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Introduction: heritage and revolution – first as tragedy, then as farce?

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ABSTRACT

If a revolution is taken to be a decisive break with the past, how can there be a heritage of revolution? Conversely, how does any revolution affect tangible and intangible heritage, as well as shifting conceptions of heritage? In this introduction to four papers dedicated to the theme of 'Heritage and Revolution', we provide an overview of changing conceptualizations of both ideas and how they have shaped each other since the French Revolution first radically changed both. This special section's papers developed from the 2017 Annual Seminar of the Cambridge Heritage Research Group. 2017, as the centenary of the February and October Russian Revolutions, provided a global opportunity for reflection on these themes and for analysis of how contemporary heritagization of revolution (or lack thereof) molds and is molded by a society's conception of itself and its past. At at time of shifting political and heritage paradigms worldwide, this topic remains timely and fascinating.

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Revolution is a central concept of modernity and, for us moderns, it appears as an intrinsic feature of politics. But it was only after the French Revolution that 'revolution' took its modern meaning as a rational effort to break with the old order and institute a new one. As Hanna Arendt put it in *On Revolution*, 'The modern concept of revolution, inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before is about to unfold, was unknown prior to … the eighteenth century' (2016, 24). Before the eighteenth century, the notion of revolution was still related to the movement of the planets, and its political usage reflected this meaning: a revolution did not involve the creation of a new order, but a return to the previously hegemonic political situation (Walzer 1979). The modern concept of revolution emerged throughout the nineteenth century, together with Enlightenment and scientific ideas and a linear understanding of time, history and evolution (Baker 1999). These ideas not only allowed for the emergence of classificatory schemes between social groups and nations, but also for the appearance of the notion of an *ancien régime* opposed to the present and future prospects of the new order. Despite claims to break with the past, however, revolutions are often permeated by tension between the old and the new, which leads to a dialectic between continuation with tradition and creation (Swann 2009). As Marx put it in his Eighteenth Brumaire:

> Men make their own history, but not of their own free will … The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to

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> help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language. (1977, 146–147)

But revolutionary processes do not only engage in dialogue with their own traditions and former political contexts (Levenson 2016). At least since the French Revolution, revolutionary movements project their future orientations and produce their own histories in relation to the ghosts of previous revolutions (Anderson 2006). But the relations, connections and dialogues between these heterogeneous processes have not been sufficiently explored from a critical heritage perspective. The significance of heritage in revolutionary periods cannot be overstated due to its central role in the legitimization and institutionalization of modern states and nations. Museums, monuments and commemorations, to name a few heritage features, connect the past with the present, create shared histories and help transform the symbolic landscape of society (Bennett 2004).

The French Revolution signaled the birth of heritage as a representation and recognition of the existence of *a past* to be overcome but, at the same time, to be preserved by 'the people': that is, according to the general will and based on the principles of reason and morality (Gamboni 1997). Indeed, the birth of the heritage concept and state strategies to preserve it are the other side of the coin of the destruction brought about by revolutions (Choay 2001). But the need to compensate for exaggerated destruction, which underpinned conservation initiatives, went beyond isolated iconoclastic or 'vandalistic' episodes: it could be seen as a specific trait of modernity (Latour 1993).

The ideology and fantasy of heritage preservation is related to a collective reaction to the loss of reality and a real sense of a 'break with the past', triggered by modernity, that moderns try to compensate for through reason and management strategies (Poulot 2006). Heritage is therefore key in revolutionary moments because, following Alois Riegl (1982), the 'cult of monuments' obliterates the meaning of the past in objects and their significance for human experience, to then reappear as aesthetic artifacts subject to new political, academic and socioeconomic uses in the present. The capacity of heritage to evict historical meaning and create new senses and values is quite related to forms of mythological thinking that underpin Western nationalism and history-making. The uses of the mythological component of heritage often surface in an accentuated fashion during revolutionary moments, whether as a charter for the present, as an obliteration or expression of social contradiction or as an explanation of origins (Herzfeld 1991). This testifies to the interest of developing a comparative perspective both of the treatment of revolutionary heritages and of the treatment of heritage under revolutionary regimes.

Examining the distinctive features of revolutionary processes while respecting their heterogeneity would allow us to provide a nuanced understanding of their kinship and distinctive traits. Questions emerging in the pieces of this special issue include: are there specific traits of heritage conceptualization and management inherent to revolutionary phenomena? How do revolutions challenge, update or recast heritage theory and practice? Do revolutions borrow heritage models from each other and, if so, how? How is the idea of heritage played out at the junction of conservation and destruction, culture and politics, intrinsic to any revolutionary moment? What different representations of the past are fought over during revolutionary periods?

Answering these questions requires as much analytic sophistication as theoretical equipment. Heritage management and conceptualization is linked to systems of domination and legitimization embedded in relations of production and the power-knowledge apparatus of the state. Every revolution challenges and transforms the formerly existing status quo, in conscious and unconscious ways: that is, with rational plans and with a de facto total transformation of the quotidian social, economic and bureaucratic relations with heritage and the past. This transformative thrust confronts us immediately with a central question: the dialectic of continuity and change, that is, of how to deal with the past and its material remains in times of change, an issue explored in the seminal works of Peter Marris's (1974) *Loss and Change* and Sanford Levinson's (1998) *Written in Stone*. Revolutionary periods challenge previous assumptions and aesthetic values, with different social groups pulling in different directions between preservation and destruction. As Michael

Walzer has argued, the interaction of two broad social groups often conditions revolutionary movements: the vanguard and the class. For him, 'analysis cannot begin, then, with either vanguards or classes considered alone, for what is crucial is the relation between a particular vanguard and a particular class at a particular moment in time' (Walzer 1998, 131). This requires exploring how different social groups and classes develop, challenge or promote critical or conservative modes of heritage practice, such as the conflict between avant-gardes and conservatives during the Russian Revolution of 1917, studied by Groys (1992), or the equivocal attitudes to the past and traditional worldviews of Asian revolutionaries, who oscillated between Marxist, nationalist and anti-colonialist positions throughout the twentieth century (Long 2012).

Revolutionary processes lead to regime changes that require new representations of power, symbolic landscapes and national narratives legitimizing the new status quo in order to create a tight fit between ideology and social reality, constituting a new symbolic order. This process, which Bourdieu (2002) calls *doxa*, involves a complex interbreeding of individual and collective identities and memories, senses of belonging and understandings of place (Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge 2000). The transformation of whole symbolic landscapes and rituals opens the door to analyzing heritage as rhetoric and practice: that is, both as a mirror of what revolutionary regimes thought of themselves and how they represented themselves to others, and of what they actually did in heritage practice and conceptualization. Using 'revolution' as analytic frame thus presents various advantages for the heritage researcher. First, it is useful because every analysis of revolutionary processes rapidly 'denaturalizes' the pre- and post-revolutionary assumptions, making heritage meanings relative and subject to deeper examination. This upturns deep-seated and commonsensical notions of heritage that are often rendered self-evident and natural by dominant ideologies, allowing for comparison between different revolutions. A key methodological strategy here is to perform studies going beyond one historical period to analyze longer trends (e.g., Viejo-Rose 2011). This would allow us to understand changes and continuities throughout different ideological periods, thus shedding light on ideas of nation, ethnicity, race, history and collective memory. For instance, Alonso González's (2018) account of heritage politics in postcolonial Cuba, from independence in 1898 until present, allowed him to identify enduring tropes and meanings in Cuban nationalism and heritage discourse before and after the revolutionary period.

Second, the initial revolutionary moments are often pervaded by a sense of accelerated temporality, punctuated by acts of destruction, vandalism or iconoclasm, and reactions to those (Schildgen 2008). This was typically justified by the need for new sources of legitimization, as illustrated by the effervescence of the USSR throughout the 1920s, the Cuba of the 1960s, or the current heritage concerns pervading the Arab Spring. 'Breaking with the past' usually involved rethinking the 'inherited' material culture and traditions, while new senses of time laid down new and alternative forms of heritage production and cultural management. Third, the exploration of revolutionary moments avoids any easy compartmentalization of research based on pre-established assumptions about different regimes. Authors like Dacia Viejo-Rose (2011) or Christa Kamenetsky (1972) have shown how fascist and authoritarian regimes might develop heritage attitudes and conceptualizations that could be easily seen as 'revolutionary' in ways similar to other ideologically oriented regimes, such as the USSR or Venezuela. This challenges the heritage researcher to dig deeper and compare the logics behind heritage production in different geographies, times and regimes, but also to constantly rethink her own theoretical background. Similarities and differences might appear, such as the existence of revolutionary 'heritage templates' like the model of the Soviet Museum of the Revolution and its worldwide replication from China to Romania (Bădică 2013), or the thrust for the immediate heritagization of objects and processes, shared by revolutionary Cuba and the USSR (Alonso González 2016b; Deschepper, this volume). Revolutions might present similar dynamics of destruction-preservation, as happened in both the Russian and French cases (Andrieux and Chevallier 2014), but differ in the symbolic meanings ascribed to heritage: in France, the idea of the nation

implies a break with the past, while revolutionary Russia represented itself in a movement towards the communist future under construction (Deschepper, this volume).

The literature is rich in historical and sociological accounts of revolutions and their cultural politics, but, although heritage is often seen as part of the cultural transformations enacted by revolutionary processes, a critical focus on heritage theorization and practice during and after revolutionary processes is lacking. Different studies have addressed conservation policies in revolutionary states (Cohen 2008; Denton 2005; Donghai 1995; Lodder 1993), and there is a blossoming of research about the heritage of revolutions and the coming to terms with the communist past following regime change, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Bădică 2014; Demeter, this volume; Light 2000a, 2000b; Main 2008; Misztal 2009; Young and Kaczmarek 2008) and Russia (Forest and Johnson 2002; Khazanov 2000). A significantly lesser body of scholarship inquires into the politics and poetics of heritage under revolutionary and post-revolutionary regimes (Todorov 1995), spatial and commemorative heritage policies (Ignatieff 1984; Young and Kaczmarek 2008), notions of authenticity and national narratives (Apor 2015; Bădică 2013; Răuță 2013; Varutti 2014) or heritage aesthetics (Begić and Mraović 2014; Ćalović 2011; Merenik 1998).

As Colin Long has pointed out, the situation is different in revolutionary countries that remain in a hybrid state: technically market economies still under control of communist parties, including China, Vietnam and Laos (Giebel 2004; Long 2012, 2014). There are also asymmetries in the depth and number of investigations addressing different countries that have undergone revolutionary processes: while Thailand and Cambodia are well researched (Herzfeld 2003; Peleggi 1996; Winter 2007), few studies tackle countries like Cuba, Libya or Ethiopia (Alonso González 2016a; Brooks 2005; Donham 1999; González-Ruibal and Fernández 2007), and even fewer scholars have paid attention to the consequences for heritage of the so-called 'Socialism of the XXI century' in Latin American countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia or Guatemala (Alonso González & Macías Vázquez, 2015; Alvarez Litben 2016; Angosto-Ferrández 2016; Irigaray et al. 2016).

2017 marked the centennial of the Russian Revolution – or, more accurately, of the two Russian revolutions, in February and October of that year, that eventually led to the formation of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, there was a bonanza that year of related academic and popular events – blockbuster museum exhibitions, seminars, talks, book releases and re-issues, even the 2017 iteration of the Cambridge Heritage Research Conference, from which the articles in this issue were drawn. In academia, museums and popular culture alike, there is a sense that this year needs to be marked, that the anniversary is noteworthy, but there is a concurrent and striking lack of consensus about what the Russian Revolution *means*. What is its heritage in the twenty-first century? Does it – or should it – have any impact on contemporary politics, society or culture, or is it moot now because the nation birthed by these revolutions is defunct? Is it, instead, really 'consigned to the slagheap of history'? And what are the motivations of those who choose each specific reading of the Russian Revolution and its heritage?

In London alone (and certainly not exclusively), two august institutions capitalized on the anniversary to host major exhibitions. The Royal Academy of Arts, bringing in many loaned items from Russian institutions, hosted *Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932*, while the British Library put on *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths*, drawing mostly on its own vast collections. Curators of both excellent exhibitions struggled with the truly immense scope of each exhibition's subject material, but also with how to present the necessary – and also vast – background information to the visitor. On top of this, these art historical and historical exhibitions, respectively, could not avoid being refracted through the lens of current conflicts and political flashpoints involving the Russian Federation. To take just one example, Uilleam Blacker, a noted scholar of twentieth-century Eastern European memory, saw the absence of any mention of the Holodomor[1] in the room dedicated to Ukrainian artist Kasimir Malevich's work at the Royal Academy's exhibition as an erasure of the actual, multinational nature of the 'Russian' revolution. In his view, the exhibition's identification of the revolution and its various political, artistic and social leaders as 'Russian' was '[a]llowing the Russian Federation to claim as many great artists

and writers as possible [which] simply helps it build up its ammunition stocks in the soft-power war' (2017). In this analysis, the revolution's legacy is far from irrelevant; instead, its public commemoration becomes another field in the contemporary contestation of Ukrainian and Russian geopolitics and identity. During the Cambridge conference, Liliana Janik's presentation took the position that the heritage of the Russian Revolution cannot be separated from the waves of repression that followed it (including such actions as the Holodomor), whether these were part of the Civil War's Red Terror or the later repressive campaigns orchestrated by the Soviet government and secret police. Following this argument, the tangible and intangible heritage of Soviet repression – no matter when in the USSR's history it occurred – is also the heritage of the revolution. This is a logical 'legacy' of the revolution(s), as the repercussions of repression, revolutionary or otherwise, still affect Russian society, culture, politics and policing. But is this the only viable legacy?

Sheila Fitzpatrick, in a public lecture entitled 'Celebrating (or Not) the Centenary of the Russian Revolution',[2] about this contested legacy, noted that this view of the Russian revolution as 'a people's tragedy' – not coincidentally the title of Orlando Figes's exhaustive history of the period, updated and re-released in 2017 – is widespread both in Russia and abroad. Further, in a post-Cold War world in which few communist nation-states exist, is it accurate to label the Soviet Union a failure? If so, does that mean that the entire 'experiment,' so to speak, was an aberration, an interesting blip that is irrelevant to the new globalized, decidedly market-capitalist world economic and political order? China Miéville, in *October*, disagrees, writing, '[I]t is not for nostalgia's sake that the strange story of the first socialist revolution in history deserves celebration. The standard of October declares that things changed once, and they might do so again' (2017, 317).

In Russia itself, the debates were no less complex as the government and other institutions struggled with how and what to commemorate that year. There was no official federal commemoration of the February revolution, and the Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, finally making public remarks at a Russian revolution-themed conference as the February anniversary approached, noted that the lesson to take from the revolution and its aftermath(s) is the danger of any group pursuing their own goals instead of working towards Russia's interests (Yakovleva 2017). This conception is skillfully designed: it ties into ongoing debates over how much public support the Bolsheviks *really* had in October 1917 while also serving as a warning to Russia's current oligarch class – some of whom have publicly and seriously challenged the Putin regime – about their rightful place in Russian politics. In other settings, Medinsky has chosen to single out 'reconciliation' as the revolution's chief history legacy. Even after decades of state repression and violence that belied the Soviet 'imagined community', the country of Russia still does exist in a cohesive form (several ongoing separatist movements and conflicts notwithstanding); so, in the end, it is technically correct to say that the different factions and ever-shifting groups of victims and victimizers have reconciled. Choosing 'reconciliation' as the main takeaway of the Russian revolution, however, seems to somehow miss the larger point of a revolution, which, by definition, ruptures. On the other hand, it is also a politically expedient narrative, as the Russian government continues to officially identify Crimea as 'Russian,' too. The unveiling of a 'Monument of Reconciliation and Concord' in the Crimean city of Sevastopol was planned to coincide with the centenary of the October revolution, although the controversial project was still stalled in court as of summer 2018 – however, a Day of National Unity did take place on the centennial anniversary (Lenta, 2017). 'Reconciliation' here effectively crosses the divide between past and present as rhetoric about the revolution's legacy becomes a vehicle to assert a unified 'national' identity into contested geopolitical and sociocultural spaces.

Then again, the current Russian state can be forgiven for not wanting to forward the message that insurrection, armed or otherwise, to effect sweeping political, social and economic change is a suitable solution to any country's issues. What to do with the Soviet past writ large is still a living, thorny problem for Russia. From government organs to street names and statues, tangible and intangible vestiges of the Soviet Union, Bolshevism and revolutionary leaders are ubiquitous in Russia and many of the former Soviet republics and bloc members. As Deschepper's article in this

issue explores, the new, post-revolutionary Soviet government moved quickly to historicize itself and deem places connected to the revolution as 'heritage'. For each of these pieces of Soviet heritage 'hardware,' to use Etkind's (2013) formulation, however, there is 'ghostware' of repression and suffering that has very few – if any – tangible markers in the landscape or heritagescape. While most Soviet-era images of Stalin are gone, Lenin is fairly ubiquitous within Russia – yet the 'Leninfall' phenomenon, in which images and statues of Lenin are removed or defaced, has taken on myriad nationalistic and ideological meanings across different areas of the former Soviet bloc.

Indeed, the statue of secret police founder and revolutionary Felix Dzerzhinsky that used to stand in front of the former secret police headquarters in Moscow has been removed, so that the only memorial in the square now is dedicated to the memory of victims of repression. Just a few blocks away, however, a memorial plaque to Dzerzhinsky is still affixed to the front of his old office building, while no marker at all stands for the thousands of Muscovites shot in that same building's garage area in the midcentury. In a non-Russian context, work by Verdery (2000) et al. provides one lens through which to critically view the controversies over Confederate war memorials that shook the United States in 2017. The secession and federation of the Confederated States of America (Confederacy), if not usually classed as a revolution, certainly constituted an organized revolt against the United States, leading to a typically bloody internecine conflict. As many scholars, notably Savage (1997), have asserted, the widespread installation of memorials to Confederate soldiers and leaders reflected a marked uncertainty over the legacy of slavery and, later, legalized discrimination against African-Americans throughout the country. The American Civil War is long over, but the US is still plagued by systemic racism and institutionalized racial inequality; therefore, the debates and (sometimes violent) demonstrations both for and against the memorials' removals are also a contest over white supremacy and the legacy of the civil war and slavery. There, as in Russia, the civil war ended in reconciliation, and a larger political movement is widely considered to have 'failed', but, many years later, contentious, underlying issues still seethe and erupt into public discourse through memorial media.

With such a contested and complex set of legacies, is it a surprise that much commemoration of the Russian revolution focuses on aspects like avant-garde art, which might appear, at first and surface-level glance, to be less controversial? Constructivism, suprematism, Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry – although an understanding of the political and sociocultural contexts of these works allows for an inarguably vaster understanding, even at its most basic encounter, these are aesthetically interesting, often even 'cool'.[3] They each embody, at core, the abandonment of any assumptions about form and shape, in art as well as reality. This was the promise of the Russian revolution, a chance at building utopia that quickly turned dystopian – but, as Iacono's piece (this volume) asserts, the heritage of communism cannot be uniformly viewed as 'dark' in any post-communist or post-socialist society. The stark ambiguity of revolution's aftermath, the double-edged sword of sweeping change, is perhaps the Russian Revolution's most potent legacy.

Notes

1. The state-orchestrated famine that took place in Ukraine in 1932–3.
2. Trinity College, Cambridge, on 1 May 2017 and presented by the Department of Slavonic Studies and Trinity College.
3. The London exhibits noted above are just two of many high-profile exhibitions on these themes worldwide this year; a full review is beyond this article's scope, but, elsewhere in London, the Design Museum put on 'Imagine Moscow: Architecture, Propaganda, Revolution', from March-July 2017, just after New York's Museum of Modern Art hosted 'A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Avant-Garde' from December 2016-March 2017. Mayakovsky's poetry and other works, boundary-shattering as they were, featured in many of these art and architecture exhibits.

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