

The Obliteration of Past Symbols is not the Right Path to Present and Future Construction and Repair

Recently, especially after the killing of George Floyd by a Minnesota policeman, we have been witnessing a series of worldwide protest actions meant to remove any traces perpetuating historical colonial and racist manifestations from the public space. These actions include, among other things, [tearing down statues](#) of historical figures identified with slavery, [banning TV films](#) that present slavery favorably, and [renaming streets](#) commemorating personalities who were involved in oppression and violation of human rights.

History, even our local one, is replete with cases of memory erasures. Maoz Azaryahu has shown, for example, that the naming and renaming of Israeli streets have removed some historical layers from the public scene, and uncovering them requires archival work. Meron Benvenisti pointed to ways in which various map designs can erase the history of locations and populations. Uri Ram revealed numerous ways to eliminate the history of other peoples from the Israeli-Palestinian space. From a broader perspective, throughout history we witness the silencing of the voices of women, immigrants, poor people, LGBTQs, indigenous peoples, and other weakened and defeated portions of humanity. Unearthing and revealing whatever remains of an obliterated history requires thorough research. Reintroducing historical voices to the public space is a significant political and ethical part of a historian's work.

Of course, there is a difference between silencing weakened populations and muting the voices of powerful perpetrators of injustice, who actively silenced the oppressed, in addition to their articulated racism and acts of oppression, killing, and robbery. One might even regard the removal of racist instigators of injustice and colonialists from the public sphere as justified retribution, "an eye for an eye."

However, silencing historical voices, whatever they may be and burying them in archives, away from the public eye, undermines the very ability to repair contemporary injustices rooted in history. Ignoring the voices of the oppressors distorts the historical picture, relieving them of any association with their actions and raising questions about their motives.

Moreover, removing symbols celebrating those who instigated acts of injustice erases the story of the society that saw fit to admire them. Statues, films, street names, and other such means are historical documents. They testify to the society that created them and not necessarily (sometimes never) to the historical period in which they are rooted. The film "Gone with the Wind" (1939), for example, talks more about the mid-20th century American society than about the Civil War of the mid-19th century. The total elimination of such symbols from our cultural landscape will restrict our ability to discuss the past. It will make our society the last to debate whether, how, and who we should remember. As a result, the next generations will have no way of learning how we saw the past, criticize our views, and add new layers of their own.

We must therefore rethink the way to handle public representations of a contested past. We should come up with alternatives to obliterating them to enable a critical discussion of them in public. This would expose the complexity of the historical reality they were part of, and help understand how their past wrongs have sprouted the current injustices of our society. Multiple voices and a thorough engagement in contested historical chapters are central tools offered by history education towards repairing society and promoting justice.

Our voice joins the call to avoid erasing the past and its present and future representations. The policy paper presented here was written by Marie-Louise Ryback-Jansen, head of the [Contested Histories](#) enterprise and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, and Steven Stegers, Head of the [EuroClio](#) Organization, the European Association of history educators. Ryback-Jansen and Stegers react to the smashing and removal of statues and monuments commemorating persons currently identified with colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and oppression. They offer alternatives to obliterating them from the public space. These alternatives generate and foster an educational process that endorses acknowledging contested history as a way of engendering social, political, organizational, and structural social changes that will promote a just and fair society.

We hope that presenting these views will set off a public debate about what is happening around us.

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