PAPER

Urban Iconoclasm: The Legacy of Toppled Statues

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This paper examines the spatial iconoclasm of public spaces, specifically the acts of toppling and vandalizing statues and monuments, as one of the spatial tactics used during conflicts and how the transformation of the everyday landscape of memorialization can change historical narratives to create new values and meanings. By analyzing a series of cases, this study compares the usage and the scale to which this strategy has been practiced in the recent events of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Spatial processes always constitute and shape social and political relations. The interrelation between protest actions and space is very explicit, making it impossible to examine these events without carefully analyzing their spatialities.

Historically, symbolism has been among the appealing factors for selecting spaces of contention in cities. Certain spatialities are charged with symbolic values because of their adjacencies to main sites of authority, religious buildings, places of festivity, or other cultural and historical elements. In many cases, the root causes of protests become the reason specific spaces are chosen. The selection of European Square during the Ukrainian Crisis of 2013-2014 in support of the Association Agreements with the European Union and the choice of Zuccotti Park during Occupy movement because of its adjacency to Wall Street are among many instances.

Aside from the choice of symbolic sites for public demonstration or occupation, the spatial iconoclasm of public spaces, buildings, and monuments has been common during many social movements. Urban public spaces get occupied in many movements, buildings are targeted, and walls are marked by paint and graffiti. Toppling, vandalizing, and removing statues and monuments are among the most common symbolic acts of protest in history with spatial manifestations. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the destruction of the statue of Louis XIV in Paris in 1792, the toppling of the statue of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Tehran in 1979, and the defacing and removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes in Cape Town in 2015 are among some examples.

What has happened during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is unique in its scope and momentum. The act of toppling of confederate statues quickly spread across the country and abroad. By choosing an ethnographic methodology of studying specific cases from a comparative cultural lens, the research highlights the destruction of statues and memorials as a recurrent spatial repertoire of contention in protest actions. However, the scale in which the toppling and vandalizing statues have spread in the BLM movement made it one of the most critical spatial repertoires that shaped the narrative of the movement.

This paper raises a series of questions, such as how iconoclasm reshape urban environments during protest actions? Why do sculptures and memorials fall, and what are some spatial and political implications? How does the transformation of the everyday landscape of memorialization empower marginalized groups?

ERADICATION OF MEMORY AND SYMBOLS OF POWER
In all nations, statues, monuments, and memorials are built in public spaces to represent a ruling class's political ideology or national identity. They are often designed, built, and placed to preserve a shared memory of people or a historical event, which in many cases are the formal reflections of advancing the political interest of a particular group.

However, the physical transformation, dismantling, toppling, and destruction of these forms and landscapes of memory occur due to political conflict among different forces. Contrary to actions of the state, the public also reacts to alter the course of history or object to dominant political beliefs. Therefore, such acts of destruction and iconoclasm by groups of people are not irrational, and they aim to abolish icons that are associated with specific values and meanings.[1]

The same scenario happens in most of the revolutions and social movements throughout history. In times of conflict, there is always a struggle over spatial resources. The battle over "symbolic capital,"[2] embodied in statues and monuments or public spaces

Figure 1. A confederate statue toppled during the BLM movement. Joe Flood.

of protest, is also an important way of getting legitimacy and sustaining power and control.[3]

For Bourdieu, symbolic capital has a dialectical relation to "Habitus," which constitutes societies. According to him, the concept of habitus is used to advance "officialization," which is the "process whereby the group (or those who dominate it) teaches itself and masks from itself its own truth, binds itself by a public profession which sanctions and imposes what it utters, tacitly defining the limits of thinkable and the unthinkable and so contributing to the maintenance of the social order from which it derives its power."[4] Here, the power of symbolism becomes vital because it defines the specific positionality of various groups in a social structure. Symbolism not only becomes a means of communication, but it is a power to determine what is real and legitimate as a part of the political operation. Statues and monuments are the material forms of political symbols; therefore, their toppling becomes the new symbol of eradicating the state's hegemony. During the turmoil of the revolution, they usually become key targets for protesters, as their destruction is relatively easy vis-a-vis their symbolic significance.

On the other hand, the acts of destruction and iconoclasm of buildings and memorials can target a group's collective identity and particular way of life. This process is commonly referred to as "memoricide." [5] One example of such an act is the destruction of Mostar Bridge during Croat–Bosniak War in 1993.

Statues and memorials also become targets to erase "places of pain and shame."[6] In this sense, clearing the difficult and shameful histories is manifested in removing the physical embodiments of such memories. This is mainly the reason why so many statues were toppled during the Black Lives Matter movement.

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS
The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013, but it started to receive national recognition after the shooting of Michael Brown in August of 2014. As the protest movement picked up across the country, demonstrators began to focus on confederate statues. There were reports of several confederate statues that had been targeted and vandalized. On May 31, 2020, in Birmingham, Alabama, the statue of Charles Linn became the first to be toppled. However, it would not be the last. [Figure 1]

Figure 2. Berkut forces protecting the Lenin statue in Kiev on November 24, 2013. Ivan Bandura.
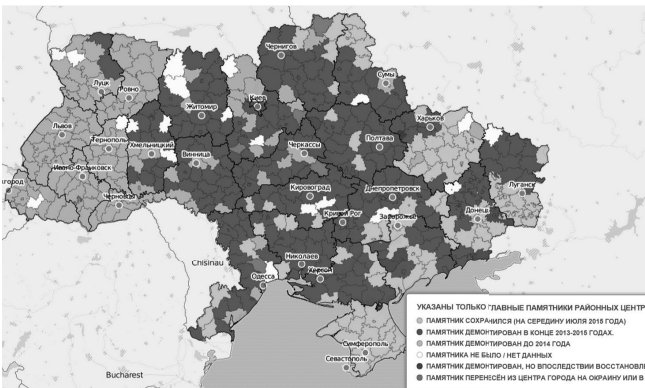

Figure 3. A map showing the location of toppled Lenin monuments. http://leninstatues.ru/leninopad.

Figure 4. Destruction of Stalin statue during the October Revolution in Hungary in 1956. Fortepan

There was a ripple effect across the country for days and weeks, with many other confederate statues being destroyed, vandalized, and toppled. The movement suddenly transcended borders with the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, UK, and the scope broadened from confederacy statues to racist figures, including the infamous Christopher Columbus.

The act of vandalism of monuments also took place in opposition to the BLM movement. On October 3, 2021, a man defaced the statue of George Floyd in Union Square, New York City, by spraying paint over the figure. The vandalism occurred three days after the monument was unveiled. This was the second George Floyd statue that was vandalized in New York City. In this case, "as monuments and heritage in urban space provide visible evidence of the presence of 'others' and/or the cohabitation of plural communities in a city, their destruction is seen to represent a means of erasing traces of coexistence in the city."[7]

The ripple effect at the scale that we see today in the BLM movement resembles the toppling of the Lenin statues during the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. While people were marching, Berkut police surrounded the statue of Lenin at Bessarabska Square in Kiev to protect it from the protesters. This was the first incident that signified the symbolic importance of the statute for the pro-Russian Ukrainian government. [Figure 2]

Protesters were eventually able to topple the Lenin statue. Over the next few months of Euromaidan protests, hundreds of Lenin and Communist icons across Ukraine were destroyed. It can be said that the destruction and dismantling of Lenin statues across Ukraine turned the focus of the movement from pro-European into anti-Russian. According to the Russian website Monuments to Lenin, which keeps track of all Lenin monuments in Russia and around the world, 740 Lenin monuments were toppled in Ukraine between December 8, 2013, and July 24, 2015. To date, 1717 Lenin statues have been toppled, destroyed, or removed in Ukraine.[8] [Figure 3]

The act of toppling statues and monuments is commonly witnessed in most revolutions and social movements throughout history. One of the oldest and most famous examples of such an act is the toppling of Louis XV statues in Paris during the French Revolution. Another notable example occurred during the October Revolution in Hungary, where protesters toppled and destroyed the bronze statue of Stalin in Budapest on October 23, 1956. [Figure 4]

It is not always the case that protesters target monuments that are representative of states. For example, the Estonian parliament decided to relocate the war monument of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn from Tõnismägi Square to a military cemetery on the outskirts of the capital. The monument has significant symbolic importance for the minority of the ethnic Russians in Estonia, and the Soviet authorities originally erected it during WWII.[9] The decision angered about 1,000 to 1,500

Figure 5. The Umbrella Man during Hong Kong protests on 25 October, 2014. Citobun.

people who came out to protest.[10] Ultimately the monument was relocated, and the protest turned violent, which led to the death of one person.

Besides the political iconoclasm, there are examples in which protesters have constructed temporary statues and monuments in times of social movements. During the 2014 Hong Kong protests, a local artist erected a sculpture later named the "Umbrella Man." [Figure 5] The sculpture became a symbol of the movement after protesters used umbrellas to protect themselves from pepper sprays used by riot police.[11] This was an act that resembled history in 1989 where Chinese student protesters built their own statute, which became known as the "Goddess of Democracy."[12]

Vandalism, destruction, toppling, or even the creation of statues highlight the importance of symbolic architecture in the creation of a political narrative. As a result, these political actions have the power to generate visibility in times of conflict.

THE ACT OF POLITICAL DISASSOCIATION
Historically, it has been demonstrated that acts of iconoclasm place pressure on authorities to act. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement has placed significant pressure on local governments to remove confederate statues, and many have acted in support of the movement. As a result, local and state governments have announced and removed many of these statues and have disassociated themselves with the past and their symbolic representation. One instance that stands out among the rest is the removal of the statue of Christopher Columbus at Farnham Park in Camden, New Jersey. The city decided to remove the statue a day early before the community protest. Ronsha Dickerson, a local activist, streamed it on Facebook Live and called on the community to gather immediately. Before long, many arrived at the park and ultimately destroyed and beheaded the statue as an act of protest before the authorities could remove it. The Camden event demonstrates that removing statues alone is not

sufficient; instead, those in power must acknowledge the dark legacy that is associated with the monuments. As more statues are taken down from parks and squares, the narrative of the past is being questioned but not eradicated.

CONCLUSION
The act of urban iconoclasm reshapes the built environment by highlighting historical narratives embodied in the sculptures and monuments. Statues are commonly built in public spaces to represent the ruling class's ideology. They represent a moment in time that shapes the political and cultural viewpoint of a particular group. As a result, their destruction during a conflict becomes a political act of resistance, typically but not always by a marginalized group.

The selected cases studied in this paper demonstrate the commonality of urban iconoclasm as a spatial repertoire of contention in social movements that reshape urban spaces and span across borders and time. However, in the case of the BLM movement, following the grand scale of destruction, vandalism, and toppling of the monuments, a shift occurred in the nation's political sphere. The movement was able to pressure local governments to stand with the cause, legislate in favor of removing confederate statues, and in some cases, local authorities even enacted new monuments.

Urban iconoclasm has been demonstrated to create a shift in political narrative during times of conflict regardless of the validity of the cause and whether it creates a positive impact. In fact, one of the critical components of iconoclasm is the ability to gather media attention for the cause. The creation of visibility or the act of "distribution of sensible," as Rancière explains, is a political inquiry.[13] The act of occupation of public spaces and destruction of monuments creates a moment of disruption, making the distribution of the new sensible possible.

ENDNOTES

1.   Gamboni, Dario. 2007. *The Destruction of Art*. 1st pbk. ed. London: Reaktion Books.

2.   Pierre Bourdieu differentiates symbolic capital from other forms of capital such as economic, political, and cultural.

3.   Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Practical Reason : on the Theory of Action*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

4.   Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, p:108.

5.   Bevan, Robert. 2006. *The Destruction of Memory*. Second expanded edition. Vol. 55423. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

6.   Logan, William, and Keir Reeves. 2009. *Places of Pain and Shame*. 1st ed. Vol. 3. London: Routledge.

7.   Frank, Sybille, and Mirjana Ristic. 2020. "Urban Fallism." *City* (London, England) 24 (3-4): 552–64.

8.   "Памятники Ленину, снесённые на Украине с декабря 2013 года (список, фотографии) | Памятники Ленину." *Leninstatues.ru*. 2013. Accessed October 10, 2021. http://leninstatues.ru/leninopad.

9.   "Tallinn Tense after Deadly Riots." *BBC NEWS*, April 28, 2007. Accessed October 10, 2021. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6602171.stm.

10.   "Deadly Riots in Tallinn: Soviet Memorial Causes Rift between Estonia and Russia." *DER SPIEGEL*. April 27, 2007. Accessed October 10, 2021. https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/deadly-riots-in-tallinn-soviet-memorial-causes-rift-between-estonia-and-russia-a-479809.html.

11.   Kloet, Jeroen de. 2017. "Umbrellas and Revolutions: The Aesthetics of the Hong Kong Protests." In *Global Cultures of Contestation*, 151–70. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

12.   "WSJ Archives: Goddess of Democracy Is Erected in Tiananmen Square." 2014. *The Wall Street Journal*. May 30, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-22451.

13.   Rancière, Jacques, and Slavoj Zizek. 2004. *The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. Continuum.

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