

Constructing the Future History

**Prefiguration as Historical Epistemology and the Chronopolitics of
Archaeology**

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We are not makers of history. We are made by history.

– Martin Luther King, Jr, *Strength to Love* (1963)

Heritage management and the preservation of archaeological sites is a major component of contemporary archaeological activity. Questioning the impact of decisions that arise through this practice is not new, nor is describing the context that has shaped the cultural structures in which these decisions are made. In this article, I use the anarchist and anti-oppressive activism concept of prefiguration to argue that archaeological sites are being mobilized not just to legitimize the state, but to create a future history where alternative power structures—egalitarian, non-state, Indigenous, pre-colonial—seem impossible to achieve; or worse, are forgotten.

The quote that opens this article serves to highlight a dialogic process within societies. When King wrote “we are not makers of history”, he wasn’t saying that we don’t create history; he was arguing that most people are not often the ones that *historians* will argue made history. And by saying “we are made by history”, he was acknowledging that history is a potent and unavoidable force for the construction of the present. This reveals an important rift because it presents history as being constructed by peoples whose names are known—generally the rich and powerful, the elites—and not the majority of humanity. It also means that our constructed history serves to create the present world, the social institutions, and the worldview in which individuals live their lives. In that way, then, we can say that how researchers *construct* history serves to create the world in which contemporary people live. We *are* made by history.

But this is not temporally stationary. Time and the construction of history work in a dialogic process where time moves the creation of history forward in an ever-unfolding network of responses. Mikhail Bakhtin encapsulated the recursive nature of the formation of past histories and the construction of future histories:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. (Bakhtin 2010 [1975], 170)

In archaeology, this consistent dialogic process is particularly important because archaeology, and more generally the construction of history, is inherently a memory-making practice (Adams 1993; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003; Sauer 2003; Sinopoli 2003; Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006; Levy 2006; Mills and Walker 2008; Beisaw 2010; Hendon 2010; see also Lowenthal 1985; Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992).

As archaeology is, at its most basic, a process for constructing history from the material record, decisions about what to use to create that history are unavoidable political acts (*sensu* Castañeda 1996; Sinopoli 2003; McGuire 2008). The type of archaeology being enacted does not matter. There is no division between an apolitical archaeology and a political one (Castañeda 1996, 24), only between the implicitness or explicitness with which the researcher acknowledges this political nature. When archaeologists, and museum professionals, make decisions about what to research, what to preserve, or what to highlight, this is political practice. The unavoidability of archaeological research as political praxis also means that the decision on what not to research has

political repercussions as well, and serves to construct a future history that is missing the excluded portions (*sensu* Sauer 2003). In the case of preservation-focused activity, these decisions might be permanent as unprotected sites and objects are lost to development, to environmental processes like erosion, to acts of destruction during wartime—themselves usually political (Sauer 2003, 162)—and to the antiquities trade. Forgetting—whether intentional or through decisions based on unacknowledged bias—is always a powerful, political act that can either support the structures of power, or hegemonic ideas, that create the unacknowledged bias (Arnold 1999; Giroux 2013) or undermine and contest that power (Arnold 2014, 2446; Bakunin 1973 [1873], 28, 1971a [1842], 57).

The political act of history making is one of the primary ways that archaeology serves to construct, and enforce, the power of the state (see Fowler 1987; Politis 1995; Meskell 2013). Archaeology can, of course, contest its supporting role in the rise of the nation-state (e.g., Schmidt and Patterson 1995), but, along with history (e.g., Tamm 2016), it has grown in lock-step with the notion of the state (Meskell and Preucel 2008, 316). Prefiguration is one way to understand how support of the state arises from ingrained bias.

Carl Boggs defined prefiguration as “the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of the movement, of those forms of social relations, decision making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs 1977, 100; see also Rucht 1988, 320; Calhoun 1993, 404; Franks 2003, 18; Maeckelbergh 2009, 81,89). Boggs was expanding on a concept developed by anarchists (Bakunin 1970 [1882]), radical feminists (e.g., Freeman 1972–1973), New Left social movement practitioners (e.g., van de Sande 2015; see also Polletta 2012), and the Industrial Workers of the World’s goal of “forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old” (Industrial Workers of the World 1905). Breines described the prefigurative practices of 1960s “New Left” social movements as “recognized in counter institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and antihierarchical values in politics [...]. The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships, and political forms that “prefigured” and embodied the desired society” (Breines 1989, 6).

Prefiguration has been extensively examined, supported, and critiqued (Calhoun 1993; Bookchin 1995; CrimethInc 2008; Gordon 2008; Maeckelbergh 2011; Franks 2014; Springer 2016), although its use and discussion within archaeology has been limited (e.g., Black Trowel Collective 2016; Borck and Sanger 2017). Prefigurative politics have become well known in recent years with the rise of the horizontally organized “Newest Social Movements” (Day 2005). David Graeber, one of prefigurative politics better-known advocates, has written extensively on how “the organizational form that an activist group takes should prefigure the kind of society we wish to create” (Graeber 2013, 23; see also Quail 1978, x; Graeber 2002; Franks 2003, 17; 2006, 17; Yates 2015).

Prefiguration is one of the primary reasons that anarchism, what one could call libertarian socialism (Rocker 2004 [1938], 28; Chomsky 2005, 180), separated from Marxism, a form of statist socialism (Franks 2014). Differing ideas about how to bring about social change turned into one of the fundamental ideological differences between Marx and early anarchists like Bakunin and Guillaume. For Marxists, change was started in the state apparatus before horizontal power could be achieved (Lenin 1970 [1902], 149; Trotsky 1973 [1938], 36). Anarchists, however, argued that such a process would only create another form of hierarchical power (e.g., Bakunin 1950; Rocker

1956, 111; Goldman 2012). This is often discussed as the difference between “the means create the end” (anarchism) and “the ends justify the means” (Marxism).

Beyond being simply a practice-based way to look at how to change society, prefiguration argues that change *necessarily* follows in the shape of actions—either explicit or implicit, purposeful or accidental, conscious or subconscious—that create that change (e.g., Proudhon 1876 [1840], 153; Rocker 1956; Bakunin 1971b [1842]; Bey 1991, 2; Kropotkin 1992 [1885]; Ince 2012; Springer 2016, 7). The underlying idea for prefiguration is that means have consequences (Maeckelbergh 2011, 16), but also that these consequences are necessarily linked to the form of the means (Franks 2006, 98–99). Therefore, prefiguration is performative (Schlembach 2012) and practice based. As Maeckelbergh notes (2011, 3) “prefiguration is something that people do [...] the alternative ‘world’ is not predetermined: it is developed through practice and it is different everywhere.” Prefiguration encompasses not only class issues, but also incorporates “every aspect of social existence” (Boggs 1977, 104). In many ways, this aligns prefigurative action with intersectional counter-cultural movements, because prefigurative actions are multi-threaded and not targeted at individual goals (Maeckelbergh 2011, 12–13).

Thus, prefiguration is more than just a performative practice. While the vast majority of researchers and practitioners who engage with prefiguration do so as a political practice to create spaces and societies free of oppression, they are doing so because they fundamentally think that ends and means are consequentially linked.

It follows, then, that this essential difference in understanding about the consequences of our actions means that prefiguration is “not only a theory of political practice; it is a theory of meaning” (Cohn 2006, 80). Taken epistemologically, prefiguration is simply that the means are *necessarily* reproduced into the ends. The configuration of the means does not matter. Far from being simply related to creating a just society, this also implies that hierarchical means will prefigure hierarchical ends. Understood this way, prefiguration is the means and ends as process. Thus, archaeologists use the past in the present to construct a history for the production of the future.

Constructing the Future History

Yes, the long memory is the most radical idea in this country. It is the loss of that long memory which deprives our people of that connective flow of thoughts and events that clarifies our vision, not of where we’re going, but where we want to go.

– Bruce “Utah” Phillips, liner notes for the album *The Long Memory* (1996)

Since archaeological practice is inherently political and our practice prefigures the ends (at least without direct intervention), what are current archaeological preservation practices prefiguring? What future history are we constructing?

A brief examination of UNESCO cultural preservation decisions in North America and the Caribbean through a prefigurative lens highlights what Western, and colonial, societies valorize and what type of history we are creating through heritage preservation decisions. Out of the 61 UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Sites in North America¹ only six (10%) can best be described

¹ Data was compiled from the UNESCO World Heritage List and included all of the cultural and mixed cultural/natural sites from the three countries that comprise North America: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>.

as horizontally organized (Figure 1).² This marginal number does not accurately reflect the sociopolitical history of North America and the Caribbean, where far more than 10% of human history consisted of some form of horizontally organized governance (although see Wengrow and Graeber 2015).

These listings can have dehumanizing aspects as well. While this article focuses on UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Sites, there are also many other World Heritage Natural Sites, like the Grand Canyon, that also contain archaeological histories and many of these histories represent alternative ways of organizing. As such, their categorization as Natural Sites also serves to further delegitimize horizontal forms of power by situating this practice within a non-human, “uncivilized”, and non-intentional framework (see Bandarin 2007)

² Data is available at https://github.com/lborck/2016UNESCO_Cultural/tree/2018UNESCO_Cultural. Coding these sites as either a vertical or horizontal sociopolitical organization necessarily reduces these political forms from a continuum into a binary. However this reduces obfuscation and allows potential patterns to be clearly visible.

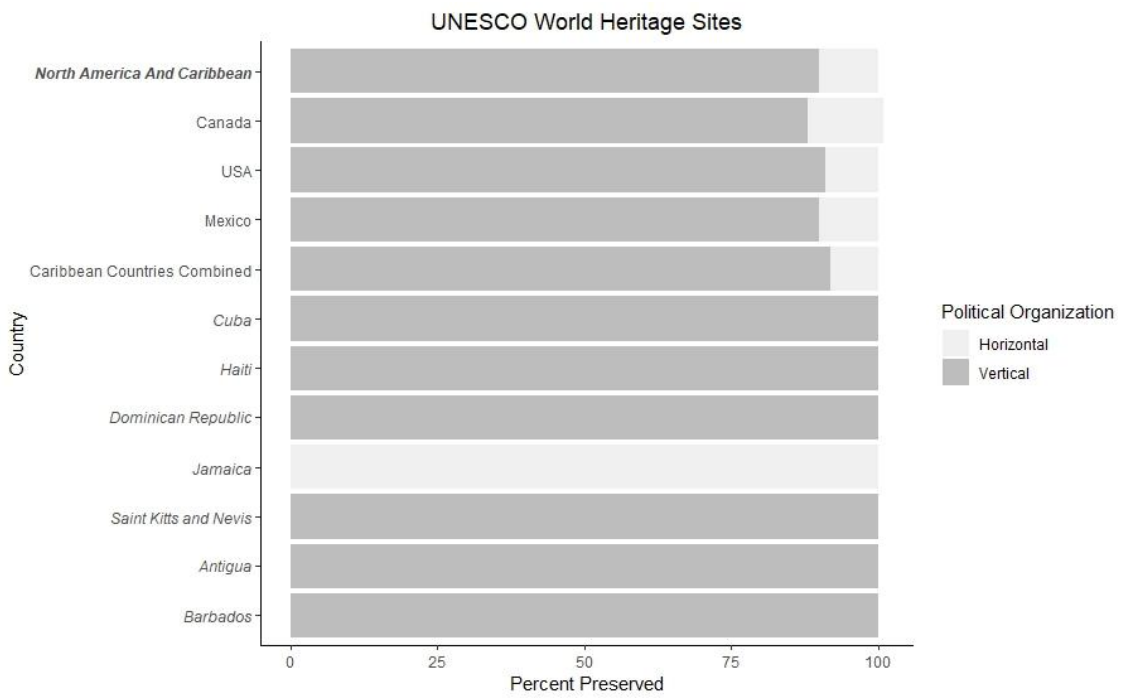


Figure 1. Proportion of UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Sites in North America and the Caribbean that are primarily vertically or horizontally organized along a socio-political continuum.

Archaeological preservation decisions, as political as any other archaeological action, prefigure our future shared history. Creating a hierarchical history limits our ability to imagine, both implicitly and explicitly, alternative ways to organize collectively outside of top-down power structures. The forever shifting present, then, is a transitional period where decisions lead society to one of several alternate futures. This transitional positioning of the political present was one of the important aspects of Wallis's ideas on chronopolitics (Wallis 1970) and one of the reasons that archaeological preservation decisions are chronopolitical.

Chronopolitics is a broad term that was implemented in the study of geopolitics to offset the overreliance on spatiality (Klinke 2013, 675; *contra* Foucault 1980 [1977], 149) and introduce temporal concerns. It focuses on the time perspectives of individuals and groups and how those perspectives influence their political behavior (Wallis 1970, 102). An important addition to this is that the present is always impacting the future, so contemporary decisions have temporally long-reaching consequences (Wallis 1970; see also Witmore 2013 for a past-oriented chronopolitical discussion of how archaeological material constitutes the present). Thus, those who are making the decisions in the present can control the future (e.g., Gellner 1964).

Klinke (2013, 680) has argued that chronopolitics are intimately linked with Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes, or timespaces (Bakhtin 2010 [1975], 84). When understood prefiguratively, archaeological sites embody Bakhtin's chronotope concept because their "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" and because they are where time "thickens" and becomes "visible" (Bakhtin 2010 [1975], 84; see also Witmore 2013). This is part of the reason that archaeological practice cannot be fundamentally separated from political practice. These sites become "where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 2010 [1975], 250).

When that narrative constructs a past that overlooks non-state efforts at communal organization—or mainly focuses on the hierarchical forms of communal organization and fails to incorporate small- and large-scale democratically-organized or horizontally-organized societies—then that past is inherently mobilized in the present to construct a future history that underrepresents societies like these. Worse, it creates a future history where organization outside of the hierarchical state doesn't even seem possible at a large scale. Chronotopes control which interpretations are possible and which are not (Allan 1994). Thus, preserved archaeological sites are chronotopes that leverage chronopolitics to control these interpretations. In many ways, this is a self-replicating process that, through time, decreases our historical imagination of alternative political organizations. It is the archaeological contribution of what Klinke (2013, 674) called the "progressive othering at the core of western geopolitics".

The anarchist geographer Piotr Kropotkin (1898) warned about this erasure when he wrote about how life and education within and under the state has permanently impacted the way that we view the world. Alternative ways of organizing, alternative ways of existing and being, are lost. This is the naturalization of the state (see also Flexner 2014, 82–85; Faryluk 2015). Questions about how to organize politically, from a context where the state is naturalized, replicate existing forms of state organization because these are assumed to be the only effective options. In this

context radical answers become difficult to hear, much less accept (Toulmin and Goodfield 1965, 43–44).

Thus, the use of archaeological sites to naturalize the hierarchical state delegitimizes horizontal power structures (for similar discussion from a memory/forgetting perspective, see Mills 2008, 82–83; Hayes 2011, 206–212). In North America, this serves a nefarious, but again implicit, purpose, since most horizontal (or alternating horizontal and vertical) power structures are Indigenous. Archaeological preservation decisions that naturalize, and are naturalized under, the state necessarily marginalize and erase the many creative forms of Indigenous management of power (both vertical and horizontal).

This is visible in how many UNESCO World Heritage Sites in North America and the Caribbean (68.9%) focus on European, or Western, colonial powers. Countries like Cuba, a Marxist-Leninist socialist state with the vanguard political goal of using the state to create a stateless and classless society, serve as indicators of the effects that the naturalization of the state has on the construction of history. Cuba, with seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites, only preserves colonial period sites with vertical political organization. There, horizontal organizations and Indigenous societies are not preserved through UNESCO.

Archaeology is a chronopolitical discipline that can, and in many cases does, limit historical memory through preservation-management decisions. But this also means that we are in a unique position as practitioners to prefigure future understandings of political organizations that do not enforce or grow social inequality. This involves a critical personal analysis as chronopolitical practitioners and an awareness that our contemporary decisions are always in process of creating a future replicated on them (following Birmingham 2013, 170). This also demonstrates that site preservation management decisions cannot be done on a site by site basis. Instead, preservation organizations should look at the corpus of their preservation activity to determine what archaeological sites, and thus histories, they should focus on to balance the story that our past is creating and to preserve a diversity of political forms.

Until this happens, we will continue to construct a future history that sees no *practical* alternative to inequality and the hierarchical state.

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