ISIS’ Staged Cultural Heritage Destruction
A double-edged tactic: Damnatio memoriae and strategic gradualism at play
November 2017

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The report “ISIS’ Staged Cultural Heritage Destruction” was led by the Global Risks research team from the Human Development Research Initiative.

28 November 2017
ABSTRACT

Dismay was an obvious reaction to the videos showing ISIS militants tearing down and crumbling to pieces statues and artefacts in the Museum of Mosul or UNESCO heritage sites across Syria and Iraq. Many reposted these videos as documentary evidence, often commenting on their moral grounds. This article aims at scrutinising the rightfulness of the heritage-conscious response with which museum curators, academics, and ordinary citizens reacted as well as the rationale and aims behind such reprehensible acts.

RÉSUMÉ

Face aux vidéos des militants de l’État Islamique détruisant les statues et artefacts du Musée de Mossoul et des sites du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO en Irak et en Syrie, la première réaction fut (et reste encore) la consternation. Nombreux sont ceux qui ont reposté ces vidéos comme preuve à valeur documentaire, en les commentant sur des bases morales. Cet article vise à examiner la légitimité de la réponse qui a été celle des conservateurs de musées, des académiciens et des citoyens ordinaires, une réponse éminemment consciente de la valeur du patrimoine historique. L’article s’attachera aussi à explorer les fondements et logiques particulières qui sous-tendent des actes si répréhensibles.
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Contextualising the issue: ISIS’ cultural heritage destruction as a spatial and moral grey zone

Since 2014, the unrecognised proto-state ISIS has deliberately destructed and looted cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq. The most prominent cases included the Museum of Mosul and the archaeological sites of Nimrud, Hatra, and Nineveh¹. According to the latest evidence, Ashur and Palmyra have been also severely damaged. Footage of such acts were diffused by the same hands that mutilated statues and destroyed artefacts dating back to 7th century BC. These videos widely circulated on countless Twitter and Facebook accounts and were broadcasted on national and international media. ISIS’ cultural patrimony destruction was met with widespread opprobrium – TV commentators, museum curators, archaeologists and ordinary citizens from mostly Western countries saw these acts as the most horrendous expression of anachronistic and medieval iconoclasm².

Against this background, this article seeks to analyse ISIS’ cultural heritage destruction through the lens of the concept of the grey zone – “a useful analytical instrument for understanding new trends in contemporary world politics” (Baluev, 2013, p. 266). For this purpose, a working definition of a grey zone will be advanced. The choice of resting upon the grey zone concept in order to examine ISIS’ cultural patrimony destruction will be also qualified. Then, the paper is developed as follows: in primis, ISIS’ heritage destruction will be analysed by pointing out at the spatial implications of their strategy. Secondly, the grey zone concept will be used to scrutinise ISIS’ history of cultural destruction on moral and political grounds. Indeed, this twofold ‘problematisation’ is justified by the fact that there are areas of world politics where the canonical strands of international relations are inapplicable and, these areas – in which the grey zone concept is instead more appropriate – may be “located both in the semantic (or functional) field [or] in geographical space” (Baluev, 2013, p. 267).


Areas Under Threat or Control of Terror Groups

“A heat map of areas that are under the direct control of terrorist groups or threatened by areas they have occupied between January and October 2015. Information from no earlier than 2015 was included due to the continually shifting nature of the MENA conflicts. The terrorist groups included in this map were based on terror groups as defined by the National Counterterrorism Center”. Source: Antiquities Coalition (2016) Culture Under Threat Map, The Antiquities Coalition.

Heritage Sites Attacked, Targeted, or Destroyed
“A map of cultural heritage sites that have been deliberately targeted for destruction, demolition, or attack by violent extremist non-state actors and organizations. This layer includes sites that have been damaged, destroyed or attacked from January 2011 to January 2016. This does not include sites that have been destroyed as a result of collateral damage in conflict”. Source: Antiquities Coalition (2016) Culture Under Threat Map, The Antiquities Coalition.

Providing a theoretical framework

Broadly speaking, the grey zone (hereinafter, GZ) is defined as a penumbra, “an area intermediate between two mutually exclusive states or categories, where the border between the two is fuzzy” (Wiktionary [emphasis added]). Nonetheless, the GZ concept can be best explained as a sensu contrario, that is, as a theoretical paradigm that does not hold in terms of ‘white’ or ‘black’ analytical categories (Baqués, 2017). In other words, the GZ as a spatial and semantic concept is neither applicable in terms of the “bona fide logic” governing international law and interstate relations in times of peace; nor in terms of conventional state vs. state warfare (Baqués, 2017, para. 6). Hence, geographically, the GZ concept does not rest upon the Westphalian paradigm where the globe is divided into states with clear borders and diplomatic-military prerogatives; semantically or functionally, GZ are areas where the traditional dichotomy moral/immoral or ethical/reprehensible lose the explanatory power necessary to account for the behaviours of the analysed actors.

Spatially, a GZ is an area characterised by not-so-clear borders where the traditional monopoly on the use of force is exerted by a variety of actors, which do not have necessarily an institutional standing (Baluev, 2013). Thus, a GZ can describe a status quo that, on a geopolitical level, differs substantially from the conventionally-defined nation state (Baluev, 2013). For instance, ISIS was de facto controlling various parts of de jure Syrian and Iraqi territory until a couple of weeks ago; these were not merely strongholds of resistance against the incumbent regime but, rather, they were territories where ISIS, as the sole supplier of security and welfare services, was effectively acting as the local authority (Pomerantsev, 2015). This phenomenon is per se hardly new. In fact, the theoretical merit of the GZ concept does not rest so much in its explanatory power over a given status quo, but rather in its explanatory potential vis-à-vis a whole range of phenomena, dynamics, strategies and instruments which bring about a said status quo. Examples are, indeed, ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but also China in the South China Sea, or Russia in Ukraine (Baluev, 2013; Pomerantsev, 2015; Votel, 2016). Specifically, the GZ concept explains the subtle
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tactics and strategies that, falling short of open-war and traditional foreign policy instruments, nonetheless help the above-mentioned actors advancing their geopolitical objectives. In this respect, strategic gradualism is often referred to as a main feature of GZ strategies. As Michael Mazarr argues, strategic gradualism does not aim at achieving a “narrow objective, but rather [at using] an avalanche of incremental steps as the catalysts of an entirely new strategic reality” (2015, p. 38). Further, Frank Hoffman explains that grey-zone strategies are characterised by “states or groups that select from the whole menu of tactics and technologies and blend them in innovative ways to meet their own strategic culture, geography, and aims” (2009, p. 45). The praxis of grey-zone strategies, in fact, range from cyber attacks to political warfare, and might involve, *inter alia*, “theatrical atrocities designed to bring as much attention as possible” (Brands, 2016, para. 4). Finally, with respect to the semantic or functional application of the GZ concept, Primo Levi’s “The Drowned and the Saved” represents a foundational theoretical work. In this book, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi examined at length the role of concentration camps’ prisoners who collaborated with the Nazi authorities. In this sense, the GZ is found in a certain behaviour that escapes easy categorisation in terms of legality or lack thereof, thereby making difficult, or even redundant, any moral judgment whatsoever – as Levi himself concludes, “the grey zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge” (1988, p. 42).

**Damnatio memoriae: spatial implications of ISIS’ grey-zone strategy**

Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1941]) theorised the idea that every human grouping has its own mémoire collective, a shared repository of ideas, totemic figures, gestures, symbols and experiences. In other words, Halbwachs’ theory is based on the idea of memory as a living soul that organically links members belonging to the same milieu – from the microcosm of the family to the macrocosm of society. For a believer in the existence of a cosmopolitan society, one that is based on a shared morality, it would not be exaggerated to argue that the footages of ISIS militiamen damaging cultural heritage in the Museum of Mosul are doomed to become part of its mémoire collective. It would not be the first time in history that actual videos are engraved in memory as historical truth. The sight of dead US soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu or planes crashing into the Twin Towers on 9/11 are vivid images that have nowadays become evidence of specific happenings that resonate forcefully with universal history and culture. This notwithstanding, the status of ISIS’ videos of cultural heritage destruction, and
certainly the cruel footages of beheadings by ISIS militiamen, is profoundly different from the above-mentioned examples. In fact, ISIS’ own image-making and carefully-crafted editing and staging of these videos are but one part of a wider strategy ranging from creeping expansionism to media propaganda.

If these videos are merely considered as actual evidence of reprehensible acts, the aims and goals behind these acts as well as their ubiquitous spread through the media are indeed missed, thereby leaving space to dry condemnation and unhopeful dismay. Looking through the lens of the concept of GZ is clear, instead, that these footages have more the status of a power discourse rather than simple visual documentation. Indeed, these videos are much more than the ‘objective’ evidence of a happening. They have become, as art historian Ömür Harmanş ah argues, “the most iconic representations of contemporary violence against humanity” (2014, p. 172); Harmanş ah continues, “the selective and paradoxical understanding of representation must read precisely as a power discourse, and if we are to be critical of ISIS, we must challenge that power discourse, not accept it.” (2014, p. 173). Indeed, ISIS’ own-image machinery finds its most effective expression through the spread of these footages on a global scale. The projection of its power reaches every corner of the world thanks to media-users’ commodification of these videos as ‘innocent’ and ‘objective’ pieces of news, thereby enlarging ISIS’ standing on a local, international and global level. To this regard, Peter Pomerantsev explains that a main feature of the information age is no longer “military escalation dominance” – memento of the Cold War mind-set –, but rather “narrative escalation dominance – being able to introduce more startling storylines than your opponent” (2015, para. 5). In this respect, the use of social media aiming at the advancing of geopolitical objectives can be indeed considered a GZ strategy insofar as traditional foreign policy and conventional warfare tools are unable to cope with such instruments. Thus, the footages of statues and temples being damaged in Mosul, Hatra or Palmyra not only advance the geopolitical objectives of the Islamic state in the very places where such destruction take place, but they also help fuelling “ISIS’ ultra-modern imagery-machine” on a global scale (Harmanş ah, 2015, p. 173).

Locally, the destruction of ancient artefacts in the Museum of Mosul and the damaging of heritage sites in Nimrud, Hatra, Nineveh, Ashur and Palmyra sought, in effect, to implement a full-fledged damnatio memoriae3. Effectively, these tactics

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aimed at targeting what can be considered as the tangible assets of the mémoire collective of millennia-old populations located across Syrian and Iraqi territories. However, if archaeological preservation and human rights are seen in an ‘either-or’ fashion, the valence that cultural patrimony conservation has for human development and well-being ends up being simplistically underrated, or even worse, disregarded altogether. As the International Journal of Cultural Property editor-in-chief claims, the ‘minimisation’ of the significance of cultural heritage represents a “static way of thinking that leaves no room for the importance of cultural meaning in promoting and securing human well-being, a way of thinking that has been increasingly challenged in the contemporary development theory” (Bauer, 2015, p. 3).

Again, Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory can simplify this point. Drawing extensively from Émile Durkheim’s sociological theory of “collective effervescence”, Halbwachs sought to understand the dynamics which bind individuals together not only during periods of effervescence, but also, and more importantly, in the context of ordinary life (Halbwachs, 1992 [1941]). The theory of mémoire collective came out precisely of this quandary. For Halbwachs, the mere presence of totemic figures does not guarantee continuity between effervescent and ordinary phases of collective life, it is collective memory that strengthens social bonds within the group through a constant process of shared remembering of the past shaped by and adjusted to the needs of the present. Nevertheless, Halbwachs agrees with Durkheim on the importance of totemic figures – statues, sacred sites, symbols or commemorative events – as fundamental devices of “continuity and connection with the past to preserve social unity and cohesion” (Britton, n.d., para. 7). While museums are, to some extent, a Western-made structure that somewhat sanctifies the objects it houses, most of the sites that have been damaged during ISIS ‘iconoclastic campaign’ were indeed totemic figures, not only as sacred sites per se but also, and most importantly as loci of collective remembrance and shared experiences. The link between this grey-zone strategy and human development of the local inhabitants might be object of discussion, yet it should not be underrated. Finally, there is another spatial dimension of this GZ that is surprisingly disconnected from its spatial anchorage. In fact, the spread of these videos not only has immediate spatial implications as it humilies local communities and condition their development, they also objectivise the destruction of places which resonates with universal history, culture and heritage. This grey-zone strategy levers exactly on a sense of universal belonging;

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4 This concept was theorised by Émile Durkheim in 1912; Collective effervescence can be explained can be explained as the human capacity to creation, intended sensu lato, which not only pertains to the ‘sphere of individual accomplishment [but] is largely, perhaps wholly, rooted in collective phenomena’. Source: Halbwachs, M. (1992 [1941]). On Collective Memory. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, edited, translated and with an introduction by Lewis Coser, p. 25. See also: Durkheim, Emile. [1912] 1995. The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. by Karen Fields. New York: The Free Press.
one that is moved by the erase of sites and artefacts representing the visible memory of loci that many envisage as the cradle of civilisation *par excellence*.

**Artefacts of ideological discourse: iconoclasm or “iconoclash”?**

The footage of beheadings by ISIS militiamen are yet another despicable example of such tactics. Although some news agencies and social-media users did repost the images of such acts, many refrained from doing so owing to concerns for human decency. Universal condemnation had its obvious implications in raising awareness that something ought to be done against such heinous bloodshed. On the contrary, the diffusion and reposting of ancient artefacts destruction appeared to be acceptable to the most. Dismay and condemnation was an understandable reaction in the face of the ignorant, anachronistic and medieval iconoclasm performed by ISIS men in the museum of Mosul or among the rocks of the UNESCO World Heritage site in Hatra. However, beyond condemnation and initiatives such as UNESCO’s United for Heritage campaign, the implications of these videos, their diffusion and consequent reaction is certainly far more reaching than what is commonly thought. As art historian Ömür Harmanşah correctly claims, the carefully-crafted staging of these videos and their diffusion not only attempt to humiliate local communities, but more importantly, it aims at alluring sympathizers and patrons as well as global-scale recruitment of further fanatics (2015). As Frederick Bohrer concludes, “ISIS purveys a sort of ‘fast violence’: shocking, theatrical, and easily commodified to the Western (addled, distracted) TV viewer, and highly useful for its own recruiting as well” (2015, para. 11). It is hence clear that the destruction of cultural heritage and its spread through the media has ‘multidirectional’ goals. In this respect, yet another GZ can be identified in the context of ISIS’ cultural heritage destruction – one that has political and moral implications.

Ömür Harmanşah (2015) notes that beyond condemnation and dismay, the reaction to ISIS’ footages was mostly focused on the very content of the videos. In other words, most commentators took the videos as documentary evidence and much of the debate was centred on the authenticity of the artefacts destroyed. Little attention was paid to the authorship of the videos and the staged performance of ISIS militiamen tearing down statues and crumbling them to pieces with pickaxes and sledgehammers. As Harmanşah concludes, “this complacent acceptance of ISIS-authored imagery as documentary is possibly more worrisome for our human condition than the destruction of antiquities themselves” (2015, p. 173). In fact, the
choreographed destruction of these artefacts shows bearded militants carefully-costumed with traditional clothes performing direct and bodily attacks on the statues (Harmanşah, 2015). These details merit indeed a more fine-grained analysis in light of ISIS’ frequent reference and citation of 630 BC removal of idols in the Kaaba. In this sense, ISIS’ tearing down of statues and destruction of antiquities across Syria and Iraq can be effectively envisaged as the re-enactment of iconoclasm in the medieval Islamic world. Along these lines, ISIS’ cultural heritage destruction could be easily branded under the label of ‘Islamic iconoclasm’.

ISIS militants destroying a statue in Mosul Museum

Source: NYMAG, Daily Intelligencer, March 2016

What is advanced here is a “performance-based analysis of ISIS videos”, in net contrast with the “heritage-conscious responses” of museum curators, academics, and alike taking the videos as mere documentary and visual evidence of such heinous acts (Harmanşah, 2015, p. 176). In this respect, Bruno Latour’s concept of ‘iconoclash’ sheds light on the nature of these videos, their unconscious commodification through the media and the ambiguity surrounding the actual aims of the alleged iconoclastic acts. In Latour’s own words,

“Iconoclasm is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking and what the motivations for what appears as a clear project of destruction are; iconoclash, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive” (2002, p. 43).
The simplistic acknowledgement of these acts as expression of millennia-old ‘Islamic iconoclasm’ results in a political and moral GZ. In fact, discounting ISIS’ acts of cultural heritage destruction as mere iconoclasm not only misses the real objectives behind these acts, it also creates a political GZ whereby the innocent conception of these acts as a theological impulse and their unconscious commodification through video posting actually entails the perpetuation of the colonial rationale of the barbaric and the civilised: the ‘us’ and ‘them’. Effectively, as Pierre Bourdieu observed, the appreciation of cultural heritage serves the purpose of making social distinctions insofar as those who deny value to cultural heritage are considered barbarians; instead, the ‘civilized’ might be subjectively critical yet she or he will always appreciate the objective value of cultural patrimony. In other words, while condemnation is indeed due in the face of this cultural destruction, envisaging ISIS acts as ‘Islamic iconoclasm’ brings about the (re)construction of a paradigmatic Orientalism. Frederick Bohrer highlights the complicate nature of this political GZ by noting that this “paradigmatic Orientalism” translates in dynamics that leave ‘no room for dialogue, [but] just death, literal or figurative […] and much of the imagery of Western Orientalism of the past two centuries has a similar message, highlighting a binary difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (2015, para. 6).

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the institution of the museum is very much anchored to the legacy of European Enlightenment. In this sense, the museum is one of a series of institutions that constitute, enlarge and project a cultural identity shaped by and adjusted to the idea of nation-state (Flood, 2002). But more importantly, at global level, this institution is “part of the paradoxical interplay between structural similarity and cultural difference that characterizes the ‘community of nations’” (Flood, 2002, p. 653). Barry Flood argues, in fact, that the objects housed by museums across the globe are central to the role of “articulating and consolidating an idea of a national culture defined in relation to the cultures of this broader community” (2002, p. 658). This aspect is unduly disregarded by those heritage-conscious reactions which point the finger at ISIS’ alleged anachronistic, ignorant and iconoclastic battle. While most of the objects destroyed in Mosul and the other above-mentioned sites are of pagan origin, it is simplistic to assume that ISIS targeted them solely for anti-idolatry purposes. As Elliott Colla correctly claims, what was targeted through carefully-choreographed bodily attacks was not primarily the ancient artefacts of pagan origin but rather “the form of veneration – the attitude of sacred appreciation – represented in the institution of the museum itself.

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5 ‘This is clear from one of the foundation documents of the modern museum, Abbé Grégoire’s 1794 call for institutions to protect French national patrimony from the depredations of revolutionary iconoclasm’. Source: Flood, F. (2002). Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum. The Art Bulletin, 84(4)
[thereby] attempting to sharpen contradictions in an effort to create a conflict of civilisations” (2015, para. 7-8).  

In light of the above arguments, it is argued that in the case of ISIS’ staged cultural heritage destruction, straightforward judgment of condemnation on the morality of these acts should be accompanied by tantamount interrogation on the narratives that the Western heritage-conscious world keep perpetuating through horrified reactions to allegedly-ignorant ‘Islamic iconoclasm’. Along these lines, it is worth indeed to cite the conclusion of an article written in 2001 in the face of destruction of Buddha statues in the Bamiyan valley by the Talibans:

“None of this is intended to condone the actions of any of the players in the events of March 2001, but it is imperative to recognize that those events have a logic rooted not in the fictions of an eternal or recurring medievalism but in the realities of global modernity […] this ahistorical paradigm should be rejected in favour of approaches that historicise iconoclastic events, acknowledging the agency of those involved, examining their motivation, and interrogating the narratives on which we depend for our information, whether courtly histories, fragmentary artifacts or Radio Sharia” (Flood, 2002, p. 659).

Back then, the use of ultra-modern media and social networks was indeed limited. Nevertheless, in both cases it might be better to speak of ‘iconoclash’, rather than ignorant iconoclasm.

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