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Beware Lest a Statue Slay You

Thomas Martin

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Anyone who reads the news is familiar with recent demands for the removal of Confederate monuments, and the related push to rename military bases like Fort Bragg and Fort Hood. These controversies raise a broader question for anarchists: Do we even need public statues at all? We're not talking here about genuine art—no one wants to topple the Venus de Milo. Such art objects representing ideas or abstractions can enrich our lives, make us think. From an anarchist perspective, statues of Union generals, and indeed of any politician or military commander, are unacceptable in that they encourage an insidious and corrupting secular idolatry. I'm tempted to make an exception for the Civil War monument in my own city, Dayton: at the top of a tall column (somewhat of a traffic obstacle) stands a statue of George Washington Fair, a local boy, a bricklayer, and private in the Union army—selected because he represents the common, often nameless soldier. We might argue that some monuments are neutral towards, or even confront, hegemonic state power. Fair survived the war.

As a Crimethinc writer opined in 2017, it's not enough to tear down the statues; the pedestal—that is, "the system that

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prevents us from making the most of our lives”—must go, too.¹ Statues are a problem, yes, but the deeper issue is the cultural trope that makes us feel we need them. It has always been in the interests of the ruling classes that the rest of us feel inferior. A statue of a dignified historical figure towering over us helps create that effect. This works on the micro scale too: studies have shown that when speaking to a small group—as a professor in a classroom, I have direct experience of this—the seated listeners understand at some subliminal level that you, the speaker or professor or whatever, standing up (or, even better, standing behind a podium), is somehow worthy of respect and ought to be listened to. For the same psychological reason, prayers are aimed heavenward.

It doesn't have to be that way. Christopher Wren, the brilliant architect who designed many of the churches of London after the Great Fire of 1666 destroyed the originals, had the right idea. He is buried in his greatest work, St. Paul's Cathedral, but there is no statue of him. Just an inscription: *si monumentum requiris, circumspice*—"If you seek his monument, look around you."

The demonstrations in Richmond, Virginia, and elsewhere in the summer of 2017 and later, following the murder of George Floyd, generated some commentary from anarchist writers, most of it concerning the links between statues of Confederate leaders and systemic racism. They were right that such monuments don't exist in isolation but are deeply entangled with the local social and political environment, and that they infect the minds of people who walk or drive by them every day, often at a subconscious level.

For an extreme example of "monument syndrome," consider Mount Rushmore—not only a horrendous monstrosity from an artistic point of view, but also a blatant desecration of Native

¹ "When You Topple the Statues, Don't Forget to Uproot the Pedestals," *Crimethinc*, August 15, 2017.

While it is a work of art, the Haymarket Martyrs' Monument, in the Forest Park, Illinois, cemetery should be no exception.⁷ Idolatry, secular or otherwise, is not part of the anarchist credo. For its part, the government designated the monument a National Historic Landmark in 1997—a perfect example of co-opting one's adversaries. To add insult to injury, a band played *America the Beautiful* at the 1997 ceremony. (Also on this list of landmarks are the Confederate White House in Richmond and the Hampton Plantation in South Carolina, which at its height "employed" 340 slaves).

It makes no difference whether a monument honors a slaveholder; a president or general; a woman or man; or even someone "looked up to" by anarchists. Books make better monuments.

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⁷ See G. L. Doebler, "The Contest for Memory: Haymarket through a Revisionist Looking Glass," *Fifth Estate* 352 (Winter 1999).



Haymarket Martyrs' Monument

American sacred land. About nine miles away, a stupendous statue of the Oglala Lakota warrior Crazy Horse has been under construction since 1948. Commissioned by a Lakota elder, it is intended as a sort of rejoinder to Mount Rushmore. It is located on private land, but still in the sacred Black Hills (Paha Sapa). Does this monument even the score, or does it just double the insult?

The dispute is not limited to the United States, of course. In 2020 citizens in Greenland voted on whether to keep a controversial statue of a Danish-Norwegian missionary, seen as a symbol of Danish colonialism. The Hans Egede statue is in Nuuk, the tiny capital of the vast Arctic island, inhabited by just 56,000 people. Leading up to the referendum, red paint was daubed on the statue, with the word “decolonize”—apparently linked to global anti-colonial protests. By a narrow margin, Greenlanders decided to keep the statue. In Canada, statues and images of Elizabeth II have been vandalized as an expression of anger against historic mistreatment of First Nations people. This resentment may seem misdirected—after all, the queen is not personally to blame for past atrocities; but she is the literal face of the governmental power that was responsible.

Also in 2020, protesters in Bristol, England, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, pulled down a statue of Edward Colston, a prominent wealthy citizen in the late seventeenth century, and cast it into the harbor. Colston had made much of his fortune in the slave trade. But he was also a philanthropist, leaving £71,000 (about \$16.5 million in today’s US dollars) to local charities after his death—nearly half his estate. This and the above examples raise a question worth asking: Given that most people commemorated in sculptures are not purely evil (or good), should we consider such extenuating circumstances when deciding whether a statue should go? I will suggest that for anarchists, the question is, in fact, irrelevant: they should all go.



Boris Korolev's Bakunin statue

We can guess that Carlyle would have approved putting up statues of Napoleon; Kropotkin would not have wanted even a statue of Sieyès or Danton, among the most radical French revolutionaries. Not even, I imagine, of the “Unknown Sans-Culotte.” Kropotkin’s grave at a convent near Moscow, by the way, is marked by a simple tombstone. But then, so is Carlyle’s.

Carlyle may have ended up in the dustbin of history, but his influence does much to explain the urge to erect statues of “heroes.” The impulse is subconscious as well as conscious. So is the impulse to tear them down when they run afoul of current trends and sentiments. In the case of the Confederate generals, some historians have recommended leaving them in place and adding plaques describing their iniquities—that is, what we now regard as iniquities, not necessarily so in their own time. These suggestions have been mostly ignored. “No,” the protestors say. “The statues have to go”—and that’s right, even if for the wrong reasons. An equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee glorifies the fight to preserve slavery, yes; but at a deeper level, it asks us to “look up” to him, literally and figuratively. The Richmond statue of Lee was sixty feet tall, pedestal included. Every postulate of anarchism argues against such an appeal to the observer.

bloody excesses of the revolution a divine judgment on a corrupt monarchy and aristocracy; he admires Napoleon as a prototypical “great man” who brought order out of chaos, though he dislikes the imperial trappings that the Corsican general adopted. Antipathy for the French and their culture runs as an undercurrent throughout the long book.

Kropotkin, in contrast, gives us a sober (and less gripping) account, emphasizing the economic and social causes and effects, and downplaying the significance of any particular individual. For Kropotkin, any revolution must combine economic and political transformation to create a whole new social order—one of those two factors is not sufficient (by this measure, the American one was not a revolution, while the Russian was). Kropotkin saw the sort of history championed by Carlyle and others in the nineteenth century as on the decline, and he was right. The historical profession, or at least some of its members, were moving away from the “great man” and towards a more comprehensive study of humanity. Kropotkin ends his book with the Thermidorean Reaction—for him, the real French Revolution was then over, as popular representation was now suppressed. Bonaparte’s armies fought so long and fiercely thereafter, not for their emperor (as Carlyle suggests), but rather to protect the gains of the true revolution: “to keep the lands that had been retaken from the lords, the priests and the rich, and the liberties that had been won from despotism and the Court.” And even though a Bourbon king eventually returned, he “might reign, but the lands were to be kept by those who had taken them from the feudal lords, so that even during the White Terror of the Bourbons they dared not touch those lands. The old *régime* could not be re-established. That is what is gained by making a revolution.”⁶

⁶ Peter Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1989, orig. published 1909), 575.

Vladimir Lenin, in the early years of his dictatorship, hoped to curry favor with the still-numerous Russian anarchists by commissioning a statue of Mikhail Bakunin for what is now Kirov Street in Moscow, by the “cubo-futurist” Boris Korolev. At the same time, monuments to the tsars were being dismantled. The Bakunin statue, for its part, was roundly condemned by Bolsheviks, mainly on aesthetic grounds; what anarchists thought is unknown. It soon disappeared, though photographs of it survive.

Pulling down statues has a long history. Egyptian pharaohs often defaced or removed images of their predecessors—that is, when they did not simply relabel them with their own names. In New York in July 1776, rebels tore down an equestrian statue of George III and purportedly melted it down for bullets. In parts of the world impacted by the three major monotheistic religions, the biblical warning against “graven images” is at the root of the debate. People have killed each other over such nonsense. In the Muslim world and in Orthodox Judaism, images of not only humans but of all living creatures are technically forbidden, though this stricture has not always been observed everywhere. Christianity has pretty much ignored the commandment (as well as the other nine), right from the start. In the eighth-century Byzantine empire, the so-called iconoclasts, influenced indirectly by Islam, went about smashing statues, icons, and other images of saints. The government took a side, and people died in street riots. Eventually a compromise was reached: in Orthodox churches, two-dimensional images (icons) were acceptable, while statues were not. Iconoclasm rippled through the Catholic world from time to time but did not take hold. In the sixteenth century and beyond, many Protestant denominations also condemned holy images, at least in churches, if not in books and art.

The most recent iconoclasts (besides America’s anti-racists) have been Muslims, though their actions have been more political than religious. In Afghanistan, the Taliban in 2001 dy-

namited the colossal sixth-century Bamiyan Buddhas. In Iraq and Syria in 2015, ISIS militants destroyed many ancient statues and monuments dating from Roman and Hellenistic times, simply because they portrayed human or divine figures. Of course, these destructive acts do not express the attitudes of the vast majority of Muslims.

In Western culture—maybe in most cultures—admiration of the hero, the “great man” (or more rarely, “great woman”) seems endemic. Historians have always been aware of this trope, but it was first meticulously explored by the Scottish scholar Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841). Carlyle was influenced by the German idealist Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and perhaps also by his lifelong struggle with gastric ulcers, which may explain his contempt for democracy and *hoi polloi*. He is remembered as the author of the “great man” theory of history, which today has few proponents, though no one denies his genius with words.

In *On Heroes*, Carlyle recommends the worship of the powerful leader—Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon, even Muhammad—all the more necessary in the age of Enlightenment and industrialism, as faith in supernatural beings declined. Friedrich Nietzsche, while dismissing Carlyle’s Anglo-Saxon sentimentalism, borrowed his “great man” as an ingredient of his *Übermensch*. But Nietzsche might have approved the removal of Confederate statues, as his theory of “critical history” calls on us to “shatter and dissolve” the past, always a product of “human violence and weakness.”²

In his *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has the prophet warn his followers: “You revere me; but what if your reverence

² See Jenny Carton, “Friedrich Nietzsche’s Three Kinds of History: Confronting the Confederate Past,” Trinity Papers, 2021, Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT.

tumbles one day? Beware lest a statue slay you.”³ “Suppress the sculptor or the block of marble, and you will have no statue,” says the French mutualist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, albeit in a slightly different context—but the metaphor works here too.⁴

The “great man” idea has few modern proponents among historians, and philosophers on the left (notably Tolstoy) have mostly condemned it, averring that the “great man” is a product of social and environmental forces, not innate superiority. Being in the right place at the right time is more powerful than DNA.

“The historian,” Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin once wrote, “wants to know how the members, of which such a nation was composed, lived at such a time, what their beliefs were, their means of existence, what ideal society was visible to them, and what means they possessed to march towards this idea... by the action of all those forces, formerly neglected, he interprets the great historical phenomena.”⁵

For a better understanding of why so many historians have rejected the “great man” theory—or more precisely, ignored it—we can compare the two histories of the French Revolution written by Carlyle (1837) and Kropotkin (1909). Both men understood that the French Revolution had changed the world. The Scottish historian offers a dramatic, almost poetic, account, often inventing dialogue and details of events—none of which are unbelievable, even if they are unverifiable. Carlyle calls the

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1954).

⁴ Iain McKay, ed., *Property Is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), from *Justice in the Revolution and the Church* (1858), 628.

⁵ Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” in George Woodcock, ed., *Fugitive Writings* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1993), quoted by Matthew S. Adams, “The Possibilities of Anarchist History: Rethinking the Canon and Writing History,” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 1 (2013). Adams shows astutely that historians of anarchism are still largely stuck in the canonical practices of the profession.