

Culture as heritage and the culture of revolutions

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Turkey experienced some extraordinary events in June 2013. An estimated 2.5 million people joined mass protests that started as a reaction to a project that would demolish Gezi Park in Istanbul. The park, now acknowledged as historically important by the Committee for the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage, is among the few green public spaces left in the city centre after half a century of industrialisation and immigration from rural Anatolia. The proposed project involved building a shopping centre that would resemble barracks that once stood on the site of the park and which had been the scene of a rebellion against the restoration of the constitutional system during the Ottoman period.

Hence, even the way the protests emerged evoked complex symbolisms and clashing functionalities, and, in just a few days, they expanded into different spheres and locations attracting crowds without a central organisation but with the facilitation of ideologically heterogeneous social movements and political organisations. The resulting variety of flags and slogans at parks and squares across Turkey indicated the multiplicity of issues that the June events represented. It appeared as if the common denominators of the demands were personal freedoms and rights, a better-working and more participative democracy, and respect for identities, historical values and the environment.

Taking these recent and extraordinary events as its reference point, this short article explores the conceptual anatomies of culture and heritage. More specifically, the article refers to old confusions about intangible cultural heritage and raises new questions regarding the material culture of large-scale protests. The term 'revolution' is used here not to imply that the June events have had immediate and significant effects within formal political institutions. Rather, it refers to sudden and significant transformations in the habits of thought, day-to-day actions and interactions of protestors in their own political spheres and the societal changes resulting from these transformations.

The concept of cultural heritage and the conviction that the cultural property of all peoples must be protected as part of a world culture emerged due to the very visible destruction of monuments during conflicts (Brown 2005; Vecco 2010). This conviction was followed by an increasing appreciation of the immaterial elements of cultural accumulation, such as rich folkloric traditions, performative arts, stories, rituals and knowledge sets such as folk medicine (Kurin 2004), as also being a part of world cultural heritage (Brown 2005); there was a recognition that the value of monuments could not be fully understood independently of broader historic and cultural contexts and an understanding that the identification of cultural heritage could not be done based on objective criteria, as our ability to recognise aesthetic, historic and social values is likely to be culturally specific (Vecco 2010).

For sociologists of culture, who have long studied definitions, contents, origins and manifestations of culture, these multifaceted extensions from a visible core to elusive and expansive conceptualisations are nothing new. Although a stream of studies approach culture as an environment transformed by communities with the aim of survival, most scholars include institutions as shared habits of thought, language and other symbol systems and networks of both relationship and knowledge while theorising about culture. Already, distinctions between tangible and intangible culture which are relatively straightforward, like, for instance, *kilim*, *oya* or *türkü*, become subjective in performance arts like the Karagöz shadow theatre or rituals like the Mevlevi Sema ceremony, where material elements play functional and symbolic roles of varying weights. The complexity involved in such distinctions increases further if the aim is also to capture symbolisms associated with kilim designs, and, even further, if it is also aimed to protect the habits of thought that enable Anatolian people to turn their observations into new symbols that will fit into the long-standing traditions of kilim making. Regarding the latter, it is well known, but often overlooked, that culture does not consist of repetitions of fixed traditions in a vacuum, but of daily sense-making, discoveries and inventions of living actors trying to make sense of how their realities are and should be.

Although, from the way culture is theorised in the social sciences, all social constructions that shape the physical and social environment an individual is born into can be considered 'cultural' and, albeit metaphorically, *inherited* from previous generations, it is not the aim of cultural heritage conventions to protect, or fix in time, all spheres of human life. The UNESCO conventions on intangible cultural heritage have been prepared with specific manifestations of traditional culture with exceptional social meanings and value in mind (Kurin 2004; Vecca 2010). The rapid acceleration of information moving between cultures in the so-called network society (Castells 2000) has created anxieties about protecting traditional and authentic cultural elements (Brown 2005) before they become extinct.

Beyond this generally retrospective and tradition-oriented perspective, UNESCO also recognises contemporary products of human creativity as part of world culture with its charter on digital heritage. Hence, on the one hand, information and communication technologies may threaten world cultural heritage and, on the other, help its production. Elsewhere, others have discussed whether the material culture of other primates, which can provide insights about our own cultural evolution, the culture of robots, as products of human creativity, and cultural elements with significant expected future value, such as settlements in space, should also be protected with cultural heritage management plans (Spennemann 2007). In all these cases, the products of creativity are approached as valuable resources, the importance of which can be temporarily overlooked.

Additional UNESCO criteria include that intangible cultural heritage must be consistent with human rights, mutual respect between communities and sustainability (Kurin 2004). Even though these additional criteria may aim solely to avoid potential clashes between different policy tools, in effect they reflect the prioritisation of not harming the current human condition over protecting long-standing traditions. This preference is not insignificant because cultural heritage identified through various decisions on what deserves to be protected, and from what, and with all its implications for cultural identities, intellectual property rights and power struggles, is ‘transformed into a highly politicized commodity’ (Brown 2005: 43).

At this point, I would like to address another manifestation of politicised human creativity: the material culture produced as part of major protests and civil resistance events such as the June events in Turkey. Culture has been the focus of recent social movements studies, diverging from earlier work that regarded social movements as instances of a universal pattern that mechanistically follow predestined stages. Recent studies identify the active, social, strategic and creative agencies of those participating in the movements as the point of focus, instead of universal laws happening to them. In this regard, culture is thought to affect various aspects of social movements including the choice of strategies used during protests, the construction of collective identities and oppositions, and the way reality in and around the movement is framed and made sense of. Culture also provides a toolkit for the material culture of the movement, which includes art forms, reference points, memories, symbols and skill sets (Klatch 1994; Polletta 1997).

Using humour at every possible outlet, the June events in Turkey quickly accumulated cultural outputs from new songs to new versions of well-known *türkü*s and from momentary street installations to rainbow-coloured stairs. From the early days of the protests onwards, the parks that were at the centre of the events hosted open forums on various matters and public workshops on arts, and they facilitated the donation and distribution of food, books and other goods in the temporary arrangement of public spaces into free ‘supermarkets’ and ‘libraries’. While the cultural outputs explored and communicated the subject matter of the protests and documented the emerging histories of the events themselves, the forums and activities experimented with alternative ways of organising or *culturing* the society’s life functions.

I will now conclude by integrating the two issues that I have elaborated on – cultural heritage and the culture of revolutions – in the form of a question. I have attempted to show that the rationale behind protecting intangible cultural heritage is to save rare and authentic outputs and accumulations of human creativity that comply with contemporary ethical standards but remain vulnerable to the conditions of our times. I will now argue that the material culture of revolutions such as the June events fulfil similar criteria. What

makes these objects rare and original is that they are products of specific times that actively and, at times, courageously question previously established and empowered settings. Although we may find continuities before and after large-scale protests, the actual occurrence of the events, with the mobilisation of time, effort, thought and creativity of large numbers of people, corresponds to important turning points in this long story. Thus, the cultural objects of such revolutions are most of all authentic representations of the worldviews, realisations, insights, discoveries and inventions of those who are standing up, or even jumping up, for human rights. While they may offer rich sources for better-negotiated futures, being closely connected to dynamic presents and elusive futures, and challenging the power imposed by formal institutions, they remain extremely vulnerable to disappearance. I therefore conclude by raising the question as to whether the material culture outputs of revolutions aiming to protect human rights have a special place in our heritage, not as exceptional works of art but for what they come to mean.



References

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