

Iconoclasm

THE SIGHT OF THE TORCHLIGHT MARCH in Charlottesville is enough to scare the bejesus out of any even minded person: hundreds of white men marching in serried ranks holding burning torches aloft as they chanted against the Jews in a conscious emulation of the Nazis. This historical re-enactment formed part of the Unite-the-Right rally organised ostensibly to defend the statue of Robert E. Lee from the iconoclasts of the left who aimed to tear it down.

Fascists from the National Socialist Movement, the Traditionalist Workers Party, the League of the South, the National Policy Institute, Oath Keepers, and many others, including some, 'in a personal capacity', from the Proud Boys, assembled in Charlottesville in order to 'peacefully' intimidate their political opponents in general and the city's black population in particular.

The left responded with counter demonstrations that aimed at the disruption and break up of the fascist gatherings. The only criticism I have of the broad left's conduct is that they appeared to rely rather too much on the police and were not as well prepared for the violence as the fascists – boots, helmets, and shields should have been *de rigueur*. Trotsky's old *bon mot* about the need to acquaint the heads of fascists with the pavement springs readily to mind.

Nobody should be in any doubt about the murderous nature of fascists and fascism in America or anywhere else – violence is unavoidable in the struggle against people who have every intension of brutalising and killing us.

That being said, it must be acknowledged that fascism does not at the moment constitute a serious threat to democratic institutions or the labour movement. Fascists and racists certainly represent a

present danger to certain communities and particular neighbourhoods, but it does not represent a general or coherent threat to bourgeois democracy or to the activity of civil society.

In recent years, however, the left has sleep walked into the strife symbolised by Charlottesville, and the murder of a young women protestor, by endorsing iconoclasm largely inspired by those who want to censor a better world into existence. Many on the left have become gripped with the idea that life and society can be improved by policing opinions, speech, symbols, works of art, exhibitions, plays and literature. It is hoped that by bowdlerising history 'safe spaces' can be created in which the oppressed are no longer traduced or intimidated by offensive cultural practices or historical narratives which demean them.

This approach is disastrous because it replaces the idea of learning from history by attempts to wipe the historical record clean. It is, of course, entirely reasonable that Agatha Christie's entertaining novel *Ten Little Niggers* should become *Ten Little Indians* and finally, *Then There Were None*. The, almost 'absent minded' racism, of Christie's editors, had no bearing on the theme or content of the novel and is completely unacceptable. However, racist artworks like D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, or the anti-Semitism of William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, or the unadulterated sexism of many of the wonderful songs sung by Bessie Smith are an entirely different matter.

What are we to do when Bessie sings:

There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I
can't understand,
That's a mannish actin' woman an 'skippin twistin'
woman-actin' man!

The song is of the opinion that such a man is "crooked as a corkscrew and evil as a copper-headed snake!" If the 'safe spaces' crowd ever get their hands on Bessie Smith's songbook it really all over for our culture, as rich as it is in contradictions, as it strives to

represent and experience our complex encounters with each other and our tumultuous and terrible past. Indeed grasping the passions, enthusiasms, loyalties, brutal conflicts, betrayals, bad faith, and subtle compromises, lived through, and by people in the past is essential if we are going to encounter the complexities of our own life now with intelligence and discrimination.

There really is no hiding place from what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel called the “slaughter bench of history”.

This is why it is absurd to think that anything good or permanent is achieved by pulling down statues of Cecil Rhodes or of renaming Stalingrad “Volgograd” – there was no Battle of Volgograd – it was the Battle of Stalingrad in which the punitive battalions, murderous commissars, and the secret police, of a vicious tyranny, together with the blameless heroism of hundreds of thousands of men and women in the Red Army, defeated the Nazi forces of General Von Paulus and signalled the beginning of the end of the Third Reich. One does not have to join the idiotic waving of red flags or post stupid Stalinist memes on Facebook to know this. History is complex; it is redolent with contradictions, viciousness, heroism, and tragedy.

The removal of the name of slave owner and trader, Edward Colston, from Bristol’s public buildings and spaces will not, expunge the city’s dreadful past or its vast profits from the Middle Passage. Nor will it do anything to improve the circumstances of black youth in Bristol’s inner city neighbourhoods. Tearing down the statue of Oliver Cromwell outside Westminster Hall will not make amends for the massacres he ordered and endorsed in Ireland or his role in consolidating British control of Jamaica.

The British Museum is a site of colonial bombast. It’s building worthy of Prussia’s Karl Friedrich Schinkel is filled with artefacts stolen, purloined, and purchased from people who had no right to sell them in the first place. Yet its collections remain an almost unmatched treasure trove of objects from every corner of the

globe. It is both a monument to British imperialism and a glorious repository of human culture. Something similar could be said of the British Library, and of many 'stately homes', built upon the ruins of labourers' cottages from the proceeds of slavery.

The presence of these monuments in our midst, just like those in literature and the arts, are reminders of our collective past and of our constant need to engage critically with history, with how it is written, how it is synthesised, how it is constructed, and reconstructed, in accordance with the perpetually shifting present.

It is clear that the statue of Robert E. Lee like many a monument to the slave-holding Confederacy across the Southern states was erected after the First World War as a means of signalling the intension of Southern elites to maintain and reinvigorate the serfdom of the black masses, which they feared had been undermined by the participation of black men in the war in Europe and by mounting levels of migration among black artisans and sharecroppers to Northern industrial cities. During the 1920s the merest hint of the weakening of the black servitude that had been institutionalised following the Civil War provoked a resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan, of lynching, and renewed and redoubled repression of the black population. These were the circumstances in which the battle flag of the Confederacy, and the erection of monuments to the heroes of the slave states, assumed iconic status in the South.

The modern struggle over these icons within the United States is, however, more to do with the sense of abandonment felt by large numbers of white working class people who's prospects and jobs have been destroyed by technical innovation and globalisation, than it is by the need to revive or reinvigorate the subordination of black people. The left, by falling for the idea, that censoring the past is the way to the future, have driven large numbers of white workers towards the fascists and white supremacists.

A ludicrous battle has been joined in which the left seems to have forgotten that hundreds of thousands of Southern farm boys, none of whom owned any slaves, were slaughtered by the bushel in the Civil War defending parochial loyalties and state's rights. By and large their descendants are not calling for the re-establishment of slavery, for segregation, or of the return of black serfdom. However, because they can see no good reason why their history should be wiped from the slate, they face the very real possibility of being driven, by the left, into the same camp as the anti-Semites, the fascists, and the racists, who are turning this mayhem to such profitable account.

Clearly, there are moments when iconoclasm is unavoidable – anarchists strewing the bones of saints and martyrs on the steps of churches in Republican Spain in 1936, the removal of the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky following the failed Soviet coup in August 1991, the destruction of the effigy of Saddam Hussein in 2003 with the fall of Baghdad. These actions are fired by revolutionary zeal or military exigency in moments of heightened crisis – They are not attempts to rewrite history nor are they fuelled by efforts to improve the world by extinguishing the past.

We have a responsibility to promote historical understanding and to reject destructive caricatures in which those who do not agree with every aspect of our interpretation of past wrongs and crimes are cast into the pit of perdition fit only for Nazis and anti-Semites.