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# Toppling statues as an act of historical redemption

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## RACE & RESISTANCE

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**The removal of offensive statues may seem to be a distraction, but it is a redemptive challenge against injustices transmitted from the past.**

**T**he brutal murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police set off an unprecedented wave of protests. In a highly publicized, graphic execution, Floyd was killed in broad daylight for possession of an alleged counterfeit bill. The ensuing rebellion of global dimensions is undoubtedly fueled by the exposure to uncertainty, stress and anxiety that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated. In the United States and beyond, frustration and anger at unprepared and incompetent governments overlap with the pressures of systemic racism, seen in sheer wealth gaps and repressive state practices.

Across the pond, protests have also erupted in Britain. In a context of recession and repression, it is common for widespread rebellions to flare up at instances of injustice. But the protesters' actions have also led to an unexpected discussion of history and memory. This was a product of direct action: protesters in Bristol took down the controversial

statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, defaced it, and threw it into the harbor.

All over the world, statues of figures associated with racism and slavery have faced a similar fate: confederate monuments were toppled and a Columbus statue was "beheaded" in the US; a statue of Leopold II, the Belgian king who slaughtered half of the Congolese population, was removed in Antwerp; and similar episodes have taken place from France to Australia.

The attack against such figures is far from misguided vandalism, but part of an ongoing reckoning with historically ingrained patterns of discrimination and racism. These acts stand for a rejection of historical closure, and hold open possibilities of a genuine reconciliation with the past.

## THE PASTS IN THE PRESENT

Given the pressing issues of the moment from the coronavirus and the economic recession to global warming, it can strike one as strange that the ire of protesters concentrates on historical monuments. Indeed, British Home Secretary Priti Patel took the angle that the toppling of the Colston statue was “utterly disgraceful” and a “distraction” from the causes of the protests. The conservative Daily Mail opted for a less restrained and more paranoid headline: “Toppling the past”, claiming that the Black Lives Matter protests are waging a war on history itself.

Ranging from distraction to culture war, right-wing reactions converge on the notion that memorials are but fragments of a time long gone by. Even if these figures held some vile opinions, this was a widely shared disposition of their time and in any case, these issues have since been resolved. From this perspective, the destruction is nothing more than aimless vandalism, a diversion from the real issues. Deliberately or otherwise, these claims miss the point. Offensive statues are toppled not because they are historical, but they are *actual*. This is not an erasure of the past, but precisely its recognition in the injustices of the present, related to an ongoing trauma quite literally transmitted from the past.

A study reveals that exposure to discrimination impacts genetic expression across generations, such that Black people, who bear the brunt of racial prejudice, are more likely to suffer from stress-related problems due to the suffering inflicted on their ancestors. This is a striking example of how the past is reproduced in the present.

But there are also other lines of continuity on both sides of the Atlantic. An obvious one is the shocking proportions of bloodletting at the hands of law enforcement. In the US, a staggering number of 429 people have been shot to death by the police this year alone, averaging at three fatalities per day. These incidents are highly racialized: Black men are three times more likely to be killed by the police than their white counterparts.

Another study shows that Black people are more than twice as likely to die from the coronavirus. Britain is also plagued by a systemically racist legal and repressive apparatus. Despite numerous instances of documented police brutality and harassment against racialized communities, the last

time a police officer was prosecuted for a death in custody, the Beatles were all still alive and together. In addition, the British criminal justice system disproportionately targets Black people, as the Lammy Report demonstrated in 2017.

Due to the ongoing reality of racial discrimination, it is not surprising that controversial statues raise anger for those who are daily reminded of it. The Colston and Confederate statues represent a side of history that their political descendants would rather declare concluded. Thus, they decry their toppling as a nihilistic destruction of a series of apolitical, even purely archaeological fixtures of the urban backdrop. But the act of toppling the statue is the incursion of history into the present, a resistance against the false closure of past wrongs and an emboldened invitation to create alternative futures from the detritus.

In my work as a social theorist I have sought to theorize multiple temporalities in the present as a principle of social and historical change. In doing so, the philosopher Walter Benjamin’s arguments regarding trauma and redemption have been provocative and useful. According to Benjamin, history is not a succession of self-contained stages that enclose and give way to one another. Rather, history is active in the present such that the struggles and defeats of the past are built up as a repository in the now, flashing in various articles and scraps that societies produce.

Benjamin’s register is replete with his signature Messianic romanticism — a theologically derived understanding of liberation. Yet this account of revolution as a “leap into the open sky of history” can also be interpreted in a secular, non-theological, sense.

History is riddled with quests to follow what the Turkish communist poet Nazım Hikmet once pleaded: to “do away with the enslaving of man by man.” This call for equity reverberates across the ages, from the egalitarian communities in the Americas that were founded by fugitive slaves, to the short-lived, anti-hierarchical Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle. Streams of vanquished histories push against the triumphalism of the victors, who compose narratives recounting their false inevitability. Thus Benjamin’s injunction for the historian: “brush history against the grain.”

For Benjamin, several generations converge at moments of rupture, striking at old injustices to redeem failed struggles for an equitable and kinder world. Michael Löwy maintains that for this reason, Benjamin sees revolutions as impeding the catastrophic unfolding of history in its tracks. The congregation of millions in spite of the coronavirus is a diametric wedge in the ordinary unfolding of events, which, left uninterrupted, normalizes myriad sources of unnecessary suffering.

## THE FUTURES IN THE PRESENT

Global protests against racism are a direct challenge to contemporary oppressors. Through this historical opening, the vanquished take the mantle of progression. At the hands of the protesters, statues are not simply removed, but replaced with alternative imaginaries of what public memorials might look like. The outlook of redemption may appear to be a philosophically weighty way to problematize established modes of remembrance and closure, but it has a quite practical relevance and implications for moving forward from the present.

What is advocated here is not a rejection of all remembrance. It is rather the substitution of periodic remembrance for reconciliation and healing that is at the root of the problem. In fact, the empty plinths left after the removal, and the unguarded statues themselves, have been the canvas of a myriad cultural expressions that are in themselves artistically valuable.

As such, redemption is a lived relation to historical time that is encoded in our surroundings. It takes place directly as a collective practice involving the popular reshaping of our historical trajectory. This can look like murals and installations, but also like the new initiatives for solidarity and mutual aid that

have been springing up in response to humanitarian catastrophe and discrimination.

Alternative “memorializations” with a Benjaminian slant provide some clues as to how the ruinous past can be used to catalyze reflection on the present and chart ways out of it. The *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin is one such example. Stretching across a large site with 2711 concrete slabs, this installation at the heart of the city gives minimal historical information or guidance to the visitor. Instead, one can feel a visceral sense of unease and ominous claustrophobia while walking around its undulating, austere plane.

The “memorial” thereby resists closure. The visitor and their prior knowledge and mindset are integral to its actualization, including those missed potentials of redemption in the face of its uncomfortable, grave-like silence. In sum, while the destruction of offensive statues reactivates a subterranean struggle for dignity, “anti-memorials,” as it were, can keep this trauma exposed and mold it in new directions. This is therefore a case not just for the removal of statues, but a substantial rethinking of how we memorialize and compartmentalize what are persistent maladies in our society.

Following Benjamin’s standpoints, the debate about history and erasure is a stand-in for a deeper chasm between the past and the not-yet that is seeded in the present. The protests defy the taken-for-granted reminders of the iniquitous status quo. In doing so, they activate redemptive potentials towards new horizons in the struggle for dignity and social justice, and invite a deliberation on new paths to go forward.

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