Iconoclasm:
is this our best route to
‘being on the right side of history’?

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Do we learn from, or about, history? What is the difference? Who decided? Statues raise interesting questions about how and what we choose to remember.

When smashing monuments, save the pedestals – they always come in handy

– Stanislav Lec (1909-1966)

In June 2020, amidst convulsions of outrage following a USA white policeman's publicly-flaunted slow asphyxiated murder of a prostrate and helpless black man, George Floyd, another drama played out. Thousands of miles away, in the City of Bristol, an erstwhile port for the British slave trade, a righteously fuelled campaigning crowd wanted to action and symbolise their kindred wrath.

The excited throng surrounded a statute of Edward Colston, a man who had died in old age and with public veneration three hundred years ago. A man now scaled the pedestal and placed a long-roped noose around the neck of the now-despised effigy. The crowd were chanting: 'Burn him … Pull him down … Finish him off!' This was a crowd charged and infected with a contagious sense of righteous retribution: they would deliver a fully deserved lynching. As Colston was rope-wrenched from his commanding plinth to the ground, a massed exultant cheer went up: he had been publicly executed.

The retribution was not yet complete. Like Mussolini's fresh corpse in 1945, the bronze Colson was now kicked, struck and cursed, and then graffitied as a besmirch of odium. Even this was not enough: utter extinction was needed. The fallen idol was now pushed and rolled a few hundred metres to the harbour, clattering at the head of a long, snaking crowd whose satisfaction climaxed in a loud cheer when his heavy effigy was hoisted from the harbour wall to plummet into the deep, still water below.

At long last, the People's justice!

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At a trial for Criminal Damage the following year were four young adults who openly admitted their acts and the physical damage they caused, but denied they were criminal: indeed they turned this into a counter-charge – the *real* criminality lay with Bristol City Council. This responsible body was guilty of something much more serious: Hate Crime – by continuing the public display and implied veneration of a leading slave-trader in seventeenth century Bristol.

The four defendants – now known as The Colston Four – exercised their right for trial by jury and then organised a skilful polemical defence. The jury agreed to side-step the technically indisputable criminal damage and instead condemn the memory of the long-dead, now-hated Colston and his attributed legacy.

In January 2022 The Colston Four were all acquitted. Outside the Court they were greeted by a large, festive crowd of jubilant supporters and interview-hungry news reporters. Tears and whoops of relief mingled with hugs, air-punches and reciprocating gratitudes. One of the Four said 'We didn't change history, we rectified it'. Another exulted at 'being on the right side of history' – a view emphatically echoed by an ex-Mayor of the City.

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Few (if any) amongst us would challenge the core notions that slavery should now

be seen as a hideous transgression of any better morality, or that this needs explicit expression and action, or that our views of this and much else have changed over the last three hundred years.

There are many, though, who doubt that destroying relics is our best way of 'being on the right side of history'. For what remains of history of which any objectionable relics have been wilfully destroyed? Who are, then, the historians? And how will they, and then we, learn?

Yes, we can (almost) all agree with the Colston Four's conscientious revulsion of past moral blindness or disregard: that morally sanitised reaction is now relatively easy and speedily achieved. What is quite as important, though harder and slower, is to *understand* how such things evolved and thrived. How and why did whole societies and their otherwise decent citizens (as we shall see) see and act so differently to what seems so evidently right today? We can only answer such questions if we carefully consider the complexities of historical context and the often self-blind paradoxes of human nature.

The problem with crowd-fuelled righteousness is that such essential nuances are either side-stepped or short-circuited. Our better moral navigation requires greater patience and scrutiny: it must come quite as much from dispassionately thoughtful understanding as any clamorous claim to superior virtue.

So here, in this brief essay, are some additions to the iconoclasts' rightly righteous, yet still purblind, rage.

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First, the nature and function of statues.

The vast majority of historic statues were fashioned and erected well before electronic screens, photography or even printing presses. They were ways to commemorate or communicate likenesses of the then powerful or lionised. They now remain as kinds of frozen biopsies or snapshots of how people lived, or were encouraged to think: all relics are some kind of object-documents of otherwise vanished times.

In our current world of speed and multimedia we now have many more ways of generating respect or publicity, so statues of living notables have become very rare, except in longer-lasting dictatorships. Alongside the decline of contemporary statutes has come the dwindling of any awe or submissive deference for the much older ones – ancient icons of Pharaohs, Crimean War Generals, Tudor Monarchs or robed aristocrats are unlikely to arouse much more than curiosity, if they are noticed at all as we hurry past in our busy lives.

But if curiosity is aroused we can discover much about not just them, but the times they lived in, what sustained or elevated them … to be seen now, fossil-like and plinthed. We will find, also, that their lives depended on, and survived, cruelties and injustices we now must struggle to imagine or understand. Statues are a good way to enter that struggle.

Our retaining statues of the long-dead thus has value for our instruction, though rarely our uncompromised veneration. Horatio Nelson – the most elevated (literally) of national heroes – commanded ships whose sailors' living conditions, recruitment options and mortality rate was little (if any) better than the human captives in slave-ships a century earlier. Yet contemporaries saw and celebrated only his fatal heroism, not the hideous support structures that made this possible: they were 'normal'.

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So the historical context is fundamental to better perceiving other long-departed lives and times. These are often closer than we like to think. As a 1950s schoolboy I simply accepted that all those far-flung pink-coloured countries on the world map were British dominions legitimatised by (our) law, long history and evident superior competence. This was an effortlessly inherited so peaceful view, not one held with vehement commitment. If the world had not changed would I still hold that view?

Such a view was essential to our economy until the Second World War. Anyone with any savings and investments was almost certainly profiting from the cheap labour and managed/plundered resources of distant dominions. The challenge to such a system came from the dominions, rarely from the profiting home island. It was 'normal', and in our interest. That is why most could not, or would not, see it.

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Let us return to Edward Colston, now vilified for this pioneering success as a slave-

trader. He died aged 84 in 1721, so his (now) iniquitous practices were then, by most, regarded as legitimate and innovative Colonial trade. Many otherwise (still) respected figures (including Isaac Newton) invested substantially in this. Equally important, abolition of the slave trade in England came nearly a century *after* his death. So much as we may readily and rightly object now, the fact is that only a minority in the seventeenth century saw through their era's assumptions of racial superiority and entitlement, to our own kind of racial equality view. The plundering and enslavement of defeated and occupied populations had been a kind of *realpolitik* since antiquity. So those erstwhile people and dignitaries of Bristol disregarded as background the *realpolitik* of Colston's wealth. What was foreground for them was his kindness and generosity: he devoted much of his life and wealth to the poor's schools, hospitals and alms houses.

Almost anyone we deem historically significant from those previous times can now be seen as a part-player in an oppressive society. Are they victim, perpetrator or bystander? Often, confusingly, they are all three. That is often the fascinating and tragic nature of human history and, many would argue, the human predicament.

Colston's world serves well to illustrate this. There are several accounts from surviving white sailors responsible for their African cargo: the long sea voyages were so dangerous and poorly nourished that, often, more sailors died than slaves. Even the Captains frequently died at sea. Such, then, were the hard, harsh and heedless norms. How difficult it is to imagine them!

Yet the more we can imagine and understand such past calumnies, the better we can examine and avoid our own.

We can here extend this kind of retrospective: if we take anyone who was not poor or proletarian in Victorian England we will find that their wealth depended largely on the inhumane, often enslaved, property-less poverty-struck. All these disenfranchised people toiled disease-provoking hours in our mines, mills, plantations, shipyards and factories. That was, then, largely accepted as our economy and our culture: there were few seers or dissenters.

Should we now compensate for *their* blind spots by demonstrating our (presumed) moral superiority and perspicacity by ripping down statues of Brunel, Florence Nightingale or Gladstone? Or, an even bigger coup, Queen Victoria – the Empress of India?

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Such discrepancies of moral integrity are common in what we discover in notable (so closely studied) individuals, and then how we may attempt (or not) to understand them. There are few that escape thorough scrutiny: Gandhi was contemptuous of black Africans; Churchill fiercely fought against Nazism but stubbornly campaigned to retain a racially subjected British Empire; Clement Atlee's government colluded with the USA to remove Iran's democratically elected leader, Mossedegh, in order to have control over Iran's oilfields – essential to fund Britain's newly-hatched and vulnerable Welfare State…

Such discrepancy is familiar to any student of history.

From the arts we have abundant evidence of the often astonishing distance between the artist's worldly acts and the quality and aspiration of their creative legacy. Fraud, murder, eroticised sadism, incest, child abuse, violent antisemitism; Caravaggio, Beethoven, Eric Gill, Wagner, Picasso… [Reader: can you match them?]. Some have suggested that it is the very struggle with inner demons that drives such sublimation to the very greatest of mankind's creations.

In real world accounting it seems that the best of men's legacies are seldom unalloyed, seldom unshadowed.

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So we must beware: we are not as rightly righteous as we often like to think…

We now ingeniously export our iniquities to distant communities and environments: we procure our 'affordable' clothes from the medieval-poor in Bangladesh, the Lithium and Cadmium from endangered African child miners, and our iPhones from camp-confined intimidated Chinese workers. We stealthily dump our toxic waste and locate our 'dirty' industries in the most wretched of countries. Almost all of us say we abhor such practices yet, in an important way, we expediently 'forget', and then reinforce, and collude with, such organised inhumanity by hungrily and happily shopping for its products at the lowest prices.

And our last century's environmental damage – the knowing destruction we have unleashed against all other life, as well as ourselves – far exceeds that of our entire previous human history. We don't put up so many statues now, so what and who

will we find, in future times, to vilify and demonstrate our superior moral sense? And how will we project our contempt?

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We are all – always – purblind parts of history. Yet the more we can bring ourselves to see of this, the more we can learn from it and – perhaps – see better what is otherwise disguised.

Statues are excellent instructors for this. They were erected in an enthralled wish for eternal idealisation. Almost always, though, they become reminders of our often collective vanity, folly, grandiosity and simplistic optimism. Their unmoving solidity now looks down at our restless fragility, our passing lives, our mortality. In this way the relics of previous spurious pride can be seen as instruments to more thoughtfulness and humility. How does *then* become *now*?

That is how I, for one, wish to think about – to learn from – history. I do not want to rely merely on official historians defining for me what was the past and what I should think about it.

Angrily pulling down statues may provide group bonding for moral relief but these actions are transient compared with the enduring and recurring opportunities to gaze, to wonder and to learn.

Let us instead retain our statues *in situ*, surround them with researched and fuller stories. Discuss them. Is that not a better way to develop and pass on some wisdom

and understanding?

'The most consistent lesson we can learn from history is that mankind does not learn from history' is an oft-quoted fatalistic maxim. Curiously, paradoxically, statues can be a powerful way to free ourselves from our near-sighted cycles.

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