



Debate Article

Historical erasure and archaeological possibilities

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The wider case presented by Hanscam and Buchanan (2023), as I understand it, is for archaeologists to consider directly the relation of the past in shaping social and political narratives in the present. I agree that this should happen; I contend it is productively happening already. It is a stretch to argue that the misinterpretation of Hadrian's Wall has been a substantive tool for political justification of US-Mexico border policy, or that archaeologists should make a comparison between such sites just in case someone tries to do so. I am interested in having a conversation about the history of bordering regimes, but why would we make a connection that might be misused in order to clarify that these are not good cases for comparison, beyond that both are walls? In relation to the authors' problem statement that history is being misused to justify the present, it is notable that the one quotation cited observing a relationship between Hadrian's Wall and present-day US-Mexico border barriers is from *The New Yorker*—hardly a bastion of jingoistic politics or a go-to source of journalism for the political right. Moreover, the quote expressed caution against making a comparison between Hadrian's wall and contemporary border walling projects.

It makes sense that any historical context would be useful to contest racialised and jingoistic politics on a host of issues. But I tend to think those who support border walls in the present do not think deeply about history at all. This is especially the case with the strain of anti- 'critical race theory' emerging in the United States, which seems to be a thinly veiled political rationale for erasing any troubling history from public education. If the wider existential problem is more one of historical erasure or (un)calculated ignorance than intentional misuse of the past, it would seem that a discipline built on material evidence to back its truth claims about the past and present should be well positioned to make claims for its own political relevance. This is a different intervention, however, than that proposed by Hanscam and Buchanan. A tenuous analogy to the contemporary US-Mexico border is not necessary to demonstrate how a materially grounded and nuanced view of history can productively challenge ideas of territoriality, sovereignty and even conceptions of the state.

Hanscam and Buchanan's (2023) debate piece also exposes the problematic nature of the proposed analogy. To make their case about the connection between the past and present, the authors misrepresent in some important ways the role of the 'wall' (officially, tactical infrastructure) at the US-Mexico border. In a 2018 article (Soto 2018), I chronologically and geographically traced some of the many material signatures of the border—dated sites of migrant belongings left behind, sites of border crossing deaths, and ethnographic observations of individuals ranging from forest rangers to humanitarian activists about the changing material

evidence of migrant passage. I then compared this ethnographic archaeological data to the geography and chronology of tactical infrastructure in southern Arizona, gleaned from direct observations and construction planning documents from the US Department of Homeland Security. My principal finding was that this infrastructure did not definitively determine how or where border crossings occurred relative to the wider border security strategy of funnelling movement into hostile terrain intended to leverage potential suffering and death as deterrence. While tactical infrastructure is a significant and potentially deadly obstacle in its own right, it does not seem strongly to determine migration flows at this border, as posited by Hanscam and Buchanan. Since the southern Arizona border was more than 80 per cent walled in 2018, my contention was that this study was a strong proxy for assessing the efficacy, or lack thereof, of this construction.

Others have written about the defence-in-depth posture of US border security—away from the physical site of the border wall—that has made US-Mexico border crossings more dangerous by extending the time and effort people spend crossing towards more mountainous terrain and remote places. While Hanscam and Buchanan nod to the humanitarian nature of these material observations, they do not directly describe the life-and-death stakes involved. This misses the most urgent point of all in this conversation.

Finally, the claim that archaeology has a role to play in present-day politics is not new. Most recently, *The dawn of everything* (2021), by the late anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow, topped bestseller lists worldwide. The book explores how rethinking the archaeological past can provide a necessary and potentially transformative antidote to the naturalised political narrative that an unequal capitalistic society is the inevitable outcome of human history, starting, as it does, from a strawman premise that communalistic societies have never really worked on a large scale. Randall McGuire's *Archaeology as political action* (2008) was a direct meditation on archaeology's role for political praxis. Others have written on *Archaeology as a tool of civic engagement* (Little & Shackel 2007) and made aligned cases for the archaeology and heritage of labour organising to problematise present-day political arguments against labour unionisation (Smith *et al.* 2011).

The writing on the political engagement of contemporary archaeological fieldwork is also important here. Others have made a productive case for thinking about the past alongside Indigenous communities, both to understand better the effects of the colonial past on the present and to expand the limitations of Western ontology to help conceptualise human responsibility towards the natural environment. There is also the politically engaged archaeology in dialogue with the Black Lives Matter movement, or archaeologies in developing countries concerned with the contemporary reverberations of colonial legacies.

So, yes, let us think reflexively about the relationship between past and present. Yes, this can be a productive tool for archaeology's relevance and political praxis. Indeed, the social stakes for this intervention far surpass archaeology as a discipline.

References

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