

Should the statues of great men be pulled down?

by Arnaud Exbalin

We thought they were mute and asleep; now they are waking up and starting to talk. In the torpid summer of 2020, dozens of statues of great men around the world had paint splashed on them, were sprayed with graffiti, had limbs amputated or were destroyed. The historian Jacqueline Lalouette investigates.

On: [Jacqueline Lalouette, *Les statues de la discorde*, Paris, Passés composés/Humensis, 2021, 239 pages, €17.](#)

This volume on the destruction of statues post-George-Floyd – the African-American who was suffocated by a police officer – looks like a topical text. Written during the summer of 2020, it was published by the *Presses des Passés composés*, which aims to “disseminate the reflections of historians from the projects”. Following in the wake of Maurice Agulhon’s work, Jacqueline Lalouette, a specialist in secularism and anticlericalism in France, had already devoted an imposing volume in 2018 to the statue-philia of the 19th century: *Un peuple de statues: La célébration sculptée des grands hommes (1804-2018)*.

Here, she expands her horizons beyond her preferred terrain (metropolitan France), in order to tackle the shores of the present. The brevity of the text and the light scholarly apparatus are designed to attract a large audience. The book is organised into four chapters: the first is a global overview of contested statues around the world,

the second focuses on statues linked to the history of slavery in the French overseas territories, the third is devoted to statues of colonisers in the French colonies, and the final chapter looks at the future of statues in public spaces. The text is accompanied by helpful illustrations, which judiciously clarify it.

Summer 2020: A wave of iconoclasm

The interest of this little volume is threefold. Firstly, it tackles a burning issue of the day, something that historians – with the notable exception of specialists in contemporary history – are hardly accustomed to doing. Jacqueline Lalouette immediately situates the iconoclastic movement of summer 2020, which journalists were too quick to interpret as a global phenomenon triggered by the US Black Lives Matter movement, in a series of destructive actions that appear in the 2010s in the United States against statues of Confederate generals, in South Africa against depictions of Cecil Rhodes with the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement in 2015, in Australia in 2017, etc.

She then presents the arguments of the destroyers and the defenders of the statues in as balanced a way as possible. For the former, certain statues (above all, those of participants in military conquests) perpetuate a colonial, racist and patriarchal vision of the past in the public space, which no longer corresponds to contemporary values. Do we still need statues of great men in a democratic society? According to Françoise Vergès, president of the National Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery (2009–2013), who is cited several times, some statues convey the idea that “humanity is divided into lives that count and lives that don’t”.

The defenders of the monuments, on the other hand, put forward the argument that the statues are part of the country’s artistic heritage, that these statues are landmarks in the public space, celebrate France’s history, and that destroying them will not erase the past.

The voice of the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, belongs to this camp: “The Republic will not erase any trace of its history or any name from it. It will not forget any of its deeds. It will not pull down statues”, official statement of 14 June 2020. To appeal to young people, he called in the online media Brut for a public

consultation to establish a catalogue of several hundred names to be honoured in the naming of squares and streets and with public statues.

In response to anti-racist activists who denounce statues perpetuating “white privilege”, Jacqueline Lalouette is careful to survey the latest monuments to the “new heroes” coming from black minorities: Toussaint Louverture, the father of Haitian independence, in Massy in 1989, Bordeaux in 2005 and La Rochelle (by Ousmane Sow) in 2015; Louis Delgrès, a free man of colour and infantry colonel who died fighting against Napoleon’s troops in 1802, in Guadeloupe, but also in Le Blanc-Mesnil in 2017; general Dumas, the novelist’s father, in Paris in 2002; Aimé Césaire, founder of *negritude*, mayor of Fort-de-France and member of the National Assembly, in Sarcelles in 2010; Jean-Marie Djiabaou, a major figure in Kanak nationalism who was assassinated in 1989, in Nouméa in 2020, etc.. Adopting the perspective of activist research, she then discusses alternatives to destroying statues: museums, explanatory plaques, deliberate artistic misappropriations.

The third contribution is methodological in nature. Since every statue is unique, their study requires a micro-situated approach, especially as the statues come into being under the auspices of city councils and hence have to be dealt with on a local scale. The heart of the author’s analysis brings together biographical details about the people represented, material facts about the statuary (materials, pedestals, locations, funding), a semiology of symbols, gestures, and inscriptions, and the civic rituals that accompany the birth and life of the statues, in order finally to provide a method for analysing the destructive gesture. The volume is teeming with case studies. We learn, for example, that the term *déboulonnage* (unbolting), which is so often used in the French press, is incorrect, since most of the statues have simply been placed on their plinths, thus making them easier to destroy. The fact that the monuments were not securely attached shows the extent to which those who commissioned them did not envisage their being pulled down one day.

For a global history of iconoclasm?

This abundance of examples is often detrimental to the analysis. For example, the world tour of destruction (ch. 1), which leaves out the iconoclastic acts perpetrated in Latin America, called for more than a simple typology (p. 40); it called for achieving a higher level of generality and for interpretations or at least questions that are not to

be found in the very brief intermediate conclusions. What does this global phenomenon reveal about the tensions at work in the diverse and antagonistic readings of colonial pasts? Are we witnessing attempts at decolonising public spaces? Is the destruction of the statues merely the work of small groups of activists, as the author suggests?

She could have recalled that the long history of statue destruction, which is only mentioned in passing in the introduction, includes iconoclastic acts which were the result of veritable national policies of “de-commemoration”: namely, deliberate programmes aimed at removing the symbols and civic rituals of a past (and despised) regime and replacing them with monuments which are compatible with the new regime in power. This was the case in post-revolutionary France, as is well known thanks to the work of Emmanuel Fureix. The 19th century, with the fall of the Empire, the restorations, the revolutions and the establishment of a republican regime, was flooded by “waves of ritual purging of the signs of the past”: for example, during the Paris Commune and the episode of the tearing-down of the sculpture of Henri IV on the façade of the city hall. As E. Fureix points out, the photos taken by the Léauté brothers give the impression that the statue was destroyed during the episode, but in fact it was simply removed and put in storage. The photograph of the tearing-down of the statue – which is meant to foster the idea of an ideological link between the Commune and the French Revolution – and its dissemination are as important for the analysis here as the act itself.

Tearing down the activist discourse?

Given her empathy for her subject, Jacqueline Lalouette tends, maybe despite herself, to frontally oppose two types of discourse: that of the measured, emotionally distanced, professional historians, who are always quick to detect the mortal sin of anachronism, and the excessive, distorted discourse of the activists, which is described as a “litany of outrages” (p. 182). But the author herself shows that there are very different positions within the scholarly community. The generational question ought perhaps to be taken into account: Is it merely by chance that Mathilde Larrère, Guillaume Mazeau and Sarah Gensburger (who are cited as scholars in favour of removing certain statues) are members of the new generation? It is not so much the question of whether or not statues of sovereigns, rulers, explorers and entrepreneurs ought to be kept which interests the scholars, but rather that of the political processes

at work in the public uses made of the past. This is a vast question, and the statues provide an excellent, solid anchor for addressing it.

Would a multidisciplinary approach (anthropology, sociology, political science) have helped to enrich the analysis and overcome the aporia of “should they be pulled down?” A sociology of these movements or, at the very least, a synthesis of existing work would have given readers some indications on how to more properly approach those who practise, according to the author, “the abuse of memory” (p. 179), i.e. who select out certain elements of the past for activist purposes. Think of the work of Abdellali Hajjat on the first anti-racist movements – the 1983 *Marche des Beurs* (Arabs’ March) – or, more recently, that of Audrey Célestine on Caribbean minorities in Paris and New York or also the studies conducted by Adèle Mommeja. Who are these anti-racist and anti-slavery activists? Are they the only ones who want to “unbolt” the statues nowadays? How have their interventions been prepared, conceived and calibrated? How are these actions interconnected with other social issues?

For example, the destruction of five Schœlcher sculptures in 2020 in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Cayenne (pp. 44–62) – which is difficult to understand for a person from metropolitan France who is unfamiliar with the local realities – cannot be considered apart from the harshness of the social relations and the palpable legacies of the colonial period (four centuries) that structure social relations in the French Caribbean. Amidst the complex tangle of different motivations leading to action, it has been acknowledged that it is not so much Schœlcher himself who was targeted as the ideology that led to the creation of the statues: Schoelcherism, “an assimilationist ideology which aims to conceal the incessant resistance of the slaves and to exalt a generous abolitionist France”, according to Patrick Chamoiseau on Twitter.

Vandals or iconoclasts?

The very terminological choices made by the author to describe the attacks on the statues are themselves problematic, since these choices are an integral part of the subject. The term “vandalism”, which appears several times in the titles of chapters and subsections, is preferred to “iconoclasm”. Preferring “vandalism”, which suggests gratuitous, disorganised violence, to “iconoclasm”, which underscores the political

dimension of the gesture, is a choice that called for some preliminary explanations. The semantic evolution of these words was studied 25 years ago by the art historian Dario Gamboni, whose work is never cited, but impossible to ignore. An analysis of the occurrences of these two terms in the press would have been instructive for assessing the reception of the movements in the media. In the long history of iconoclasm, the history of the condemnation of the destruction is a key topic which would have deserved attention.

Amidst the wide variety of iconoclastic acts which have been perpetrated recently, the statue of Gallieni, the governor of Madagascar, which was dedicated in Paris in 1926 and funded with money raised by *la ligue maritime et coloniale française*, was not destroyed, but covered with a black veil (a shroud) and sprayed with the graffiti "Let's pull down the official story". The sculpture of Gallieni is supported by four ethnicised caryatids, which are allegories of Paris, Tonkin, Sudan and Madagascar. It was already the target of attacks by anti-war activists in the late 1920s and had to be moved.

Finally, there is a blind spot in the study: if Jacqueline Lalouette insists, of course, on the materiality, financing and location of the statues, she says nothing, on the contrary, about the ideological background to their creation. What was it that fuelled this cult of great men at a given time (most of the statues were put up between 1870 and 1914, the high point of the French colonial empire)?

Looking again at iconoclastic acts outside metropolitan France might have encouraged further reflection. The hundreds of statues put up in the southern states of the USA in honour of Confederate generals were not only meant to honour the memory of the Old South. When they were built between 1890 and 1920, the Civil War had been over for more than thirty years. They were situated in the continuation of the segregationist "Jim Crow" laws. They were about engraving the dominant civic values in stone and nourishing the myth of the "lost cause".

To be properly appreciated, *Les statues de la discorde* should be read more as a documentary overview of the iconoclastic wave of summer 2020 and a moderately polemical essay (the author is clearly in favour of keeping the statues) than as a historical study. Linking contemporary iconoclasm, understood on a global scale, to past iconoclasms is admittedly a monumental undertaking. It is a project that can only be carried out collectively and one that Dario Gamboni already solemnly called for in 1997.

Further reading

- Célestine Audrey, *La Fabrique des identités: L'encadrement politique des minorités caribéennes à Paris et New York*, Paris et Aix-en-Provence, Karthala et Sciences Po Aix, "Questions transnationales" collection, 2018.
- Fureix Emmanuel, *L'œil blessé: Politiques de l'iconoclasme après la Révolution française*, Champ Vallon, 2019.
- Gamboni Dario, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Reaktion Book Ltd, 1997.
- Hajjat Abdellali, *La Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*, Paris, Amsterdam, 2013.
- Lalouette Jacqueline, *Un peuple de statues: La célébration sculptée des grands hommes (1804-2018)*, Éditions mare & martin, 2018.
- Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy", revised version of 1 February 2019, online.

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