Historical memory, reimagining the present:
The spatial politics of monuments in Thailand and Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

We explore the contested politics of space and memorialization in Thailand and Sri Lanka, arguing that when monuments and sites embrace several, and often opposing memories, the question of whose histories are remembered and openly shared or marginalized and excluded becomes critical for understanding social dynamics and political change. Here, we consider how constructed narratives and histories (what is remembered and who is forgotten) have been publicly challenged, contested, and sometimes (re-)negotiated. Of significance in the cultural mediation of memory and monuments are the competing claims to equitable representation and the invariable memorialization of certain forms of representation. A fundamental feature of religio-political ultra-royalism in Thailand and ethno-Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka is that the memorialization of either contesting democratic discourses or of the Tamil minority respectively, is marginalized. In this article, we assert the ethical imperative to continually intervene and challenge the crisis of nationalist (re)presentation.

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Introduction

This article considers the contested politics of space and memorialization in Thailand and Sri Lanka. The article argues that when monuments and sites embrace several, and often opposing memories, the question of whose histories are remembered and openly shared or marginalized and excluded becomes critical for understanding social dynamics and political change (see also Capdepón et al., 2020). The various forms of public memorialization are connected to how mnemonic elements are spatially inscribed in place-making through various cultural articulations. Here, we consider how constructed narratives and histories (what is remembered and who is forgotten) have been publicly challenged, contested, and sometimes (re-)negotiated.

At stake in the cultural mediation of memory and monuments are the competing claims to equitable representation and the invariable marginalization of certain forms of representation. It is an inescapable feature of religio-political ultra-royalism in Thailand and ethno-Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka that the memorialization of either contesting democratic discourses, or of the Tamil minority respectively, is marginalised. In this article, we suggest that the ethical imperative is to continually intervene and challenge the crisis of nationalist (re)presentation.

Thailand's democracy moments

The current military-monarchy regime in Thailand has been rolling back the temporal space of liberal democracy and modernity to establish a monocracy or absolutism under the king[1]. A continuing appearance of democracy is maintained as a veneer in an increasingly authoritarian social and political milieu. This is contemporary Thailand now at the beginning of the Tenth Chakri Reign (2016-); replete with totalizing historical narratives (*métarécit*) and its spatial ordering around the axis of the center-nation summit (royal palace/monarchy regime). The immutable historic relationship between monarchy and military maintains a status quo dominance that remains unchallengeable and supported through the use of extensive propaganda[2] using ideological repressive state apparatuses, controlling the media, and in the play of symbols and images.

This essay concerns national monuments (as politico-religious and secular), memorialization, and counter-memories. It is argued that national monuments are not fixed symbols that stand in isolation, affixed in time and space, distinct from the cultures that bring them into material being. Instead, time-placed, often contested, monuments are performative embodiments and enactments of life-worlds, collective values, and shared cultural practices. This is memory and history as "past presencing" (Macdonald, 2013, p. 253); as ways in which "the past may be (and be made to be) present – as well as represented" among individuals and in the wider national imaginary. The argument is that memory is never only about the past, but is strongly connected with the present and the future.

In Sri Lanka and Thailand, the religio-political landscape is scattered with material reminders of the past in the present and, among ethnic ultra-nationalists, obsessed with the disappearance of collective memory and its interpellated presentation. In Thailand, the

destruction under the current regime of monuments to emergent democracy and replacing these with iconic autocratic royalist ones is a connotation of (traditional) power that is historically emplaced in the cultural power and authority of the monarchy. The signifying power of monumentalized ultra-royalism in image/s[3] at sites where the 1932 constitutional democracy symbols were once placed, has spun a genealogical narrative in maintaining power and order in an immediate royal descent to the current ruling monarch.

In Sri Lanka, as in Thailand, monument making is fixed in history and the present time. If pre-colonial time was informed by ontological energy, the post-colonial modern is informed by epistemological energy that attributes objective knowledge to monuments and respective fields of (re)presentation. An example of the movement from the ontological to the epistemological is the mythic-historical life of Dutthagāmanī and his encounter with the Hindu King Elāra who ruled in Anuradhapura. With respect to the epistemological, in the lexicon of Sinhalese nationalism, this event is re-interpreted as somehow conveying a truth about the nature of agency between Sinhalese and Tamils in the present. All nationalists are destined to misread the mythic register as a charter for politics. The central event in the life of Dutthagāmanī is his military campaign which he launched from the Sinhalese heartland in southern Sri Lanka against the Tamil King, hailing from the Cōla kingdom in the south India. The defeat of Elāra represents the restoration of a Buddhist kingship in the polity centered on Ānuradhapura (Tambiah, 1992, p. 173–6).

The purpose of the monuments which were erected following Elāra's defeat and demise was essentially cosmological. It culminates in the construction of the *Mahāthūpa* (Great Stupa), the *telos* of which was "cosmic stabilisation whereby the inherent fragmenting possibility of the world order and of its kingly embodiment – inherent as a function of the logic of hierarchy and incorporating encompassment – is overcome by the affirmation of Buddhist cosmic unifying principles" (Obeyesekere, 1990, p. 57–58). The *Mahāthūpa*, by housing the relics of the Buddha at Anuradhapura, "is itself a visual metaphor of the centricity and implicitly of Buddhism in Lanka" (Greenwald, 1978, p. 30). The hierarchy of the cosmic order is reconstituted through the reinstitution of the unifying principles of Sinhalese Buddhist kingship after a period of Tamil rule.

In according honor to Elāra in the celebration of funeral rites, Dutthagāmanī not only incorporates Elāra's social order, but also mythically signifies his own "transformation from the demonic to compassionate beneficence" (Obeyesekere, 1990, p. 63). Dutthagāmanī's transformation signifies the simultaneous restoration of the hierarchy of the Buddhist cosmos. This process of reordering is reinforced in his post-conquest building of monuments to the adoration of the Buddha, as well as the expunging of unwholesome actions (*akusala kamma*) that he accumulated through waging war (Kapferer, 1998, pp. 69–70). In the Sinhalese nationalist re-reading of these events, the essentially Buddhist informed rule by Elāra is lost and the ethical imperative that motivates Dutthagāmanī's building program is also lost. In the modern narrative of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, the memory of Elāra has come to epitomize an anti-Tamil sentiment among the Sinhalese populace.

With respect to their ideological re-imagining we draw on Freud's elaboration of the "uncanny."[4] These monuments have an embodied absence/disembodied presence; a material sign situated on the cultural landscape. Monuments are, as Hook (2005) noted,

"machines of the uncanny, as vehicles of ideological uncanniness" (pp. 702-703). Monuments and images operate a "mechanism of presence" and hence disturb those who see fear (and one can say, passion) in them in ambivalent ways (Hook, 2005, p. 699). Indeed, Hook talks about the "ontological dissonance", a case of what cannot be, but that we implicitly (even if only momentarily) believe is. In the construction of monuments and commemorative rituals, we may talk of the abuses of memory, or what Ricoeur (2004) calls "the uncanniness of history". The extent to which history is explained understood and represented, contingent on collective memory, is an imaging largely based on both narration and rhetoric. In the case of historical monuments, these are not only superfluities of secular or sacred (public) space, but they also articulate distinct cultural and politico-religious national sentiments (doxa) that have little regard for the cultural "other", such as ethnic minorities. Monuments are social symbols, though not recognized alike, while their symbolic dimensions are connected normatively to social memories and identity policies.

The 24 June 1932 was marked by an anti-Absolute-monarchy revolution under the People's Party (*Khana Ratsadon*) in Thailand, though short-lived as the royalists eventually seized back their power. A democracy memorial plaque to this event, until recently located at Bangkok's Royal Plaza and representing the revolutionary doctrine of the sovereignty of the people, was removed by the current regime (discussed briefly below).

Royalists performing a "removal ritual" for the 1932 Revolution (democracy) plaque in Bangkok on 21 June 2015 with compliant monks [Photo from MThai reproduced in Prachatai https://prachatai.com/english/node/7090]. Note the statue of King Chulalongkorn (Rama 5) in the background. The plaque was actually removed in April 2017 and replaced with one which instead glorifies monarchy.

The democracy plaque represents both that which is not to some actors, and that which is to others and "created a physical and symbolic mottle - a dark spot on the royal space..." (Thanavi, 2016, p. 38). The People's Party revolution under an anti-monarchist officer corps[5] indicated an ending of the "absolutist regime in Siam…as the identity of this landscape and royal artifacts were challenged, re-defined and re-claimed" (Thanavi, 2016, p. 56).

In fact, the Thai military swears an oath of allegiance to the monarch in front of a statue of the late King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) at the Royal Plaza; indicating that the military's loyalty and interests are clearly to the crown, not the people. In contradistinction, pro-democracy activists swore allegiance to the 1932 people's revolutionary constitution at the site of this small memorial plaque on 24 June 2012 commemorating the 80th anniversary of the revolution symbolically reading out the new People's Party democracy principles. After this event, following the 2014 coup d'état, such mass gatherings of democracy protestors (monks and laity) were crushed.

Monuments create an "interpellative" (Althusser 1971) and an ontological ambiguity (Hook, 2005, pp. 701-702). As noted earlier, they are a contradiction, an abjection to some, and exalted or as an ideological aura to others and necessitate the involvement of active agents. In the aftermath of the Siamese Revolution of 1932, a number of democracy monuments were erected around the capital and surrounding provinces. A number of these have been removed since mid-2017 (the second year of the current king's rule) by unknown reactionary entities, grabbing back control from a fleeting (and in fact illusory) gesture of modern democracy in the post-war years. The removed monuments were substituted for signs (or place names), symbols, and images which reflect, once again, a revived monarchical Absolutism.[6]

The real and imagined memory politics of now-time

In Thailand, we see symbols of the short-term and transient democracy removed and replaced with perpetuating and dominant royalist images and signs; more akin to neo-feudalism and a controlling cultural despotism. How can we explain such a reactionary mode of behavior in a modern nation-state? As overarching normative "representations of space"[7] this ascendency is tied to a cultural and socio-historical justification for the rule, which is not understood in terms of the singularity of moments in time; instead as a historical continuum (linear time), albeit one cleaved by intense contested moments[8].

In Sri Lanka public space has been similarly appropriated by Sinhalese nationalist interests since the 1950s, a process that has intensified in recent decades. While in Thailand new royalist monuments replace those symbolizing democratizing moments, in Sri Lanka there is little in the way of monuments to the early anti-colonial nationalist movement (which was in the early 20th century multi-ethnic and multi-religious). If there were such monuments, it would be a celebration of a deeply conservative form of anti-colonial nationalism, conservative for the reason that the Ceylon National Congress (formed in 1919) saw as their mission a gradual transfer of power from "white sahibs" to "brown sahibs". The first generation of bourgeois nationalists saw no merit in a nationalist movement that

would engage the masses; it was this strategic failure that precipitated the emergence of a diverse array of ethno-nationalist movements in Sri Lanka from the 1920s which would invariably adopt more progressive and democratizing agendas but now couched in terms of ethno-religious entitlement. This invariably ensured that Sinhalese Buddhist majority organizations would actively campaign as victims of privileged minority excess. As a seductive campaign this subsequently generated a plethora of Sinhalese Buddhist monuments imbued with national political intent.

In the last twenty years conflicts over the placement of Buddha statutes in sites of multi-ethnic contestation and memorializing the Sinhalese war dead (in the civil war between 1983-2009) have dominated the narration of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese nationalist imaginary. The consequence has been the simultaneous effacing of Tamil suffering and memory. No sooner had the war ended[9], President Mahinda Rajapakse set about altering the demography of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual north-east – a project motivated by the ideology of Sinhalese myth given new ontological ground in modernity. In fervent nationalist Buddhist zeal – no sooner had the war ended, in 2009 President Mahinda Rajapakse's wife (a Catholic) visited Jaffna accompanying a statue of Sanghamiththa, the first woman Buddhist missionary to Sri Lanka, and the daughter of King Asoka, the ruler of the Buddhist Mauryan Empire that dominated north and middle India from 320-180 BCE. The statue was enshrined in a newly built Buddhist temple in Maathakal in the high security zone. Indeed, once this was gazetted in Parliament, Tamil and Muslim landowners were unable to seek legal redress in the courts with respect to establishing title to land within these designated "high security zones".[10] This symbolic moment, in which Buddhist "just-war" place-making (Frydenlund 2017) was conferred, resulted in the continued dispossession of non-Sinhalese residents in Maathakal.

State terror also extended to eviscerating the memory of the Tamil struggle in the north-east, where the army methodically erased all traces of the LTTE and their fallen.[11] Kilinochchi's cemetery for the LTTE dead was totally eradicated and the Tamil dead were effaced. In the center of Kilinochchi[12], the army erected a victory monument: a giant concrete cube with a bullet hole cracking its fascia and a lotus flower rising from the top (McDowell, 2012, p. 34). Writing in *The New Yorker*, Jon Lee Anderson recalls how soldiers stood to attention before a marble plinth, whose inscription extolled the Rajapaksas' leadership during "a humanitarian operation which paved the way to eradicate terrorism entirely from our motherland, restoring her territorial integrity and the noble peace."[13] The emotive force of this inscription is driven by an ontological appeal, one which imagines violence in the context of Sinhalese nationalism.

The chilling and totalizing logic of a conservative Buddhist religiosity in connection with violent nationalism is further exemplified in the form of the Jaffna war memorial. In the inscription on the memorial, Mahinda Rajapakse – in the manner of a ruling Buddhist monarch – is fashioned as the "Lord of the Three Sinhala Countries" (Tri-Sinhala), a unifier of the island under the umbrella of an all too actual Sinhalese Buddhist popular sovereignty. Through the memorial, Mahinda Rajapakse establishes a genealogical link to ancient kings like Dutthagāmanī, who built relic shrines to the Buddha in the aftermath of having waged

war. Within this mythic horizon, Mahinda Rajapakse's defeat of the LTTE momentarily brought to an end the cyclical cosmic journey of unity, fragmentation, and reordering. The Sinhalese Buddhist state, nation, and people were finally seemingly unified within a hierarchical relation. The memorial expresses ontological force – Rajapakse's journey from the margins of the Sinhalese Buddhist heartland in the south occupies the same ontological ground as that of the myth of the Buddha, who in the *Mahavamsa* ordains the island as the *dhammadipa* (the island ennobled to preserve and propagate the Buddha-Dhamma). The definition is loaded with ontological meaning, one that is grounded in a dominant and totalising discourse.

The destruction of a number of alternate historical images and signs of democracy in Thailand is one such means of annihilating collective memory, replacing with an overriding and dominating elite historicism. As a compelling symbolic act, this has enduring and reflective ramifications for spatial practices; the way in which we perceive and internalize conventional history.[14] In considering the functions of historicism it is necessary to consider the means by which it mitigates difference and competing heterogeneous space. In Thailand, replacing monuments and symbols of a peoples' constitution, royalists thus "fixed" (in Benjamin's sense) the narrative encoding of its history back in place. In Thailand, narrated history effectively inscribes in the present a internalize beneficent royal imagining; a sequential and perpetuating imagining of the past. In relation to Benjamin's critique of historicism: In this narrative, normative history in Thailand (and Sri Lanka) as a repressive ideology is a celebration of a genealogy of its victorious and beneficent rulers. All monarchs under the current reign are the heirs of victorious rulers who came before them. Hence, we may say that, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current ruler (Benjamin, 2003, p. 391). This vision of historicism has little or no room for alternate visions of lived space (*espaces de représentation*).

In the Chakri lineage it is scripted that all the land belongs solely to the king abiding "by the royal customs established by…(their) ancestors who came together to form Chat (nation). This gathering of people (royalty) chose from one family a capable man to be the leader of the Chat…" (Phatsakorawong in Murashima 1988). This was not due to the opinion of the majority of citizens; "rather it had been through the leader's own authority. The people who were organized into the Chat were loyal to him and followed his every advice. *They renounced their natural rights, whether public or private.* Therefore, the leader (i.e., the king) received full freedom and power which was set forth in the royal customs that the people had enacted."[15] Nothing really has changed in late-modern Thailand.

Aside from "now-time" as a momentary historical and political experience, it also articulates ambiguities through image-space and concepts such as remembrance or memorialisation. Indeed, historical monuments which capture elitist imagery or events in time are in fact spatial representations of a historical ambiguity; fragments of time, bound loosely to a temporal (subjective) experience of the now. The past is not simply there in memory, but it needs to be articulated to become (cultural) memory (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3). This involves a conscious invocation of a past that is real and/or imagined (Soja 1996) through state institutions, at public events, in art and literature. Both Thailand and

Sri Lanka are at crossroads in this current historical moment. The normative reading of histories inscribed into the collective consciousness under the aegis of royal historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and reproduced over time as a "general politics of truth" (Foucault, 2000, p. 131) no longer remains watertight in Thailand. In Sri Lanka progressive citizens' journalism, women's organizations, and Tamil activists still penetrate normative Sinhalese nationalist historiography. Normative histories are produced by monopolizing knowledge-producing practices with respect to a common past. These histories, following Foucaul "create and maintain the unity and continuity of a political body by imposing an interpretation on a shared past and, at the same time, by silencing alternative interpretations of historical experiences" (Medina, 2011, p. 14).

Inevitable memory challenges, or counter-histories that cannot remain suppressed, must emerge from the margins; the subversive power of silenced historical experiences. These counter-histories in turn may generate distinctive knowledge/power effects in mobilizing new meanings and attitudes such that normative history which legitimized Thailand's monarchs as the rightful owners of the land may be challenged by the oppressed. In this way, these vernacular or counter-histories, as a radical epistemic or "guerrilla pluralism" (Medina, 2011), are considered treacherous to the monarchy-military regime. The Announcement No.1 of the Siamese Revolutionary People's Party stated: "You, all of the people should know that our country belongs to the people—not to the King...."; and No. 1.20 declares that, "the time has ended when those of royal blood farm (/plow) on the backs of the people…" (People's Party, 2000; Thanavi, 2017, p. 136). Indeed, the manifesto was specific in its criticism of royalty, stating how the king was above the law, appoints cronies without merit to power, fails to listen to the people, and squeezes taxes from the people for his own personal use (Pridi, 2000). It is little wonder it is ideologically contested by the dominant ruling regime.

History and the cultural politics of memorialization

In distinguishing between history and collective memory (*la mémoire collective* as in Halbwachs' sense), geographer Stephen Legg (2005) suggests that history is thus positioned as the story of the "triumphant and the literate"; whereas memory (as work) is seen as the "democratic enterprise of oral traditions, folklore, and material culture" (p. 418). However, at the same time, collective memory may also be defined as working for or against certain histories. Pierre Nora has been criticized for not attending much to "counter-memories" (Legg, 2005, p. 496); the marginalised "Other", that is, citizens who "remember differently" though obscured by the machinations, fixity, and plot of normative (narrated) history. Monuments thus convey axiological functions; the memory-based understanding that observers have about monuments influences how they value the events, ideals, and individuals represented in monuments (Bellentani and Panico, 2016, p. 34).

Nora's lieu de mémoire helps to explain the construction of a nation or a community, but not counter-spaces where history dominates memory (as lived space). It is clear following Halbwachs (1980) that memory is in any case relative to the changing configurations of collective consciousness, selecting mutable images of the past those that best suit its present needs. Indeed, for Nora (1989), and earlier Halbwachs, memory and history are mutually

opposed ways of appreciating the past. Nevertheless, Ariès revealed in his work that even memory has a history and that if the memory was a way into historical understanding, "that understanding could not help but condition memory" (Ariès in Hutton, 1988, p. 322). Zizek (2009) noted how the past, as perceived, "exists as it is included" (p. 56); as it is represented in the texture of historical memory in a constant process of reinterpreting the past into new textures.

It is clear that these contemporary memory perspectives are conventionally formed and informed by historical narratives which are already set in place and which demand a particular reading of past events in the present (Thongchai, 2002, p. 263) Indeed, in Thailand there can be no forgetting (as in the "erasing of traces" [Ricouer, 2004, p. 417]) the popular uprising in October 1973 and three years later in 1976, events which are well enshrined in the Thai psyche. These historical moments in the 1970s involved a burgeoning revolutionary new student middle class, influenced by selected western values and the re-imagining of an autochthonous Siamese history. The state sanctioned its memorialization in the years following the student uprisings. This is not surprising as a number of the student revolutionaries from this time affiliated with the Communist Party of Thailand, after receiving a royal amnesty in 1980, went on to become royalist politicians and prominent public and private sector figures. However, during the April-May 2010 sanctioned massacre enacted by the military on pro-democracy (Red Shirt) protestors, participants were stigmatized in the establishment media as being insignificant "low persons" even as "nonpersons" (Taylor, 2011, p. 10), as they were mostly rural dwellers (but in fact a diverse social group). As attempts were made over the past decade to collectively remember this tragic event and its sites, it has been obliterated, washed, and cleansed from state-sanctioned collective memory. The 2010 events in Bangkok remain a sanctioned "non-history." As Foucault (2003) said: "the history of some is not the history of others". It has been expunged from normative history; just as monuments symbolizing Thailand's early revolutionary democracy were recently removed from various public spaces.

Similarly, we see this directed memory erasure of democratic sentiments in the removal of the 1932 democracy memorial plaque; replaced instead with a new dominant royal insignia. Even the 2010 democracy protestors' blood was hosed away in Bangkok's streets by royalist ultra-nationalist volunteers; a ritual cleansing process (Douglas, 2002 [1966]) was a means of destroying memory and ensuring the reproduction of society qua order. In Douglas' (2002) early terms, the democracy memorials and contemporary protestors were seen by ultra-royalists as not belonging and as "dirt" (Thongchai, 2014, p. 97); individuals needing to be ritually cleansed from the sanctified boundaries and space of ennobled (royal) place/s. This perception was connected to the rural-urban (dual economy) divide since late modernization; where most of the democratic aspirations were largely rural-based, given the policies of regional empowerment generating greater awareness of rights during Thaksin Shinawatra's government. Many of these rural people, for the first time, started to have a meaningful sense of an emergent "democracy-in-action" before the 2006 coup (Glassman, 2010, p. 1306; Taylor, 2012, p. 131). This was at least one underlying reason for the 2006 coup, as power was taken back by the elite summit-center and within the continuing monarchy patronage system.

The attempt by military-monarchy interests to redefine memory space in the centre of Bangkok where the small democracy plaque was a landmark is stunning in its bravado. A year after the 2006 coup d'état, this People's Party democracy plaque became a center for anti-(Absolute) royalism; both as a public gathering point and as an "operational site for (pro-democracy) red shirt political activities" (Thanavi, 2017, p. 142; 2016, p. 142). As a mediator between the past and the present, the plaque provided both a symbolic and literal locus for the 1932 Revolution. Another symbol of that historic early period of anti-royalism was also discreetly removed in 2018 (Pravit, 2018); namely, the Constitution Defence Monument in North Bangkok[17]. This monument was erected in 1936 to commemorate the newly established constitutional democracy following a failed anti-democracy revolt in 1933 by the Boworadet Royalists (Phatarawadee, 2019; Thanavi, 2016, p. 57). In the case of the Constitution Defence Monument, observers who witnessed its removal were detained. No one knows where either the democracy plaque, or the monument were taken, or if these have been destroyed.

As Herzfeld (2006) noted, the constructed landscape is directly correlated to the ideologies that chiefly endorse it. The construction of monuments "implies permanence, eternity, the disappearance of temporality except in some mythological sense. Monuments have a metonymic relationship to the entities (such as nation-states, monarchies) that they serve, and their ponderous ontology discourages thoughts of their potential impermanence..." (2006, p. 129) Indeed, this is a reason why monuments, which represent a particular ideology of change at a historic moment, can be seen to be so threatening to incoming authoritarian rule in the interest of the status quo ante. Herzfeld goes on to say that monumentality serves the interests of the ruler and to indoctrinate "individual bodies those habitual relationships to the built environment that supposedly induce political docility and ideological complaisance" (2006, p.129-130). The monuments of a powerful state or institution are equally performative as among state or parastatal actors and are no less liable to be torn down and/ or replaced. It is at sites of collective memory that social groups inscribe myths about themselves and their world onto a specific time and place. This is an integral element of the ongoing project of establishing individual and group identities, which are "symbolically coded in public monuments and their attendant ceremonials" (Johnson, 2002, p. 294).

According to Boyarin (in Johnson, 2002, p. 295), memory is neither something that exists and remains latent in the past; nor is it something that we project from the present. Instead, it has a potential for "creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past". It is how we imagine the past and then project this onto the present which is significant to social actors in relation to specific sites. In this regard, Nora (1989) noted how memory attaches itself to sites, as embodiments of a memorial consciousness. As Anderson (1983) remarked in relation to nation, memory and forgetting, all significant changes in consciousness naturally tend to "bring with them characteristic amnesia" (pp. 204-205). The "forgetting" (as traces) is made into a "project" and in shifting the narratives of identity. It is the past, as both history and memory, that is actually "lost" in forgetting (Ricouer, 2014, p. 284); as in the destruction of national

democracy monuments, signs and symbols, as witnesses of a past history. But destroying monuments and erecting nationalist politico-religious monuments in Thailand is nothing new; at least since the collapse of the Constitutional Front Government following the coup d'état of 1947. This has been ongoing, even if subtle in intent, at least until the current monarch when reactionary activities have become more explicit.

In a revealing media piece, Lawattanatrakul (2019) cited a 1989 newspaper article (cited in Thanavi, 2017, pp. 131-132) written earlier by ultra-royalist and former Prime Minister (1975-1976) Kukrit Pramoj, criticizing the 1932 People's Revolutionary Party as "having bad taste and no love for Thai arts and culture" and how this became "one part of the criticisms of the revolution as 'early ripe, early rotten'". This indicated that the new People's Party was rushing to change the country when the people were not ready for democratic change. Kukrit, among other royalists, supported the demolition of symbolic revolutionary historical buildings that were considered unattractive and "not suitable" to "performatively" reflect the new royal Chakri/Rattanakosin era. Thanavi (2017, p. 132) noted that the demolition of the 1932 People's Party architecture reflected an ideology in the return of the "royalist order to Bangkok's landscape".

In a sense the royalists regarded the revolutionary party's urban landscape as foreign, alien to Thai culture and society, embedded in an ongoing contestation between revolutionary (liberal democracy) and royalist reactionaries (Thanavi 2017, p. 133). Not dissimilarly, in the sacred realm, normative representations of Buddha-images are important in Thailand following a precise royal-sanctioned normative style. In the late 1990s the construction of the so-called "Superman" Buddha-image at Wat Sanam Chan to the east of Bangkok showed how particular social practices remake the sanctity of the place and the aura and uncanniness associated with particular dissonant things/objects. The contentious casting of the kitsch, hyper-modernist "Superman" Buddha-image, standing with one foot on the globe, and one arm in the air, created considerable controversy among establishment elites (especially in the Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture). This led to state requests for its dismemberment (Taylor, 2008, p. 78). Indeed, normative Buddha images (as palladia) with their royal sanctioned genealogy have played a distinctive political role in conferring legitimation and power among Thailand's rulers (Tambiah, 1982).

In Sri Lanka, the army recently completed the restoration of another Buddhist stupa in the Eastern Province; the project at the Neelagiriseya Temple is the latest in a series of Sinhalisation projects that have targeted the east of this minority dominated province. These state-sponsored "Sinhalisation" efforts of traditional Tamil populated areas, particularly in the north and east of Sri Lanka, have been reported more often in the past couple of years.[18] It echoes with events in 2005 in Trincomalee (also in the Eastern Province) in May 2005 where a large Buddha image was erected on public land in the city center.[19] The objective was two-fold: Firstly, to further polarise inter-ethnic relations in a city that was evenly divided between Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese, and secondly, to send a message to the minorities in Trincomalee that they were hierarchically encompassed by the Sinhalese.[20] The potential for violence (that would accompany any attempt at removing the image) would be contrary to Buddhist ethical values, but working to serve the interests of certain Buddhist ultra-nationalists in the encompassing order of the Buddhist state.

The completion in 2021 of the Sandahiru Seya which began in 2010 in Anuradhapura under the auspices of the Sri Lankan military was recently inaugurated by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his elder brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa as an expression of national gratitude to the war veterans.[21] The stupa represents the ethno-cultural imagining and hegemonic dominance of Sinhalese Buddhists and as a mnemonic device to the "war heroes" and to their "noble sacrifices". The opening ceremony marked a new epoch in the revival of a particular Buddhist legacy on the island in the official narrative of the state. Addressing the gathering, Mahinda Rajapaksa said that every time people worship at the Stupa, blessings will be invoked on all war heroes who sacrificed their lives to bring peace to the island and to all those who died during the war. Such gestures signal late *modernist* Buddhism's political propensity for "virtuous violence" (in the name of civic Buddhism), but also the shameless (mis-)use by the Rajapakse's of the memory of Sinhalese young men who died in the war. The only viable and simultaneously empty response is "*what would the Buddha have made of this*"? Not much we reckon, but as Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyeskere (1988) contended over 30 years ago (in their seminal work on the transformative dynamics of Protestant *modernist* Buddhism) violence has taken root in the heart of Sinhalese Buddhism (or rather violence carried out among those who would resort to the Buddha's teachings for their own religio-political ends).

Sandahiru Seya in Anuradhapura

At the same time as the ceremony that initiated the Sandahiru Seya a crackdown launched by the security forces in the Tamil dominated northeast in the run up to *Maaveerar Naal* (held on November 27 each year). This is the day on which many Tamils around the world honor the memory of those who died in the campaign for external self-determination; an opportunity to memorialize Tamil sons and daughters.[22] In the conservative Sinhalese nationalist imaginary, the Tamils are denied the legitimacy of remembrance, in much the same way that democracy advocates in Thailand are denied any legitimacy and right to memorialization.

In Thailand, the institutional process of erasing the memory (and historical significance) of the early 1932 People's Party has been implemented under repressive state

ideology for decades, starting with an imprecise and distorted coverage in schools. This commenced with a counter-narrative following the coup in 1957 under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat who was intent on restoring monarchy prestige and power and turning against the imposition of liberal democracy. The downplaying of the importance of the people's revolution included terminating celebrating 24 June (1932) as the National Day and shifting attention instead to King Bhumibol Adulyadej's birthday on 5 December each year. This symbolized that the "state's interests had successfully overcome the brief interregnum caused by the 'revolt' of the commoners" and that the 1932 revolution "would be forgotten." (Mark, 2017).

As discussed here, an important means of erasing memory and reinstituting a new sense of history is in a twofold process: firstly, in the destruction of monuments and related historical artifacts and, secondly, substituting new symbols of monarchy and its ritual authority. Lawttanatrakul (2019) referred to this as the "war of memory" as in the case of Sinhalese nationalists and ethnic Tamils post-Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), and in Thailand following the 2006 military coup which annihilated democracy histories, material and nonmaterial.[23] In Freud's (1909) view, monuments and memorials to past events are mnemic symbols which he equated among some of his patients who cannot free themselves from the past and tend to "neglect what is real and immediate" (p. 16). But things also get forgotten, or, in Freud's terms, suppressed. In Thailand this is evidenced in the case of the current reign, destroying the material remnants of the 1932 Peoples' Party in the hope that such mnemonic suppression would turn instead to new devotion and to the abiding loyalty to the monarchical hierarchical order.

In Thailand, the establishment of the 1932 constitutional government centered around a mass ritual[24]; a transformative spectacle or performance as the revolutionary leader Phraya Phahon read the first declaration of the People's Party at the Royal Plaza in front of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, first commissioned by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). This was the site of the sovereign power of the monarch and it was here on 10 December 1936 that the (now removed) People's Party democracy plaque was embedded and where Phahon read the people's manifesto. A spectacle such as this draws attention to the dramatic and stunning; legitimating new forms of political power and authority that creates and reinforce social hierarchies. However, the revolutionary fervour was not to last after the death of King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) on the 3 June 1946 and the coup a year later, together with the return of conservatives and royalist forces intent on restoring secular power and authority back to the monarchy. The status quo since then has remained unchanged.

Connerton (1989) has shown clearly how social memory is maintained through objects and performances and that these are not static but manipulated and rationalised anew with changing regimes. In relation to elite interests, it is clear that in the modern period national elites invented rituals and symbols that "claim continuity with an appropriate historic past" (status quo ante), and in so doing create revived ritual spaces (1989, p. 51). It is these spaces under the current military-monarchy compact that have created new conceptual or conceived representations of space, where the agents of the monarchy regime define the

norms and statutes as inscribed in a symbolic system of language, discourse, text, and law. The historical past is now reaffirmed and captured in the present (now-time) moment.

The continuing calendrical ritual performances undertaken at national memorials maintain this sense of the constancy of rule. But it is clear that when power changes hands, this necessitates the need to create new historical memorials. In other words, reasserting cultural re-imaginings of the past, intent for the civil-political means of regaining total control over the discursive flows of historical consciousness. The problem comes when, as in Thailand, a monarchy assumes unconstitutional (or para-constitutional) power; blocking certain material and symbolic aspects of the past that it finds incongruous to its absolute rule and obstructing any progress towards democratization (Geddes et al., 2018, p. 210).

A lack of organised commemoration around these original constitutional monuments in Thailand means that people forget that these sites exist; or fail to realise how historically significant these symbols are to democracy. Historically, "the idea of the monument is closely tied to commemoration (of a victory, a ruling, a new law)" (Caves, 2005, p. 318). There are five constitutional monuments in various provinces in the Northeast Region of Thailand and it is only a matter of time before these are also removed as part of the ideological "memory war" (as a royalist "cleansing") over Thailand's history. The authoritarian state resorts to ideological forms of repression through its institutions and apparatuses at hand. Its concerns are where ideology (as a weapon), namely legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic, can be turned against the ruling classes. In total, at the time of writing, reports identified at least six sites memorialising the revolutionary People's Party which have been removed or renamed in the past twelve months as they are seen by the monarchy-military regime as subversive.

The immediacy and visibility of such counter-memory statements in Thailand are symbolic of the memorial heritage of an early rebellion against continuing monarchical absolutism. As *lieu de mémoire*, the removal at one stroke of some of these monuments in the past few years erased a remembered moment, as a representational space (*espaces de representation*) and replaced it with a sanctioned memory-history of the perduring power of royalty, one is more intimidating and coercive. The removal of constitutional monuments and the capture of democratic symbols is a means by which reactionaries control space. This entails a dwindling (Habermasian) "public sphere", as a "tactical-strategic" action (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 244) in subverting national symbols. The ethnic nationalist state in Sri Lanka or the military-monarchy state in Thailand, attached to their territory and eternal historical imagining (as historicism), control memory space; they arbitrate and act as a dominant power from and by this space.

Conclusion

In the context of the nation, Pierre Nora unfortunately never conceived a memory space in which power relations are contested (Legg, 2005, pp. 495-497). The nation (-state), as a hegemonic signifier, needs to be de-reified or deconstructed and seen as a contested site; not as a collective, nostalgic whole. Monuments themselves are signifiers that have become essential for the articulation of the national secular and religio-politics of memory and

identity, through which military-monarchy (political elites) or religious ethno-nationalists set political agendas and legitimate political power. In general, the use of monuments by rulers or political elites represents their own "dominant worldviews in space" and in using selective historical narratives that connect in immediate time, attending to those "events and identities that are comfortable" for them (Bellentani and Panico, 2016, p. 29; Cosgrove, 1989, p. 127).

Essentially, the destruction of people's constitutional monuments or the proliferation of post-civil war religious sites in minority dominant places are acts of reasserting historicism and a continuing elite hegemony over the socio-spatial dialectics of "now-time" (Soja, 1980). In Thailand this challenges historical representations embodied in monuments to the power of the Chakri monarchs (1782- current) in an endless suppression of difference between repetition. As counter-histories, alternative sites of remembrance resist forgetting and implant spatial events as a separate and distinct narration. The many liberal pro-democracy protestors or ethnic "others" killed or disappeared provided a counter-historical narrative built on the early Siamese revolution, or the mythic histories of early Sri Lanka, where survivors or minorities have not the cultural and political wherewithal to construct their own sites of remembrance (even if these were allowed by the nation state). These alternative commemorative sites in a Deleuzian sense would be reterritorializing as new "lived space" (*espace vecu*) if they were allowed to persist; and as "corporeal, unofficial, temporal… born in social memory and rumour" (Legg, 2005, p. 496).

In its harking back to feudalism and absolutism, Thailand's current potentate and his royal officer corps have replaced democracy with a mix of Siamese palingenetic ultranationalism incorporating a conservative Buddhist ideology that is grounded on the moral right to rule (Taylor, 2021).

The 1932 democracy brass plaque stated: "Here on 24 June 1932 at dawn, the People's Party proclaimed a constitution for the country's advancement." It has been replaced with a royal plaque stating: "Long live Siam forever. Happy, fresh-faced citizens build up the power of the land. Loyalty and love for the Triple Gems is good, for one's state is good, for one's clan is good and having a heart loyal to one's king is good. These are the tools to make one's state prosper" (see Head, 2017; Lefevre, 2017; Mark, 2017; Kongpob, 2017). This statement follows the proverb of the royal seal on the "Most Illustrious Order of the Royal House of Chakri", created by King Rama V (Mongkut 1868-1910) to honor the Mon-descended King Rama I (Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok Maharaj, 1736-1809). Royal historicism in Thailand is an attempt at connecting time in a linear progression to substantiate continuing and unquestioned rule.

It is no coincidence also that although the Thai regime has been destroying material or visual evidence; the recent student-led democracy protestors from diverse groups such as Free Youth, Progressive Red 63, Nonthaburi Network for New Generation, and Khanarat 63, attempted to consolidate a passive (though increasingly radical) space to contest the ruling status quo. Although the leaders are currently incarcerated, they took their cue for street action from the historical moment on 24 June 1932, even replicating the missing democracy plaque to commemorate this event in public space.

In 2020 the Thai army and its political ancillaries celebrated the (failed) 1933 royalist restorationist rebellion in a public relations statement waxing lyrical on continuing royalism and the need to protect the monarchy. This sentiment resonates with the restoration of royal symbols and monuments since 2017, replacing sites dedicated to constitutional democracy. In Sri Lanka the erasure of Tamil memory – the destruction of Tamil graves for example – is simultaneous to the ossified logic of Sinhalese memory that nationalist political Buddhism both necessitates and legitimises.

Benjamin (Theses [V] on the Philosophy of History) wrote that "for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably". The urgency of the moment entails retaining a conception of alterative historical narratives that are not the historical norm; but a vision of the revolutionary moment of democracy and equality embraced in multi-religious, pluralistic, and fully representative political systems. History, or historicism, as perceived as a storm of progress or as an eternal continuum, is nearing a critical now-moment.

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1   Absolutism is embedded in the radical notion attributed to Louis XIV (1643–1715): "L'état, c'est moi" ("I am the state").

2   Propaganda (through media) is a means of manipulation using rationally, quasi-scientific calculated (psychological) methods of dominating the perceived "irrationality" of the masses (see Adorno 1982); but also used as a means to signal the regime's strength in maintaining social and political order.

3   Especially to the championed late father of the current Thai king (Rama X, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, r.2016–), Bhumibol Adulyadej.

4   Freud's complex theory holds that the uncanny is something new that exists in something already known. But the uncanny is not simply something unknown that enters our consciousness; he argues that the notion of familiar space (as in "homely") relates to something which is known and comfortable on the one hand and discrete on the other. The home, for Freud, is a type of secret place, and the unhomely, the uncanny, is something that should have been kept a secret but is revealed. An example given is the mannequin which looks familiarly human, but is in fact lifeless and therefore a potential cause of anxiety as a result of this dissonance of not comprehending at first glance whether we are looking at a human or a piece of plastic.

5   Although Jory (2015) showed that some post-war Siamese Marxists considered 1932 less a "revolution" than an (anti-[Absolute]-monarchy) "coup d'état", Reynolds (1998) suggested that it was a response to a fervent nationalism "from below" and based in civil society. The problem in definitions of this event was also one of language and borrowed concepts in explaining the nature of the revolution in the context of the new Siam post-revolution (Subrahmanyan, 2020:78). A reason given for early Marxists in not seeing 1932 as a "revolution", is that the country remains a "semicolonial, semi-feudal society" (Wongtrangan 1981). Nothing has fundamentally changed in Thailand's social morphology since military strongman Sarit Thanarat (1908-1963) reinstated the power of the monarchy after his 1957 coup d'état.

6   Additionally, the palace has now reclaimed significant metropolitan land and formerly leased

property that was under the crown, removed from the Thai monarchy following the 1932 revolution, and now turned into urban public leisure space (see Ünaldi 2016; New Mandala 27 July 2020).

7   Lefebvre's (1991: 33,38-39) représentations de l'espace, (conceived space) as the dominant space in any society, tied to relations of production, hence to order, knowledge, to codifications, signs, and abstract representations.

8   E.g., transformative social and political events in Thailand 1973, 1976, 1992, and 2010.

9   An estimated 40,000 Tamil civilians died in the final months of the conflict (Weiss 2011).

10   Minority Rights Group International (2007: 3).

11   The Sri Lankan army website at the time drew on the Sinhalese nationalist invocation of the Aryan racial trope. It referred to the Indo-Aryan settlers who had first settled the island. Such sentiments drew on Max Muller's conflation of Sinhalese linguistic and racial identity and the characterization of Sinhala as an Indo-Aryan language.

12   Kilinochchi had been the de facto capital of Eelam, the separate enclave carved out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

13   Nearly all LTTE memorials and graveyards in Jaffna and Vanni constructed for their dead have been destroyed (groundviews.org/category/issues/end-ofwar-special-edition/page/2). The evisceration of memory has extended to the Sinhalizing of Tamil town names in the Eastern Province (McDowell 2012: 34).

14   This correspondingly enables an appreciation of the (re-)construction of local histories, biographies of the oppressed, or as de Certeau (1984: 108) talks about: "inward turning histories" and a kind of "knowledge that remain(-ed) silent". This implies a change in the "structure of feeling" (Williams 2001) and in the spaces of representation (images and words) which consume and take the place of the history lost to it (Chambers, 1990: 6).

15   Quoted from one of King Chulalongkorn's (Rama V) chief ministers, Phraya Phatsakorawong in 1889, cited in Murashima (1988: 86).

16   Ricoeur notes memory as a multiplicity of human experiences that captures diverse ways of seeing among remembering groups. Ricoeur (2004:85) contemplates the notion of memory as the "womb of history inasmuch as memory remains the guardian of the entire problem of the representative relation of the past to the present". History as written, he suggests, is a viewpoint of the past as "having been"; which signifies more as a lived presence (2004:280,364).

17   In fact, after the 1932 revolution, many new constitutional monuments were constructed not only in the metropolis, but in outlying provinces, especially in the frontier Northeast Region; some of these were erected even before those in Bangkok.

18   Tamils accused the government of an attempt to redraw district borders and thus alter political borders, encroaching on the Tamils' political power.

19   A local judge ordered the removal of the statue but it was not implemented. Indeed, it was argued that the removal would risk violence.

20   https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/wikileaks-jvp-sirisena-and-sampanthan-on-trinco-buddha-statue/.

21   http://www.adaderana.lk/news/78518/sandahiru-seya-in-anuradhapura-unveiled-for-devotees.

22   In November 2021 the government also announced new legislation that will restrict the number of people allowed to attend public gatherings – the pretext being the danger of *covid-19* transmission.

23   The "war of memory" was enacted through the demolition of buildings associated with the 1932 revolution and in the symbolic construction of a new parliament, also an enclosure newly placed around Sanam Luang (literally, the "Royal Field", originally defined as a closed sacred, royal space; which after the 1932 anti-[Absolute] monarchy revolution becoming an open public space) and in the Rattanakosin Island developments; the latter not without some resistance from local residents (see Herzfeld, 2012).

24   Interestingly, in contradiction to established norms, when taking the oath of office on 16 July 2019 in front of a picture of the current king, the junta Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha omitted a crucial last sentence to "uphold and observe the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in every respect" (Khaosod 2019). No excuses or explanations were offered.

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