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The Power of Monuments

Why should the US be purged of images of Confederate leaders, while statues of Admiral Nelson and Cecil Rhodes still stand in Britain?

The ghastly spectacle last month of neo-Nazis marching through the US city of Charlottesville, carrying torches and barking slogans about the supremacy of the white race, was sparked by the city's plans to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee, the leader of the Confederate army, which fought to retain slavery in the secessionist South during the American Civil War. The statue of General Lee on his horse has been there since 1924, a time when the lynching of black citizens was not a rarity.

Inspired by the events taking place in Charlottesville, advocates have emerged in Britain seeking to pull Admiral Nelson off his famous column on Trafalgar Square in London, because the British naval hero supported the slave trade. And two years ago, protesters at the University of Oxford demanded the removal of a sculpture of Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College, where the old imperialist had once been a student, because his views on race and empire are now considered to be obnoxious.

There always was something magical about this kind of iconoclasm, which rests on the belief that smashing an image will somehow solve the problems associated with it. When English Protestants challenged the power of the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, mobs laid waste to stone-carved saints and other holy representations with pick-hammers and axes. Eighteenth-century revolutionaries did the same to churches in France. The most radical example occurred in China only a little more than 50 years ago, when Red Guards destroyed Buddhist temples and burned Confucian books – or indeed anything old and traditional – to herald the Cultural Revolution.

It is easy to deplore this type of destruction. Great buildings and works of art are lost. One is tempted to assume that only people who believe in the magical power of images would wish to erase them. The sensible way to deal with monuments of the past would be to see them simply as artefacts of history.

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And yet it is not so simple. Who would argue that after 1945 streets and squares in German cities should continue to be named after Adolf Hitler? It was surely not just a childish mistake to remove sculptures of the Führer – or of Soviet leaders in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. One could argue that images of these leaders and their henchmen lacked the artistic value of great churches of medieval England, or Tang Dynasty Buddhist sculptures in China. But then statues of General Lee are hardly worth preserving for artistic reasons either.

The question is where we should draw the line. Should a historical figure be judged by the amount of blood on his hands? Or should we establish a proper time frame?

It might be argued that monuments celebrating villains who lived within living memory and would still cause grief to surviving victims must be removed, and that anything older should be left alone. But that doesn't quite work, either. The argument for preserving a sculpture of Hitler in a public place, assuming that such a thing still exists, does not get stronger as time goes on.

Many people in the US South argue that Confederate monuments should be protected as mere reminders of the past, as part of a common 'heritage'. The problem is that history is not always neutral. It can still be toxic. The way we tell stories of our past, and keep memories alive in cultural artefacts, is a large part of how we view ourselves collectively. This demands a certain degree of consensus, which often does not exist, especially when there has been a civil war.

The case of post-war Germany is quite straightforward. Both East and West Germany set out to build their collective futures in direct contrast to the Nazi past. Only a resentful fringe still wishes to cling to fond memories of the Third Reich.

Nonetheless, to this day, German authorities ban the display of Nazi imagery, fearing that it might still tempt people to repeat the darkest episodes of their country's history. This fear is understandable, and not wholly irrational. Such temptations could even become stronger as Nazism fades from living memory.

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though fairly conventional in their time, are certainly no longer fashionable today. It is highly unlikely that many British people gazing up at Nelson on his column or passing Oriel College, Oxford, will be inspired to advocate slavery or build an empire in Africa.

The American South, however, is still a problem. The losers in the Civil War were never quite reconciled to their defeat. For many southerners, though by no means all, the Confederate cause and its monuments are still felt to be part of their collective identity. Although hardly anyone in his right mind would advocate the revival of slavery, nostalgia for the Old South is still tinged with racism. That is why statues of General Lee in front of court buildings and other public places are noxious, and why many people, including southern liberals, wish to see them removed.

There is no perfect solution to this problem, precisely because it is not just about images carved from stone. Resentment in the South is political. The wounds of the Civil War remain unhealed. Much of the rural south is poorer and less educated than other parts of the US. People feel ignored and looked down upon by urban coastal elites. That is why so many of them voted for Donald Trump. Knocking down a few statues will not solve this problem. It might even make matters worse.

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Ian Buruma
New York

Ian Buruma, Editor of The New York Review of Books, is Professor of Democracy, Human Rights, and Journalism at Bard College. He is the author of numerous books, including *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* and *Year Zero: A History of 1945*.