

Monuments, memory, and movements: How should the world reckon with a controversial past?

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As statues honoring white supremacists fell in the wake of the anti-racist protests and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, this essay asks: should monuments that memorialize a problematic past be removed or preserved as historical relics? To answer this question, the author contextualized the destruction of monuments and the memorialization of controversial historical events and personalities as manifestations that grievances against these remain in society. Ultimately, the essay argues that monuments, as tangible representations of the past, are only as strong as the message they convey. Once they outlive their intended purpose or their meanings fall into disrepute, the reevaluation of their meaning and relevance is necessary.

Keywords: monuments, memorialization, Black Lives Matter, racism, colonialism

Amid the growing political sentiment against racism and police brutality in the United States after the killing of George Floyd and the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Sarah Parcak, an Egyptologist, tweeted some advice on how to safely pull down an “obelisk masquerading as a racist monument” (Parcak, 2020). Parcak has worked in Egypt for the past two decades and had extensive knowledge of ancient Egyptian architecture. She contended that many monuments in the United States use classical sculptural styles, such as the Egyptian obelisk, to mask what they glorify—more often than not, colonialism, white nationalism, and racism.

What followed was a spate of monuments falling, one after the other. A statue of slave trader Edward Colston was toppled by activists in Bristol, United Kingdom, and sent the monument into the harbor basin (Siddique & Skopeliti, 2020). A Henry Dundas monument in Edinburgh has been defaced with graffiti (Hay, 2020). Dundas was known to have delayed the abolition of slavery by more than a decade. In Belgium, busts and statues of colonial-era King Leopold II were splashed with red paint or set on fire by protesters (Bradshaw, 2020). Leopold was the monarch responsible for turning the Democratic Republic of Congo, then known as the Congo Free State, into his private colony and a massive labor camp. In the United States, the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee has been vandalized. The 12-ton monument was dedicated to the commander of the pro-slavery Confederates Army and erected in 1890. Virginia has already decided to remove the statue from its place (Suderman & Rankin, 2020). These are but some of the many monuments razed to the ground in the wake of a global protest against racism that has led to a public reckoning of the memorialization of a controversial past.

Monuments and meaning

The word *monument* is derived from its Latin origin *monere*, which means *remind*. Today's definition neatly dovetails to its origin, as a monument, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, could mean a burial vault, a written document or record, evidence or memorial stone erected to remember a person or event, an identifying mark, a carved statue, a boundary marker, and a written tribute, among others. The very notion of a monument as being made of metal and stone denotes an attempt to continue reminding, despite the limits and impermanence of time and memory. Historically, at least for eleven thousand years (Greaves & Helwing, 2003), humans have erected monuments for their symbolic purposes. Many of these monuments have either stood the test of time or destroyed, naturally or deliberately.



"The defaced J.E.B Stuart statue after the George Floyd Protests in Richmond, Virginia" by Tyler Walter is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

Nonetheless, monuments are meant to withstand time and take a great deal of effort to remove (Bevan, 2007; Bradley, 2012). These characteristics spring from the very nature of monuments as objects put in place to create a space where viewers are forced to form associations between the site and the representations of the object. Thus, viewers assign meaning to the structure, compelling them to associate the monument to the community where they live (Auster, 1997; Osborne, 2001; Runia, 2007). It is but logical that there is power involved when monuments are built because aside from the physical structure, the meanings and messages to be represented in stone or metal will be carried through to the public eye. A monument that supports particular meanings and messages brings legitimacy to its intention (Osborne, 2001). It is no wonder that societies, states, and groups of people have a predilection towards creating monuments, as it is a way to immortalize the past. However, the problem is when this immortalized past in monuments becomes a source of

grievances in society, especially as the messages of the past are built on the subjugation of another group of people. This phenomenon is evident in today's destruction of monuments dedicated to people who perpetrated injustices in the past. As society reckons with a controversial past, the meanings behind monuments need to be re-evaluated (Osborne, 2001), and destruction is one of the many recourses. However, it is not the only course of action that could be taken.

Monuments of a besieged past

History is replete with monuments being destroyed for a host of reasons and actors. Christians in the middle ages destroyed sculptures of Ancient Rome. The Spanish conquerors destroyed temples of Aztecs and Incas in the Americas and vestiges of traditional culture in the Philippines. In 1776, American soldiers and civilians tore down a statue of Britain's King George III in Manhattan. After World War II, symbols of hated leaders such as Adolf Hitler were destroyed. In Europe, the post-Soviet states cleansed their cities and towns of statues of Vladimir Lenin. In more recent times, we see monuments continue to fall: a monument of Christopher Columbus, who claimed the Americas for Spain, was toppled in 2004 in Caracas, Venezuela, and the statue of imperialist businessman Cecil John Rhodes in Cape Town, South Africa, was dismantled in 2015, among others.

It is easy to paint efforts to destroy monuments as mob rule. After all, and especially true in today's world, many of these statues could be removed through peaceful means, by lobbying in local and international venues and expressing concern through demonstrations. But to say that the forceful toppling of monuments is barbaric or unnecessary discounts a vital historical truth. According to historian Lucia Allais, sculptures as public monuments convey the idea that "history is made by individuals... but these events (toppling of monuments) make clear that history is also made when individuals mobilize into movements and masses" (Fortin, 2017). While vanguards of the rule of law are wont to call for civility, they forget that the fall of a monument is in itself a historical act. But a monument's fall could also be done without toppling a monument, as global history professor Jürgen Zimmerer argued.

De-heroizing monuments

Zimmerer contended that monuments could be kept as historical sources, but attention must be paid to clearly "de-heroize" monuments and classify them as historically relevant (Schlagwein, 2020). Then these monuments could be placed in areas where their significance as monuments are depleted, akin to statue parks in Eastern Europe. One of which was Memento Park in Budapest, Hungary, where communist statues are laid to rest, yet the public can still revisit a traumatic part of the country's history by visiting the site (Walker, 2018).

Art historian, Arnold Bartetzky, argued that such a statue park allows these statues to continue as mere statues, away from the public eye, or at least those who want to avoid their past. However, both Bartetzky and Zimmerer maintain that they prefer monuments to remain in their original location while determining ways to draw attention to them and explain their historical context (Schlagwein, 2020). Zimmerer suggested that statues be turned upside down, laid down, or half-dug into the ground, challenging how statues are usually viewed and forcing the public to consider it in a different light. Bartetzky demanded a more public confrontation with history. He argued that "liberal societies should be able to endure that not everything that is in public spaces corresponds to our current world

view. That is exactly what distinguishes us from dictatorships and autocratic regimes” (Schlagwein, 2020).

However, these suggestions are wrought with the erroneous notion that monuments that glorify racism and colonialism could remain while the public deals with the meaning and message the statues hold. It is the usual bureaucratic powers that decide the fate of monuments. As in the case of the Colston monument in Bristol, the campaign to remove the statue has been present since the nineties. In 2018, the city decided to add a corrective plaque to the sculpture. But it was clear that there were forces that work against correcting historical injustices, especially those who attacked the proposed plaque and attempted to water down the negative actions of “Colston, the slave trader” with “Colston, the philanthropist” and “one of the city’s greatest benefactors” (Russell, 2020). The corrective plaque was never posted, and it was the collective action of the people that toppled the monument in 2020. This anecdote shows how the bureaucracy could take a while before dealing with historical grievances. As interest groups hamper the process of bringing justice to historical grievances, the memory of injustice continues to live on.

Conclusion: Toppling monuments for peace?

The reason why monuments of white nationalism, colonialism, and racism endure is that the meaning and message behind said monuments are still today’s realities. This rationale is the same life force behind the BLM movement, which is resonating because issues of racism are present throughout the world. While some could call for cooler heads and diplomatic actions, the same forces that allow injustices to perpetuate arm themselves with the same arguments for civility and levelheadedness.

Could toppling monuments be a way to achieve reconciliation? I would argue favorably. Destroying monuments that memorialize and glorify a painful and controversial past is as valid as de-heroizing statues or creating statue parks as cemeteries for these monuments. However, I would argue that to achieve true reconciliation, dealing with monuments to controversial pasts is the tip of the iceberg. Structural reform must penetrate society in its entirety. We must take a closer look at how the past manifests in our everyday life. We must deal with how racism and colonialism are handled and discussed in schools, media, and public spaces. Ultimately, we must rethink the way we commemorate the past, especially those parts that could perpetuate the injustices felt in society today, as a transformational moment is happening not just in the United States but also around the world.

Finally, we must realize that the collective action that launched the BLM movement and toppled racist monuments is a form of collective anti-memory that challenged the controversial past that monuments venerate. As these monuments fall (and I trust many will follow), we must be reminded that these monuments, while created with timelessness and immobility in mind, could crumble in the face of collective action. As the poet Vanessa Kisuule, a witness to the toppling of the Colston monument, penned the poem titled “Hollow” (Russell, 2020). “Colston, I can’t get the sound of you from my head,” a verse reads. “Countless times I passed that plinth, its heavy threat / of metal and marble. But as you landed a piece of you / fell off, broke away, and inside: nothing but air. / This whole time, you were hollow.”

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