

Fighting over statues obscures the real problem: Britain's delusion about its past

Martin Kettle : A collective failure to look the history of empire in the eye stops us from being the kind of country we could be. Thu 11 Jun 2020 Guardian.

5 *(Everything which is in brackets is from Alison, is not in the original text)*

10 There were two historically striking things about Bristol's statue of Edward Colston. The first, most obviously, was that the statue of a slave trader could still have had pride of place in a British city in 2020. The second, much less remarked, is that the statue was only erected there in 1895, fully 200 years after Colston's life and almost 90 years after the abolition of the slave trade.

15 Why did the statue go up when it did? It wasn't to celebrate slavery. It was because, at a time when Britain's empire stretched around the globe, what seemed to matter most about Colston to the city's rulers was not how he had got his riches but his enduring and formidable (beeindruckend) legacy of philanthropy. Like most late Victorian British cities, Bristol was governed by Gladstonian Liberals not by Tories. The Liberals abhorred (hated) slavery and extolled (praised) their abolitionist forebears (ancestors). But they celebrated
20 their own enlightenment, in the form of the charitable schools, hospitals and research centres that they endowed (gave money to/stifteten), even more.

25 This is emphatically not an argument in favour of the Colston statue, let alone of restoring it to its place. What it is, though, is a reminder that public history is often based on selective myth. The Bristolians who commissioned the statue in the 1890s were part of a Liberal tradition that saw Colston and his like through rose-tinted lenses. They put the slave trade out of their mind. Today we do not. That's why Colston's statue went into the dock (it was toppled into the water) on
30 Sunday.

Bristol is a city with a riotous history. Last Sunday was merely the latest example. It is right that the Colston statue should now be placed in a museum, in its defaced and humbled state. There it could remind us of many things as well as Bristol's turbulence. These should include the fact that history is a large and
35 complicated business, and that tidy historical verdicts are often the exception, not the rule. It could help us to remember that more than one thing can be true at the same time. We might eventually acquire a sense of history that is capacious enough to include the philanthropist and the slaver alike.

40 This will not be easy. We start from a very bad place at a very bad time. There are not many countries as steeped (wörtl: eingeweicht) in their own history as Britain appears to be, yet which are so ignorant about it. We look to history as a source of national self-justification rather than to learn. The potent idea that history might offer a warning rather than cause for self-congratulation - the idea
45 that runs through the approach to history in modern Germany, for example - is nonexistent here. The net result is a void (emptiness) where a mature and modern relationship with Britain's history should be.

50 When history waves a national flag, it always tells a partisan story not a true one. Britain is a very divided country on class, culture and other grounds. We thus

react to the inherited celebrations of British greatness either by embracing or by rejecting them, but always too emphatically. Events such as the toppling of the Colston statue do not solve this divide. There is too little shared imaginative space, not enough humility and tolerance within civil society, and therefore a less generous approach than there should be to the task of evolving a shared culture. The absence of a national museum of British history, underpinned (supported) by a better history curriculum, disables the country.

As a consequence, British history continues to be a political battleground between those who insist that our historic greatness is self-evident and empowering, and those who cannot bring themselves to see much in our history beyond lies about crimes. In public policy, public rituals and public debate the old, island-story narratives of greatness still have the upper hand.

The Brexit decision and the premiership of Boris Johnson are the catastrophic incarnations (Inbegriff, Fleischwerdung) of all this ascendancy (Vormachtstellung?). Only a nation that is intoxicated with the need to be “great” would have cut itself off from its neighbours as we did. One that wanted simply to do its best would want to learn from neighbours, not ostracise (ausgrenzen) them. Which other nation feels the laughable need to say its tragically ineffective tracing system will be “world-beating”? A nation that was more at ease with itself would simply say we need one that works, and look for best practice to follow.

The dark star behind Brexit, without which it cannot be understood, remains the British people’s unreconciled relationship with the experience of empire. The empire is a huge and complicated subject that, to our enduring collective detriment, is barely taught and is thus also barely known and absorbed into public discourse. This is partly why Sunday was probably the first time that most people outside Bristol will ever have heard of Colston.

But the damage done to 21st-century Britain by collective public denial (Verleugnung) about empire goes far beyond statues. We have too many statues in Britain. We don’t need more. Rather than purging them in the pretence that we inhabit a Robespierrean republic of virtue, it would make more sense to surround some of the more controversial ones with information that encourages people to think about why they were put there. But please let’s not trivialise the general denial and oblivion (Unendlichkeit) about empire by obsessing over statues.

The failure to look the history of empire in the eye is not the only neglected issue in Britain’s enduringly delusional (wahnhaft) relationship with its past. But it is the one that more than any other impoverishes (makes poor) modern Britain’s understanding of itself and the world of 2020. It was always a disabling failure. Brexit has now turned it into an epochal self-inflicted wound. It is bad enough that it means we don’t understand how others see us. It is even worse that it still stops us from being the kind of country we could be.

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