

What is an appropriate educational response to controversial historical monuments?

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Abstract

There are many things that can be done to educate young people about historical monuments in schools. At the same time, however, we argue that there is little warrant for optimism concerning the educational potential of classroom instruction given the institutional constraints under which school teachers must labour. For these reasons, we think it best to expand the scope of educational possibilities one is willing to consider.

KEYWORDS

Monuments, history, colonialism, controversy, epistemic diversity, alternative education

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over.

– W.E.B. DuBois¹

Large protests erupted in hundreds of cities in the wake of George Floyd's murder, each demanding immediate change to the structural ways in which racism often does its most insidious work. Public outrage quickly fixated on historical monuments. Historical monuments are sites where sometimes controversial figures are elevated to mythical status, and where narratives are fashioned and inscribed on permanent structures in public space. Often admired for the craftsmanship of the granite or marble on which they have been etched, the events commemorated invite reverent reflection; the images of persons described or depicted there further summon respect for a cause they represent, or even for great deeds that they, ostensibly, have done.

Yet, it is precisely the question of *which* or *whose* narrative is told, and also *what* it is that said individuals did to deserve being cast in granite or marble in the first place that is very much at issue. In addition, it requires little imagination to conjecture that citizens fixed their anger upon certain historical monuments not only because of what those

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historical figures had personally done, but also for what they continue to represent, that is, the valorization of cultural and racial supremacy, and the corresponding erasure of the lives of subjugated victims. The indignation comes into even sharper relief when it is known that public monies are used to pay for their maintenance.

The defacement or toppling of public monuments in 2020 — for example, in the United Kingdom, the United States, India, South Africa, Chile, New Zealand, Ireland, Belgium, The Netherlands and even Slovenia — where a wooden statue of Melania Trump was set on fire — would both precipitate legislative decisions to remove other monuments with unprecedented speed, as well as reignite a debate about ways in which historical events are (mis)portrayed in the public domain. In rapid succession many dozens of statues depicting controversial figures — often, but not always, implicated in the slave trade — have been taken down. In the United States alone, dozens of monuments have already been removed, and dozens more are scheduled to be removed, by cities and universities alike, across the entire country.

As with other conflagratory socio-political issues, many are instinctively inclined to ask the question, ‘what role should education play in the controversy surrounding historical monuments?’ Before taking up this question, in the first part of this paper, we begin by situating the educational question(s) within a broader, critical historical discussion. We then turn to consider the role of the history classroom, and examine what we think it possible to do in a school setting as it concerns discussing historical monuments. We will demonstrate that while history classrooms arguably have unique potential for facilitating dialogue concerning sensitive subject matter, even history classrooms in most state schools are likely to be hobbled by a variety of institutional and non-institutional obstacles, not the least of which is the content and interpretive frame of the state-sanctioned curriculum.

We then pivot to explore an alternate educational method not beholden to the same constraints. We propose an educational tool, one we model on an analogous example, that can be marketed to different media outlets as a way of reaching a broader public, and hence not only children of school-attending age. Ours is a thought experiment, but one informed by other para-educational precedents, and moreover one that we believe holds out more promise than what it is reasonable to expect from state schools charged with teaching a narrative whose very contents often do not lend themselves to more critical historical discussion.

Though every attempt to address controversial subject matter will face both limitations and objections, ones we later address vis-à-vis our own proposal, we nevertheless think it best to *diversify* attempts to educate, rather than adopt the reflexive assumption that the school must again pick up the slack, whether that be concerning how to talk with young people about the historical figures and events in question, or indeed anything else about which there continues to be a larger societal failure. But it is important that we stress here that our proposal is meant to supplement, rather than supplant, what we might reasonably expect from the school.

HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

Historical monuments come in various shapes and sizes, but the purpose they serve ordinarily falls into different categories, sometimes but not always overlapping.

The first purpose, that is, lest future generations forget, is simply to record an event, or series of events, having happened in the past. Some of these monuments are little more than granite or marble structures of threadbare description: for instance, to commemorate the fallen in battle, or merely to mark the place where said battle occurred. In many cases little more is engraved into stone beyond the dates of conflict, the battalions involved and the approximate number slain. Other monuments pay tribute to an alliance of different nationalities who rallied against a common threat, such as one finds at the portal gate in Ieper, Belgium, commemorating the lives of those who fought ‘in Flanders’ fields’ against the Germans in the Great War (1914–1918). And as the Ieper example suggests, even when a wide consensus exists maintaining that the ‘cause was just’, these historical monuments are not entirely unproblematic inasmuch as their form lends itself to an oversimplification of the conflict. For instance, many war monuments also tend to sentimentalize national tragedies, invoking phrases like *pro patria* (‘for one’s country’), thereby providing fodder for contemporary patriotic zeal.² Even so, we think it safe to say that many of these examples are not controversial in the same way, or to the same degree as those we discuss below.³

Conversely, a great many monuments throughout the world unequivocally take a very particular side, going so far as to mythologize history; in some cases, even defeats are reconstructed, paradoxically, as victories. Many civil war (1860–1865) monuments erected in the American South in the first half of the 20th century fall into this category. Some explicitly extol the Confederacy as a ‘Lost Cause’ concerned with ‘state’s rights’; needless to say, the onlooker is not invited to honestly assess what those state’s rights entailed (i.e. to deny black people equal recognition and treatment), or to consider Southern secession as an act of treason. Indeed many Confederate monuments can only be fully understood by appreciating the ways in which they came to symbolize defiance to an imposed Northern military occupation during the years of Reconstruction (1865–1877) and later, additional federal injunctions to desegregate (1954–1968), as well as to evoke nostalgia for an antebellum South in which white supremacy was total and unquestioned. Another example is the imposing ‘Padrao dos Descobrimentos’ monument on banks of the Tagus River in Lisbon that celebrates Portuguese ‘discoveries’ in the 15th and 16th centuries and helps to sustain a mythological interpretation of Portuguese history that glosses over its colonialist violence by framing Portuguese conquests in terms of ‘exploration’ and ‘encounters’ with other cultures (De Sousa, 2021; see also Pereira and Araújo, 2017).

Another sort of monument, and arguably the most contentious, falls into yet a third category, where we find individual historical figures: generals, monarchs, explorers and statesmen. These monuments seem to exalt marbled figures as exemplary citizens, role models to be admired for their ‘great deeds’, if not for their overall contribution to society at large. Thus, they not only favour a particular side; the exalted figures embody this in a form that, more than non-representational monuments, encourages identification with a cause – and, in the same stroke, celebrates people of a particular race or ethnicity. Many of these figures, when viewed from the vantage point of subsequent generations whose revisionist history has since revealed them for what they were, or what they did, cause many to wonder why they were ever held in high regard in the first place. Christopher Columbus (whose statues are still on display in Italy and America), Hernan Cortez (Mexico and Spain) and King Leopold II (Belgium) still have their defenders, but both the weight of the historical evidence and the growing sensitivity to former colonial oppression and violence have swayed public opinion away from seeing these figures as benign, let alone ‘heroic’. What is more, the horrors carried out by these three men were no secret to their contemporaries; nor were their deeds seen by everyone as ‘normal for their time’.⁴

Other figures, however, seem to defy facile description. Winston Churchill and Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, occupied opposite sides in a longstanding struggle in India (and elsewhere) against British colonial rule. Historical monuments of each are still common (statues of Gandhi, for instance, can be seen in countries as diverse as India, South Africa and England), and both figures are more often than not depicted in singularly positive terms, both in statuary and in school textbooks. Yet, while both Churchill and Gandhi remain revered figures, both men also were outspokenly racist.⁵

Irrespective of the degree of controversy, what is an appropriate educational response to historical monuments? In particular, how ought schools to tackle discussions of this kind, ones involving figures whose legacies presently are very much a matter of public discussion and debate? In principle, any classroom in a school might serve to facilitate discussions about historical injustice. A literature classroom might occasion discussions concerning why until the 20th century female authors were inclined to take male pseudonyms, or why, for that matter, so few female authors appear in the literary canon. A science classroom might occasion discussions concerning eugenics, or the experimentation on (and sterilization of) human subjects, and the reasons why ethical protocols were introduced as late as the 1970s; or questions could be broached concerning the double-edged sword of chemical discoveries that have led to the development of atomic and nuclear weapons. Other examples could easily be adduced. But in the following section, we suggest one place where the controversial status of historical monuments might be discussed is the history classroom of a secondary school.

THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

Consider the potential advantages of a history classroom, and in particular as it concerns discussions of historical monuments: (a) the emotional distance young people usually feel toward the past; (b) the strong retrospective consensus many issues now enjoy, for example, that religious violence is untenable, or that slavery is wrong, or that homosexuals and the disabled are entitled to the same rights as heterosexuals and the able-bodied. Further, in the history classroom it is reasonable to assume that (c) the spurious arguments and pseudo-science once used to justify colonizing, proselytizing and enslaving ethnic others can be critically examined without the atmosphere in the classroom being unnecessarily politically charged.

Moreover, in a history classroom, students might be invited to work from the past toward the present, comparing debates of long ago with those of contemporary society, drawing out the different positions and critically examining the arguments and evidence in favour of one view or another. For example, on the weight of the evidence concerning the role of Canadian Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, a key architect of the Residential School System — whose assimilationist purpose arguably was to prosecute a war of cultural genocide against the First Nations lasting more than a century⁶ — was the city of Victoria, British Columbia, correct to remove his statue from in front of its city hall in 2018? Opinion in Canada, after all, remains sharply divided on the issue.⁷

A high school history teacher can use these discursive advantages in several instructive ways. First, our history teacher can expect her students to read about these events outside of class; this would include conducting online research, using newspaper stories, film clips and documentaries. In-class discussions can further prompt collaborative research projects, whereby students are invited to delve into the events that eventually led to there being a historical monument in the first place. Each group can research a separate monument. This research project can be ongoing, lasting an entire unit (approximately two months) during a school semester. Second, during this historical unit, field trips in many countries can be arranged to visit historical monuments, which serve as prominent landmarks to past events. Such visits also allow young people to see battlefields (e.g. Rajasthan, India; Somme, France; Gettysburg, Pennsylvania) where decisive, but also by definition, tragic, events unfolded, some of them not long before.

Historical monuments need not be confined to battlefields, of course. The statue of Steve Biko in East London, for instance, was dedicated in 1997 by none other than Nelson Mandela, and honours the life of the anti-apartheid activist, assassinated only 20 years earlier. More recently still, the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial in Bosnia commemorates the lives of more than 8000 Muslims murdered in 1995 under the command of Bosnian Serb, Ratko Mladić. Doubtless some teachers will themselves have lived through the time when these events were still unfolding. The students can read inscriptions on these monuments in light of what they previously had read for their fieldtrip preparations, but also in light of what they may have heard from family members. Upon debriefing they can be invited to reflect and compare the information recorded there versus the resources they previously had consulted.

As a third step in this educative process, back in the classroom students might further be invited to read a clear and accessible philosophical text, such as that provided by Andrew Valls (2019), who distinguishes between different kinds of historical monuments to argue why, given the implications of state-sanctioned speech, certain monuments — given what they represent — should not be permitted on public land. Monuments that convey superiority or domination of one group at the expense of another, for instance, violate both a legal as well as a moral standard of neutrality. Students can be invited to discuss and debate the merits of Valls' argument before being asked to discuss and debate whether or not certain monuments in their own surroundings ought to remain as they are, be revised in some way, moved to a museum or even destroyed. Students can be expected to supply reasons and evidence for their decision. They may further be invited to discuss and debate whether individuals ought to be commemorated in public in the first place if the weight of the evidence suggests that their legacy is one undeserving of a public monument. Finally, and as a summation of the investigation, students can be invited to present their collaborative work to the class on their respective historical monument.

Reality check

There is much to recommend such an approach, and we do not doubt that some history teachers have even taken a similar approach. But there are several reasons why we would caution against optimism. First, arguably diversity of a certain kind (e.g. ethnic, racial, religious, political) lends itself to more *epistemic* diversity, where more experiences, informed opinions and critical insights, in short *more ways of constructing knowledge*, make certain kinds of reflective encounters and dialogic interactions not only possible, but also more meaningful. If that is right, then it is difficult, though not impossible, for instance, to imagine a variety of perspectives in a Canadian classroom concerning the legacy of MacDonald if there are no indigenous voices present. It is similarly difficult, though not impossible, to imagine classroom discussions about the Bosnian tragedy in the absence of Bosnian Muslims. Notice, too, how in both cases the perspectives on offer are likely to be informed directly by the experience of *living relatives*.

It is, of course, possible for a teacher to assign readings from absent voices. For instance, there need not be Buddhists in the classroom to conduct a lesson on Buddhism, or to foster sympathies for a Buddhist way-of-life. But surely not all discussions are quite like that: A conversation about homophobia in the absence of those whose daily experiences are deeply impacted by its effects will surely fail to have the impact one hopes to have, if the aim includes assisting students in appreciating the pain and suffering experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) persons.

So, too, with many historical monuments that symbolize oppression, as counterintuitive as this may seem. Indeed it is the contested history that so many monuments represent that arguably necessitates a substantive diversity of perspective and opinion in the classroom. And if the aim is to draw out different perspectives, and thereby to critically examine them from decidedly different points of view – that is, *epistemic diversity* – then it is questionable whether an academic study absent actual representation, that is, absent the *informed experience of historically marginalized others*, will suffice to unsettle or challenge received opinion about controversial historical monuments. And with respect to this epistemic diversity, it goes without saying that in most countries perhaps even a majority of schools will fail to satisfy even this most basic condition. Indeed even in schools with a high degree of diversity, too often the level of interaction between members of different groups remains superficial, if not hostile, a fact reinforced both by institutional (e.g. tracking) and non-institutional (e.g. peer homophily) mechanisms.

A second reason to be sceptical about how much can be accomplished in a history classroom is that the broad (though of course far from universal) consensus on such matters as the immorality of slavery or the equal moral standing of homosexuals is not a sure thing. Take slavery: Students in a classroom may all agree that slavery is unacceptable and wrong, but a significant number – in particular, of the historically dominant group – may also hold the view that slavery belongs to the ‘distant past’; they therefore may express exasperation with all the attention given to it, which in their view it no longer merits (‘of course it’s wrong but now let’s move on’). Of course, while in itself disagreement may be a more fertile environment for education than unanimous agreement, *this* type of agreement is not, for it means that the classroom will be asymmetrically divided between those who are invested in the issue and strongly motivated to explore it, and those who could not care less, or who even become hostile to the idea.

A third reason, also related to the controversial nature of the issues, is this: Conversations on controversial subject matter are inevitably freighted with emotional intensity. Hence the teacher in question will need to have not only a commanding knowledge of the relevant issues, as well as be able to facilitate the multiple perspectives that will be brought to bear on the subject at hand. She also will need considerable didactic and philosophical skill if she is to assist students in navigating the difficult conversations that inevitably will arise. Few, if any, teacher training programs devote time to cultivating this knowledge and these skills. Dramatic incidents, too, such as the recent beheading of high school teacher, Samuel Paty, in the suburbs of Paris, or similar threats to a teacher in the Dutch city of Den Bosch, further discourage teachers from broaching sensitive material. Yet, even in the absence of such threats, teachers ordinarily are saddled with too many other responsibilities – not least of which is preparing students to sit exams and

graduate — and hence the time and motivation needed to acquire this knowledge and skill may describe a luxury few can afford.

And finally, a fourth reason to caution against optimism is this: When controversy is introduced into the classroom it is not unreasonable to expect that many parents will object to a history teacher attempting to facilitate critical discussions about figures whom the parents, not to mention the *grandparents*, had long ago learned were heroes of one sort or another. Moreover, not only have their parents learned these lessons *in school*, but so had likely everyone else's parents, reinforcing the societal consensus about these figures in the first place. None of this means that it is impossible to challenge popular conceptions about historical figures in school. Nor does it mean that teachers ought not to try. It does, however, mean that doing so will likely be a Herculean undertaking.

Ideal versus the real

Ordinarily this is the point in our story when an earnest defender of the school — often arguing for the necessity of 'teaching citizenship' — will interject with an injunction like this: *the fact that these may be practical difficulties is no reason to abrogate one's responsibility to change the status quo. Indeed the fact that facilitating controversial discussions will be difficult, or that a parent opposes the direction of a history lesson, is no reason to shirk one's responsibility as an educator.*

This is of course true. Let us suppose, then, that a history instructor encourages 'critical thinking' about topics that militate against parents' basic beliefs. For some decades now, a number of liberal philosophers (e.g. Macedo, 1995) have argued that parents of this sort fail the test of 'reasonableness' given how their beliefs ostensibly militate against a child's interest in hearing contrary views. Philosophers of education (e.g. Zimmerman and Robertson, 2017) have followed suit, more often than not with an explicit civic mission in mind to quell the influence of the politically or religiously conservative parent who, for example, is opposed to certain features of sex education or biology.

But pitting conservative religious parents against the school is a tendentious way of framing the conflict, and certainly as it concerns the matter of historical monuments. For by facilitating a discussion on the historical legacy of, say, Winston Churchill, the emotional distance we mentioned previously may not be a foregone conclusion. Indeed a high school history instructor may find herself facing stiff opposition from a *whole raft* of parents, many of them not politically conservative at all, and not a few also will have studied history at university.⁸

For example, a teacher who invites a critical discussion about the legacy of Pedro de Valdivia, founder of Santiago, Chile (whose statues have been defaced), or Francisco Franco, former dictator of Spain (whose last statue, incidentally, was removed from the Spanish mainland in 2008), may proceed without much backlash, given all that is known about Spanish conquistadores, or more recently, the brutality of the Franco regime, most especially by bereaved families directly affected by state violence. Indeed, plenty of parents and students can get behind a discussion of *this* kind precisely because there already is a strong cultural consensus (though one, it should be stressed, that was not likely fostered by the school).

But similar assessments of other contentious figures (e.g. Benito Mussolini, whose likeness is still on display in Rome; Josep Tito, whose statues can be found throughout the Balkans; and even the ruthless Joseph Stalin, whose statues can be found in many countries throughout the former USSR) are not likely anytime soon to proceed without tremendous resistance by parents and non-parents alike, many of whom continue to regard former leaders with great affinity, perhaps especially given the difficult transition from a communist to a free market economy. Similar problems attend national monuments, such as the Yasukuni Shrine in Japan, which commemorates Japan's imperialist wars in the 1890s and early 1900s, or the monument of the African Renaissance in Senegal, built by President Abdoulaye Wade using public monies that might have been used for health and education.

Doubtless tricky ground to navigate, our advocates for 'teaching the controversy' may concede, but difficult or not, *more harm is done in doing nothing than in making the attempt.* Point taken. Suppose, then, that we consider a history

lesson in a secondary school in more detail, one situated in, say, Britain, Spain or the Netherlands. And suppose, too, that in attempting this effort to accurately and fairly assess the legacies of colonialist violence, the moral implications of the subject matter are brought to the fore.

To the extent that the lesson is concerned with historical accuracy, but also the normative implications of remembering contentious historical figures and occupations (regardless of whether or not there are any monuments), surely an honest examination concerning any chapter of British, Spanish or Dutch colonialism would have to include not only a rehearsal of names, dates and places, or even a discussion concerning the economic opportunism occasioned by these 'adventures'. Indeed to properly assess the question of historical monuments, such a historical analysis also must entail scrutiny of the attitudes and beliefs that justified colonialism in the first place, namely, beliefs of racial, cultural and religious superiority that justified the occupation of foreign lands, the imposition of the Christian faith and the brutal repression and enslavement of colonial subjects, not to mention the exploitation of natural resources for the enrichment of a monarchy and a tiny economic elite – whose wealth even now is conspicuously on public display in cities such as London and Amsterdam.

Depending on the perspective of the student (and her parents and grandparents), these are not beliefs we can so easily relegate to the past, even if that is precisely where the majority population in Britain or the Netherlands would prefer to keep it. And we can expect these attitudes and beliefs to manifest in the thoughts and attitudes of elected officials and the general public as it concerns popular holidays (e.g. the St. Nicholas tradition includes the practice of black face in the Netherlands), official names applied to the built environment (e.g. libraries, parks, universities and schools), not to mention the influential views of prominent historians who – perhaps unsurprisingly – often stridently *oppose* the reassessment of historical persons and events in light of new evidence and more recent understandings.⁹ And then there are the monuments themselves, some of which are so large and, quite literally, *chiseled into the landscape*, they simply have become a part of the fabric of national consciousness.¹⁰

Moral arguments that insist the authority of parents in these matters needs to be tempered by the influence of the school are neither here nor there: Such *philosophical* objections do nothing to prevent parents from *morally* remonstrating against school officials, to say nothing of exercising their *legal* rights to withdraw their child from school altogether. Importantly, too, those doing the remonstrating are just as likely to be members of stigmatized cultural minority groups as they are to be counted among the conservative or the 'privileged'. A Belgian history teacher inclined to give 'equal time' to perspectives in the classroom on the legacy of King Leopold II will win no favours with parents of African descent who will see little point in dispassionate deliberation about a megalomaniac responsible for the brutal treatment and murder of tens of thousands of Congolese. And note, too, that the pushback from minority parents is at least as likely to be motivated by a concern to prevent harm (e.g. ignorance and insensitivity of the teacher or other students) as it is to shelter their child from ideas with which they themselves disagree. So much, then, for the liberal canard that objections to history lessons are only likely to come from reactionary parents.

And here, finally, is the point of the foregoing discussion: Even if objecting parents (or students) represent a small but vocal minority, this is reason enough for many teachers to avoid discussing controversial material, preferring instead to 'stick with the text' (a point we return to below). In short, these and many other difficulties make attempts to discuss controversial historical monuments an unattractive option for teachers; indeed *real* teachers – and not the ones dreamed up by philosophers – are typically keen to avoid unnecessary conflict in the classroom, not to mention the local community, on whose support they depend in order to do their job well.

Bracketing these concerns

Now of course our critic would be right to interject at this point and remind us of the following: The fact that the foregoing is the case does not tell us what *ought* to be the case. After all, the school – including whatever content is taught in a history classroom – is charged with a number of moral and civic duties that presumably go beyond simply incul-

cating algorithms, factoids and descriptive narrative. Many also expect schools to foster certain virtues, among them *epistemic virtues* that will include a concern for truth and accuracy, an openness to criticism and a disposition of intellectual humility. As a field of study, history, arguably more than some other subjects taught in school, is a discipline perhaps particularly susceptible to error given the need to reach far into the past and sort, select and piece together a narrative, sometimes with but fragments of information. Moreover historians, particularly if writing about their *own* national or regional history, are actors imperceptibly shaped by that selfsame history, as well as socialized and trained to consider some evidence to be weightier than others, or to assume certain things to be 'obviously' true about particular individuals and events. Little wonder that so much historical narrative is liable to revision. Students should be educated about these things. Excellent point.

So let us imagine, *for the sake of argument*, that our litany of obstacles is no matter, and thus the teacher can expect strong support from the administration, as well as the community, and can therefore proceed with this important moral or civic work. Further, we can suspend reasonable doubt about the competences and temperament the average history teacher may or may not possess, and imagine that she marshals both an impressive knowledge and pedagogical skill in navigating difficult issues. Accordingly, we can expect that our history teacher is more than able to cultivate the relevant epistemic virtues among the students taking her class. In short, in this *best case scenario*, our fictional history teacher is well-educated, philosophically astute, empathically well-suited to the task of facilitating difficult conversations and moreover enjoys broad support from the community and school administration.

Yet, even if we could be confident that teachers possess this extraordinary set of abilities, we need to remember that students' educational experiences are shaped not only by their teachers, but by the *state-mandated curriculum*, a curriculum that among other things has canonized a particular narrative, one that is rarely inimical to the interests of the ruling political establishment that in many countries continues to dictate the official — and often explicitly patriotic — historical narrative that must be taught in school. Indeed, insofar as its historical and political task is concerned, C. Wright Mills (1956, p. 318) long ago observed that 'in many schools, [this] has been reduced to a routine training of nationalist loyalties'. And it is not only the question of what is *included* in this narrative that matters; importantly, the curricular *silences* about historical figures and events arguably matter more, certainly more than whatever is inscribed on an historical monument — which comparatively few will likely visit in any case. And so, rather than thinking about the extent to which teachers permit space for dialogue around controversial historical figures or episodes to be brought into the classroom, we should recognize the *highly controversial nature of the school curriculum itself*, in particular the state-approved historical narrative, and the routine denial of that controversy, for example, concerning the nature and scope of one's colonial history.¹¹ In other words, controversy is already there, in the curriculum, but it is rarely acknowledged.

And perhaps this is where we can see more clearly what it is that makes the challenge so difficult for our history teacher. For it is not simply a question of whether a nation's crimes are largely absent in school textbooks; in many cases, these crimes are *inverted*, such that perpetrators of colonialist violence emerge as 'heroes' in the telling of history, that is, in the pages of the state-approved history textbook. The hagiography continues *outside* of the school as well, where one finds inverted history not only on the historical monuments, but also in public holidays, as well as on postage stamps, monetary currency, the names of streets, city parks and university buildings, much of which mythologizes the past, making it even more difficult — though not impossible — to get these difficult conversations off the ground.

And the problems go deeper than this, for this *schooled ignorance* feeds denial in the broader public: denial that there is a problem with the way 'we' talk about and rationalize the past, or fail to understand its relevance for the present, or refuse to come to terms with the ugly truths of 'our traditions', even when the descendants of this past are *fellow citizens*, and even when — as is so often the case — they ask us to listen. So routine is this practice of denial that it shapes the 'common sense' of the school.

Let us be clear: We do not oppose attempts to reform the curriculum, improve teacher training or diversify school classrooms. To the contrary. But we do maintain that it is naïve to expect that these things will occur in most countries anytime soon, particularly when curricular revisions continue to provoke conservative backlashes — often from the

very historians whose own published histories are now being contested; moreover, given all that we have said thus far, it is unrealistic to expect most teachers to broach these matters without an uphill battle. And in any case, schools should not be expected to do this kind of work on their own; delegating this responsibility to the school is a piecemeal strategy at best. We therefore suggest that other routes can and should be explored, and turn now to a different kind of proposal. No doubt there is a myriad of educational responses available, but we limit ourselves in this paper to just one.

HISTORICAL EDUCATION BEYOND THE SCHOOL

In the fall of 1980, a 13-part television series named *Cosmos* was broadcast by the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). The series was hosted by astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan, who for the last 20 years of his life was professor at Cornell University. Author of many books, both scholarly and popular, Sagan had a unique ability to communicate difficult and profound scientific truths to a popular audience. Over the course of his career, he would be awarded medals of public service and public welfare from NASA and the National Academy of Sciences; he would also become a celebrity in his own right, making multiple appearances on late night television. The *Cosmos* series itself would go on to win two Emmy Awards, the Peabody Award and the Hugo Award. Having been aired in more than 60 countries, and viewed by more than 500 million people, to date *Cosmos* remains globally the most widely viewed public television series of all time.

The scale of success for *Cosmos* is unlikely to be matched by similar endeavours, including the one we will introduce. But the example illustrates the potential of *alternative educational spaces* to engage and inform large audiences. *Cosmos* was also concerned with questions of universal import, and quite literally, cosmic significance. Who are we? Are we alone? Is there intelligent life elsewhere in the universe? These and other profound existential questions are sure to fascinate audiences the world over in a way that few other programs can, even when they are similarly focussed on questions of global importance — such as climate change¹² — and even when they are hosted by such well-spoken and engaging figures as Sagan.

And indeed, insofar as our subject is the teaching of history, *particularly as it concerns the meaning and purpose of historical monuments*, then it is perhaps more realistic to imagine a similar type of educational program that is focussed on a particular nation: hence, for example, South Korean history for South Korean citizens. Indeed given the infinite complexity (and controversy) of even *one* nation's history — particularly if this involves centuries of colonial expansion to other parts of the world — we think it reasonable to expect that educational programing ought to principally concern itself with historical monuments that pertain to a particular nation, or region within a nation, where, for instance, regional and indigenous histories may helpfully challenge those constructed by national powers. At the same time, these monuments often symbolize or evoke in one way or another the relations of those regions or nations with places and peoples beyond their borders. Thus, a focus on a region's or nation's monuments does not entail parochialism — quite the opposite.

Alternative historical programs may be initiated by public or private broadcasting companies, researchers, journalists, YouTubers, museums or other parties. Dutch examples, on public television, of entertaining and critical history programs for primary school children include *Het Klokhuis maakt geschiedenis* (The Core makes History) and, by the same makers, *Welkom in de geschiedenis* (Welcome to History). 'Het Klokhuis' is a program (aimed at children between 7 and 12) that began in 1988 when a third public TV channel was launched. Its name is the common Dutch word for an apple core; the idea is that this is what you see when you eat an apple and reach the core — that is, when you 'dig deeper'. Episodes of 'Het Klokhuis' always feature a combination of 'reporting' and drama or re-enactment; they first serve to explain the topic clearly, the latter to illustrate these in a humorous but also thought-provoking way.

Serious topics of personal and general importance — emotions and feelings, moral issues, societal problems are treated in this way, so that 'the topic gains depth, because it is viewed from multiple perspectives' (Het Klokhuis, n.d.). As the makers explain on their website, their basic premise is that children are curious and want to understand the

world around them; for that reason, they cannot avoid difficult topics. The programs aim not only to entertain, but also to 'offer [children] information and tools to deal with the difficult things in life', about which they often receive questions from children themselves. Themes about which Het Klokhuis have developed a series include cancer, war, death and bullying. This inevitably means the program receives not only compliments but also criticism from parents who feel that these topics are too 'heavy', or too dark, for children. However, the creators intentionally choose not to avoid these topics – which after all, they point out, are on children's minds – but to treat them in ways that fit their viewers' level of development, and, of course, the 'heavy' themes are lightened by tasteful humour.

The series 'Welkom in de geschiedenis' treats a range of historical periods (e.g. the Romans, the so-called Dutch 'Golden Century', the newly dubbed 'Iron Century' – that is, the industrial 19th century) familiar from the school curriculum, using the aforementioned format of alternating (but sometimes intermingling) 'reporting' and re-enactment ('reporting' between scare quotes, since it is fake reporting, where, for instance, a talk show host receives long-deceased guests from the past, or we join a presenter in a classical Roman television studio).

The intentional use of anachronism renders today's practices surprisingly visible, while at the same time raising questions about human 'universals' versus historically relative customs. The 'reporting' is deliberately naïve, which makes it amusing for viewers, but it also is a highly effective way of exposing existing commonplace views that are, upon some reflection, rather problematic. For instance, in a sketch on the abolition of slavery we join an elegant, well-to-do, white female journalist, who reports on the festivities in Surinam after the abolition of slavery (Het Klokhuis, 2018). With a radiant smile she explains that the people we see dancing in the background are now 'free', and when two former slaves, a black man and woman, walk past, she beckons them to the microphone for a 'first reaction'.

Journalist: Are you happy?

Man: Uh, yes, we are uh, extremely happy, now that we are free.

Journalist: Yes, and what are you going to do now, make a trip around the world, or just enjoy a holiday?

Woman: Holiday? Madam, we can't go anywhere. We have no money, not a dime.

Man: And anyway, we are not even allowed to leave – by our 'liberators'!

Journalist (surprised): You are not allowed to leave? Why not?

Man: We have to labour on for another ten years!

[At this point a hand holding a sign slides into the screen at the top right corner; the sign says: 'Echt waar' ('Really true' or 'True fact')]

In this very simple way, it becomes immediately clear that the formal abolition of slavery – annually commemorated to much fanfare each July in Amsterdam's Oosterpark – did not actually end the subjugation of black people in the Dutch colony.

Nor, of course, did abolition do anything to guarantee the equal status and treatment of black people in the Netherlands to this day. Indeed, efforts to link the legacy of slavery to contemporary racial hierarchies and discrimination, if not simply met with even more racism, routinely invite comments such as, 'it's such a long time ago', an insouciant attitude that only the (willfully) ignorant can afford. The false assumptions on which this still widespread ignorance are based – in no small measure owing to the official textbook narratives as well as the absence of these discussions in schools – are effectively exposed by giving voice to those on the receiving end of history, that is, by placing marginalized perspectives front and centre.

It is worth noting that the importance of multi-perspectivity is also increasingly enjoying attention from researchers and history teachers (see, for instance, Kropman, Van Boxtel and Van Drie 2020; and The Black Archives: <https://www.theblackarchives.nl/index.html>). The emphasis on widening the historical lens is often connected to the problem of discussing 'sensitive subjects', or as we have already seen, 'teaching the controversy'. Logtenberg *et al.* (2020), for example, evaluate a teacher training program aimed at helping history teachers treat subjects that are thought to

be sensitive in the Dutch context (such as Black Pete, slavery, the Holocaust and Islamist terrorism) by way of focusing on historical objects, discussed from multiple perspectives.

But examples such as the above offer inspiration in particular for thinking about history education *beyond the school*. There are many possible ways to envisage how alternative history programs might deal with historical monuments. Each episode (or vlog, or whatever the medium would be) might tackle a particular existing monument, for instance, by collecting responses from various passers-by (*Do they know who or what is represented? How do they feel about this, and about the monument being there, in that place?*), looking into the history of the monument itself (*How did it come to be there? Who wanted it there? What was the historical – social and political – context? How was the monument received? Has it been the object of controversy, and if so, for what reasons?*), and finally, by taking a fresh look at the historical persons and/or events represented or symbolized by the monument (*asking whether the monument asks us to ‘remember’ everything or not, and if not – as is likely – what is being omitted*).

Alternatively, programs might engage in ‘alternative history’ in one way or another, for instance, by imagining different outcomes of pivotal events in a nation’s history and how these outcomes would have expressed themselves in monuments; or by asking students to consider how, and through what alternative monuments, marginalized groups might (have) commemorate(d) events if they had been given the chance to ‘furnish’ public space. Both would serve to offer an outside perspective on existing monuments and the narratives they represent.

In whatever way this is done – in an entirely ‘serious’ format or in a more entertaining format like that of Het Klokhuis – alternatives will of course inevitably suffer from other limitations. For instance, one can hardly claim to present an objective point of view; moreover, programs of the sort we have described will only reach some children, not all. And here we see potential for convergence with the history classroom, for the inevitably selective number of children watching from home strengthens the case for integrating these programs into the school curriculum, so as to maximize their reach.

That said, programs of this kind are bound to raise objections, not only along the lines of ‘this is not appropriate for children’ (when the program targets a young audience), but also of a more substantive, political nature. In the current political climate in the Netherlands, for instance, any consideration given to what might be called an anti-colonialist perspective – whether the topic is Dutch slavery or not – is bound to incite the ire of many parents who see this as a threat to ‘their’ Holland, ‘their’ traditions, and therefore as a form of cultural slander.¹³ In that factual sense, at least, such programs will always be controversial. The strength of programs like Het Klokhuis, however, is that they provoke reflection and shifts in perspective on a very minimal basis concerning widely accepted, seemingly ‘undeniable’ historical facts. Facts cannot speak for themselves, of course, but they do not always require an elaborate story. In short, these programs offer a challenge to those who object to what they perceive as a deconstructionist threat behind them, yet at the same time, one that even younger children are able to appreciate.

To conclude this section, it seems to us that it is often the education we receive *outside of school* that is most decisive for how we think about many things, including whether we are open to changing our mind, or questioning the ‘official record’ as given to us in school textbooks. In most cases, that is, our outlook on the world is primarily shaped by the environment in which we grow up and the experiences the world affords us. Accordingly there is great value in having, alongside the formal curriculum, other spaces where folks may be educated and educate themselves, as these offer vantage points from which the school curriculum may be critically assessed.

It goes without saying that the creation and existence of such spaces is no guarantee that students will use them. Nor is there any guarantee that alternative ‘educational’ spaces will actually succeed in being educational; some may in fact be launched with dubious political motives and present historical narratives that are as problematic as those they seek to replace. Further, minority and working-class perspectives both in front of and behind the cameras in mainstream media continue to be sorely lacking in Europe, as in much of the world. These are all formidable difficulties, and we are not naïve concerning the various challenges any such undertaking would face. Even so, these practical obstacles provide us no compelling argument for avoiding the effort; rather, they strengthen the case for encouraging parents, teachers and teacher organizations to actively push for, and engage with, *alternative educational spaces*. Indeed, generally students are likely to benefit from the availability of a plurality of narratives, rather than just one.

CONCLUSIONS

Philosophers of education are wont to issue injunctions of the following kind: 'Schools need to...' and 'Teachers ought to...'. But we have provided a number of reasons to be sceptical concerning whether the school is ideally suited to the task at hand, namely, to critically assess the meaning and moral significance of historical monuments. Indeed we are dubious concerning the value of such injunctions, and not only because precious few school administrators or teachers have the time or inclination to read philosophy journals ordinarily accessible only behind a paywall. For such injunctions to cut any wood, *ought* must also imply *can*, and not only in some 'would that it were so' sense.

Nowhere have we argued that schools have no contribution to make; there are many things that can be done to educate young people in schools, and this certainly will include the history classroom. At the same time, however, we have demonstrated that there is little warrant for optimism concerning the educational potential of classroom instruction given the interpretative frame of the state-approved history curriculum; the onerous institutional constraints under which school teachers must labour; the unusual constellation of talents history teachers must possess; the frequent absence of marginalized voices in these conversations; and finally, the not unlikely indifference — if not outright hostility — expressed by far too many members of the dominant group. For these reasons, we think it best to expand the scope of educational possibilities one is willing to consider, particularly when so much of what we learn inevitably occurs outside of the school.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ DuBois, W.E.B. (1962, p. 722).
- ² This is common statecraft across the world, but it would be difficult to top Belarus, where more than 9,000 elaborate monuments have been erected around the country to commemorate the 'Great Patriotic War' from 1941 to 1945.
- ³ Of course sometimes we do find that monuments commemorate wars, conflicts and personages that were — and remain — controversial, though it may not be the monument itself that is controversial. The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, for instance, commemorates the more than 57,000 American casualties in that dreadful war, without insinuating anything about the (im)morality of the war itself, let alone the two million Vietnamese and Cambodian lives lost, or the countless lies propagated by three successive presidents in order to justify the war in the first place.
- ⁴ To take but one example: emulating others before him — notably Pedro de Córdoba and Antonio de Montesinos — Bartolomé de las Casas meticulously recorded in his *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (published in 1552), as well as other volumes, the many atrocities of the Spanish colonizers in the New World. De las Casas is considered a controversial witness, in part for having suggested replacing Indian with African slave labor — a view that he later deeply regretted and for which he publicly expressed compunction in his book, *History of the Indies*. His legacy continues to be debated by historians, though the general consensus corroborates the view that he devoted more than 50 years of his own life to denouncing the violence carried out against indigenous peoples and interceded on several occasions before Spanish monarchs on their behalf.
- ⁵ Churchill's deplorable racism towards all varieties of non-white people is well-documented. Lesser known, perhaps, is Gandhi's inconsistent record on India's caste system, as well as his racist disdain towards black Africans. Accordingly, Gandhi remains a controversial figure in India, and his statues have been defaced in South Africa and removed in Ghana.
- ⁶ The residential school system was but one of MacDonald's white nationalist policies. For a brief summary of his moral crimes, see: <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/here-is-what-sir-john-a-macdonald-did-to-indigenous-people>
- ⁷ For a recent philosophical examination of MacDonald, see Abrahams (2020).
- ⁸ Indeed these kinds of reactions are far more likely in communities where the level of education is higher than average. More often than not the school administration is forced to relent on pains of potentially losing the 'most involved' parents from the community. Parents have even been known to express outrage over seemingly less contentious issues, such as the move to change the name of a school in West Bromwich, UK, from Guns Village Primary to Hanbury

Primary school. One parent offered, 'I think it's disgusting'. See <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2016/09/30/guns-village-primary-school-parents-anger-as-name-changed-because-of-gun-links/>

- ⁹ In the Netherlands, for instance, several (older) historians accuse younger, 'activist' historians of inappropriately judging past deeds and events in light of today's values (see Emmer and Den Heijer, 2019; Wilschut, 2020), that is, of committing a historiographical sin, for these younger historians supposedly fail to understand the past on its own terms. In this move these conservative historians sideline the real issue at stake, namely, whether the dominant historical narrative is a fair representation of historical reality, or rather an idealization that serves particular political interests. Indeed, Rousseau (1779 [1762], p. 238) noted that 'the facts described by history are far from being an exact portrayal of the same facts as they happened. They change form in the historian's head; they are molded according to his interests; they take on the complexion of his prejudices.' Edward Said (1993, p. 206) has also astutely observed that 'the writing of history... is tied to the extension of Empire'. Before writing this lengthier analysis in English, we responded to this internal debate in Dutch (<https://www.socialevraagstukken.nl/waarom-de-beeldenstormers-gewoon-gelijk-hebben/>), in particular as it concerns the contemporary propensity toward relativism in evaluating the racism of historical figures, and why it is both factually incorrect and morally problematic to rationalize, say, the white supremacy of 19th century figures as 'normal' simply because more (white) people at that time subscribed to these views, or because they may have opposed slavery, thus attenuating moral blame. Stephen Jay Gould (1996, pp. 413–424), for instance, attempts to excuse the chillingly racist views of Charles Darwin in precisely this way, conveniently neglecting the fact that dissidents (including contemporaries of Darwin) were always and everywhere to be heard condemning racism, and not only its cruelest manifestations. See also *supra*, note 4. In any case, white men of 19th-century Europe are perhaps not the appropriate moral yardstick, for the victims of white supremacy – or sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc. – were rarely confused about the violent injustices they suffered, however 'normal' they may have seemed to members of the majority group. 'Others may see these facts', Reinhold Niebuhr (1932, p. 166) observed, 'but no one sees them so clearly as those who experience their consequences in their own lives'.
- ¹⁰ Such is the case, for instance, with Mount Rushmore, which prominently displays the faces of four American presidents on a mountainside in the Black Hills of South Dakota, USA, and which serves as the iconic backdrop to Independence Day celebrations each year and copious other examples of Americana. The granite carving was completed on stolen land sacred to the Sioux Tribes, and, adding insult to injury, sculpted under the supervision of Gutzon Borglum, son of Danish immigrants, whose sympathies with the Ku Klux Klan also aided with inspiring the immense Confederate memorial carved into the side of Stone Mountain, Georgia, a carving that features the images of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis and glorifies white supremacy like few monuments do. The mountain is situated within a popular state park that receives over 4 million visitors a year.
- ¹¹ Thanks to Darren Chetty for stressing this point. For an example of this kind of curricular analysis concerning educational policy-making in the state of New York, see Cornbleth and Waugh (1995).
- ¹² More recently, the BBC series *Blue Planet II*, hosted by David Attenborough, has enjoyed a similar kind of 'success', only partly because of how it addresses questions of existential importance. But a better example of the sort of historical programming we have in mind is BBC2's *A House Through Time*, hosted by historian David Olusoga, which features stories across Britain about people who lived in one house from the time it was built until now. One episode, for example, featured a slave trader's home in Bristol. The series seems particularly well-suited to bringing adults and children together – both inside and outside the classroom – to discuss episodes not typically covered in school textbooks.
- ¹³ Indignation is routinely directed at anyone who dares to criticize Dutch traditions, particularly when the person doing so is non-white, no matter how racist or offensive the tradition may be. Unsurprisingly these persistent denials are fueled by profound historical ignorance, something that has been duly noted numerous times in the Dutch press: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/-nederlanders-weten-niets-van-de-koloniale-geschiedenis~a47d2be8/>; <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/10/25/meeste-nederlanders-kennen-onze-zwarte-verzetshelden-niet-a2752763>; <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/postkoloniale-absences>; <https://big.nl/we-moeten-van-duitsland-leren-hoe-we-met-ons-koloniaal-verleden-om-moetengaan/>; <https://www.trouw.nl/verdieping/david-van-reybrouck-is-verbijsterd-over-het-gebrek-aan-historisch-besef-in-nederland~b60e8e1f/>

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