Derecognising past honours: toppling statues can redirect passions, but towards what?

***Dina Gusejnova** writes that while symbolic, one-off interventions such as the toppling of statues are good for kick-starting public conversations, much more is needed to kick-start social change.*

In the wake of the George Floyd protests, Black Lives Matter protesters have highlighted what some campaigners have been saying for years: how Britain's landscape remains full of monuments to slave owners and those closely associated with the slave trade. These monuments, which have been in public view all this time, are no longer overlooked: they have developed a sudden vitality as anchors of anger, expressed through several movements. There may be few established figures today publicly claiming the racist beliefs that many of these statues represent, such movements argue, yet people still experience racism every day, including as a result of government policies. The toppling of statues is therefore linked to demands for equality now.

Official responses to this controversy have nevertheless been unusually harsh. 'Iconoclasm', 'vandalism', 'defacement', 'criminal activity', and 'thuggery' is how the recent attacks on some public statues – most prominently, the spontaneous toppling of that of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in early June – have been described by leading politicians including the Prime Minister.

The British capacity for redirecting passions

Yet Britain has always had a great social and cultural capacity for re-evaluating its own past in a positive light. This had been shaped by works of philosophy and literature, and, to a much lesser degree, by art in public spaces. An empire shaped by proud slave traders and owners, Britain became a nation of passionate abolitionists – and in this quality, pushed for imperial expansion on an unprecedented level, the so-called Second Imperialism. The more philosophical hinterland of this continuous adjustment of public self-identification can be revealed in part by referring to what David Hume called an 'alteration of direction' of the passions. 'There is no passion, therefore, capable of controlling the interested affection, but the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction.'

But something has gone awry recently. The global financial crisis aggravated existing structural inequalities which there still seems to be no obvious will among the establishment to alleviate. Indeed, what followed the 2008 crisis was a populist exploitation of public anxieties, leading to the 'hostile environment' policy of the over immigration in 2012 and the three-year run up to the 2016 referendum. The rights of British subjects from the 'Windrush generation', as well as of immigrants from the EU, have also been called into question in favour of short-term, party political as well as personal gains. And now, the mismanagement of the pandemic only serves to highlight the vulnerabilities of population groups already suffering from systemic inequality. It is this largely unchanging, and in some cases worsening, situation that the acts of toppling and redacting monuments are directed towards.

The sheer spectacle of monuments falling initially calls for comparisons with examples of cultural practices during revolutions. The current crisis could be better described as an instance of what I have called 'derecognition' of past honours. Derecognising someone like Colston involves reminding the public what someone like him stood for – i.e. contradicting and criticising the statue's plaque that honours him as a 'virtuous citizen', an allusion to him using slave trade money to also fund charities for the poor in the metropole – and then demanding to disavow these privileges in some sort of public act. But if derecognition is to lead to meaningful social change, it is important to articulate more clearly how the act of dishonouring a specific figure from the past will serve to support broader demands for recognition and equality. Hume's model of changing the direction of passions might work well for passions which are strong enough to be shifted, but it may be more difficult to shift passions which the indifferent majority is seemingly unaware of holding at all.

Speaking of Hume: his statue in Glasgow also recently had a piece of cardboard hung around it, highlighting his views about the racial inferiority of black peoples. It is true that, while Hume criticised slavery, he also believed in the inequality of races. Similarly, historians have shown in the past, a philanthropist and abolitionist like Wilberforce rejected slavery but endorsed a belief in the inequality of races. Can Enlightenment knowledge *itself* be trusted, given the historical record? Do we have room for humanists who have also exhibited anti-human beliefs?

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This is difficult territory, and one which has only now reached a wider public in Britain, having been treaded by several generations of historians and literary scholars. The problem is that not only today's establishment but also various activist movements are drawing on a body of knowledge which has been formed by Enlightenment legacies, which include financial and cultural capital from slavery. As a historian, I see no other choice but to seek a fuller understanding of these human contradictions, and to separate out the work towards that understanding from a call for a radically different social, economic and cultural future.

Beyond toppling statues

The 'continental' theorists who witnessed different revolutions offer useful observations in this context. Georg Lukács had the revolutions of Russia, Germany, and Béla Kún´s Hungary happen before his eyes when he wrote *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923. The book actually deals with situations in which people lack the kind of class consciousness that is desirable for a real revolutionary transformation. He observed how people have a tendency to act 'past their destiny' – i.e. behave in ways which contradict the logic of their real social interests, the things which enable them to flourish as human beings. Their 'consciousness' can even lag behind the historical process, and be guided by a 'fixation upon a past society' which can contradict their real economic situation. Lukács ´s observations are also applicable to those involved in the current controversies over statues.

In this case, the 'past societies' to which some seem to cling on to are seventeenth-century or nineteenth-century England and the British empire. Some of those attacking monuments now associate themselves with slaves and link their oppressors with slave owners (in part genealogically). But unlike one's provenance, structural inequalities arising from global capitalism today need to be addressed as something which can be changed.

Yes, the public needs to know how the relationship between race and power came to manifest itself historically in systematic forms of exclusion in which Europeans came to dominate and shape a global trade in slaves, as well as exonerate themselves with the help of racist science and discourse, and that is the story that statues such as that to Colston can tell. This point was made especially effectively in the personal remarks of Bristol's mayor Marvin Rees, who very explicitly divided himself into two personae – the man of Jamaican heritage offended by Colston, and a mayor in modern, democratic Britain, who has to denounce the act of throwing Colston's statue in the harbour as vandalism.

But it is equally important to use symbolic interventions and personal statements to draw attention to a third dimension of the problem: that modern exploited labour from a range of ethnic backgrounds is used in cities like Leicester and Prato. While the goods are made in Britain and Italy, the racism is reinforced by an increasingly global society of consumers. The position of the subaltern is not permanently fixed in history around a dialectic of 'white' against 'dark' skin but includes more diverse iterations of inequality and exploitation. A recent report by the Runnymede trust has shown that while some critical limits to social mobility in Britain continue to fall on what W.E.B. Du Bois has called the 'color line', in today's Britain this applies to particular 'BAME' groups more than others – again, through no fault of their own but for historical reasons. What is worse, it also highlights that education does not appear to break the vicious cycle of privilege linking household wealth to social mobility, which structurally privileges white households in Britain.

Britain's self-fashioning as a nation which used to know how to land on the right side of history has come to an impasse in the face of this monument controversy. The voices of those who attack monuments resonate so loudly because of the overwhelming public indifference towards the issues which they raise. These symbolic interventions should not be dismissed as disorderly thuggery, but as an attempt to connect a tacit approval of past abhorrent ideas to practices which must be rigorously criticised today. Public acceptance of this passion might even shape a new language of humility and self-criticism, so sorely missed in the patriotic, 'world-beating' Brexit discourse.

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Symbolic, singular interventions are good to start loud conversations in public spaces. At the same time, the social benefits of hanging, for instance, Hume's shameful footnote on his statue are marginal compared to the numbers of people turned away from reading Hume by this act. Students and scholars should be given the opportunity – and that means, also financial access – to read Hume within previously neglected contexts, such as Enlightenment race science or Scotland's intellectual and material connections to Atlantic slavery. Understanding, for example, how toleration and abolitionism – and not just slavery – have been linked to racism, is a labour-intensive task for individual minds, with significant social benefits. At the very least, knowing the intellectual mechanisms of alienation is a technique which can act as a mirror for today's new humanism. It would be good to think of knowledge more like a continuously running clothes factory than a design museum: in addition to changing icons of style, we need to know who owns the factory.

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