

Iconoclastic Ruptures: Black Lives Matter and the cleansing of colonial memory in the West

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The removal of racist and oppressive pasts through the toppling of monuments standing in the epicentres of colonial and slave dominions, the US, UK and across Europe, has ruffled the feathers of leading conservative politicians, historians and even some ‘liberal’ thinkers and representatives, who claim that historical revisionism should not come with ‘erasure’ and iconoclasm. Conservative discourse calls this activity looting, saying that ‘the mob’ commits violent actions against society, its order and property, in the same way rioters loot our tradition and monumental legacy. As a scholar of partisan, socialist and postsocialist transition, focusing on the postsocialist cleansing of memory, I would like to compare these two historical moments: 1990s postsocialist memorial revisionism with the current iconoclasm of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Let me start historically: ever since 1989 and the fall of Berlin Wall, the iconoclast trope and memorial cleansing of socialist and partisan pasts were reserved for the Western gaze and its dominance over both history and present events: staged, or authentic, top down or grassroots, these new iconoclastic activities targeted the symbols of what they deemed ‘totalitarian’ dictatorships. The ‘end of history’ was announced and the history of the former communist block was obliterated, demonised and utterly revised. This process saw the removal, or vandalising, of thousands of monuments of Soviet soldiers, socialist and partisan figures and collectives – perhaps best represented in the repetitive waves of the toppling of the countless statues of Lenin and Marx. The work of the nationalist neoliberal ‘mob’ was accompanied by more ‘decent’ state-led removals that were often silent, taking place at night, where plinths were either buried in the woods in secret locations, or put in museums or depots, waiting to be restaged in the future (for example, in reunified Germany). Such monumental cleansings were legitimised by new regimes who grew to occupy the frame of neoliberal capitalist realism and the reinvention of ethnonationalist traditions. It is noteworthy that the tradition they were destroying stood for a trans-nationalist, egalitarian and emancipatory past (i.e. working class and antifascist struggle) and that, perversely, on the former historical sites revisionist figures, nationalist to local fascist collaborators were erected as the communities’ new monuments. After socialism was thrown in the dustbin of history, the Western gaze directed itself to the last strongholds of ‘despotic’ dictatorships, with the so-called human interventions in ‘rogue states’, with the symbolic toppling of both living leaders *and* their monuments, including Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. With them, the history came to its final end. The universality of Western European / American civilisation was proclaimed on the banners of freedom and the expulsion of ‘totalitarianism’ from the Earth was in near sight. Everything that remained was controlled through the ministries of culture, with their proper musealisation of the evil wrongdoers and their actions, or in their subcultural deviation in nostalgic appropriation of the past. The First World reigned supreme and the old transitologist discourse proclaimed that everyone else had to modernise and catch up became universal. If there is no need to romanticise the fallen leaders of the past, or real existing socialism, there is even less

urgency to participate in the universal triumph over flattening the past and blocking emancipatory future. This type of unidirectional memory serves only the European / American capitalist order, typical of the period after 1989, which since the major capitalist crisis in 2008, and now severely deepened by the Covid-19 pandemic, started to crumble, losing its ideological, political and economic power.

The new iconoclast grassroots movement we see today that stretches from the US to Europe and beyond exposes the continuous police violence and structural racism over black people and people of colour. The moment should neither be seen as the typical practice of historical revisionism that continues the memorial moment of post-1989, neither should it be reduced to just some violent behaviour. Rather, it signals one of the major blind spots in the European / American colonial mission: there are no official policies, monuments, museums or textbooks recognising the reality of Western colonialism. Furthermore, the movement directly exposes – and has been in the last decade building a strong critical discourse – a long lasting symbolic monumental legacy of colonial masters and their slavery and genocidal policies. These monuments have remained intact and deeply inscribed in the urban fabrics of our public spaces, cities and in the imaginaries of their inhabitants. Moreover, the anti-racist movement does not simply take down the figures of oppression in order to create a more politically correct visual landscape. Rather, it calls for a new radical justice that would dismantle and defund the military-police-prison complex, so well described in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag*. The toppling of racist and oppressive figures is probably the most spectacular and iconoclastic visual marker: it also highlights the popular power and strength of the Black Lives Matter movement that carries a qualitatively different 'memorial' stance that opens towards 'multidirectional memory' (Michael Rothberg).

It is through these political movements that we can trace the real end of the memory and discourse of 'end of history' which started in 1989. This detour through history and memory must be done in order to open up a radically different future. This was known to all revolutionary movements of the twentieth century and to turn now to traditional policy that neutrally safeguards the monuments (despite knowing how wrong, unjust and hurtful they are to any critical thought and the oppressed) would be a wrong move that does not recognise the urgency for deeper social change today. Marx remarked that we act under specific given circumstances, but the social forces and processes can be shaped and recreated by the masses. This is why we should not fall into the trap of cloaking ourselves with the mantles of past glory. Rather, the point is now to invent new ways to both inscribe, in memory, the past injustices and oppressions, as well as launch partisan decolonial liberation figures, (be it through individuals or collectives) that already signal the new world. Evacuated plinths can remain empty, as signs of what happened there, and how the oppressed waged important battles in their struggle against the legacy of their oppressors. In the communities, and through work of critical thought, activities and the oppressed can choose how to use the monuments, and the memory. The role for those of us who work on the subjects of partisan, anticolonial and emancipatory memory/history of the past, is to involve ourselves in the struggles, and contribute with some modest proposals (my book [Partisan Ruptures](#) is one such attempt), but we should never again hide in the cloak of some neutral mediator that respects and listens to all sides, and enshrines the reconciliation to all sides. We have been listening, looking at, reading, and experiencing the side of the perpetrator, oppressor and coloniser, for a way too long. Those from the postsocialist and in particular from post-Yugoslav regions saw the protagonists of partisan and antifascist struggle substituted by fascist collaborators. History is neither a closed process nor a linear progression, but a complex process full of interruptions. And the removal of oppressive monuments shows not only past and present dramatic asymmetry, but also imagines a new world that is now shifting to the side of the oppressed.

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