

Iker LAISEKA URIA***An interview with Neil Faulkner*****Abstract**

Neil Faulkner is a British historian and archaeologist, well known thanks to his works regarding Marxism and divulgation. In this journal of archaeology, we are devoted to the study and discussion regarding theory and its political influences within archaeology and history in general.

It is because of this that we embarked into this theoretical endeavour, aiming to introduce some of our readers to the forementioned author, who may be unknown to them. Nonetheless, Neil Faulkner has written several books, and some of them have been already translated into Spanish.

We hope this humble interview succeeds in its primary goal, which is to understand better the mind behind the aforementioned books. Furthermore, we want to know what its motivations and deepest thoughts regarding several political and philosophical questions are, as these are irredeemably linked to historiography and archaeological theory.

Introduction

Neil Faulkner graduated in archaeology in London's King's College, and has been working as either an archaeologist, or a historian (or sometimes both at once). He is currently a researcher at the University of Bristol. He is editor of *Military History Monthly*, Co-Director of The Great Arab Revolt Project and Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project. In addition, he is a member of the Society of London antique dealers. Some of his most notable books are *A Marxist History of the World from Neanderthals to Neoliberals*, *A Popular History of the Russian revolution* or *The War of Lawrence of Arabia* among many others.

These are his best-known works. I've been able to read, nevertheless, some of his lesser-known works, such as *digging Sedgeford*. Far from being an author solely focused on wider perspectives (including within them world history as a whole), he has produced indeed some extraordinary books and articles that we could catalogue as archaeological. And these were written to divulge archaeological record and activities, but at the same time

they include a very strong theoretical position and are rich with philosophy and methodology.

Those who take part in this our journal of archaeology feel proud of their theoretical position, of their philosophical formation and, above all, of their herculean commitment to making something else than regurgitating data and facts. Neil Faulkner excels in his field, as he understood the power of History and Archaeology, just like others before him (Carr, Hobsbawm...). This doesn't lie in rehearsed historical facts or the application of state-of-the-art technology without the slightest criticism; as that, by itself, is not methodological progress.

Further to this, as I mentioned earlier in this very same page, he has managed to convey his ideas through two channels just as crucial. Therefore, he has been able to transmit the importance of theory to the wider audience (*a Marxist History of the World...*) and to a more academic one (composed of professionals and students). The importance of divulgation sums up to his way of treating History and Archaeology.

On the whole, the reasons that support the need to carry out this interview are too many to name them all. Not much more can be said without spoiling the forthcoming pages. Note that it is one of the first interviews in English included in this journal, so recommendations regarding the questions or other authors (soon to be interviewed) are more than welcomed (please use the email provided under the main title).

How it was made

After noticing *A Marxist History of the World* copy in my local bookshop shelf, I knew I had to get myself one. Reading it was rather revealing, I was surprised to see how a general topic regarding world history was approached from a much more interesting perspective. And most importantly, the author was not at all scared to show its intentions, which were fully present in the very title.

This was my first contact with Neil Faulkner, and of course I liked how he worked with historical and archaeological concepts. There are few authors brave enough to pierce through the thick layers that separate ideology and history. This is worth mentioning, as openly showing one's opinion is the ultimate sign of an anti-establishment approach. The reason is most of the times general

history works (and academic articles) refrain from developing theory, in a so-called quest for objectivity (seldom achieved).

This triggered my attention as I soon found myself reading other earlier works on more theoretical subjects. I tried to download "archaeology from below", a 1990s article. Sadly, the file was not available online, and I pressed the "request full pdf" button, not expecting any results. I couldn't believe it when I checked my email and Neil himself had sent me the files. The kindness he showed, not sometimes very common among authors online, certainly moved me.

It was after this first contact that I decided to carry out the interview, and Neil agreed. The questions and answers are the exact transcript from the original video. Please enjoy.

Interview

- Well, Neil Faulkner, thanks for agreeing to this interview for RAMPAS archaeological journal. It is really a pleasure having you here today and being able to talk with you about these topics I do find quite interesting. The most important feature I think we should actually talk about when interviewing a historian is your role as a political activist, just as well, because I think it's not really typical in the academic world, I suppose.

- Not at all.

- I am acquainted with some other historians like Thompson who were political activists... It's something I actually wanted to talk about. Thank you for coming, and now I'll probably start with the questions. Given the fact that this journal is mainly focused on historiography and specifically in archaeological theory, what role do you think theoretical positions should play in the development of social sciences? Understanding I do myself give it some importance and I'm aware my colleagues do as well. You cannot go straight into writing history without a previous philosophical and historiographical education I suppose. What are your thoughts on this subject?

- I think I would say you need both. If you are simply an empiricist, disconnecting data, you are not doing anything terribly useful, because the data in and on itself cannot explain how societies worked in the past. If on the other hand you are simply a theorist it is possible to build theories upon

theories which are not grounded in data, which are not grounded in evidence... And those theories are not actually explaining the past either, they are literally theoretical contracts. There is necessarily a relationship between theory and practice. That is a fundamental insight of Marxism, theory and practice related to each other; and it applies to Archaeology as it applies to anything else. I found myself discussing with colleagues who will say to me "how can we trust what you say if you are influenced by a political ideology" and I have to say to them that Marxism is not a political ideology, it is a method for trying to make sense of the world, you too will have your own method for trying to make sense of the world, even if you are not aware of it and you don't admit to have one. Necessarily when people are trying to interpret data -and all archaeologists are obliged to try and do that- they must be drawing on some kind of theoretical framework whether they are conscious about it or not. Very often they are not. I'm very often involved in discussions about political economy in the past, how economics worked. Again, and again and again I'll find archaeologists who were primarily empiricists who were not working theoretically, who were default, and they would use terms like trade, exchange, commerce, markets... Terms that they have simply lifted out of a neoclassical economic textbook and then they have tried to apply them to the roman world, to the prehistoric world...without any sense whatsoever. But these are ideologically charged terms which had been generated in modern capitalism, and they think they can just apply them to explain how stuff was moving 1 thousand or 5 thousand years ago. So, they are using a theory, but they are using the wrong theory and they are doing so very badly because they are not theoretically properly informed. You must have unity of theory and practice in your works as an archaeologist.

- I do agree with you, I've read about the importance of theory and practice in many Marxist books. Actually, throughout my career, I've encountered many different schools of thought and some of them (shockingly) reject theory. They claim they don't need it because it's subjective. Thus, they kind of embark in some kind of empiricist crusade, placing data in a pedestal. Some of them argue that they seek being a scientist, however you cannot become one without theory. They harvest data, they analyse it, and then they come up with a hypothesis, ba-

sed on theory! Unaware of their use of theory. They are deliberately using mainstream doctrines and schools of thought, those that do not collide with the system (academic or not). They place these pre-absorbed ideas into the paper (without further analysis) and call it a day.

So, my second question relates to theory. Did you face any adversities during your academic life and career regarding your condition as Marxist archaeologist/historian?

- I think what I was aware of is that there is a tendency to be a little patronizing sometimes. Certainly, to marginalise my contributions or to attempt to marginalise my contributions. And possibly what underlies that is the assumption that because I'm a Marxist, somehow that delegitimises my contribution to mainstream discussions. I think it's probably true that's become a much bigger problem for Marxists in the neoliberal era. There has been a whole process of abandoning theory, social theory, grand narratives (patterns that one can see) there's been a movement away from the kind of tradition of many great thinkers from the 60s and the 70s. When Marx was much stronger, when Marx could not be marginalised. It's ironic that Marx has been marginalised in the academy, because in the outside world Marx is back; because of the scale of the crisis that is unfolding. There's a real explosion in the real world because the people are aware of the crisis and its reach.

- I'm quite sure this crisis has increased the level of consciousness of people. Marxism in the academy was surely stronger when my parents went to university. Nowadays however, you have to disguise your Marxist orientation because if you don't you may be excluded from certain journals, symposiums... etc. Marxism it's still rejected by big sectors in the academia. I sense that at least.

- I agree.

- The third question is related to your books. The second edition of a Marxist History of the World saw some changes, the title among them. But you do introduce new topics in the book, don't you? Sometimes when you display your thought within a Marxist framework, you do have to disguise it. Was this the reason behind the change of the book title? Because now its name is A Radical History of the world and not the forementioned title, more easily related to Marx and Marxism.

- The decision was made by the publisher, not by me. He decided to change the title because he thought we would sell more copies if Marx was not present on the cover. I think the publisher may have been wrong, because as we mentioned before, Marx is having a comeback. A lot of people, an activist audience, is seeking Marxist interpretations. It is still a Marxist history of the world, of course. However, I introduced some changes. For example, in the Spanish edition I included some contents regarding Spanish speaking countries. That was then incorporated into the second English edition, but so where some gaps were filled. The most important change was the reworking the section of the book regarding the crisis which is now unfolding. There's a much fuller analysis of the development of capitalism up until the point where there's what I call the neoliberal counterrevolution. I wanted to look in much more detail at what are in fact the greatest crisis in history. The book is a progression of the whole of human history, and towards the end of this progression we see how humanity faces its greatest crisis and the crisis that could lead to the collapse of civilization as we know it. The second edition is oriented towards this concept of crisis and the concept of the end of time (something not as clear in the first edition). Now I'm quite sure this crisis is the final crisis, is the end of the story and probably a call to arms.

-I thought the title change was a little bit counter-productive. When one goes to the library and sees a book mentioning Marx it really gets one's attention. When he isn't present you have to know each and every author in order to know what to look for. Well, how do you think we should explain archaeological contexts using a Marxist perspective? How should we explain historical processes using this very same method?

- I'd put it slightly differently. I'd say that if you consciously set out to interpret a specific site, culture or period from a Marxist perspective you are approaching this back to front. What I'd say is if you have to equip yourself with a Marxist understanding of how human societies work, and if you have internalised Marxism as a method of interpretation to maximise the capacity of that period. If you have internalised it, you are not even doing the interpretations consciously. The revolution of iron and how transformative it came from the

outside, it's not being generated from within. When you see the astronomical and colossal expenditure made by the ruling class and their tight control... You understand that the profits of these civilizations were used in temples, pyramids, monuments... etc. That's why the iron development didn't develop in Egypt, for example. This is a Marxist interpretation, but I didn't interpretate this process being aware of my Marxist position, I did it naturally. What I'd say to young researchers is that you need to get such a handle on this way of understanding the way in which the world works so it becomes almost a second nature when it comes to interpretate a set of data.

- Well, Neil, the fifth question is: what are your thoughts on this mainstream school of thought that defends objectivity in archaeology but in fact encourages a very poor analysis of the past reinforcing very old stereotypes? Could it be the New Archaeology and its heirs?

- I think there's been a terrible confusion between objectivity and subjectivity. This is a false dichotomy. You don't have on one hand objectivity (about collecting data and then making scientific statements) and then subjectivity where you develop a body of ideas, derived from a political ideology that you then try to apply to data. In real science this dichotomy is non-existent. You need both, and all of the great scientific works use great doses of theory. For example, if you are to understand how human psychology works you go out to collect data, case studies. This is what psychoanalysis does. But then, they go and explain the ideas and the complex data, they develop a conceptual and theoretical framework in order to process this data. That's the science of psychology, and exactly in the same way there is a science in human sciences, in History, in Archaeology... The data is just the evidence, whether it is part of material culture or written texts, but it never tells you how societies worked, that is what is surely achieved through theory (most of the time unconsciously). It hasn't been properly worked out, and what happens is you get lost because these people haven't bother to study social theory, thus data is misinterpreted. They are missing an understanding of how human societies really work. So, you actually get the data being completely misrepresented because an interpretation is being imposed on the data which simply isn't plausible when you compare it with

what we know about how human societies work. I would reject this forementioned dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity. I'd say that all scientific work involves a unity of theory and practice; an interaction, a dialectical interaction between theory and practice. If you don't do this, you are just collecting data, like some kind of stamp collector. I won't be interested in data unless you are giving it an interpretation, and if you avoid doing this, you aren't doing anything useful.

- Indeed. Some people in the academia still defends this artificial dichotomy, which is, in my opinion, nonsense. A professor of mine told me that sometimes specialists carrying out scientific methods like dating and others tend to include subjective interpretations of the data; even before it reaches archaeologists! And it is because in their belief of objectivity when using data. They unconsciously repeat a rather pernicious pattern, learnt throughout their career. Most of the time, mainstream schools do, in my honest opinion, leave a mark in these analysts, ironically avoiding any objectivity whatsoever.

Sixth question: some colleagues have already written about the capital importance of social activism. How important do you think social activism is when doing archaeological or historical research? Does it make any sense using Marxism explaining historical processes if you ignore its more than obvious social implications?

- I would divide the question into two parts. There is a relationship between archaeology and social activism in both a theoretical and a practical sense. In the practical sense, I take the view that archaeology belongs to everybody; our history should be collective property. In so far, what we need to do is to disrupt the way we do archaeology in order to apply these principles as much as we can. What I have practised for 25 years in Sedgeford, in Norfolk, England is practising what I called democratic archaeology, which consists of allowing anyone interested to participate in the excavation itself. And in fact, generally speaking I have run my projects without external funding. Partly on the basis that there is in fact a lot of people interested in doing archaeology as a hobby. It is a kind of social activism, because you demonstrate in a kind of microcosm because you show a society in which labour is not alienated, in which labour is not for capital, in which

labour would be carried out by groups of people who decided voluntarily to work together. They would be developing themselves working with each other in this microcosm. I think we do get so many volunteers because a lot of people is sick of their shitty lifestyle and their rotten jobs under the actual conditions of capitalism. We are creating through this a way of doing in archaeology an example of how the world could be a better place. If you are socially active, a historical actor (as opposed to being historical passive) your understanding of how human societies work will be better. My concrete experiences of class struggle, trade unions, unemployment and its effects... For example, if you have experienced police violence against left wing demonstrations, against working class picket lines, against oppressed people organising themselves, racist killer cops... If you got concrete experiences of that you will never read an historical account of an encounter on the streets between working people and the police and have anything other than sympathy with the people who are on the receiving end of the police charges; and you won't believe for a second that those cops haven't got their heads filled with the most reactionary rubbish. You have got your own experience of what happens when working people begin to organise from below and fight back; they come up against the state, which represents the interests of the ruling class, and the ruling class has armed bodies of men and sometimes women who are organised on a paramilitary way and whose heads are filled with reactionary rubbish whose job it is to knock back the resistance from below. You know that because you are a social activist, and so you can interpretate things that happened in the past much more effectively. I've read Egyptologists stating that volunteers built the pyramids. Anyone that has any social experience at all knows that in no way ordinary Egyptian peasants would have volunteer to spend their effort, time and well being to build those colossal, pointless, wasteful monuments oriented to the glorification of an autocratic ruler. You know that from your social experience, because you are an activist in the outside world. I think we need to bring our social commitment to bear on the way we do archaeology but in the exact same way we should draw the experience of social activism in order to understand better how societies worked in the past.

- *I agree with your last comments regarding the building of the pyramids, because I recently watched a BBC documentary about the origin of state and civilization in Caral (where there are, too, pyramids) and one of the explanations was that the process started because people worked together in some kind of harmony, peacefully; motivated by trade, commerce, and the uneventful ascension of a ruling class... It is nonsense in my honest opinion. The other explanation relied on war to the outside, so it disregarded violence from the ruling class towards its own citizens; again, agreeing with what you just said, presenting only these two options and not presenting any other increases my doubts about the real credibility of these hypotheses.*

Seventh question: A Radical History and a Marxist History are books written not at all in a dense way, which makes them easy to read. Of course, they main interest they have, in my opinion, is their Marxist approach. For obvious reasons we are interested in Prehistory; how important do you think prehistory is in these studies? And how would you approach its study from the forementioned perspective? I want to add something before we carry on: I said the book was not dense, because I somehow perceive these two books are accessible to those not very familiar with the subjects being introduced. For example, when you can talk about DNA you introduce its importance and how it really works, that is of great aid to the reader, so he can go through the contents without having to be part of the academy.

- I would say this, when I think about Prehistory, I would say that the starting point is still Frederik Engels book *the Origins of Family Private Property and the State*. Because although he was working with a very limited set of data, there are some essential truths contained within the pages of that book itself. As soon as you bring private property and the division of classes, a state turns itself necessary, that is a fundamental truth in this book. Throughout Prehistory we can study the way societies change- it was incredibly poor being a hunter gatherer, you cannot idealise it- but we can say there was a situation with a relative social equality along with a very basic level of subsistence. Through Prehistory we observe the construction of state, of systems of state property, violence... That is a crucially important story, because there are so many people out there who argue that inequality is a part of human condition, archaeology and anthropology tells us that it is not the case. If these

things are constructs, that creates the possibility that on the basis of a more industrial civilization we could move to another social organisation.

- I am quite sure the role of Prehistory should be to show how all these inequalities appeared (with all these problems regarding its study because there were no texts whatsoever). What you said is quite true, we should not idealise the way of living of the palaeolithic; there is people trying to take a myriad of prehistoric traits and traditions into the XX century, claiming the subsistence methods of the period to be superior. What they probably fail to understand is that is not technology from the past the one we should be aiming to implement in our daily life, but social practises and social organisation. Concepts regarding private property, power, state, wealth distribution... Needless to say the neoliberalist machine itself would not allow the spread of these ideas as they do with paleo diets and other sub-products.

So the eight question is: lately we have been able to see general disinterest in theoretical positions and historiography among students, academics, etcetera. What do you think of this affirmation? Why do you think it happens? Could it be that this objectivity that rejects philosophy is actually encouraged by the elites?

- I think the shift is rooted in neoliberalism, because what really happens in the late 70s early 80s is that capital and the ruling class on a global scale launch a counterattack against the working class (globally). Sets about dismantling the kind of mixed economy, welfare type capitalism that had emerged on the developed world and sets to dismantle national development programs that had unfolded in parts of the global south. You get a breaking down of those models, you get a retreat from the state from being a proactive economic force and the space is filled by corporate private capital. That's what's been unfolding for 40 years, it does involve an ideology of competition, individualism... It implies an atomization of society into separate individuals, so they are all making their own way. It implies that we cannot organise together and make collective decisions in order to plan our future and the future organisation of society. Postmodernism or postprocesualism is the idea that there is no overarching pattern that we can see within the historical process. However, within historical processes what we got is endless

negotiation of roles and identities. What we need is people at the bottom of the system organising together. We have a neoliberal counterrevolution, with postmodernist ideas, that react and demolish the idea that we, the people, we the great collective, can make a difference. Postmodernists claim that this is all about the empowerment of minorities and forgotten voices; this is garbage, complete an utter garbage. The oppressed advance when they build a movement that connects with others. Collectives it is what we should be interested in, this hostility to grand narratives, Marxism and collective is rooted in the empowerment of neoliberalism. Postmodernism is not revolutionary, it is completely reactionary, it brings the voice of Neoliberalism into the academy. We need collective understanding, organisation and action from humanity as a whole in order to provide solutions to this crisis we are indeed suffering.

- From my point of view postmodernism is an strategy for the elites to appear more appealing to the masses. It's not at all revolutionary and it does not offer a different insight into the wonders of the past, which is what we focus on as archaeologists and social theorists. Don't we?

Ninth question, which authors influenced your work (archaeologists, philosophers, thinkers...) Did Hobsbawm, Thompson and Patterson leave a mark on you?

*- In terms of archaeology, I have to mention Vere Gordon Childe, probably the best archaeologist of all times. Certainly, someone who was in the field collecting lots of data, and then producing extraordinary synthesis, a perfect example of unity between theory and practice. Hobsbawm did influenced me but not as much as Marxist history from below theoreticians, like Christopher Hill, who the great Marxist historian of the English revolution, like Thompson, the great historian of the XVIII century... What I like about that tradition is that, well, Hobsbawm was a bit of Stalinist, and a such was a bit mechanical. Thompson and Hill saw history as something being actively done. The other person I have to mention is Trotsky, because the best history book I have ever read is Trotsky's *A History of the Russian Revolution*. The whole of the mechanical of class struggle, of political and power struggle. Trotsky was the dominant influence in the Russian Revolution, people think it was Lenin, because he was the leader of*

the Bolsheviks party, but it was Trotsky indeed. He was Petrograd's soviet leader, and he led the red army. I recommend this book to everybody because it gives you a glimpse of the massive power that people's organisation may have if directed properly. Trotsky's ideas of course were later crushed by Stalin's counterrevolution in the late 1920s; but for a year or 2 or 3 you had the most extraordinary experiment in power from below represented in that revolution. The best account on it you can read is Trotsky's book.

- *Thanks. I do find interesting for our readers to make themselves familiar with the authors that in some way left a mark on you. Sometimes other thinkers and writers do not clearly state their sympathies and so- indirectly in my opinion- they confuse their readers.*

Well, the tenth question is: any advises or thoughts on the revival of the theoretical debate among young researchers? I think the younger sectors of academia are more easily influenced. The second question is, what would you say to a young researcher/historian/archaeologist reading this interview?

- I am just going to throw one idea. Maybe we, Marxist archaeologists should be thinking about creating some kind of international grouping. Because of this polarisation we have been talking about, and the crisis, the climate catastrophe, and all those global problems will only be solved if we join forces. We on the left should be building international connections in order to overcome this international struggle. So that we can explore theoretical issues that concern us and discover new ways in which we can be socially active. During the BLM protest last summer, statues got tore down in Britain. There was this particular example in Bristol where a statue of a slave owner was tore down and thrown into the harbour. It was an exemplary protest, and I wrote a letter to one of our national newspaper defending the destruction of this statue. Internationally we got signatures of archaeologists along the world supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. That is the way we can intervene as radical archaeologists, socially, and then learn from the theoretical perspectives of other colleagues. Maybe you and I should start working on some kind of initiative.

- *Building a community would be quite helpful, because we would be much more powerful politically speaking, and more initiatives could have been developed appropriately.*

The last question is about your next works. Have you thought about writing a philosophy book analysing the theory behind your thought?

- I have not, and I do not see it happening anytime soon, because I have so many writing projects on my agenda. I am working on three books at the moment, so I'm left without time to write about these matters. It's not on the agenda, I'm afraid.

- *It's a pity because I would find it incredibly useful for young researchers, as well as for senior archaeologists. It is not something you find in books-hops nowadays, theory is being forgotten, and your approach would be of the utmost interest. Let's hope you do write something in this sense in the future.*

Neil Faulkner, thanks for your time, and your dedication. It was an immense pleasure talking with you about all these topics. I am quite sure our readers will find them incredibly interesting and insightful. Let's get our finger crossed about your future publications, and I hope you join us here on RAMPAS once more in the future to discuss other matters as well as presenting your articles, new books to come, or thoughts in general. Once again, thank you.