Central America", the "Archaeology of the high mountain", "paleoeconomy" and "Forensic Archaeology". He is currently the secretary of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union.

