Enduring Pasts: The Intersections of the Past and Present

A central component of Donald Trump's campaign to become President of the United States was the promise to restore America to greatness. Using this as an example **Phil Hughes**, a PhD student in the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, explores engagements with the past both ideologically and materially to reveal how the past is a deeply-inscribed element of our being in the present.

'We swim in the past as fish do in water and cannot escape it'...

...wrote eminent Marxist scholar Eric Hobsbawm (1972). It is a saying I have recalled repeatedly during the course of the United States Presidential elections and the early stages of Donald J. Trump's presidency. Indeed, Trump's supporters chanted a mantra emblazoned on kitschy crimson caps: 'Make America Great Again'. As we shall see, this is an idealisation of a perceived purer past, and it is a motif of human history. It goes far beyond wistful nostalgia; it can also be ideological.

> "Idealising and promulgating a perceived purer past is a well-worn motif of human history"

But in Trump's case it is constructed, vague, and no evidence of exactly when America was great in the first place has been offered. Is Trump referring to the era of Reagan and financial deregulation? Is he perhaps longing for the days of the liberal optimism, sexual revolution and the counter-culture of the early 1960s? Is he asserting a desire to return to 'traditional family values' of the 1950s and the ideal of the post-war domestic housewife? We have not been told, and this is deliberate. Rather, Trump is emphasising that, in his view, America has entered a period of decline, and his rhetoric represents an attempt to cement this idea as an accepted narrative in public consciousness.

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Make Rome great again

Whilst Trump's lack of specificity is glaring, other cases evoking an idealised past can be more explicit. We can observe such a scenario in Roman history, (c. 59 BCE–17CE). According to Livy, a historian of the early Roman Empire, an aristocrat named Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus having already served in the Roman Senate as Consul, the highest political office in the Roman Republic, refused to illegally stand for a second term and instead retired to work on his farm.

However, in a series of political crises which subsequently threatened the survival of the Roman state and the fabric of Roman society, Cincinnatus was pleaded with to abandon his pedestrian life on his agricultural estate and return to public life. Agreeing, he was twice granted the office of emergency dictator in 458 and 439 BCE. Successfully fending off the challenges engulfing Rome, Cincinnatus nobly relinquished his powers, foregoing personal glory and opting instead to return to his humble farming existence. As a result, Cincinnatus was revered for placing the Roman state above his personal ambitions.

Most ancient historians are naturally dubious of the historicity of this tale. However, its authenticity is largely irrelevant; crucial is the fact that Livy utilised the story hundreds of years later

> "A version of a past can also be deliberately forgotten as well as collectively remembered"

for the purposes of legitimising the rule of Augustus, who had ascended to the role of Emperor after the bitter civil wars of the 1st century BCE, which resulted in the collapse of the Roman Republic. In fact, the story of Cincinnatus tells us much more about Roman society in the age of Augustus than it does about the time of Cincinnatus. As part of his many legal and religious

The Statue of Cincinnatus from Bicentennial Commons, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. Constructed in 1988, it reflects the deliberately constructed association between the United States and the political ideals of Classical Antiquity.

reforms, Augustus advocated a moral agenda of virtue and piety, explicitly wishing to return the Republic to greatness and restore *mos mairoum* (the tradition of the ancestors). In this context, Livy's reflection on Cincinnatus is no coincidence; the narrative of Cincinnatus' story is deliberately woven to create a link between these two figures, uniting past and present. Like Cincinnatus, Augustus is presented as the humble saviour of the Roman Republic, mitigating the fact that he had essentially assumed the role of dictator for life.

An invented Tradition

We might note that Cincinnatus' legacy has a longevity beyond the Romans, lingering in US political consciousness. Following success in the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), George Washington, a farmer from Virginia, elected to surrender his position as General of the Continental Army and, like Cincinnatus, return to life on his farm. Prior to Washington's Presidency (1789-1797), in 1788 a statue of him designed by Jean-Antoine Houdon was erected

in the statehouse of Richmond, Virginia. It depicts Washington standing in front of a plough. To his right are the fasces, - a bound bundle of wooden rods sometimes with an axe - the Roman symbol of political and military power. Through this monument the audience, who will have had a knowledge of ancient history and literature, is invited to make the connection between Cincinnatus and Washington.

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As Carl Richard has demonstrated, this reflects a carefully constructed narrative where the fledgling United States, freed from the shackles of British imperial rule, was consciously defined as the natural successor to the political ideals of Greco-Roman society (2009). For instance, in 1988 a statue depicting Cincinnatus and his plough was erected in Bicentennial Commons in the aptly named Cincinnati, cementing the deeply-embedded nature of Cincinnatus' narrative in American consciousness and highlighting how events of the past can be appropriated in order to ascribe political legitimacy in the present.

The selection and dissemination of a specific narrative of the past can, therefore, be overtly ideological. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger termed the process the Invention of Tradition (1983). It is employed widely to ensure the cultural acceptance of and establish a continuity with an appropriate past which reflects agendas of the present. Like Augustus, Trump's campaign team cynically, but successfully, exploited an old rhetorical device appealing for a return to a glorious age which may be fictitious, exaggerated or vague. Washington, like Augustus through Livy's works, orchestrated a conscious link between himself and Cincinnatus communicating that he embodied Cincinnatus' values in the present.

Living in a Material World

We have been interested so far on specific narratives or events of the past used in later periods through the lens of political ideology. It is important, however, to recognise the capacity of material things to be integral in the construction of the present. Recent archaeological debates have focussed on returning objects to the front of our discussions. Arguably relegated to the role of passive materials merely representative of social behaviours, archaeologists now recognise the ways that materials act. This extends to discussion of the past in the present because material things are not confined to the same linear time as human lives or events. As Bjørnar Olsen suggests: 'the past is pressing against the present, and we cannot conceive of it without things' (2010: 120).

This is a useful way of considering the intersection of ideology and materiality. Take, for example, the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, occupied on and off by Daesh forces since 2015. Daesh have destroyed some ancient monuments within the city , such as the 1st century CE Lion of Al-lā. Indeed, Abu Laith-Al Saoudy, the assumed named of a Daesh military commander, stated in a radio interview '[we will] break the idols that the infidels used to worship'. For Daesh, we see the opposite process of Trump and Augustus' idealisation of the past; here a perceived impure past, encoded and expressed materially, is eradicated as part of a fundamentalist agenda .

But the destroyed monuments have an importance and capacity to act beyond their obliteration. Western outrage at the annihilation of parts of Palmyra resulted in a 3D technology-inspired reconstruction of Palmyra's destroyed Roman Triumphal Arch made by the Institute of Digital Archaeology, unveiled in Trafalgar Square In April 2016, before making its way to New York and Dubai.

Here, the arch has been appropriated as a powerful symbol contrasting the barbarity of Daesh and its destruction of the past with the enlightened West and its emphasis on preservation and heritage. The arch of Palmyra shows us that separate ideologies are contesting and negotiating the same ancient monuments.

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However, because the recreated arch is removed from its original archaeological context, an attempt at attaining authenticity of how the monument would have been experienced in the past is avoided. Whilst some purists may sneer at an out of place replica, considering it nothing more than further evidence for the commodification of the past bounded with the heritage industry, we miss a wider point taking this view. The reconstructed monument is as much a living object as the annihilated original. Consequently, the two monuments are dependent on one another; the meanings and memories are indexed in both the destroyed and reconstructed monument. This leads us to perceive that events are not moments of time that happen to objects but, rather, meanings in time that emerge with and through them. In this way, we learn that whilst historical time is linear and sequential, objects of the past are always in the present, exerting an influence, and that their 'pastness' is central to how this process operates.

> "The past is not remote and unchanging but in a continuous state of flux"

All this suggests, as Raphael Samuel famously argued, the past is not remote and unchanging but in a continuous state of flux, living in practice and reinvented constantly for the multiple competing needs of the present (1994).