



THE CONFLICT OF OPINIONS: ICONOCLASM AND THE BRITISH HISTORY WARS

Posted on August 1, 2020 by Jeremy Black



International movements delight those who like to find commonalities in cause, course and consequence, but each country has a unique dimension in every crisis and there is danger to reading readily from one to another. And so also with Britain. The demonstrations, agitation and commentary seen in 2020, notably in Bristol and London, but in practice across much of Britain, saw both deeper and more widespread tendencies and ones particular to the country, notably to [the legacy of empire](#). The latter provided a matter of intellectual and conceptual confusion on the part of much of the agitation, with an elision of the distinction between discussion of the slave trade and that of the empire. In reality, the two were very different, and one of the major activities of the empire was the campaign against slavery. That distinction, however, was of no interest to what rapidly became a movement drawing together a range of interrelated discontents.

Declared a murderer, as his statue was thrown into the water, Edward Colston (1636-1721) was scarcely the evil personified that is now asserted, in a period in which the interface between history and myth is very active, while a new public history is constructed, mindless of the very many killed in the Chinese model of the 1960s cultural revolution; but then a total lack of context and comparison is part of the situation, as is a failure to understand the nature of tyranny in recent (and current) Communist states. Thus, those who care not a fig about the dire situation in North Korea today are very happy to make gestures about the situation centuries ago.

Television presenters confidently announced as fact that Colston's statue was thrown into the very harbour from which his slaving ships set sail, and that it met a watery grave like the dead and dying slaves thrown from the ships from which he made the bulk of his fortune; but he directly owned no slaving ships, and the bulk of his fortune did not derive from the slave trade. In many respects with Colston, we have the problems of addressing many issues for a period in which information is not as full as we would like; not that that prevents commentators.

A child born in Bristol, and fond of the city as a result, Colston left it during the Civil War and was essentially a London merchant. It is unclear how much of his fortune derived from the slave trade, in which he was involved from 1680 to 1692, due to his membership of the Royal African Company, of which he was Deputy Governor, from 1689 to 1690. Colston was also a partner in a Bristol sugar refinery. In practice, much of his merchant activity was focused on trading with the Mediterranean and Iberia, lucrative trades from which he presumably derived most of his wealth; and Colston was involved with slavery for around one fifth of his long business career. For the last thirty years of his life, he was not involved, although, crucially, it is not clear why. It was in that time that he endowed his charities, for

education and poor relief, which makes him the greatest philanthropist in Bristol's history.

The fate of the Royal African Company is separately interesting, as a result of the impact of national politics on its fortunes during Colston's life (see my [Slavery. A New Global History](#)), and that possibly deserves more attention when he, who was later in his life an MP, is discussed. At the risk of being ahistorical, the relationship between his active levelling-up philanthropy and discussion of contemporary social policy and politics is also interesting. None of this concerned the demonstrators in Bristol. The facts of Colston's life are irrelevant to the protestors who do not want to be told the truth, but, rather to attack the myth.

As far as the general point about memorialisation is concerned, it is surely better if matters are handled in a legal and temperate fashion. Feeling strongly about an issue as a justification for mob action could all too readily be used across a society that includes many who feel strongly about other aspects of belief and activity; and then we would be in a very dark place indeed, one possibly of sectarian violence, or of physical attacks on homosexuals or abortion clinics, or a whole range of what is hated by at least someone. I cannot help reflecting on the image of violence in [Sir Thomas More](#), a play in the writing of which Shakespeare may have had a role:

And that you sit as kings in your desires,
Authority quite silent by your brawl,
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed;
What had you got? I'll tell you. You had taught
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
How order should be quelled; and by this pattern
Not one of you should live an aged man,
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
With self same hand, self reasons, and self right,
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
Would feed on one another.

Readers of this who support the Bristol rioters might shrug their shoulders and say the ends justify the means and that I am 'privileged' by my whiteness, a charge thrown at me on Radio Four; but of course this passage referred to the ugly [May Day 1517 riots](#) in London; riots directed against foreign residents. And just before, as all too often, race is thrown to the fore, these foreigners were white, and the writer

vividly refers to refugee foreigners, 'their babies at their backs.'

As a Policy Exchange public opinion poll indicated, these discontents in practice were only those of a minority, and most of those polled wanted no iconoclasm, but, nevertheless, the impression was created of a mass movement.

The basic constituents were fourfold:

1. Campus agitation
2. Discontent among the young
3. Pressure from the Left, especially the Far-Left
4. Anger from ethnic minorities.

These categories, however, have to be handled with care, as much of each group, and, polls indicated, only a minority of the young backed the cause of the protestors. At the same time, to label the latter simply as entitled, primarily public-sector, often middle-class, politically correct, left-wingers, would be to adopt an overly tight schematic. More pertinent would be the observation that these were individuals and supporting groups and institutions; for example the BBC and the Guardian newspaper, frustrated by the overwhelming Conservative victory in the general election of December 2019.

Thus, in electoral terms, the demonstrations took place at a very different moment to those in the United States. There was, and is, however, a degree of highly inappropriate mimicking, as with holding up 'don't shoot!' placards, like those in the United States, at unarmed British police. So also with the desperate and disproportionate search for episodes of real or alleged police brutality, which are then typecast to produce an image of alleged systemic violent racism. The reality throughout is that there are very few such episodes in Britain and, in contrast, a very large number of black-on-black killings, mostly linked to drug-dealers and turf-wars. However, the "performative" (a favourite "progressive" word) nature of protest is not to be directed at drug-dealers and the related criminality; a choice that is highly indicative of the irrationality and overt politicisation of the protests.

As another instance of difference with the United States, the "long march through the institutions" has developed further in more statist Britain. This "long march" is especially significant in the case of the universities, where they were particularly (although not exclusively) linked with Departments of English,

History and Politics, and with younger academics. In part, this was a process of fighting for consequence in the face of the proletarianisation of a profession being expected to work harder as a consequence of mass-access student entry. There was also the ascribing of established intellectual strategies and academic practices to a new situation apparently full of potential. In particular, the discourse-merchants and zeitgeist specialists found opportunities in a situation that they could define in terms of good and evil.

In part, there was the normative repetition of slogans about inherent White privilege, many linked to reductive analyses on the part of "New Left" academics keen to reduce individuals to categories and to explain people in terms of supposedly inherent thought. Most of those offering this analysis were middle-class of some type or other; so, in order to pose as helping the underprivileged, the critique of a redundant, imperialising, conservative whiteness suited them. Ironically, the principal slants or "disproportionalities" in university entry in Britain were in favour of women as a whole, and, among ethnic groups, of Asian pupils, but truth was not to be allowed to stand in the way of a good narrative of justifiable anger. Thus, BAME [Black and Minority Ethnic] was employed as a classification, even though there was much variation amidst it, including very considerable tension. Yet universities lined up to sign up for, and propagate very actively, what was presented as an "antiracist" strategy.

Leaving aside the obvious self-interest involved, with those linked to this process gaining or protecting well-paid jobs, these attitudes helped encourage and disseminate the iconoclastic ideas of 2020, and as part of a rejection of the imperial past, indeed the past as a whole. There were liberals involved who were ready to vary the critique, but the key dynamic was that from a far left who saw all qualification, let alone criticism, as totally unacceptable. Moreover, they lived in a bubble of likemindedness that owed much to social media. Thus, on 22 July 2020, the Registrar, or head of the administration, of Exeter University, sent an email to staff declaring: "If you see or hear any inappropriate behaviour, and you feel able to call it out, please do so in an appropriate way. It may be that a colleague is unaware of the impact of their behaviour, and mentioning this may give them a chance to adjust their behaviour alongside allowing them space to reflect." Such "space" to "reflect" is steadily becoming tighter, but the entire exercise is reminiscent of Communist activity. Those who do not say the right things can be "called out." This "cleansing" will doubtless cause a thousand flowers to bloom, as long as they are the same colour and height.

An additional trouble is that now, as apparently "silence is violence," those who remain silent will also be forced to go to mandatory "retraining" sessions. Freedom of thought and expression, as well as open

enquiry, have been totally discarded. This is power at play; but, as so often, it is power masquerading as weak and suffering hardship, so that grievance becomes a necessary drive to action.

An historical perspective on this process would point out that we have been here before. Iconoclasm itself was central to the Protestant Reformation, notably with the destruction of monasteries and of shrines in the Henrician Reformation, named after Henry VIII. The end of sainthood proved particularly damaging for many churches. In turn, more strident Protestantism in the Edwardian Reformation, named after Edward VI and then in and after the mid-seventeenth century Civil War led to fresh destruction, the latter extending to the iconography of royalty, including statues. At that stage, Britain had a tradition of political and religious instability far greater than that of Italy, one compounded in 1688-1689 by the overthrow of James II (VII of Scotland), in what to the victors was the Glorious Revolution.

And yet, thereafter, iconoclasm ceased to be part of the British tradition. In part, this was due to the contingencies of history, notably no successful foreign invasion after 1688. Indeed, the prime damage to British (like Italian) cities was bombing in World War Two. There was also the practice and ideology of a domestic politics that in Britain (although not Ireland) saw political, economic and social transformation, but in a largely non-violent fashion. This, indeed, became a key element of the British "way," one celebrated by conservatives influenced by the idea of organic change derived from Edmund Burke and by nineteenth-century liberals (and religious Nonconformists) similarly committed to peaceful reform. Taking outsiders into the political system was part of this process, as when the governing Whigs absorbed first (some) Tory policies and then Tory politicians from the 1720s. A key development was that trade unionism followed the path of the system-joining Labour Party rather than system-rejecting syndicalist or communist methods. None of these processes was simple or easy, but they were all important.

To a degree, the situation now is less happy. The system-rejecters who populated the Momentum Movement and were very influential in the Labour Party in 2015-2020, when it was led by Jeremy Corbyn, can be found behind Black Lives Matter, which is keen to replace both capitalism and the police; as well as being heavily white and middle-class. The critique of Empire provides a rhetoric to make their movement popular with tranches of campus culture, current or recent. And thus, the statues are attacked.

There is a present-mindedness at play, but also an absolutist, Manichean, good versus evil worldview,

one defined by the would-be setters of the agenda, who have variously been described as Maoist, narcissist and Orwellian; all descriptions employed with reason. There is also a deliberate rejection of the notions of History as both a trust between the generations and a public practice of nationhood; or, seen differently, a determination to transform both into a very contrasting trust and practice. That is a deliberately disruptive process, and iconoclasm is simply one consequence.

Pressure on, and from within, institutions to change, in large part first by admitting institutional and inherent flaws in the shape, in particular, of racism, is part of this process. Thus, educational curricula, and hiring practices in all forms, are to be changed, not as a consequence of debate, but due to a demand for a monoculture of opinion and monopoly of power that is far more serious than any supposed virtue-signalling. I have seen this clearly with the University of Exeter from which I retired in January 2020. Its new self-definition as an "anti-racist university" might be an amusing comment on the racists who therefore supposedly ran it until the new initiative, but this is to be enforced by "unconscious bias" policies that are a clear grab for power by a group of administrators, would-be administrators and related academics, notably in Critical Race Theory, which is problematic in its conceptualisation and implementation. Typical of this is the search for microaggressions which, to put it mildly, are very much in the eye of the beholder. In another echo of the Cultural Revolution, student monitors have been employed at Sheffield University to report on staff and students, and, on the pattern of the NKVD, this only works if they provide the necessary evidence.

An industry is at play, with Advance HE, a data provider for UK Higher Education, pushing universities to meet its Race Equality Charter That it has Trustees who are senior officeholders in universities now agreeing, at considerable cost, to meet its targets, provides at the very least a serious conflict of interest. Moreover, significant sums of money are shown in the accounts as going to Trustees. Doubtless this has all been cleared by the relevant committees of their colleagues, but it will look heavily questionable with the perspective of history, and, at present, might strike some as unacceptable.

That money and status, and an ability to imagine that hard work is giving orders to others, who actually do the teaching, marking and research, are all at play, will surprise no-one who understands how bureaucracies operate in totalitarian systems. What is surprising is that this situation pertains in a democratic system with a Conservative government. So also with the BBC and its treatment of British politics and history, notably of late, Winston Churchill. The News at Ten, flagship programme, on 21 July 2020, was highly critical of Churchill's stance during the Bengal Famine and provided no balance or

contextualisation. To note that Churchill's statue was one that was recently attacked is pertinent, as is the degree to which the criticism of Churchill by the BBC is part of a long pattern of revisionism in pursuit of a left-wing agenda. There is no equivalent in attacks on aspects of the left-wing past, for example, the Labour government's role in the foundation of the National Health Service.

Statues are both real and figurative. In the latter sense, attacks from the Left have been on the ascendant from the 1960s, and the Thatcher years (1979-1990) did not really see this process stop. The intent on imposing a twisted narrative of hatred of the country, even a perverse virtue-signalling selfhatred, are issuing a call to destroy gentle, generous, democratic Britain; not a call to destroy statues. The dangers are far greater than ignorance of history; and the idea that a rational review of the real historical facts will help is far too optimistic, because any who argue thus are presented as sharing in the evil of a past that must be destroyed.

Conservatives in Britain are apt to be highly pessimistic about the state of the "Culture Wars," and certainly Labour has done particularly well in university cities, such as Cambridge, Canterbury, Exeter and Oxford, and in the last election was in the lead among voters aged under 44. Thus, the crowds demonstrating or tweeting against statues are scarcely marginal. Yet, the self-indulgent, obsessed with an ignorant view of the past, should apply their energies to the present in giving direct help to the poor, on their own doorstep, and in large tracts of the World, who have nothing. That point makes addressing the situation more urgent.

Remedies worthy of attention include taking away the BBC's anachronistic licence fee, reforming and/or removing funding from university quango bodies such as UK Research and Innovation, and the Office for Students, supporting legal and administrative action against universities that limit free speech, as permitted by the law of the land, and shifting the balance in post-16 teaching from HE (Higher Education) to FE (Further Education), with the latter encouraged to focus on vocational education and funded, in part, by money moved from HE. The radicals are the new establishment and their power can only be lessened by radical means, the means also necessary to hold off their malice.

I am most grateful to Julie Arliss, Peter Cull, Bill Gibson and Andrew Sharpe for their comments on an earlier draft.

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The image shows the statue of Edward Colston, in Bristol, before it was toppled.

