Britain is in a froth, and sharply divided, over the desecration or removal of statues of historical figures linked to slavery and empire.

What began as Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, following the appalling murder of George Floyd by a white policeman in Minneapolis, swiftly morphed into attacks on statues and monuments in London, Bristol, Edinburgh and other towns and cities in the UK that implicitly venerate slavers and imperialists. Some were removed from their plinths, one was thrown into a river, others were vandalised, and a Union Jack flag on the Cenotaph, the national war memorial in central London, was set on fire. In Oxford, where there have long been calls to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the wall of a college, the student-led Rhodes Must Fall movement (which originated in South Africa) was given new impetus, and large street protests were held. Some statues have been removed by local authorities “for their own protection”, such as that of eighteenth century slave-owner Robert Milligan, which stood in London’s Docklands.

Images of these events blazed across the media day after day have both incensed and delighted in equal measure. The British public learned more about its dark past in 48 hours (and rising) than in
decades of being taught empire-light history in school classrooms. I was one of them. All we learned
of empire was the victors’ story, and Britain’s “proud” role in the abolitionist movement. No wonder
all this statue-smashing has come as a shock to the system – in every sense of the word. (Similar
outrage over monuments linked to racial oppression and slavery has swept the US and other nations
in the wake of BLM, but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the wider phenomenon.)

The right-wing media, the Tory government and other far-right commentators have predictably
dubbed the attackers “mobs”, “thugs” and “vandals”, with Home Secretary Priti Patel (the daughter
of Ugandan-Asian immigrants to Britain who could well have been denied entry under her hard-line
regime) vowing to find and swiftly punish those responsible. (That may prove tricky since many were
wearing protective masks against COVID-19.) In Tory hands, playing to the Brexit gallery, it fast
became a “law and order” story. The courts were granted powers to fast-track prosecutions of
demonstrators within 24 hours of an incident, “amid mounting concerns that Britain is facing a
summer of disorder” (The Times, 12 June).

We are good at summers of disorder. Every dull English summer seems to require a new moral
panic. In the middle of COVID lockdown, this uproar has almost come as light relief, not least to the
mainstream print media, which is struggling to survive. The right-wing tabloid Daily Mail devoted its
front-page lead and 7 inside pages to the story on 10 June, and the issue was still taking up the
entire two-page spread of readers’ letters two days later (including an edited letter from me, calling
in part for changes to the school history curriculum). At a time of COVID crisis, this was
extraordinary. Every national newspaper has covered it too, with the downmarket Daily Star poking
fun by giving away cut-out paper “statues” of famous people for readers to shout at if they so
wished. (It’s a “free” country.)

The broadcast media has also covered the story extensively. A question about statues and apologies
for imperial wrongdoing was the first to be asked on the BBC’s weekly televised Question Time on
11 June. Booker Prize-winning novelist Bernadine Evaristo, a woman of colour, gave a robust
argument for the defence, calling in part for dark history to be recontextualised, challenged and
interrogated. “I absolutely relished the toppling of the [Colston] statue in Bristol. He was a really
toxic symbol,” she said. (More on Colston below.)

For the prosecution, we have Nigel Farage, leader of the Brexit campaign, leading the charge.
“Where are the police?” cried this arch Brexiter on Twitter. “Where are you Boris? Do we have a
leader?” And, next to a photograph of a graffiti-daubed statue of war-time premier Winston
Churchill: “Boris Johnson is supposed to be a Churchill fan, but he says and does nothing. He is not
half the man.”

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In the Telegraph (9 June), Farage accused “our craven leaders” of “failing to stand up to a Marxist
mob which wants to tear down our history”. Prime Minister Boris Johnson responded a few days
later, fuming that his hero had been dubbed a “racist”. (Boris wrote a much-derided 2014 biography
of Winston Churchill, on whom he clearly models himself.) This was pretty rich coming from a man
who, in his former career as a journalist, described Africans as “piccaninnies” with “watermelon
smiles”, compared niqab-wearing Muslim women to “letterboxes”, and said of colonialism in Africa:
“The problem is not that we were in charge, but that we’re not in charge any more.”
I will say more about far-right white youth rage in a moment, but it takes its cue from Boris, FaRAGE (as I prefer to call him), and links to Brexit-related frustrations. Brexit is meant to have happened on 31 January this year, but curiously, those who voted for it seem angrier than ever.

**How it all began: Slaver Edward Colston**

When BLM demonstrators tore the bronze statue of the seventeenth century slave ship owner Edward Colston from its plinth in Bristol on 7 June, dragged it to the harbour and threw it in, police wisely decided not to intervene. This, and police refusal to intervene in similar incidents elsewhere, is what Farage (plus fellow Brexiters and Tories) are so incensed about.

Colston, a rich merchant and MP, was venerated as a benefactor and philanthropist, with schools, a concert hall and streets named after him. (Some have been renamed.) Bristol residents had been calling for the statue’s removal for years, and had presented an 11,000-signature petition to the council. But nothing had come of asking nicely, hence some decided it was high time to sling Colston’s hook themselves. His reburial in a watery “grave” was itself laden with symbolism, since it was from this harbour that Colston’s slave ships sailed. They carried more than 100,000 West Africans to the New World between 1672 and 1689. More than 20,000 slaves died en route and were thrown overboard – something the slavers welcomed because they could claim insurance.

The Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset police, Andy Bennett, defended his force’s actions that day, telling the BBC he understood that Colston was “a historical figure that’s caused the black community quite a lot of angst over the last couple of years”. He said he understood their anger, and the symbolism of the statue. He went on: “You might wonder why we didn’t intervene and why we just allowed people to put it in the docks - we made a very tactical decision, to stop people from doing the act may have caused further disorder and we decided the safest thing to do, in terms of our policing tactics, was to allow it to take place.” (A furious Priti Patel reportedly gave him a dressing-down.)

Marvin Rees, Bristol’s Labour mayor and the first directly-elected black mayor in Europe, was widely praised (and condemned by the usual suspects) for his considered comments in the media. He termed the toppling of the statue “a piece of historical poetry”, and has called for a “city-wide conversation” on the future of the statue (which has now been hauled out of the harbour). It may be placed in a museum, along with demonstrators’ placards taken from the scene of the “crime”. He added: “I’d like to make sure that conversation is informed by good history.” Hence he is putting together a team, including local historians, to make a study of statues, memorials, street names and the like, so that future decisions are based on “good history, good understanding”.

Other targeted statues of imperial, fascist or slaver figures are listed on a new website called Topple the Racists ([www.toppletheracists.org](http://www.toppletheracists.org)). They include Lord Nelson (as in Nelson’s Column, Trafalgar Square), Robert Clive (of British India infamy), Scotland’s Robert Dundas (son of a man who deliberately delayed the abolition of slavery), Jan Smuts, the architect of apartheid, and Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the scouts movement. The latter also has links to Kenya: he is buried in a Nyeri churchyard, near a cottage in the grounds of the Outspan Hotel where he spent his final years. Baden-Powell is accused of atrocities against Zulus during his military career in South Africa, and
for his flirtation with fascism. In his 1939 diary, he wrote: “Lay up all day. Read Mein Kampf. A wonderful book.” Former scouts travelled to Poole in Dorset to protect a statue of their idol, which has been placed under 24-hour protection. They cut ridiculous figures: middle-aged men in shorts, brown shirts and woggles (a device used to fasten scouts’ neckerchiefs), vowing to follow the scouting motto: “Be prepared!” Kenyan scouts have also pledged allegiance to their founder.

Far-right youth

Those ripping statues from their plinths, or “vandalising” them if removal is physically impossible, are white, black, and all shades in-between. But the racism in critics’ hysterical responses is palpable. Far-right white supremacist youths have waded in, joined by older beer-bellied men, with supporters of Tommy Robinson (a notorious far-right Islamophobic activist) and groups like Britain First vowing to “defend” and “protect” monuments from “commies” and the “unwashed”. Self-styled “Tommy Teams” rushed to scrub the graffiti off monuments, including Churchill and the Cenotaph, and stayed to “protect” them since the police were not doing so at that stage.

In some provincial towns, they also collaborated with angry older men, many with military backgrounds, to “protect” monuments, including war memorials. Posting videos of their exploits on Twitter, they spoke of protecting British heritage, and defending historical icons. Bragging of their manhood, they asked (as Farage had done) where the “real men” were.

As I write this, far-right groups from across the country had travelled to London to “protect” the monuments from BLM, which had planned more demonstrations in the city. Police boarded up major monuments to keep both BLM protesters and their opponents away; these included statues of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Boris Johnson called the boarding up of Churchill “absurd” and “stupid”, conveniently forgetting that he had done the same with certain monuments when he was mayor of London.

Priti Patel publicly denounced the current London mayor, Labour’s Sadiq Khan (a hate figure to far-right Islamophobes, Tories and Brexeters), who had ordered the protective measures. The government also hates the fact that Khan has set up a commission to review all monuments in the capital, while more than a hundred Labour councils across England have pledged to review monuments on public land. In a bizarre twist, the far-right protestors gave Heil Hitler salutes before Churchill, a man revered for fighting fascism. Having denounced supposed BLM violence, it was they who ended up getting drunk and fighting the police. The word “Eng-er-land” (their chant) is trending now. Angerland?

Why has this issue fired up far-right, mainly white, youth groups? Rootlessness, a lack of identity, unemployment or low-paid insecure work, lack of educational attainment, poor prospects, the crisis in masculinity and other factors combine to create youth disaffection not unlike that which produced the Mods and Rockers, two rival youth groups that rioted in seaside towns in southern England in 1964, though in some ways, today’s youth alienation is worse. (One could write a whole thesis on this alone, and no doubt scholars already are.)

Throw into the mix the economic crisis which will hit the poorest, including Brexit-voting, communities, hardest. The UK is said to be heading for its worst economic depression in 300 years following COVID, and is likely to fall off a cliff once Brexit is fully implemented. The anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-“woke” rhetoric of right-wing politicians and media commentators who call on “true patriots” to show their allegiance to Britain and British “values”, the failure of Brexit to deliver yet (if indeed it ever does), and the frustration of weeks of COVID lockdown: all this and more stokes the anger of particular groups. In their insecurity, Tommy’s boys - and some girls - have long clung to perceived icons of national identity. (Their Twitter profiles feature images of Churchill in
particular, bulldogs and St George flags, though in fact St George wasn’t English and never set foot here).

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But let’s not get too carried away with the perceived threat to society, which is how the Tories want to frame all this. Sociologist Stanley Cohen, in his classic 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, identified how certain figures, groups or events periodically spark moral outrage, and are scapegoated as “evil” threats to civilised society. Cohen noted the Mods’ and Rockers’ overwhelming sense of boredom. Street clashes or the prospect of them were as thrilling then as they are now – “just simply being present in a crowd was an event...” Having studied white street gangs in the 1970s, I know that putting the boot in (and crime in general) is very exciting when you are working class, young and bored. If you can film the bovver on your phone as it happens, take selfies and tweet to the world, that’s all the more satisfying.

**Turning briefly to Kenya**

The imprint of empire’s boot is still visible on the monument landscape of Kenya, though there have been some notable changes down the years. The Nairobi city centre statue of Lord Delamere was removed at independence to the Delameres’ Soysambu estate, but the Vasco da Gama pillar is still a major tourist attraction at Malindi. Street names have changed: for example, Victoria Street became Tom Mboya Street. Many South Asian street names have been Africanised.

The statue of Queen Victoria that previously stood in Jeevanjee Gardens, a public park Nairobi, was beheaded by unknown vandals in 2015. I am told by A.M. Jeevanjee’s great-granddaughter, the historian, activist and writer Zarina Patel, that the county government later removed the rest of the monument, which now lies in a storeroom. “Who did it, and why remains a mystery,” she says. “Was it politically motivated? That would be understandable because Queen Victoria represented an unjust colonial power.”

However, she has concerns that one of the conditions her forefather made when handing over the gardens to the then colonial government was that the statue should never be moved. In so doing, he hoped to protect the gardens from future land grabs. In 1991, Zarina campaigned successfully against an attempted grab of the park by “the highest powers-that-be in the land”, adding, “of course they have never been identified”.

Zarina Patel welcomes the arrival of statues commemorating Dedan Kimathi and Tom Mboya, and the Mau Mau Memorial in Uhuru Park, which she hopes will set a trend. She also believes that the Nyayo monuments in Uhuru Gardens, erected by former president Daniel arap Moi, will be moved at some point.

What is her take on colonial-era monuments, and those glorifying post-independence leaders? “The statues celebrating colonists and dictators are part of Kenyan history – rather than destroying them I think they should be kept in some suburban parks or museums with explanatory texts to give them proper historical context; so that our future generations can be reminded of the battles we have fought for freedom, justice and democracy.”

A review is surely long overdue of place-names with colonial connections. Lake Victoria is the
obvious one. Smaller fry include Uplands and Thomson’s Falls, though Scottish geologist/explorer Joseph Thomson did not (as far as I know) enslave anyone. Lugard’s Falls in Tsavo West is more clear-cut, since Lord Lugard was a colonial administrator.

And what do we do about tourism centred on colonial nostalgia, starting with Karen Blixen? Why is Karen the suburb still on the map of Nairobi? Why is the Norfolk Hotel (among others) still proudly branding itself as a white settler hang-out, and every safari lodge and camp in the Mara selling a Blixenesque sundowner fantasy? This type of tourism generates huge sums, but at what cost? It reinforces the notion that Kenya is one big Happy Valley playground, a safari-suited hyper-real theme park (see Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*) where racy white mischief can still be had, at a price. I’ve even seen Japanese tourists in pith helmets at Elsamere, Lake Naivasha, who had no idea how uncool they looked. If I find all this embarrassing, how do Kenyans feel?

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Maybe it’s time for a national conversation – led by citizens, not government – on what Kenyans would like to see changed or removed. If the conversation is anything like the one convulsing Britain right now, be prepared for a huge row. A very healthy one.

I concur with those who see this as an unmissable opportunity to re-educate global citizens about the past. The destruction or removal of monuments from sight is not the answer; they should be moved to a dedicated museum, with educational materials (textual and audio-visual) providing deeper context. Use them for debate, alongside alternative narratives. Fill the monument landscape (if you must) with new figures who more accurately reflect your diverse societies and the best of your ideals. Then bin the current school history curriculum, and replace it with something fit for purpose in the post-post-colonial twenty-first century.

Postscript

Latest news from Bristol: a statue of the Jamaican poet, playwright and actor, Alfred Fagon, was doused with a “bleach-like substance” on the night of 12 June. It was erected in 1987, in the largely black and mixed-race area of St Pauls, on the first anniversary of his death. Fagon was the first black person to have had a statue erected in his honour in the city. One of his first plays, *No Soldiers in St Pauls*, explored the social tensions between the police and the black community in 1970s Bristol.

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