Old Monuments, New Populations: thinking about the political lives of statues

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New governments and new regimes often remove, destroy, or displace the public monuments that symbolize the past.  After the fall of the USSR, statues of Lenin, Marx, and Stalin were removed from public squares and government buildings and taken to statuary ‘graveyards’ where they can be seen to this day.  The same is true throughout history:  new Pharaohs defaced the statues of their predecessors; the Revolution in France saw the toppling of many an aristocratic memorial.  Beyond politics, this practice is also a common accompaniment to changes in state or national religions; archaeologists and historians are familiar with the partial destruction and repurposing of civic religious statues and monuments; the statue of a god that became that of a saint, or the church that becomes a mosque, with the attendant destruction.  When there is no top-down political or religious regime change, the same actions are seen as ‘mob rule’ and ‘property damage’ and ‘civil unrest’.  Where the usual changes that accompany a paradigm shift in government or religion are unremarkable when they occur from the top down, when they occur from the bottom up, they seem dangerous in inchoate and revolutionary ways.  Agitating about statues is seen as dangerous and transgressive in itself.

Yet, this is to miss the point of public monuments, and heritage more broadly.  The protests about (and in some cases, toppling or vandalising of) statues of slave traders, slave owners, and colonialists in the UK and the US are politics from the inside, or underside, of the body politic and are exactly the sort of public conversations that heritage monuments are meant to trigger.  The memorialization of a particular piece of history gives rise to political action here, not the (more usual) reverse.

From this perspective, the protestors are not trying to change the government from democracy to monarchy, nor indeed to deny the events of the past.  Instead, the challenge is to the social ethics upheld by the politics of display.  The ‘radical’ position is that the public memorial domain is a meaningful site of protest.  This is not radical.  The question of how heritage in the built environment affects us all has been discussed by governments, politicians, academics, and communities for centuries.  It has underpinned both the destruction and the preservation of cultural heritage in wartime and in peace.  Heritage brings communities together and also, as we recognize, separates them.

The discourse that has been bubbling along in the US regarding confederate statues and in the UK around the statue of Cecil Rhodes has now become part of a greater movement that seeks to undo racist political investments and historical complacencies.  This movement comes from the inside of civic action – from positions of personal engagement with how the built environment reflects the lived environment, and how cultural manifestos can be proclaimed by monuments that, to the unreflective eye and ear, remain still and silent.  It is worth considering how wonderful, and thought-provoking, it is to see the importance of heritage revealed in a moment such as this.  In all the various uses of heritage, and statues, representation and display in public monuments either include the public or are meant to dominate it.  This engagement is by the people who look at public monuments and note that the heritage narrative is one in which they are dominated.  The cultural landscape created by these statues excludes the descendants and victims of these memorials, and this symbolic exclusion may have genuine real-life effects on their civic rights.  In choosing who and what to commemorate, we also choose who and what to relegate to the shadows.  Thus, these bronzes and marbles were created to speak of one set of values when they were first erected; they are now heard differently.  The protesters give ancient victims the voices of present witnesses, and by doing so, populate the public realm with shadows and bodies that are otherwise excluded.  The statues can be moved into museums or placed in temporary ‘safety’.  The crowds around them, formed of both the living and the dead, are to be celebrated.