

Iconoclash 2.0:

Epistemologies, affects and the politics of undoing heritage

A workshop organised by

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To say that heritage is inherently always contested has become a truism. Indeed, while the urge to protect and preserve remains a central concern in heritage policies and research (Holtorf & Kristensen 2014), this is far from the only way in which we engage with heritage.

Iconoclash — a term drawn from Latour (2002) that we employ here because, unlike iconoclasm, is open-ended — has seen a marked rise in postcolonial societies, South and North. The undoing of heritage manifests in a variety of forms and meanings beyond heuristic divides. These include, but are not limited to: the rewriting of history through destructive ‘beautification’ of urban heritage in authoritarian and neo-liberal regimes (Herzfeld 2006; De Cesari and Dimova 2019; Collins 2015; Lazzaretti 2021), the persistent erasure/absence of plural histories of colonialism in public space and tourist destinations (as represented by a lively debate in Lisbon — see for instance Peralta 2020-2021), the contestation by minority movements of mainstream versions of history through creative vandalization of controversial statues and monuments (Frank and Ristic 2020; Hammami and Uzer 2022; Peralta 2022), and the debates around the memorialisation of memoricide and violence (González-Ruibal 2008; Blanes et al. 2025).

Maintenance of status quo, though, continues to be framed as superior to the erasure, reuse and substitution of heritage, even though attitudes towards heritage in many societies are varied and often not aligned with dominant conservationist approaches (Holtorf 2014; Byrne 2019). Concomitantly, heritage becomes increasingly entangled with knowledge production and affective experiences: its role in shaping narratives about the past and informing future aspirations is crucial (Harrison 2013 and Zetterstrom-Sharp 2015), as recent debates that rethink the function of museums in our postcolonial societies show (Kramer 2017; DeBlock 2020; Hicks 2021; Adams 2024). However, the potential of *undoing heritage* in these processes remains systematically underexplored.

Practices that alter, attack, or even destroy heritage, though, are not only well documented throughout global history and increasingly mainstream, but may well help us challenge given assumptions and knowledge about heritage. Even when intentions behind

destruction are made explicit, diverse executors and audiences can experience it differently or interpret it anew according to the context and medium of expression. In addition, meanings attributed to iconoclasm and even to explicit iconoclasm also morph over time and, paradoxically, the specific heritage targeted for erasure often ends up being reinvigorated through its undoing or at least recast in multiple afterlives (Cherry 2013). Yet, iconoclasm and the undoing of heritage are often sidelined — treated as deviations from a presumed curative default.

In this workshop, we interrogate the epistemological, affective and political potential of undoing heritage. While the destruction of heritage often leads to binary narratives in which the divide between perpetrators and victims is a given, we invite contributions grounded in original historical and ethnographic research to challenge these assumptions and help us reframe iconoclasm — past, present and future — as a new generative paradigm for thinking about heritage.

Research questions:

- How is the undoing of heritage narrated and itself memorialised/monumentalized over time in a variety of analogic and digital media and everyday life?
- When — and under what conditions — can iconoclasm be understood as a way to connect with, rethink, care for, and reclaim the past? And when does it fail to do so — or risk reinforcing exclusion, violence and inequality?
- To what extent does iconoclasm contribute to redefine and rethink participation and the shifting power relations inherent to heritage-making?
- What kind of knowledge, affects and politics does the undoing of heritage afford (about and around contested heritage and its proprietors, for instance)?

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