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Objectionable Commemorations, Historical Value, and Repudiatory Honouring

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ABSTRACT

Many have argued that certain statues or monuments are objectionable, and thus ought to be removed. Even if their arguments are compelling, a major obstacle is the apparent historical value of those commemorations. Preservation in some form seems to be the best way to respect the value of commemorations as connections to the past or opportunities to learn important historical lessons. Against this, I argue that we have exaggerated the historical value of objectionable commemorations. Sometimes commemorations connect to biased or distorted versions of history, if not mere myths. We can also learn historical lessons through what I call *repudiatory honouring*: the honouring of certain victims or resisters that can only make sense if the oppressor(s) or target(s) of resistance are deemed unjust, where no part of the original objectionable commemorations is preserved. This type of commemorative practice can even help to overcome some of the obstacles objectionable commemorations pose against properly connecting to the past.

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1 Introduction

Recently, the Transitional Justice Commission in Taiwan recommended that the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei be transformed into a public space that commemorates the struggle for democracy and the victims who were persecuted, tortured, and murdered during the authoritarian rule initiated by Chiang Kai-shek. Among the concrete proposals is the recommendation that the 6.3m tall bronze statue of the former dictator be removed from its high pedestal. This proposal was welcomed by living survivors of the ‘White Terror’ the Chinese Nationalist Party (a.k.a. KMT) imposed upon Taiwan under Chiang’s direction. However, the KMT—now the primary opposition party—unsurprisingly criticized this recommendation as something akin to the Cultural Revolution in China and what the Taliban did in Afghanistan [Huang 2021].

The confrontation of commemorations—statues or monuments that present some historical figure or event in a positive light—of racist, colonial, and oppressive historical figures around the world has faced similar backlash. Decisions to remove Confederate Monuments and the vandalism of figures associated with the British colonisation of Australia have been condemned as erasing, rewriting, or disrespecting history. Such

strong reactions have been based on a worry many of us share: Even if those commemorated were far from exemplars, something of historical significance may be lost if we remove or destroy commemorations of the past.

This paper will engage with the underlying moral considerations of this apparently legitimate worry: It is important a) to preserve connections to the past and b) to learn from historical mistakes. I will argue, however, that these potent moral considerations offer very limited support for the preservation of racist, colonial, oppressive—or simply objectionable—commemorations. In contrast, I propose a commemorative practice that involves what I call *repudiatory honouring*. That is, the honouring of victims or resisters of oppressors or oppressive ideologies that can only make sense when the oppressors or ideologies are taken to be unjust. *Repudiatory honouring* realizes these moral considerations as well as, if not better than, the best preservationist proposals.

The plan is as follows. Section 2 elaborates upon the historical value considerations of connecting to the past and of learning from historical mistakes and introduces a seemingly plausible proposal—what I call *recontextualized preservationism*. This proposed principle appears to also respond correctly to the objectionableness of racist, colonial, and oppressive commemorations. Sections 3 and 4 argue that objectionable commemorations often fail to instantiate any historical value whatsoever, and scrutinize the extent to which recontextualized preservationism fares better. Section 5 conceptualizes the practice of *repudiatory honouring*, and argues that repudiatory honouring is as good as, if not better than recontextualized preservationism in realizing the historical value considerations.

On the scope of this paper, I do not argue that or why some commemorations are objectionable. I merely engage with another aspect of the debate: whether objectionable commemorations possess sufficient historical value to warrant preservation (and omit non-historical reasons, such as to preserve objectionable commemorations to express our apt contempt towards wrongdoers [Bell 2021] or to yield to unjust threats, from the discussion).

2 The Historical Value Considerations

Many have argued that certain commemorations are deeply objectionable. For instance, that they are expressive of racism [Burch-Brown 2017, 2020] or other problematic moral commitments [Nili 2020], are inconsistent with the state's duty to repudiate wrongdoing [Frowe 2019], degrade or alienate [Schulz 2019], are akin to state-sponsored hate speech [Lai 2020] or slurring speech acts [Shahvisi 2021], downplay wrongdoing [Archer and Matheson 2021], cause psychological harm [Timmerman 2020], or shape our identities in problematic ways [Abrahams 2020], just to name a few. We may thus come to hold that objectionable commemorations ought to be removed. However, something seems amiss if we act accordingly. Commemorations, even those that commemorate serious wrongdoers, appear to be important connections to the past. Moreover, exactly because they commemorate the objectionable, they can serve as crucial examples through which important historical lessons can be learned.

Commemorations commemorate. While they indeed have 'unhistorical ends' such as an appraisal function, they appraise historical figures or events [Miranda 2020]. Even if we disagree with the appraisals of objectionable commemorations, we can use the appraisals as important clues to the past, as they apparently mark out

significant historical figures or events. Now, many of us have an interest to connect to the past. We wish to know what the lives of our forerunners or ancestors were like. We would also like to experience, where it is feasible, the past, to be able to emotionally connect to or even physically touch the past [Korsmeyer 2012; Matthes 2013; Bülow and Thomas 2020]. Commemorations, even objectionable ones, can serve such a purpose. We can know what parts of history they mark out. We can aesthetically experience their grandeur. We can be in the same physical space and even (in some cases) touch them. Removing them amounts to losing important connections to the past.

Moreover, objectionable commemorations can serve as vivid reminders of historical mistakes. Many of our forerunners and ancestors were ordinary people. Many of them praised, supported, or even actively participated in historical atrocities, and the objectionable commemorations they built bear testimony to this. By seeing objectionable commemorations regularly, we have an opportunity to embed historical lessons into our everyday consciousness, realizing that we, as ordinary people, are also capable of repeating history. Remove them, and we lose opportunities to learn from past mistakes.

Some believe that these two considerations offer sufficient reason to preserve objectionable commemorations as they are. Call this position *simple preservationism*. One major shortfall of simple preservationism is that preserving objectionable commemorations fails to properly convey historical lessons. They still appear to be objects of glory rather than things from which we should learn historical lessons. Furthermore, simple preservationism completely fails to respond to the *objectionable* aspect(s) of objectionable commemorations.

Given these shortfalls, some have proposed that we indeed ought to preserve, but in ways that clearly convey the historical lessons and respond appropriately to the objectionable aspect(s). This can be achieved through significant alterations that provide some counter-messages that match the publicity of the original commemoration. For instance, defacing and preserving the statue of a colonial figure (like that of Cecil Rhodes) would help us achieve this [Lim 2020b]. First, we would have preserved the statue where it is with all its publicity, and this in itself is a testament that ordinary people, just like us, have been honouring dishonourable figures. By having it vandalized, we also clearly mark out the historical mistake(s). By seeing this whenever we pass by the objectionable commemoration, we come to embed this important lesson into our everyday consciousness, so that we can be wary not to make the same mistakes ourselves. Second, the state sends a clear signal that it does not endorse whatever was upheld by the original piece of commemoration. As the disfigurement is as salient as the statue, one cannot unsee it and remain confused that we still honour the dishonourable figure. Since we no longer honour, but actively condemn the dishonourable, we also effectively respond to the objectionable aspect of the objectionable commemoration, be it support for racism or anything else. Call this proposal *recontextualized preservationism*.

Recontextualized preservationism seems to be a balanced and workable solution, as it not only preserves connections to the past and contributes to embedding historical lessons into our everyday consciousness, but also responds to the objectionable aspect(s) of objectionable commemorations. With that being said, this seemingly plausible solution is undermotivated, as it overestimates the historical value and indispensability of objectionable commemorations, or so I shall argue.

3 Connections to the past

To reiterate, some hold that commemorations, even objectionable ones, serve as effective connections to the past. This is correct only if objectionable commemorations commemorate history accurately, which is not always the case [Eisikovits 2020]. Consider, first, Confederate monuments. These commemorations were first established by Confederacy apologists such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy as part of an effort to re-write the history of the US Civil War. The ‘Lost Cause’ myth they promoted rests on falsehoods such as that the Confederacy did not fight for slavery but for the noble cause of ‘states’ rights’ [Brundage 2018]. Or consider commemorations of Chiang Kai-shek. The Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall presents Chiang as the beacon of freedom, the saviour of mankind, and the defender of democracy. In truth, he was a dictator until his death and constantly disregarded human rights through acts of imprisonment, murder, and torture. Monuments commemorating him were predominantly the result of his efforts to build a personality cult [Wakeman 1997; Taylor 2006], a project that was further carried out by his son, who succeeded him as dictator. In such and similar cases, the objectionable commemorations are not commemorations of historical figures as they were or events as they happened, but rather distortions of history established often for the very purpose of connecting the intended audience to something that would serve the political agenda(s) of the establisher(s). Preserving objectionable commemorations of this type not only fails to help us connect to the past, but risks connecting us affectively and aesthetically to mere myths or fantasies. Furthermore, defacing and preserving them also fails to contribute to connecting to the past. Such defacement merely indicates that those objectionable commemorations *do not* connect to the past. It fares no better than simple removal, and much worse than establishing something that genuinely commemorates the past.

It might be that some objectionable commemorations faithfully record history, but merely fail in offering proper appraisals. This would, of course, already exclude many objectionable commemorations from our discussion, and significantly limit the plausibility of preservationism in any form. But some commemorations central to ongoing debates are indeed of this type. For instance, commemorations associated with Australia Day seem to qualify. Australia day, 26 January, marks the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet, a major turning point in Australia’s history. For indigenous Australians, the arrival marked the beginning of ‘[d]ispossession, discrimination, disadvantage, and death’ [Pearson and O’Neill 2009: 79]. Does the preservation of such commemorations offer desirable connections to the past?

Preserved in their original condition, they do not, for the following two reasons. First, commemorations represent historical figures as exemplars. When someone or something is represented as admirable, we often come to believe that it is because they were indeed admirable. This belief is inconsistent with the perspectives of groups that were oppressed by those commemorated. But since we are psychologically disposed to prefer evaluative consistencies, we are more likely to then discount evidence that leads to inconsistencies [Newby-Clark *et al.* 2002]. This would lead to the risk of disregarding the history of the oppressed (see Matthes [2018] and Rossi [2020]) and would thereby make connecting to the past—at least the parts relevant to the suffering of marginalized groups—more difficult.

Second, the practice of commemorating history is deeply influenced by power imbalances. Dominant groups get to determine what *is* commemorated, and thus get to significantly affect our beliefs about what *ought* to be commemorated. This not only normalizes the commemoration of the objectionable, but also makes commemorating the history of marginalized groups appear to be abnormal. This creates further obstacles to connecting to the past of marginalized groups. For instance, the effort to put the American abolitionist Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill was denounced as ‘dividing the country’ and ‘pure political correctness’ [Yglesias 2016]. As they are, objectionable commemorations, just like other ‘oppressive things’, are not just the products of racism, colonialism, or other forms of oppression: ‘[T]hey will come to function as material anchors for patterns of thought and action’ [Liao and Huebner 2021: 101] and come back to legitimize different forms of oppression. In our case, the normalisation of objectionable commemorations hinders efforts to establish connections to significant parts of the past.

What about *recontextualized preservationism*? By significantly altering or even defacing objectionable commemorations, the objects represented no longer appear admirable. Furthermore, the defacement can incorporate fitting counter-messages that give voice to the perspectives of the marginalized. Thus, to this extent, it may seem that recontextualized preservationism is somewhat plausible. I believe that this is incorrect. I contend that replacing objectionable commemorations with commemorations of the victims or resisters of the oppressors is a better solution. I will present my argument shortly in section 4, where I introduce my primary proposal: *Repudiatory honouring*.

4 Historical Lessons

As previously mentioned, unaltered objectionable commemorations present objectionable historical figures as objects to be admired. By themselves, no historical lesson is conveyed: they may even hinder the uptake of the perspectives of the marginalized [Rossi 2020] and actively hinder us from learning from historical mistakes. In contrast, recontextualized objectionable commemorations fare better. They clearly mark out historical mistakes and denounce those who have committed historical injustice. However, the fact that they can convey historical lessons does not yet lay sufficient grounds for preservation. First, there might be better means to learn historical lessons. Good learning can be facilitated in museums, in schools, through watching documentaries, and by reading peer-reviewed publications. Through such means, a balanced and comprehensive version of history can be taught in ways that draw from different perspectives, engage with our rational capacity, and facilitate civil discussions. Second, those who subscribe to political liberalism may worry that commemorations fail to engage with our rational capacity, rather tending to elicit our emotions [Tsai 2016; Lai 2020], and are thus inconsistent with the requirement that the state ought to persuade its citizens via public reason [Brettschneider 2012].

In response, the recontextualized preservationist can say, first, that we ought not to subscribe to an overly rationalist understanding of pedagogy. Indeed, in recent years ‘moral education research has moved away from a predominantly cognitive approach’ [Engelen *et al.* 2018: 360] to properly acknowledging that eliciting the correct emotions towards injustice is crucial to motivating us to work to address injustice. Second, preserving altered or defaced commemorations represents a good way of embedding

historical lessons into *our everyday consciousness* [Lim 2020b]. In contrast, removal leads us to forfeit opportunities ‘to continue to recognize and reflect on past injustices and their present and future consequences’ [Enslin 2020: 1341]. Third, adults do not need to go to school anymore, nor do they have to go to museums or watch documentaries. Peer-reviewed publications are often behind paywalls (and not all pre-prints are uploaded to websites like PhilPapers). Some adults, however, may be the exact persons who need to learn historical lessons. Since it is infeasible to make adults go through re-education, we need to find other ways to convey these lessons. Moreover, even if we have learned history well in schools, these lessons are important and thus warrant regular reinforcement. Thus, it may be that some form of ‘civic rhetoric’—as Jason Stanley [2015] calls it, ‘propaganda’, that is, speech that engages with us non-rationally but promotes worthy political ideals—is needed. Accordingly, significantly altered objectionable commemorations can serve as effective civic rhetoric perfectly, and this is the indispensable value of objectionable commemorations. They embed worthy ideals such as apology, inclusion, and equality, into our everyday consciousness.

It may thus seem that recontextualized preservationism is the way forward. Significantly altered objectionable commemorations not only denounce historical mistakes but they do so in a way that engages with us in our daily lives, so that important lessons can be embedded into our everyday consciousness. Again, I believe that this still falls short of justifying preserving objectionable commemorations, because there is a better way: *Repudiatory honouring*.

5 Repudiatory Honouring

Let’s start with the following two examples. In Taiwan, there are many roads named after Chiang Kai-shek. One of the most prominent ones was the Chieh-shou Road leading to the Presidential Office in Taipei. ‘Chieh-shou’ literally translates into ‘Long live Chiang Kai-shek.’ The naming was to celebrate Chiang’s 60th birthday in 1946. In 1996, the road was renamed the ‘Ketagalan Boulevard.’ ‘Ketagalan’ refers to the indigenous people who lived in the area now known as Taipei [Rudolph 2004]. The renaming was an act of recognition of the traditional custodians of the land and their suffering. Consider also, Virginia’s recent decision to replace the statue of Robert E. Lee with that of Civil Rights Activist Barbara Johns in the National Statuary Hall Collection, as one of the two historical figures who represent Virginia. This symbolic move suggests that Virginia now endorses the values Johns represents (rather than those of Lee).

I contend that both decisions were exemplar policy responses to objectionable commemorations. The culture of the Ketagalan was lost to us as a result of the forceful Sinicization that occurred in the past few centuries. Even before Chiang came to Taiwan, the Ketagalan language was no longer spoken. But it was Han colonizers like Chiang who were responsible for the displacement and cultural erasure suffered by different Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan [Chiang and Kau 1995]. Indeed, during Chiang’s rule, aboriginal languages and names were banned, and the Indigenous Peoples were constantly exploited. The recognition of the Ketagalan is at the same time a repudiation of the forceful Sinicization that occurred through the centuries. Similarly, Lee and the Confederacy he fought for, represent the pinnacle of white supremacy in the form of the institution of slavery. Johns, on the other hand, represents the resistance

and struggle against racism. By honouring Johns, Virginia repudiates racism even if it no longer mentions Lee.

In neither of the above cases were the original objectionable commemorations preserved or referenced. But in both cases, such recognition or honouring only makes sense if their oppressors are taken to be unjust. Indeed, such acts of recognition or honouring share the structure of how objectionable commemorations function. I theorized that objectionable commemorations work through a mechanism called *derogatory pedestalling*:

Derogatory Pedestalling

'By saluting, glorifying, or honoring an unjust oppressor or ideology, speakers indirectly rank their target(s) as inferior, convey hostility, or implicitly insult and assault their target(s).' [Lai 2020: 604]

We can say that the Ketagalan Boulevard and the statue of Barbara Johns, and many other cases, function through what I call *repudiatory honouring*:

Repudiatory Honouring

By recognizing, glorifying, or honouring the victims of or those who resisted unjust oppressors or ideologies, speakers indirectly repudiate the unjust oppressors or ideologies.

Since we recognize the Ketagalan people as the victims of forceful Sinicization, we indirectly repudiate forceful Sinicization. Since we honour Barbara Johns because of her resistance against white supremacy, we indirectly repudiate white supremacy.

Derogatory pedestalling and repudiatory honouring share the same structure, and only differ in substantive moral properties: Whether something is an instance of derogatory pedestalling or repudiatory honouring depends on the moral status of the object of saluting, recognition, or honour. For instance, in 2018, Pauline Hanson, an Australian right-wing politician, moved a motion stating that 'it is okay to be white' [Commonwealth of Australia 2018]. This slogan is widely acknowledged as a form of white supremacist trolling [Anti-Defamation League 2017]. The motion was narrowly defeated, but it was nevertheless an instance of derogatory pedestalling. This way of celebrating whiteness could only have made sense if Whites were indeed the victims of non-White oppressors, immigration, and multiculturalism—a blatant falsehood [Busbridge *et al.* 2020], and implicitly portrays non-whites negatively. In contrast, the Nobel Peace Prize 2010 awarded to Liu Xiaobo 'for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China' [The Nobel Peace Prize 2010] qualifies as repudiatory honouring, as the award can only make sense if the Chinese Government, the government that imprisoned him as a political prisoner (until mere days before his death), was deemed unjust. (This can further help us explain the inapt rage that came in response from the Chinese Government.)

Returning to the issue at hand, we can learn historical lessons through civic rhetoric that incorporates repudiatory honouring. Repudiatory honouring repudiates through recognizing, glorifying, or honouring those who are in opposition to certain actions or ideologies. It thereby indirectly condemns certain historical acts or events as historical mistakes that we are aware of and would take steps to avoid. By replacing objectionable commemorations with repudiatory honouring, the new commemorations can enjoy the publicity of the original commemorations. Thus, they contribute to embedding the historical lessons into our everyday consciousness, which can have an impact at least as positive as altered or defaced commemorations. In such cases, we do not

need to preserve (any parts of) the original objectionable commemorations for the sake of historical lessons.

Repudiatory honouring can also help to overcome the earlier mentioned problem of ‘oppressive things’ (as Liao and Huebner [2021] call it). To reiterate, objectionable commemorations are the result of oppressive ideologies (such as racism or colonialism), but they also serve to normalize and reinforce the ideologies. Recontextualized preservationism can, of course, help to challenge the oppressive ideologies by countering the messages of objectionable commemorations, where the counter-messages can affirm the value of the marginalized. For instance, spray-painting a Confederate monument with ‘Black Lives Matter’ asserts that black lives matter and counters any implicit message to the contrary conveyed by the monument. This, however, does not address the downstream effect of oppressive things that persons of colour fail to receive due recognition and are still predominantly excluded from our commemorative practices. Repudiatory honouring, on the other hand, directly addresses this exclusion by openly commemorating victims and resisters of injustice. Once the commemoration of members of marginalized groups becomes part of our common practice, commemorating them will no longer appear abnormal. The marginalized will no longer appear to be people we do not commemorate, and we can thus mourn the losses of the victims and recognize the achievements of the resisters in the same way we commemorate the losses and achievements of other groups. This not only addresses the discriminatory selectiveness of commemorations, but also helps us connect to the past affectively and aesthetically. Sometimes, repudiatory honouring can even connect to that which was purportedly connected to by objectionable commemorations. Reconsider the opening example of this paper. The Transitional Justice Commission in Taiwan proposed to transform the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall into a public space that commemorates democratic struggle and victims of human rights abuse. If implemented, this would establish a further connection to Taiwan’s authoritarian past, the oppression Chiang initiated.

There are additional advantages repudiatory honouring enjoys over significantly altered objectionable commemorations. For example, we can avoid preserving ‘eyesores’. Even if some of us can learn to live (even proudly) with defaced commemorations [Lim 2020a], commemorations that involve repudiatory honouring can be grand, humble, sombre, or whatever fits their purpose, and thus aesthetically pleasing. More importantly, however, repudiatory honouring avoids a phenomenon called ‘leakage’. I have argued that while sometimes counter-messages provided by defacing can block the harm of objectionable commemorations, the objectionable messages sometimes ‘leak’ out [Lai 2020: 609]—just as in the case of slurs, the insulting force of which cannot be completely blocked by mentioning them rather than using them [Anderson and Lepore 2013; Bolinger 2017; Langton 2018]. We can, of course, work to avoid the leakage, but merely seeing the oppressors, even in defaced forms, may suffice to force the victims to relive their oppression. Repudiatory honouring involves no such risk.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that many objectionable commemorations do not serve as good connections to the past, either because they connect to mere myths or fantasies, or because they come back to reinforce problematic ideologies. I have also argued that even if we need commemorations as reminders or propaganda that embed important

historical lessons into our everyday way of thinking about such matters, we can do so through repudiatory honouring—replacing objectionable commemorations with commemorations of the victims of oppression or resisters of injustice. Furthermore, repudiatory honouring can help to overcome the feedback loop of problematic ideologies and can serve as connections to the past. Preserving objectionable commemorations, even after significant alteration, is thus often unnecessary for the sake of connecting to the past or learning historical lessons.

I will mention some further implications. First, the justification of removal or of activism that involves vandalism is much easier than it initially seemed. We would often just be discussing the fate of oppressive things that possess no historical value whatsoever. Second, since even recontextualized preservationism is undermotivated, we need not go out of our way to deface and then preserve objectionable commemorations. This, however, does not imply that we ought not to preserve objectionable commemorations vandalized during protests. Acts of vandalism may sometimes bestow historical value to things that otherwise lack much historical value, granting them a *raison d'être*. Note, however, that these vandalized commemorations then become records of resistance and social struggle. The historical values of these vandalized commemorations come from them being vandalized, not because they initially instantiated historical values.

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