

Introduction

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Its starting point was the quincentenary of the Reformation (Luther's 95 Theses) and the centenary of the Russian Revolution. The idea has since expanded to include the seventieth anniversary of the 1947 Truman doctrine, the symbolic starting point of the Cold War, and overflowed into the 2018 centenary of the end of World War I and the fiftieth anniversary of May '68 in France.

The five articles in this special issue reflect these beginnings, both thematically and institutionally, with four of the five authors being based at the University of Sydney. All five authors reflect on what these various 'Landmarks' set in motion, directly or indirectly, or left in their wake both nationally and transnationally, what ideational and cultural ruptures they have come to symbolise, and most especially how they are remembered. They also consider intersections between these different moments and aspects of rupture and upheaval: how was the Reformation remembered in the wake of World War I? How have different engagements with Marxism impacted on understandings of decolonisation or the upheavals of the late 1960s? How do we understand the revolutionary subject in relation to cultural avant-gardes? How have revolutions reverberated through time and place to define us as political and social subjects today?

Perhaps fittingly, given that 2017 was also the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, now known as the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, four of the five articles focus on either France or Germany, those two core powers of the EU, both at the moment of its creation and now. However, rather than focusing on the EU as such in the *(mi-)longue durée*, the articles in this issue focus on the *longue durée* of the inscription of revolutionary moments in European history, culture, politics and intellectual debate.

Presentation of the articles

We begin, of course, with the major Landmarks of 2017: the Reformation and the Russian Revolution. In the first article, 'The Politics of Prophecy: Reformation Memory and German Exceptionalism in the Weimar Republic', Cat Moir examines how the Reformation was understood in post-World War I Weimar Germany. Moir examines how Weimar writers Ernst Bloch and Hugo Ball interpreted distinctions between the

‘magisterial’ Reformation of Luther and the more radical current represented by anabaptist Thomas Münzer, leading figure in the Peasants War. Their different conceptualisations of the future of the German nation developed in a context that was itself characterised by the tensions between a revolutionary left and the assertion of a more moderate power, in the wake of World War I, the 1917 Russian Revolution and the 1918 German revolution that led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. In that context, the Reformation becomes a vehicle for developing different contemporary nationalist narratives of a newborn yet fragile and unstable postwar German nation-state. Moir demonstrates how the historiography of the Reformation framed Luther and Münzer as representatives of two distinct trends within German and European history in an intellectual context characterised by a deeply felt crisis of tradition.

Graeme Gill discovers a different kind of crisis of tradition in his article, ‘The Russian Revolution After 100 years’, which points to the scant commemoration in 2017 of the Russian revolution, either in the West or indeed in Putin’s Russia (notwithstanding a number of scholarly works to mark the centenary). Despite this apparent failure of memory, however, Gill maintains that the revolution was nonetheless ‘the defining episode of the twentieth century’, shaping ‘both global politics and the domestic politics of a number of states, including the main Western ones’ (p. 28). He reviews that defining episode before going on to discuss its lasting impacts today. Certainly, the revolution and its impacts are no longer a principal factor in how international politics play out, and the oppositional lefts of the world have become, following the failure of the Soviet project, comparable to Pirandello’s six characters: cast adrift in the middle of the plot, they now need an ‘author’ to finish their (political and ideological) story.¹ However, Gill reminds us that revolution remains ‘a potential option in the eyes of many of those who feel disadvantaged by current political arrangements’ (p. 41), as the Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 have demonstrated. Moreover, he emphasises that the values that underpinned the Russian revolution—equality, freedom, justice—continue to inform revolutionary aspirations, and contemporary leaders may end up ignoring these values at their peril.

It was the revolutionary values of equality, freedom, and justice that inspired French avant-gardes in the aftermath of the First World War, as Rory Dufficy reminds us in his piece, ‘Dream-work: Surrealism and Revolutionary Subjectivity in Andre Breton and Georges Bataille’. The devastation of war gave rise to a new aesthetics of disillusionment and refusal of a reality found to be wanting, while at the same time, the Russian revolution opened up a new political space of revolutionary idealism. Dufficy discusses debates over the relationship between aesthetics and politics during the 1920s and into the 1930s, through a focus on surrealism in the figure of André Breton, and one of its/his major critics, Georges Bataille. Dufficy identifies three components of avant-garde movements: first, they are deeply political: their aesthetics thus become ‘overdetermined by a revolutionary conjuncture and consequent revolutionary commitment’ (p. 44). United with this political preoccupation is a radical revolutionary subjectivity and a sense of aesthetic and political community. Dufficy argues that surrealism, and in particular the debate between Breton and Bataille about the nature of the relationship between revolutionary politics and revolutionary aesthetics, are ‘central to conceptualising the trajectory of the avant-garde in the 20th century’ (p. 43). It is a debate encapsulated by the prefix ‘sur-’. Breton’s ultimately

¹ Luigi Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, first performed in Rome in that same wake-of-war-and-revolution period as the one under discussion here: 1921. Published by Mondadori (1984).

unresolved dichotomy between the aesthetic and the political, with his privileging of a Freud-inspired ideational ‘materialism’, put him at odds with the ‘base materialism’ of Bataille, which Breton dismissed as ‘vulgar’. Bataille, for his part, accused Breton and the surrealists of placing themselves, and the ‘avenging idea’, above the *object* materiality of ordinary people. The actor of the *surréal* quickly translates into *surhomme*: Marx’s ‘old mole’, working away underground at the revolution, becomes the ‘eagle’ or even ‘supereagle’ of a programmatic communism/Stalinism (or in Breton’s case, Trotskyism) that sets itself above the ‘masses.’

The revolutionary disillusionment that engulfed the surrealists in the decades leading up to the Second World War can also be found in its aftermath, particularly in the context of the slow dismantling of Europe’s empires ‘in the shadow of the Cold War’, as Elizabeth Rechniewski puts it in her discussion of the case of French Cameroon. In the 1940s, a weakened France clung to its empire, as it had done in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war in the 1870s. As politician Jules Ferry famously put it in 1885, France’s *rayonnement* [literally, ‘radiance’, that is, France’s reputation and influence], would count for nought if it did not invest in colonial expansion, as it would slip from first in Europe to third or fourth.² In striking parallel, in the 1940s there was ‘consensus across the major French political parties that the retention of the Empire was a vital component in the nation’s bid to recover its role in the world and its stature as a great power’ (p. 54). Rechniewski shows that the French Communist Party (PCF, expelled in 1947 from the postwar governing coalition), was a less wholehearted ally of the colonised than may be assumed. During and after the Second World War, it shifted its anticolonial stance to support of Empire, first on the pretext of preventing colonies falling to Nazi rule and subsequently in the name of anti-Americanism. Meanwhile, the French state found in anticommunism a new moral justification for retaining its colonies. By the 1950s France had convinced the Western bloc in the UN that the main Cameroonian independence party, the UPC, was a ‘communist threat’. Other anticolonial movements at that time were similarly framed—whatever the movements themselves actually claimed. The Cold War framing of the Cameroonian story plays out again and again, albeit in differing ways: in Indochina, in Madagascar, in Algeria, and indeed in colonies of other European powers: for example, India.

Finally, Robert Boncardo and Bryan Cooke investigate another transnational framing of ‘revolution’, examining the different strands of French Maoism and Alain Badiou’s influential, if controversial, interpretation thereof. Badiou was as critical of the participation by the PCF and the communist French trade union *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) in the reformist system of state-monopoly capitalism (through nationalisations and the welfare state) as he was of other Maoist formations: quasi-institutionalisation through a reverence for the Maoist Chinese state on the one hand, and direct-action anarchist-style ‘stunts’ of student Maoists on the other hand. Setting himself and his own Maoist group apart from these two extremes, Badiou saw in the Shanghai Commune of 1967—itself modelled on the Paris Commune of 1871, the uprisings in France the following year, and the ‘rent strike’ in the mid-1970s by immigrant workers housed by Sonacotra (*SOCIÉTÉ NATIONALE DE CONSTRUCTION DE LOGEMENTS POUR LES TRAVAILLEURS ALGÉRIENS*), a ‘promise that the space of political possibility was not exhausted by the “grey tyranny” which had been the ignominious fate of the parties of the Third International’ (p. 84). Boncardo and Cooke’s examination of Badiou’s Maoism and framing of the Shanghai Commune reveals a

² Jules Ferry, Speech to the Chamber of Deputies, 28 July 1885.

particular pessimism, albeit not one directly stated as such. For Badiou, '[e]very victory is the beginning of a failure of a new type' (cited in Boncardo and Cooke (p. 84)). The Shanghai Commune, like its Parisian model, was far from victorious: it was even more ephemeral than its homonym, and quickly taken over by the Maoist establishment. The movement of May '68 was either repressed or tamed, and the Sonacotra residents' final victory in 1980 was a Pyrrhic one: they obtained some concessions but no formal recognition of their status as tenants. The Sonacotra strike nonetheless remains 'exemplary' as the largest autonomous action by tenants in France,³ and May '68, which at the time of writing approaches its fiftieth anniversary, remains in the French left imaginary as a revolutionary moment which despite its failure, left enduring traces.

The landscape of European intellectual, political, and cultural history that emerges from these five articles is an ambiguous and turbulent one, riven by revolutionary moments, the crises that were both their condition and result, and the hopes and dreams that propelled them yet were so often disappointed in their wake. On the one hand, the European 'revolutions' that are discussed in this special issue not only became the stuff of dreams, hopes and indeed myths, they also left lasting transformations—some more profound than others. On the other hand, this raises the question whether revolutions are doomed to failure, perversion through power-grabbing or reformist co-optation? Is every victory indeed 'the beginning of a failure of a new type'? These are far from merely academic questions in a contemporary context in which Europe, in both its institutional and ideal form, is struggling to survive and redefine itself in the face of multiple global crises and growing internal opposition. As the articles in this volume demonstrate, the idea and political reality of Europe has always been defined by crisis, and reform and revolution, or some combination of the two, have characterised responses to it in the past. In important respects, the shape of Europe's future will depend on how far reforms can reach, and how big leaders and citizens are prepared to think.

Coda

In rereading the contributions to this issue and writing this Introduction, I am struck by one thing: how much the story of European historical and political 'landmarks', and the ways in which they are remembered and debated, remains a story of men. This critique reflects not on the authors of the contributions—very far from it—but on the material with which they engage. Virtually all the prominent figures, subjects and objects of Big History as writ both in this volume and in historical debate more generally are men, and the preoccupations, issues and problematics (all, ironically, feminine nouns in French) are declined ideationally and politically in the masculine.

Yet 'fixing' this problem is not a straightforward exercise. It is extraordinarily difficult, in fact, to write a gendered analysis of Landmarks in European History without resorting to some form of tokenism or gender particularism. For example, one could insert a 'women too' into the narrative, a Rosa Luxemburg or a Hannah Arendt or a Leonora Carrington (surrealist novelist and painter) or a Bertha von Suttner (first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1905), those illustrious exceptions that prove the rule. However, such inserts do not fundamentally shift the narrative, they merely provide it with some descriptive representation of a few prominent women, in the sense given by Hanna Pitkin in 1967: representatives that simply share a

³ Mireille Galano, 'Une lutte exemplaire'. *Plein Droit* 53-54, March 2002. Online <https://www.gisti.org/doc/plein-droit/53-54/lutte.html>.

demographic characteristic with a section of the constituency.⁴ Or, more collectively, one could discuss women's participation in Big History: women organising in distinctive ways as part of collective anticolonial struggles, for example. But they invariably do so as 'auxiliaries' (often directly named as such): the main event, however, still remains that articulated and driven by men. Alternatively, one could look at the 'gendered impacts' (a frequent institutional code for 'impacts on women') of the events and debates discussed in this journal issue. However, in this case women become not actors of events and debates but passive figures 'impacted' by them: the discussion still seems tokenistic, and denies women agency. Or else, one could look at those questions typically framed as 'women's' or even 'feminist' issues, discussing, for example, women's actions in local communities, peace movements, feminist protests or publications. However, such discussions appear to separate 'what women do' from 'what men do' and in the process possibly configure women as secondary or minor (much as one configures domestic production or decorative arts as minor). Or one could simply ask 'where are the women?', 'where are they *not*?' and 'why is this the case?'. How are women 'hidden from history'?⁵ In which case the discussion may end up primarily being about absences.

Or one could perhaps change the lens through which we look at 'defining moments': the women's suffrage movement, the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* in 1949 and the so-called 'second wave' of feminism could all easily be framed as fundamentally transformative, and thus as Landmarks in European history in their own right.

However one approaches it, the topic is far from trivial, yet it is dogged by political problems of the very sort one may wish to avoid in discussing 'Women in History-Writ-Large'. It is certainly a problem with which feminist historians, cultural critics and political and social scientists alike continue to grapple, as 'Landmarks in History' remain resolutely masculine. Here, even the French term is declined in the masculine: *repère*, as is the German one for that matter: *Meilenstein*.

⁴ Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972 (revised edition).

⁵ Title of a celebrated feminist work of the 'second wave': Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, London: Pluto Press, 1975.