Book Reviews

DIGITAL HERITAGE AND POLITICS OF THE PAST

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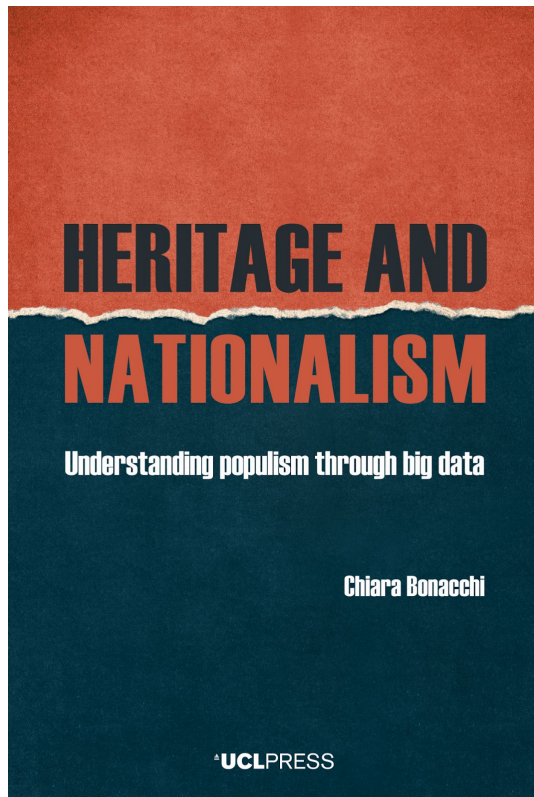
According to an old Soviet Joke, one day fictional Armenian Radio was asked by listeners whether it's possible to predict to future. Their answer: 'Yes, that is no problem: we know exactly what the future will be like. Our problem is with the past: that keeps changing' (quoted in Prins, 2001, p. 134). This witty joke is a reference to the well-known practice of totalitarian regimes to constantly revise historical records and accounts in line with latest policies and political developments. Although exaggerated, the insight that the past is unpredictable and constantly changing in light of the present holds somewhat true even in non-totalitarian settings; variable interpretations and uses of the past is a common occurrence, especially in political arena where the past is immensely valuable for mobilization, identity construction and legitimization efforts, making it a highly contested field. Reading about the populist interpretations of the past such as how Roman

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Empire collapsed due to uncontrollable influx of 'immigrants' or professional debates on whether to abandon historiographical practice of referring to certain ethnic groups as 'barbarians' reminded me how our perception of the past is always filtered through the present and how the past is underdetermined.

Archeologist Chiara Bonacchi's book, an output of the project titled *Ancient Identities in Modern Britain* funded by UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, explores 'politics of the past' and focuses on how pre-modern history of Europe is leveraged and used on social media by political parties, press, politicians and the general public as part of populist nationalist movements in different countries. While there is an expansive literature cutting across different fields and disciplines such as memory studies, heritage studies, archeology, history and political science on this area, Bonacchi's work stands out in terms of its approach, methodology and subject matter. As she points out, there is a dearth of systematic studies investigating the content and circulation of historical narratives as well as public engagements with the past on internet and social media, a noticeable gap in the research field known as 'digital heritage' (p. 9). She argues that this type of digital heritage research is critical since social media constitute the natural habitat of populist nationalist movements, with strong 'elective affinities' (Gerbaudo, 2018) between social media and populism (p. 14). Thus, social media research is indispensable for understanding modes of historical consciousness and historical imaginaries driving these new nationalist movements, which, for Bonacchi, are vital for anticipating and intervening in "political futures' (p. 173).

The book is structured in three parts; first three chapters including the Introduction are devoted to methodology and theory. Chapter Two reflects on the value of big data research for heritage studies as well as introducing the reader datasets, data collection and analysis methods used in later chapters. Chapter three presents a literature review on the topics of nationalism, populism and heritage. It also introduces main types and dualities of historical tropes and narratives recurring in nationalist discourses such as heroism and imperialism, myths of origin, development and destiny that also act as thematic categories in later case studies. Second part consist of three case studies investigating how European pre-modern past is used and mobilized in the present by populist nationalist movements: Italian General Election in March 2018; UK Brexit referendum in June 2016; and US presidential election in November 2016 with an emphasis on debates around Trump's 'Great Wall'. Chapter Seven, together with the Conclusion, forms the third part of the book and explores the relationship between expert and populist interpretations of the past in terms of clashing political values and broader themes such as post-truth and declining trust in experts.

As methodology is the most emphasized and original aspect of the work, it deserves a detailed treatment. Bonacchi broadly follows a digital humanities approach in the book, using terms such as "data-intensive ethnography" or "quali-quantitative" to characterize her methodology. As common with other qualitatively oriented big data research, she adopts primarily an inductive and exploratory approach, alternating between

modes of close reading based on established qualitative methods such as Critical Discourse Analysis, and modes of "distant" reading based on quantitative analyses such as descriptive statistics, topic modeling and clustering. In this way, quantitative analyses are used to 'contextualize and orientate more qualitative kinds of analysis' and formulate hypotheses and theories inductively (p. 181). This methodological design, in combination with the research site (social media), allows Bonacchi to study engagements with the past in a more "naturalistic" manner (p. 24), capturing everyday and mundane types of interactions with the past as well as official and professional ones. At the same time, it also allows her to adopt a more global perspective and compare differing receptions and uses of the European pre-modern past in different countries.

As for the major findings and themes appearing in case studies, perhaps not surprisingly, majority of the references to pre-modern past were focused on Roman Empire, suggesting that Romans still loom large in Western historical imaginary and consciousness. Analogical and exemplary uses and interpretations of the past were most common, with 'decline and fall of the Roman Empire' being the most popular historical analogy. As emphasized by Bonacchi throughout the book, there are striking differences, dualities and contradictions in terms of how pre-modern heritage is interpreted and used at the individual, national and international levels. For example, in the case of Brexit, some pro-Leave supporters compared European Union to the collapsing Roman Empire with an expansionist and tyrannical agenda (p. 103). In contrast, Italian populist nationalists tended to identify Roman Empire as the national point of origin of Italy and compared immigrants to barbarians who, if not stopped, would bring about Italy's downfall (p. 68-69). There are striking differences of interpretation on the national level as well; for example, in the context of Brexit, Celtic myths of origin were used to defend both pro-Leave and pro-Stay positions, some seeing Celtic identities as national, others supra-national. The case study on Trump's "Great Wall" is also rich in dualities and dichotomies. In the wake of Trump's presidential campaign and his proposed Mexican wall, media outlets and social media users compared it to famous historical walls such as Hadrian Wall and debated their effectiveness as means of border control as well as pointing to their symbolic, performative and affective dimensions.

Although methodology is the most distinctive and novel aspect of the book, it is also not exempt from criticism. Firstly, Bonacchi and her colleagues seem to have encountered some 'small data' problems during their research, especially in Chapter Six. They found only three tweets mentioning Hadrian Wall in 'US Immigration and Travel Ban' corpus of 12 million Tweets and even after collecting additional Twitter data, they found out that they are mostly about British politics. In the study, datasets searched for references to the premodern past are no doubt impressively huge, but actual number of references they found appears to be on the lower side. This raises the suspicion that the pre-modern past may not be a major theme for populist movements on social media. Perhaps, the author and her colleagues could have alleviated these issues by making more use of Twitter data or adopting a more pronounced cross-platform design instead of primarily

relying on Facebook. Secondly, the results of quantitative and computational analyses could have been better presented by making more use of visualizations rather than tables.

Despite these minor criticisms, Bonacchi's work is highly original and pathbreaking in its vision and methodological design, paving the way for future research studying heritage, cultural memory and politics of the past on digital media. The book's significance will undoubtedly vary depending on the field and discipline, but as a new media researcher, the focus on the deep past was quite refreshing and interesting to me since majority of new media research has a narrow focus on the immediate present. This is perhaps where the greatest contribution of Bonacchi's book lies; by making connections between the deep past and the immediate present, it might act as a bridge between past and present oriented fields and disciplines for common political futures.

References

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