



Hate and Iconoclasm: The Historical Importance of “Warts and All”

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This is the first in a five part series looking at efforts to control and censor freedom of expression in the name of fighting hate speech, racism and other forms of thought crime.

*There's more than one way to burn a book.
And the world is full of people running about
with lit matches.*

Ray Bradbury, Fahrenheit 451

It might seem strange to name a forum that advocates for freedom of speech ‘*The Iconoclast*’ [n. (1) a person who attacks or criticises cherished beliefs or institutions; (2) a destroyer of images used in religious worship], especially given the events of the Summer of 2020. In truth, the name was chosen before the wave of civil unrest that swept first America and then other countries where the aping of America’s cultural trends has become for many a vital element of staying relevant in the online age. At that time the practice of iconoclasm was associated primarily with the intolerant extremists of the Islamic world such as the ISIS and the Taliban, such as the latter’s campaign to eradicate graven images like the magnificent Buddhas of Bamyán.¹

Historically, however, iconoclasm has taken myriad forms with some sources claiming that the missing nose of the Sphinx was the result of a 14th century fit of religious pique by one Muhammad Sa’im al-Dahr.² Other forms are notably more political, such as when, during the American Revolution, the Sons of Liberty melted down statues of George III to make ammunition for their cause.³ Equally political though far less sincere was

the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 2003,⁴ a clumsily orchestrated photo-op that served only to highlight the lack of local support for the invaders.

The most recent wave of attacks on iconography has also been decidedly political in nature, at least purportedly; frequently it seems the underlying motivation of participants may be less ideological and more about the personal emotional release it allows. There is also a distinctly religious element to the underlying ethos of the attacks, which is something I will examine more in the future. Typically, religions have held varied views on iconoclasm: some, such as the Egyptians, held the destruction of monuments to be one of the worst sins, while others, such as the early Israelites, held idolatry, investing images with spiritual value, to be a far greater evil.

Certainly the recent wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Antifa related destruction would fall squarely in line with the Israelite stance: smash the Golden Calf and send the sons of Levi out to massacre those who worshipped at its altar. In doing so they invest the statues and monuments they target with a latent power which some would say is not there. And yet, they do have power, not as evidence of BLM claims of institutionalised racism, but rather, as part of our collective history and shared heritage, they play a part in shaping our cultural traditions, our values, and our

¹ BBC. 2019. Once destroyed by the Taliban, the Buddha statues live again. *BBC*, 7 April. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-47954950>

² Smithsonian. 2020. What happened to the Sphinx’s nose? *Smithsonian Journeys*, 20 May. <https://www.smithsonianjourneys.org/blog/photo-what-happened-to-the-sphinxs-nose-180950757/>

³ Lawler, A. 2020. Pulling down statues? It’s a tradition that dates back to U.S. independence. *National Geographic*, 1 July. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/07/pulling-down-statues-tradition-dates-back-united-states-independence/>

⁴ Fisher, M. 2011. The Truth About Iconic 2003 Saddam Statue-Toppling. *The Atlantic*, 3 January. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/the-truth-about-iconic-2003-saddam-statue-toppling/342802/>

understanding of the past. As Benedict Anderson pointed out, our communal identity is to a large extent imagined, and the basis for these beliefs may lie in both truthful or fictitious narratives.

Rewriting the Past

THE fragile temporality of our cultural touchstones means that BLM's tactics can, regardless of how based in the ignorance of mob violence they may be, have real impact. It's not always axiomatic that the victor, or the dominant power, shapes the historical narrative. The grossly distorted 1619 project,⁵ an attempt by the New York Times to rewrite the founding of the USA as something grounded *primarily* in racism, is a perfect example of how a small, yet privileged class of activist journalists and academics have been moderately successful in reshaping historical narratives to fit political agendas. Even when carried out by small groups of extremists, when they are spread widely enough, and done with enough repetition, such revisionism acts much like other propaganda, in that it influences both social behaviour and popular beliefs.

What it cannot do is alter truth, instead it can only hope to obfuscate it, aiming to create a social order wherein, like the status of Emmanuel Golding in 1984, you cannot be sure what is real and false, and are told, "if you live to be ninety years old, still you will never learn whether the answer to that question is Yes or No." Yet, the more you distort, the more draconian your efforts to control information must become until you find yourself cropping a dwindling number of former friends from your selfies as one-by-one they fail to uphold your interpretation of the one true narrative. Physical iconoclasm is always a self-serving effort at political control rather than, as its practitioners so often claim, an effort to improve our understanding of the past. It is also, in its promotion of a violent 'us vs. them' mob mentality, a generational threat that, like Mao's cultural revolution, can degrade society of its civilised faculties at shocking speed.

Intellectual iconoclasm, by contrast, is a search for truth that proceeds in flagrant disregard for the comfort that more popular yet less factual belief systems offer. It is a costly pursuit that is, by its very definition, socially and politically unpopular, and has little benefit for practitioners other than satisfying a desire to find and highlight truth above

all else. A civilisation can be measured by the extent to which it allows truth to become politically malleable. When political parties, news agencies, and activist groups all have their own competing truths and the system for evaluating them is so compromised by propaganda and deception that the public distrusts everyone and everything, dialogue becomes impossible and civil disorder becomes the norm. We have to hope that such spasms of irrationality and demagoguery are temporary conditions and that, despite the lack of recent evidence, our culture's alleged appreciation for objective standards of analysis and rational discourse will steer us back to firmer intellectual footing. Maybe however, it is not our love for rationality, but our distaste for the alternative that will be our saving grace.

An Ever-widening View of WrongThink

DURING WWII, the Vichy government in France melted down a statue of 16th century scholar Michael Servetus because they feared that his status as a martyr for personal convictions would inspire the maquisards, one of the few groups who can claim to have fought against actual Nazis rather than the present day reinterpretation of the word, i.e. anyone to the right of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. After the war the citizens recast the statue from its original moulds as a testament to the failure of totalitarian extremists to sway public values through their attempted control of the historical record. We face a similar wave of totalitarian excess today, not just from the ideological Antifa fanatics who claim to be the furthest thing from the Brownshirts they so resemble in dress, demeanour and action, but also from weak-willed governments that, like Vichy France, seem happy to sell out the principles that used to form the bedrock of their state as appeasement to the mob. Yet, in a way we can take comfort in the fact that mobs always have a tendency to sink to the mental and ethical level of their worst members. As a result we do not have to fear that their actions will be carried out in a way that makes strategic sense or is likely to build any sympathy with the general public. The real danger lies in such mobs becoming tools for more savvy political operators, people who would be happy to stir racial tensions to boiling point, see cities burn, homes destroyed and countless people hurt, purely so that they might gather and solidify their political position.

⁵ Kaufman, E. 2019. The '1619 Project' Gets Schooled. *Wall Street Journal*, 16 December. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-1619-project-gets-schooled-11576540494>

At the outset of the recent Black Lives Matter protests they focused on targets that were understandable, if not ultimately justifiable. The Cecil Rhodes statue at Oxford has been a longstanding focus for their intolerance,⁶ and that of Edward Colston in Bristol was at least of someone who had directly benefitted from the slave trade.⁷ Yet, inevitably, any semblance of reason or proportionality soon vanished as the list of targets grew. The cartoon character of Aunt Jemima who graced Quaker's baking goods was deemed a harmful stereotype,⁸ despite originating from the lyrics of a former slave, and despite the family of the woman whose image was used fully supporting the character. The movie 'Gone with the Wind' was declared equally problematic for its historical portrayals, despite the fact that it was the first movie for which a black actress won an Oscar.⁹ In the UK, Prime Minister William Gladstone, possibly the foremost figure in the liberalisation of Britain, was deemed illiberal due to his father's actions.¹⁰ Earl Grey, of the eponymous tea, was also listed on statues targeted for removal even though he was responsible for ending the slave trade in Britain.¹¹ Apparently this wasn't enough, with his 'crime' being that he compensated slave owners for their losses rather than paying reparations. Surprisingly the organisers of the campaign actually realised this might be a step too far and removed him as a target before damage could be done.

Other figures didn't receive the same concern, however, with statues of Churchill, yes, the man who implored us to fight the Nazis "on the beaches, in the hills...to never surrender", daubed with graffiti.¹² A similar faith befell a statue of the author Cervantes,¹³ possibly because they mistook him for a Golden Age explorer, even though the man had himself been a slave for several years. Their hatred toward a memorial of the Armenian Genocide is even more inexplicable,¹⁴ unless it stems from frustration at a form of suffering which they have been unable to co-opt for their own purposes. Perhaps it's too much to expect such people to have a knowledge of history, after all, they clearly have no interest in preserving it. Even so, you would expect, given the instigating factor of this latest wave, for those involved to be aware of the history of slavery in the United States. Yet, if that was the case why did they vandalise a memorial dedicated to Black Union soldiers who fought to free slaves?¹⁵ Why did they do the same to a statue of noted abolitionist Matthias Baldwin,¹⁶ and to anti-slavery poet John Greenleaf Whittier?¹⁷ And why on earth would they attempt to destroy the Emancipation Memorial which was commissioned and paid for by freed slaves?¹⁸

The Dangers of Manichaeism

THIS is a common factor in extremist politics, whether the Reign of Terror, the Night of Long Knives, or more recent Cancel Culture, the initial

⁶ Davies, G. 2020. Black Lives Matter protests: Oxford Chancellor attacks 'hypocrisy' of Rhodes scholars calling to remove statue. *The Telegraph*, 10 June. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/10/black-lives-matter-uk-london-protests-george-floyd-statues-racism/>

⁷ BBC. 2020. Edward Colston statue: Protesters tear down slave trader monument. *BBC News*, 8 June. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52954305>

⁸ AP. 2020. Aunt Jemima brand retired by Quaker due to racial stereotype. *Boston Herald*, 7 June. <https://www.bostonherald.com/2020/06/17/aunt-jemima-brand-retired-by-quaker-due-to-racial-stereotype/>

⁹ Leff, L.J. 1999. Gone with the Wind and Hollywood's racist politics. *The Atlantic*, December. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/12/gone-with-the-wind-and-hollywoods-racial-politics/377919/>

¹⁰ Tombs, R. 2020. Targeting statues of historical figures is a clumsy attempt to start a culture war. *The Telegraph*, 10 June. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/10/targeting-statues-historical-figures-clumsy-attempt-start-culture/>

¹¹ Gardner, B. 2020. Anti-racism activists draw up 'hit list' of 60 statues they want toppled in London, England. *National Post*, 10 June. <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/anti-racism-activists-draw-up-hit-list-of-60-statues-they-want-removed-in-london-england>

¹² BBC. 2020. Black Lives Matter protest: Why was Churchill's statue defaced? *BBC News*, 8 June. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-london-52972531>

¹³ Hedgecoe, G. 2020. Spain expresses concern to US over attacks on colonial-linked statues. *Irish Times*, 25 June. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/spain-expresses-concern-to-us-over-attacks-on-colonial-linked-statues-1.4288588>

¹⁴ Ghazanchyan, S. 2020. Armenian Genocide Memorial in Denver part of mass vandalism at Colorado State Capitol. *Armradio*, 31 May. <https://en.armradio.am/2020/05/31/armenian-genocide-memorial-in-denver-part-of-mass-vandalism-at-colorado-state-capitol/>

¹⁵ WCVB. 2020. Shaw 54th Regiment Memorial defaced during protests. *WCVB News*. <https://www.wcvb.com/article/shaw-54th-regiment-memorial-defaced/32733306>

¹⁶ Tornoe, R. 2020. Photos of defaced statue of Philly abolitionist Matthias Baldwin go viral. *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 12 June. <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-protests-matthias-baldwin-statue-abolitionist-twitter-photos-20200612.html>

¹⁷ PAGE, C. 2020. Column: Think twice before you topple that old statue. *Chicago Tribune*, 2 July. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/clarence-page/ct-column-lincoln-emancipation-george-floyd-page-20200702-iz23cbxt35gfphutmkudp4l24a-story.html>

¹⁸ From Ian Miles Cheong's Twitter feed on 27 June 2020. <https://twitter.com/stillgray/status/1276862015621828611?s=19>

range of legitimate targets inevitably expands until they fall upon themselves or begin openly violating the principles they espouse. Part of it is the inherent nature of the fundamentalist mindset. Nobody will ever agree with your subjective interpretation of every single thing and if you are 100% correct they must be wrong, so even close allies can fall out and, when both hold this mentality, the fallout can be extremely messy. Their failure is that they refuse to see shades of grey, a layer of subtlety that challenges their emotional certitude. Certainly, many people who have been memorialised throughout history have had darker sides that may have been glossed over due to ignorance, political bias, or outdated social norms but you will be hard pressed to find figures, especially those involved in politics, who do not have flaws, vices or sins—whether minor failings such as Martin Luther King’s womanising,¹⁹ or more significant ones such as Barack Obama’s role in drone bombings.²⁰

Mark Twain once referred to history as being written in the ink of fluid prejudice, and it is inevitable that just as our view of people are shaped by known and unknown biases, these views will change as social mores shift. Figures who were lionised in the past may be seen in a negative light today, and vice versa. The danger is when we hold people, institutions, nations, or races up as exaggerated characterisations of vice or virtue. Just as professional blowhard Neil DeGrasse Tyson does when he describes “*European colonial history in six words: Is that yours? It’s mine now.*”²¹ This kind of inaccuracy isn’t simple ignorance, ineptitude or laziness, it’s a deliberate and narcissistic choice to fan the flames of racial tension in return for fleeting applause.

We can certainly assume that DeGrasse Tyson isn’t referring to the actions of the West African Squadron, a naval group formed by Britain to help end the Atlantic slave trade (and rescuing some 150,000 slaves) after it had been made illegal in Britain itself. Their efforts have been described as

“a remarkable episode of sustained humanitarian activity, involving patient diplomacy and problematic wrangling over treaty arrangements, dangerous and exacting naval operations, and intense political debate at home questioning the cost and purpose of the patrols.”²² The initiative was the most expensive moral effort in world history with direct and indirect costs that amounted to almost 2% of British national income over sixty years.²³ This is just one example but even so, you don’t have to agree with everything said in Bruce Gilley’s *Case for Colonialism* to admit that the topic is far from clear cut.²⁴

The phrase “warts and all” is attributed to Oliver Cromwell’s comment on how he should be represented in portraits. Cromwell is a hugely divisive figure in his own right; believe me, as an Irish person I consider this a huge understatement. Yet, in this at least there was lasting wisdom. When you face a statue of a person you have to work under the assumption that the object before you is an imperfect representation of them, that it has been commissioned for a specific purpose that will disproportionately highlight one element of the person over other facets of their character or history. By imbuing such statues with the power to influence the views and opinions of modern audiences you divest those people of their own common sense and independent judgement. Surely, in this age we should consider our civilisation as being capable of looking beyond such simplistic black and white morality? Or, given that we clearly fall far short, at least aspire to such targets? We should be capable of understanding the complexity of people and, potentially, admire some aspects of their character, while disapproving others. Of course, we may favour one side of their character more than another, but if we only see in absolutes we aren’t exercising personal judgement of any kind but rather an adherence to learned dogma that has made our decisions for us.

¹⁹ Miller, J. 2019. I’m an MLK scholar – and I’ll never be able to view King in the same light. *The Conversation*, 31 May. <https://theconversation.com/im-an-mlk-scholar-and-ill-never-be-able-to-view-king-in-the-same-light-118015>

²⁰ Friedersdorf, C. 2016. Obama’s weak defense of his record of drone killings. *The Atlantic*, 23 December. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/president-obamas-weak-defense-of-his-record-on-drone-strikes/511454/>

²¹ From Neil DeGrasse Tyson’s Twitter feed on 11 June 2020. <https://twitter.com/neiltyson/status/1281810005528805376>

²² Lewis-Jones, H. 2011. The Royal Navy and the Battle to End Slavery. *BBC*, 17 February. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/royal_navy_article_01.shtml

²³ Kaufman, C.D. and Pape, R.A. Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain’s Sixty-Year Campaign against the Atlantic Slave Trade, *International Organization*, 5(4). 633. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601305?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

²⁴ Gilley, B. 2018. The case for colonialism. *National Association of Scholars*, Summer. https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the_case_for_colonialism

Intellectually Craven Violence

GOOD deeds, ones worth memorialising, can be carried out by men who did far worse ones, without negating the value and significance of the other act. If a man runs into a burning building to save the children of a woman he doesn't know and succeeds but dies himself in the process, that act is worth commemorating. We don't commemorate the man himself because the act was only one moment in a long life, but a moment that encapsulated something noble about the human spirit. If a statue was made to remind people of this act and it later became known that the man had engaged in domestic violence, of course there would be outrage and inevitable calls for the statue to be torn down. That would certainly be an option. But a better one would be to recognise the fact that because he was a bad person it makes the significance of him doing something noble more important, highlighting the fact that people we deem vile or evil, may be capable of noble acts that we ourselves would not. In this case the statue might list both the man's good and bad acts. Another option would be to change the monument to reflect only the act and not the man, making it anonymous. You might also choose to relocate it to a less visible place. All these options would depend upon the results of public discussion and the following of proper procedures because, unsurprisingly, we have systems that allow these types of thing to occur.

Despite this, we are seeing a significant increase in the number of people who refuse to accept the results of democratic processes and instead turn to mob action to promote their agenda through intimidation or outright violence. What the statues represent are not people, a thousand page biography would have a hard time doing that well. Statues represent fragments of these people, either specific acts they carried out or principles that they stood for and violence cannot change historical truth or overturn the legitimacy of specific values. You can cow people by violence, or even force them into certain patterns of behaviour, but the only way successfully alter what they believe in any meaningful way is through dialogue, by attempting to convince them that either their understanding of historical factors is skewed or that the values they adhere to are not in their own self-interest. Any violence you use undercuts the credibility of all other arguments you might make.

To overcome, or even weaken an idea or ideology, you have to show people why adhering to

these beliefs will deprive them of security, comfort, or other benefits (and very often do them actual harm). You then have to offer them alternative beliefs they can invest in that will provide them with the succour or emotional outlet that they need. The problem is that it is rare for those who resort quickly to violence to engage in discourse as they have some understanding that the outcome, if done in good faith, will rob them of the shallow self-justifications they use to cloak the petty and wanton acts of desecration that give them emotional stimulation. They are individuals who have often chosen, wantonly, to forsake a harder path toward practical long-term change in favour of a far-easier but ultimately pointless path that gives them short-term emotional release.

An understanding of how such individuals may be countered is not something we, as a civilisation, have managed to consistently display but that is not the aim of of this article. Rather, it is to show the difference between two directly opposing definitions of 'iconoclasm', one an act of political vandalism, engaged in by those with no faith in their ability to convince others of the validity of their beliefs, the other a form of intellectual engagement that holds that all beliefs must be challenged to ensure they are robust against structural flaws. In the present day, when it seems that more and more people, especially the young, are prone to react over-quickly to the emotional manipulation of demagogues, it is vital that those who value intellectual engagement remain willing to challenge all deeply held beliefs, not simply those of the opposition but just as much, even more so, those of their own ideological brethren.

Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. - **George Orwell, 1984**