Is There a Place for Monuments in the “New Historical Condition”?

Moira Pérez

Cite as: Moira Perez, “Is There a Place for Monuments in the “New Historical Condition”?,” in Geschichtstheorie am Werk, 12/07/2022, https://gtw.hypotheses.org/7020.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: https://gtw.hypotheses.org/7020

License: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
Is There a Place for Monuments in the “New Historical Condition”?

In recent years, various authors of theory and philosophy of history have suggested we are experiencing a “new historical condition”, which Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm have characterized as driven by the “anthropocenic and technoscientific transformations of our lifeworlds”. The existence of such a condition has been widely debated, as have its challenges and ramifications in relation to long-standing conceptions of temporality and time scale, the human and the non-human, the natural and the artificial, among others. Many of these works are tinted by a feeling of uncertainty, of exploring and analysing something while we are not really sure what it is or what will emerge from it.

The idea of an unimaginable world (in the present and the future) poses interesting challenges to those of us who have been raised with a linear conception of time. But authors such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Dipesh Chakrabarty have shown that these challenges are far from alien to historiography, even when limited to traditional subjects (namely, human beings), if we extend our view to events and processes beyond the Global North. Trouillot in particular, in his analysis of representations of the Haitian Revolution, raises a question that seems fundamental to the debates in this field: “How does one write a history of the impossible”, of what is “unthinkable even as it happen[s]”? Chakrabarty and Trouillot identify an array of resistance mechanisms that historiographers put into practice when faced with the unimaginable: agency is denied and/or displaced; non-rational objects can be “anthropologized” (that is, at best reduced to a mere belief of historical actors, without ever granting them agent status); events are trivialized by diminishing them to isolated occurrences or denying their interconnection with and influence on future events; or events are downright negated (which poses thought-provoking challenges for the archive, as it contains traces of such events, although not explicitly figured as such).

In short, through “terminological fuzziness, […] empirical blanks, and […] preferences in interpretation”, says Trouillot, “worldview wins over facts”. It is somewhat puzzling to see that the mechanisms deployed to resist acknowledgement of events in the past are also used to resist acknowledgement of certain aspects of the present, such as an environmental catastrophe or structural racism. In a way, they are all practices of silencing. To this we must add, of course, epistemic silencing: “the unthinkable” applies not only to events, but also to the possibility that
certain subjects might have something to say about them, both in the past and the present. “The unthinkable” is, then, ontological, epistemic, and political.

Now, Tamm and Simon agree with other theorists working on this “new historical condition” that it is not about replacing an old historical condition with a new one, but rather about an “intermingling and coexistence” of multiple modes of historical being. Following this idea, I would like to draw attention to what, in my understanding, is or could be a material point of juxtaposition between these different modes of historical condition. I am referring to monuments as a material expression of the uses and production of history in the public space. What place do monuments that were created and sustained in and for other (previous and persisting) frameworks of historical being have in this “new historical condition”? Will monuments as “residues” of the past survive this tide of change? Should they? I will address these issues in three steps: something old, something new, and something gifted. With this I hope to contribute to the ongoing work on both the “new historical condition”, and on monuments and other deployments of history in the public space.

**Something Old**

The idea that monuments are “residues of the past” can sound surprising to some, since one could rightly say that they are not about history at all, but about consolidating a certain collective identity and/or legitimizing a certain order in the present. History, in this sense, seems to be little more than an excuse for the existence and preservation of the monument. The whole question of temporality (past, present and future) in relation to monuments is complex and intriguing. Monuments can be understood as a kind of time warp, where different dimensions of traditional lineal temporality meet. Although one could in a sense say this about any object, the case of monuments is particular in that this intertwining is what makes them such: it is, taking Arthur Danto’s term, their “aboutness”. Under the guise of an object referring to a past that “is there”, we find the dynamic production of such a past, along with a projection onto the future (the monument displays how we expect the future to be) and an interpretation of the present (it is also about who we are now or, more precisely, how we imagine we are). Alongside time, space also comes into the equation, in that monuments as material objects use and (re)configure (usually public) space, and frequently even organize it, serving as orientation markers. Space, time, but also two other dimensions are collapsed into each other in monuments: the material (their taking up space, their
perishability) and the symbolic (the meanings attached to them by those who erect and maintain them; the ones subsequently coated on them by different social groups). This is probably why Victoria Fareld proposed approaching controversies on monuments “in terms of chronoschisms—that is, conflicts about how to understand the relationships between different times in the present”. Monumental, in her reading, provide an opportunity for contemporaneity to unfold at once as the present and as the co-existence of multiple times. Monuments can function as – disputed – windows on new notions of historicity, on other forms of historical being, or as clusters where they meet and interact.

When I stated earlier – mostly for the sake of provocation – that monuments are “residues of the past”, it was not so much in reference to the past they allegedly represent or celebrate, but rather to the past of the moment they were erected and/or when such celebration was considered important. Additionally, when we bring in the materiality of the monument (its existence as a physical entity made of perishable matter) we must also include the successive moments in which a certain administration decides to invest in its preservation, since it would otherwise gradually decay and eventually cease to exist (an interesting way of intervening in monuments: suspending interventions).

In my introduction I mentioned the idea of the “unimaginable” and the “inconceivable” and some mechanisms that are deployed to resist confronting it, be it in relation to the past, the present or the future. Monuments stand at the intersection not only of “different times in the present”, but also of the various forms of denial that go with each of those times. This is most evident in the monuments that Johannes Schulz and others have called “tainted commemorations”. Tainted commemorations or contested monuments seem to be grounded precisely in the denial of the horrors of the past, and/or in the reassurance that such horrors are only in the past, which is what has placed them at the centre of heated social debate – and physical intervention – in recent years. Perhaps most notably since the rise of the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa (2015), the public space has again (following a long tradition on all continents and the most varied historical moments) been the site of political disputes over participation and representation in relation to monuments. Such interventions bring to the fore questions of universality, unity and representation, all of which should be central to analysis of the possibilities, limitations and risks of the “new historical condition”.

But although monuments have historically served as the materialization of the crudest forms of denial, some have suggested that they can also help us resist
such denial. Contested monuments remind us not so much of the events they allegedly represent, but rather that these events were celebrated at a given historical moment. In this view, monuments should be kept as pedagogical tools. In many instances, however, such proposals surreptitiously convey the reassuring idea that the horrors they point to are only in the past, thereby freeing the present (and the future) from any harm or accountability.\textsuperscript{14} This is often the case, for example, when a contested monument is re-signified as a reminder of some kind of “nunca más”: something that must never happen again.

**Something New**

This suggests that although monuments are popularly understood as something about the past, they are in fact forward-looking entities, an expression of the present and a statement (or rather various, at times conflicting statements) for the future. We could even say that monuments serve as a strategy to tidy up the future (for better or worse) or to pour some form of certainty into its uncertainty. Thi Nguyen suggests understanding monuments as – among other things – commitments: “a way for a group to commit itself to something – a way of concretizing that commitment”,\textsuperscript{15} be it backward-looking – “keeping the memory of someone alive” – or forward-looking – pledging to “stand together” for a common cause. In this perspective, monuments would function as approaches to how we imagine the future or, rather, how we wish it to be. This brings us closer to the German *Mahnmal* – a monument intended as a remembrance of something we must not repeat, as a reminder of our past mistakes and failures. Most – if not all – statues and monuments that have been intervened or toppled in recent years were *Denkmäler* (commemorative monuments), not *Mahnmale*; but we could also ask ourselves if and how a *Denkmal* can be turned into a *Mahnmal* – if that is what we want to do.

Now, a whole other set of issues surfaces when we reinterpret these conceptions in terms of “a new historical condition”. Can we institute some form of connection or commitment to a future – even a present – that in many ways is unimaginable to us? How much sense does it make to establish commitments whilst in the middle of an unprecedented historical change? Are we really capable of laying out a blueprint for the future? Lisa Regazzoni\textsuperscript{16} has warned that this talk about the future, including the idea of monuments as the material expression of a set of values or instructions we propose for the future, can also be a seed for totalitarian thinking. This is why she calls for a shift towards an “open past” instead of prescribed
futures, or, in her words, to “free the future from the prescriptive will of the single individual”. Hers is no doubt a legitimate fear, which I share. And I tend to think that this risk actually increases at a time when our historical condition is still to a large extent unimaginable, with a plurality of subjects, ways of life, and needs that are now only beginning to germinate (not to mention environmental disasters, surveillance capitalism, necropolitics and other forms of violence that mark the rhythm of our times). The danger of smuggling the worst elements of the present into an uncertain future is indeed considerable.

I referred earlier to tainted monuments as sites of denial. Perhaps denial can also provide some kind of answer to the question of monuments and the new historical condition. Denial, as we saw, is central to our individual and collective experience of the radically changing times we are living in now. If we want to reassess the function of monuments as a cultural and political practice, we could try approaching them as tools to help us withstand denial of the “inconceivable” elements of the new historical condition, both in the present and the future. In this sense, monuments would not be celebratory reminders of the past, but uncomfortable reminders of the present and the future. (This, by the way, also means reminding us of the limitations of the present/future divide, given how slow violence and extinction as deferred events tend to be reassuringly projected, as Espen Ytreberg and others have shown, into specific moments in the future). This is, of course, a possibility. But even then, we must not forget that various agents in different contexts attribute different meanings to monuments, as happens with other physical entities in the public space, so any project that relies too heavily on the meaning we attribute to an object is doomed to – at least partial – failure. What might be a trophy for some could be a reminder for others of an ongoing massacre. Vice versa, we could imagine a Mahnmal in any “developing” country (such as mine: Argentina) aimed at denouncing the environmental disaster underway (for instance, by incorporating a counter of waste accumulation or CO2 emissions). The same object could, on the other hand, be interpreted by others as a sign of a much-ambitioned technological development and, therefore, as superiority over other more “primitive” neighbours. There is also, of course, the very frequent – case of monuments that are downright ignored by the public and serve as mere geographical references for nearby residents.
Something Gifted

My aim here has been to explore some issues and challenges related to the role of monuments, particularly contested or tainted commemorations, in what many have conceptualized as a time of radical change. To this end, I proposed approaching them as sites of a porous juxtaposition of various historical conditions (“something old”, “something new”) and pointed out their complicity with the forms of denial that such conditions entail. Monuments can accompany and reinforce denials vis-à-vis the “unimaginable” – unimaginable “as it happens” and beyond; in the past and in the present or the future. In what follows, I propose a modest gift exchange, from reflections on monuments to work on the new historical condition, and vice versa.

What would a monument in this new historical condition look like? Does it even make sense to have monuments at all? Do we need monuments (be they Denkmäler or Mahnmalen) in our new historical condition? Do we want them? Our relationship with the past has not always been materialized through monuments in the public space. Nor is this the case in many non-Western cultures. So, a world without monuments as we know them is possible and real. But regardless of our answer to this question, we do have the issue of monuments that already exist, many of which have been targeted by protesters in recent years. Do any of our insights into the new historical condition suggest how we should deal with them?

A first point to be considered has already emerged in the previous sections: that of multiple temporalities. Instead of limiting the discussion to whether monuments are about the past or about the future, we can understand them as dynamic points of juxtaposition, dialogue or clashes between different modes of historical being and different notions of historicity. This applies to our approach to monuments (and perhaps to history in general) whether our aim lies in open-ended pasts, as Regazzoni suggests, or in prefigurative-oriented histories, as Ewa Domanska has proposed.18 On a similar note, dynamism and change should also be central to our reflection and practice around monuments. Debates on the subject have often adopted a binary form in which we consider whether monuments should fall or stay. In opposition to these reductive frameworks, perhaps the porous, simultaneous nature of historical conditions, their multi-layered and multi-temporal character, can teach us something about what we could do with monuments. Monuments could be dynamic, changing or perishable, not just as an unintended aspect, as is the case today, but as part of their identity. Key here, in my view, is the role of participatory monuments and interventions.
One of the most interesting contributions of current work on the “new historical condition” is the critique of anthropocentrism in our understanding of history and historiography. Anthropocentrism shapes our conceptions of agency, temporality, the object/subject distinction and, of course, history itself. Helge Jordheim has identified the Vesuvian man as the (somehow obsolete) model of a chronoa nthropocentric regime of historicity imposed by historiography’s professionalization (a model with which we are still, to a large extent, working). In a way, Western monuments could be seen as the materialization of this Vesuvian man, not only in terms of anthropocentrism but also of forms of body normativity and its interwoven notions of historical time. Even in the more recent monuments that attempt to include nature (a notion that in itself entails the idea of something different and separate from “Man”), nature is again used as a resource. The inclusion of non-human nature, the digital, and of course other forms of the human body in our interventions on monuments is central to working through their anthropocentrism, and to becoming aware of ours.

This brings us to a fourth point, related to participation. Bringing down monuments has often been performed as a form of political engagement, as disputing public representations of the past. This movement is undoubtedly fascinating and politically powerful, and I have argued in my work that participation and acknowledgement must be central to any project regarding monuments. I am also aware, however, of the lurking danger of interpreting a toppled monument as the end of a certain line in history, and the beginning of a new one, in which the very traits that made the monument contested – e.g., colonialism or sexism – are coming to an end. Although those advocating for the removal of monuments are aware of the continuities between past and present (the actions themselves are intended as a warning that neither racism nor colonialism are a “thing of the past”), they can still come across as evidence of a new condition, one with no place for such violent worldviews and practices. A condition in which we have moved forward: “we” (if not all of us, at least those protesting) now know better, and what was once acceptable and even celebrated in the past will no longer be tolerated. Thus, by the very act of criticizing narratives of progress and exposing them as fallacious, these approaches feed them with new energy and symbolic resources.

Finally, a crossed reading of discussions on monuments and debates on the “new historical condition” can stimulate a more thorough consideration of the question of emotions. Each of the temporalities that cuts across monuments brings with it a whole range of emotions: emotions of the personal relationship to that particular
site, emotions triggered by whatever the monument is thought to represent, emotions of relief if we interpret the monument as a sign of an injustice that “was”, but no longer is, or of rage for those who see it as proof of persisting injustices. Monuments, at least those we care about, mobilize emotions, which in turn can mobilize us into action. But which emotions – if any – will be mobilized by monuments in the new historical condition, is still an open question.

A previous version of this text was presented at the 2022 INTH conference in Puebla, Mexico as a part of the Panel “Toward a New Historical Condition?” organized by Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm on 28th and 29th April 2022.

Moira Pérez is a researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research, Argentina, and currently a Fellow at the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie in Hannover, Germany. Her work focuses on the interplay between violence and identity, and brings together contributions of narrativist philosophies of history, queer theory, and decolonial and postcolonial studies.

Tags: monuments / new historical condition / temporality

3 Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 73.
4 Ibid., 104.
5 Ibid., 93.
8 Simon and Tamm, “The New Sattelzeit”.
10 Arthur C. Danto, The transfiguration of the commonplace. A philosophy of art. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1981. What an artwork (or a monument in our case) is about, is of
course contingent upon its historical context: see also Arthur C. Danto, The Abuse of Beauty. Chicago: Open Court, 2003, xii.


12 Fareld, “Framing the Polychronic Present,” 31–32.


17 Ytreberg, “The Extinction of the Great Whales”.

18 Ewa Domanska, “Prefigurative Humanities,” History and Theory 60, no. 4 (2021), 141-158.