

The Cultural Logic of Statues

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A statue tumbles and, with an almighty splash, sinks below the water. Those responsible cheer with joy. Onlookers are captured in a range of emotions: confusion, rage, wonder. What is taking place? Is this an anti-historical act of violent vandalism, or the liberating removal of a relic of the colonial era, an enduring reminder of oppression?

When Black Lives Matter protesters in Bristol toppled the statue of the merchant and slave trader Edward Colston in June 2020, it was not merely iconoclasm but an 'iconoclasm', a concept discussed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour. In cases of iconoclasm, Latour notes, the act of breaking is unambiguous, its motivations and contexts clear. In iconoclashes, on the other hand, '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'—or, for that matter, both.¹

In the weeks following Colston's felling, protests continued in cities across the UK and the US. This clash played out over social media and the periodical press as the world tried to work out what exactly it had witnessed. No consensus emerged. At least on the surface, the debates seemed to turn on the ambiguous axis of 'history'. Following damage to the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, Prime Minister Boris Johnson condemned what he saw as attempts to 'edit or censor our past' and 'pretend to have a different history'. Across the Channel, French President Emmanuel Macron promised that 'the Republic won't erase any name from its history'.²

On the other side of the disagreement, the Museum of London

expressed its support for removing a statue of the slave-trader Robert Milligan at London's West India Docks, associating the monument itself with an 'ongoing problematic regime of white-washing history'.³ Similarly, the British journalist Ian Cobain pointed out that the misrepresentation and erasure of historical reality has been a 'habit of the British state for decades', most evident in the illegal concealment and destruction of hundreds of thousands of records evidencing its colonial barbarisms.⁴ Advocates for retention and for removal point the finger at each other, trying each other for crimes against the past. No surprise, then, that Professor Richard J Evans' treatment of the subject in the *New Statesman* was titled 'The history wars'.⁵

Yet Clio, the Greek muse of history, stands to one side of this symmetrical standoff, confused and, one imagines, more than a little offended. In this conflict, the stakes are not historical but above all iconographic, representational. These are not the history wars but rather the image wars, into which the past has been hastily and rather clumsily press-ganged. Only by recognising this and dispelling the projection of 'history' can a path out of this impasse be traced. Statues aim not to memorialise history but to escape from it, striving to transcend contingency and reach the universal. Yet under the conditions of secular modernity this attempt has become futile. The logic on which it rests is riddled with contradictions and incoherencies. Ultimately, if cultural memory is to regain legitimacy, it will have to take the opposite approach, focusing on suffering rather than 'success', the mass over the individual.

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1 Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (The MIT Press 2002) 16.

2 Boris Johnson, 'It is absurd and shameful that this national monument should today be at risk of attack...' (*Twitter*, 12 June 2020) <<https://twitter.com/BorisJohnson/status/1271388181343145986>> accessed 18 March 2021; Reuters Staff, 'Macron says France won't remove statues, erase history' (*Reuters* 14 June 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-france-macron-stat/macron-says-france-wont-remove-statues-erase-history-idUSKBN23L0QP>> accessed 18 March 2021.

3 Museum of London, 'Robert Milligan statue statement' (9 June 2020) <<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/news-room/press-releases/robert-milligan-statue-statement>> accessed 18 March 2021.

4 Ian Cobain, 'Lying about our history? Now that's something Britain excels at' *Guardian* (London, 18 June 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/18/lying-history-britain-statues-slave-trade>> accessed 18 March 2021.

5 Richard J Evans, 'The history wars' *The New Statesman* (London, 17 June 2020) <<https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/06/history-wars>> accessed 18 March 2021.

Statues are in and of themselves historical artefacts, but their subjects are extrinsic to history. Historicity is not suddenly conferred if a sculptor chooses to fashion Churchill's face rather than any other individual's. Calls to take down statues therefore signify not an assault on the past 'itself', as suggested by Johnson and Macron, but justified opposition to a particular conception of it. Juggernauts of Churchill, Colston, Milligan and the like stand as icons of a model of the past which holds individual subjecthood and action in the highest acclaim. The individuals elected as prime movers are elevated above faceless socioeconomic forces. Overwhelmingly, they are white, male, and upper-class. The Victorian essayist Thomas Carlyle pioneered this approach in a series of lectures from 1840, grouped together in print under the title *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*. Carlyle concluded that 'the history of the world is but the biography of great men'.⁶ Although the historical profession has largely overturned this false and discriminatory view of the past, the public are yet to do the same.

The literal concretisation of historical figures into statues epitomises deceptive attempts to reduce history to a shallow agent of culture. Statues do not preserve but annihilate the past. They remove their objects from the course of history and enlist them as representatives of an ahistorical culture. Change over time is the essence of history, but culture aspires above all to stability and constancy, so that it can entrench itself within individuals. As the German philosopher Theodor Adorno repeatedly sought to show, this hunger for permanence can have disturbing consequences. In the 1960s, he diagnosed within the post-war German population an alarming case of 'verdinglichtes Bewusstsein' ('reified consciousness'). For Adorno, this malaise is characterised by a blindness, intentional or otherwise, to 'all insight into one's own contingency' and to the ultimate contingency—and therefore changeability—of the world at large.⁷ In the earlier work *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), written with his friend Max Horkheimer, Adorno expressed this idea in an unrelenting aphorism: 'all reification is a forgetting', an erasure of history in the form of an unquestioning acceptance of the present.⁸

Recent insistence on the immutability of statues, along with outlandish attempts to ensure it, strongly suggest that the symptoms identified by Adorno persist today. June 2020 saw men in baggy jeans and camouflage jackets gather around a statue of the writer George Eliot in Nuneaton, ostensibly in its defence. One of these 'defenders', an army veteran, informed reporters without a hint of irony that 'I'm purely here to protect our history'.⁹ The content of this undifferentiated 'history', its twisting and turning contingency, is rendered utterly irrelevant. History becomes a scapegoat, a hollow justification. The statue itself is exposed as a simulacrum, parading the deceptive appearance of the historical but possessing nothing of its substance. In a case yet stranger, Ashbourne in Derbyshire saw a racist bust of a black man's head moved under mysterious circumstances from the town centre to a secret location, suspected to be the garage of a local Conservative councillor.¹⁰

6 Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (first published 1841, Yale University Press 2013) 41.

7 Theodor Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit, Vorträge und Gespräche mit Hellmut Becker 1959 bis 1969* (Suhrkamp Verlag 1970) 104. Translation the author's.

8 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (first published 1947, Fischer Verlag 2007) 244. Translation the author's.

9 Aaron Robertson, 'Defenders of a George Eliot statue had no idea what they were doing and I'm here for it' (*Literary Hub*, 16 June 2020) <<https://lithub.com/defenders-of-a-george-eliot-statue-had-no-idea-what-they-were-doing-and-im-here-for-it/>> accessed 18 March 2021.

10 Archie Bland, 'How "racist" bust "hidden by Tory councillor" divided

These cases are revealing precisely because of their absurdity, which drags the cultural logic of reified consciousness to its perverse and dangerous extremes. Here, a morbid fear of change reveals itself, reminiscent of the underlying assumption of Christian providentialism that 'everything is as it should be'. Items of the utmost insignificance are hastily made into religious icons whose violation is a mortal sin. In particular, they come to resemble secularised *acheiropoieta*. *Acheiropoieta* are Christian icons, generally of Jesus or the Virgin Mary, believed to have come into being miraculously, without human involvement. The corresponding perception of statues as immaculate conceptions of history is quickly shown to be inaccurate. After removing Colston's statue from the Avon, the museum M Shed discovered within it a furlled 1895 edition of *Tit-Bits* magazine, with the scrawled names of the statue's fitters.¹¹ It is hard to imagine a better illustration of appealing to the bulwark of history whilst refusing to peer beneath its bronze façade.

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Statues are problematic and contested for reasons that extend far beyond the individuals they represent. Firstly, they attempt to smuggle individuals out of history, allowing them to escape their own time. Then, building on this, they contrive to ensure reverence and hero-worship for them. As the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously observed, 'the medium is the message'. Reverence is not an emotion about which one hears a great deal nowadays. It is associated above all with the religious, with veneration and sanctity. Crucially, it is an emotional state which functions only when it is unqueried and accepted as absolute, without deconstruction or interrogation.

When it is undertaken, this interrogation delivers alarming results. No coherent moral calculus or set of 'rules and regulations' can justify reverence. No clear ethical boundary can be drawn which, if overstepped, would prevent one's memorialisation. Take the example of Churchill. Much of the discussion around his 'worthiness' for preservation as a statue has concentrated on the extent of his racism. Defenders argue that his undeniably racist views and actions were justifiable in context, whilst critics like Professor Priyamvada Gopal stress that Churchill's stance on race was actually 'deeply retrograde even for his time', such that 'even his contemporaries found his views on race shocking'.¹²

Professor Gopal is correct, but unfortunately this is irrelevant in this context. Even engaging on the terms of retrospective moral evaluation means being drawn into a dangerous and abyssal logic, which presupposes a coherent moral calculus according to which 'worthiness to remain' might be established. Discussing the moral facts of any individual's life is only useful here if we believe there is a genuine possibility of establishing whether they were a 'good' or 'bad' person. Framed in the most extreme terms, we could imagine a tribunal aimed at determining whether a person's opinions and actions crossed a clear moral threshold, sorting the sheep from the goats. Such thought experiments are, of course, absurd, and their

Derbyshire town' *Guardian* (London, 12 June 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/12/ashbourne-derbyshire-racist-black-bust-tory-councillor-petition>> accessed 18 March 2021.

11 M Shed, 'After careful cleaning and drying we found someone had handwritten the names...' (*Twitter*, 11 June 2020) <<https://twitter.com/mshedbristol/status/1271124618091401216>> accessed 18 March 2021.

12 Priyamvada Gopal, 'Why can't Britain handle the truth about Winston Churchill?' *Guardian* (London, 17 March 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/why-cant-britain-handle-the-truth-about-winston-churchill>> accessed 19 March 2021.

parallels with a kind of divine judgement are no coincidence. They function only if the body making the judgement has both perfect moral knowledge and complete access to a person's life and thoughts. Yet the fundamental prerequisites for this hypothetical tribunal are the same as those that would be needed to indict Churchill's character. They are also the same as those necessary to sustain the reverence for which the statue form calls.

The ideal of any society is that its moral structures remain constant for such a long time, or are enforced with such completeness and efficacy, that they begin to appear absolute and extrasocietal, their contingent emergence having been masked and repressed. As this takes place, morality is de-historicised, extricated from the skein of time. Consciousness becomes reified, in line with the emphasis of providentialism on preserving existing states of affairs. Only under these conditions—in which an unquestionable transcendent standard is established and allowed to reign—can reverence be deserved and heroism possible. It is for this reason that Christian sainthood is irrevocable. Nonetheless, the Catholic church did carefully vet all candidates until the time of Pope John Paul II. It employed a genuine 'Devil's advocate' and enforced a pre-sanctification waiting period of 50 years after the individual's death, during which any untoward information about them ought to come to light.

Sainthood is, however, a decidedly pre-modern phenomenon. So too is heroism, in the form of Herculean labours, military leadership, or charismatic state formation. No longer can reverence be sustained by religious or teleologically nationalistic metanarratives. The speed and chaos of life in the twenty-first century does not admit of such lasting simplicity. As early as 1967, the French thinker Guy Debord argued that a decisive shift had occurred: social life in its authentic form had been superseded by its virtual double, a spectacle of pure representation.¹³ This shift obliterated any chance of heroism in its established form, but the hero survived as an icon on the screen or a series of pixels on the television, continuing to exist only as an unreal representation. Building on Debord, the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi in his text *Heroes* traced the consequences of this disappearance into the virtual, finding them to be no less than murderous. Berardi writes of school shootings and murder sprees as tragic occurrences 'at the threshold where illusion is mistaken for reality'.¹⁴ Discussing 2011's Utøya massacre, the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard writes similarly that the perpetrator Anders Behring Breivik 'acted like a figure in a computer game, but the act of heroism he thought he was performing, and the carnage he brought about, did not belong to the world of images'.¹⁵

The world of images, connected with the world of numbers and the world of profits, is also a means of transcending and escaping historical reality, a world with neither past nor future. A statue stands in a public square, an avatar floats on a screen. As the former becomes impossible, the latter pervades society ever more deeply. One can be toppled, the other cannot.

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Despite all of this, the need for cultural memory to be represented in some concrete form remains strong. Discussions are already underway as to whose statue should replace that of Cecil Rhodes

¹³ See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (first published 1967, Rebel Press 1994).

¹⁴ Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (Verso 2015) 5.

¹⁵ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The End* (Vintage 2019) 839.

in Oriel College, Oxford.¹⁶ The philosopher Alain LeRoy Locke, the first African American elected to a Rhodes Scholarship, is an understandable suggestion. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the dangerous incoherence of statues is intrinsic to their form and cannot be overcome simply by choosing a preferable subject. Is there an alternative? Supplementing existing monuments with contextual plaques enumerating the misdeeds of their subjects creates an unbearably perverse tension. A critical statue is a contradiction in terms. Rather, we must look towards a means of commemoration which is not celebratory but fundamentally negative: the memorial in its true form. Recognising that one person has suffered at the hands of another presents its own challenges and complexities, but is fundamentally legitimate. Its tether to reality is unbroken. Pain and death bear a visceral authenticity which society, for all its efforts, can never fully extinguish.

Where memorials are established, they must be porous, offering the possibility of fluid interaction with the public. The German conceptual artist Jochen Gerz is right to suggest that ultimately 'the places of remembrance are people, not monuments'.¹⁷ The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, for example, is imbued with a distinct, personal significance by each mourner who looks upon it. Gerz's Monument Against Fascism in Harburg, developed with Esther Shalev-Gerz and initially erected in 1986, took a more direct approach to interactivity. The Monument invited Harburg's residents and visitors to commit to opposing fascism by inscribing their names on a 12-metre-high stele, which was then lowered into the ground until it disappeared. In doing so, it embodied a concept of remembrance in stark opposition to unchanging statues, embracing and encoding its own violation and historicity. It served as mirror and conduit, rather than opaque fortification.

Achieving real change in the symbolic representation of memory will not be an easy task. A 1957 competition announced by the International Auschwitz Committee to design a monument for the end of the Auschwitz-Birkenau rail track led to such difficulties that no memorial could be agreed upon. The English sculptor Henry Moore, who chaired the competition's jury, was forced to admit that only 'a very great sculptor—a new Michelangelo or a new Rodin—might have achieved this'.¹⁸ This, as James E Young observes, is an 'extraordinary statement', since Moore 'seems to concede that the project was doomed from the start, that none on the jury could imagine a winner, that, hypothetically, there might be no winner'.¹⁹ Jochen Gerz, striving for a way out of this apparent dead end, turns Moore's admission on its head. He invites the public to be the architect of its own memory, constructively and destructively. At the site of the now-sunken tower, a sign offers hopeful realism: 'In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice'.

¹⁶ See Ann Olivarius, 'Rhodes must fall, but who should stand in his place?' *Financial Times* (London, 15 June 2020) <<https://www.ft.com/content/336d57a8-fb23-4ec8-8333-bb8e6bc36c98>> accessed 18 March 2021.

¹⁷ Jochen Gerz, 'Rede an die Jury des Denkmals für die ermordeten Juden Europas' (14 November 1997) <https://jochengerz.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/Rede-an-die-Jury-des-Denkmals_Jochen_Gerz.pdf> accessed 18 March 2021.

¹⁸ Henry Moore quoted in, for example, Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979* (Ohio University Press 2003) 157.

¹⁹ James E Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale University Press 1993) 135.