**Racist Monuments and the Tribal Right: A Reply to Dan Demetriou**

Forthcoming in Oxford University Press’s *Ethics Left and Right: The Moral Issues that Divide Us*

In *Ashes of Our Fathers: Racist Monuments and the Tribal Right*, Dan Demetriou makes a novel tribalist case for the preservation of racist monuments. He and I arrived at radically different conclusions in our respective chapters and we may be further apart on this issue than most “opponents” in this text. For this reason, I want to first emphasize some points where our positions overlap.

First, while I find tribalism (as Demetriou conceives of it) objectionable, I don’t necessarily deny that humans are a tribal species or that political structures should, in some ways, accommodate this fact. However, we no doubt disagree about howbest to take these facts into account and we may also disagree about the precise way(s) in which humans are, and are not, tribal species.

Second, Demetriou suggests a number of “honorable compromises” that the “tribal rightist” should endorse, including “narrowing the gap between peoples in the heritage landscape” by creating additional monuments for people in historically underrepresented groups. We agree this should be done.

Third, Demetriou and I agree that it can be permissible to, in certain conditions, selectively honor people who have performed grossly morally wrong acts in the past. Again, denying this would prohibit honoring pretty much anyone. Still, Demetriou and I certainly disagree about the exact conditions under which this is permissible.

Finally, Demetriou concedes that we should remove monuments “whose designs are highly ideological,” “leave little room for interpretation, deliberatively provoke,” and “carry little meaning to anyone but hardened ethno-tribalists” when such monuments are offensive to a significant number of citizens. He and I agree that these criteria apply to many monuments, including numerous Confederate monuments, and we agree that such monuments should be removed.

Demetriou rejects premises *(1)* and *(5)* of my argument. Our disagreement over *(1)* concerns a technical debate about the nature of reasons, one that I believe is ultimately inconsequential to the Confederate monument debate. Our fundamental disagreement concerns *(5)*. More specifically, Demetriou believes that preserving most Confederate monuments is necessary for maintaining tribal identity and cohesion over time, which is supposedly more important than preventing the harm such monuments cause. Much of our disagreement can be traced to two points of contention.

**(A)** I deny that removing Confederate monuments need result in the loss of tribal identity and social cohesion.

**(B)** Even supposing I’m wrong about *(A)*, I believe that it is more important to prevent the harm Confederate monuments would cause than the loss of tribal identity and social cohesion supposedly at stake.

With respect to *(A)*, Demetriou claims that “memorialization is essential to maintaining tribal identity and cohesion over time.” He also grants that memorialization can take many forms, including museums, historical sites, temporary installations, one-off events, and the like. As I explained in my chapter, it’s quite possible to take down public Confederate monuments, yet preserve them in private museums or historical sites. Doing so could remove the objectionable features of the monuments (e.g. their reverential nature, a lack of proper historical context, their state-funded preservation, and the racist reasons behind their current location). Yet, preserving Confederate monuments in museums or historical sites can allow for memorialization while removing these objectionable elements. So, it seems possible to grant Demetriou’s claim about the importance of memorialization, yet still hold that we should remove public Confederate monuments.

There’s another issue in the background here. Even assuming that it would be socially disastrous if tribes were always prevented from engaging in memorialization, it doesn’t follow that it would be socially disastrous to prevent certain particular instances, or types, of memorialization. This is true in the same way it would be socially disastrous to completely deny freedom of speech to all citizens, but *not* socially disastrous to prevent the Westboro Baptist Church from protesting at a fallen soldier’s funeral. Generally, memorialization *may* be essential to maintaining tribal identity and cohesion over time, but preserving public Confederate monuments needn’t be.

Now consider *(B)*. Suppose, with Demetriou, that removing most Confederate monuments would result in some loss of tribal identity or social cohesion. Nevertheless, preventing the suffering such monuments cause is, all else equal, more important than preventing the suffering their removal would cause when that suffering is predicated on irrational beliefs or contemptable attitudes. Removing Confederate monuments for harm-based reasons shouldn’t be construed as a threat to social cohesion. That fact that some people would (irrationally) interpret it that way doesn’t preclude them from having an obligation to remove the Confederate monuments, assuming that they’re part of the relevant group. Of course, the diminished social cohesion *could* be bad for everyone, including the marginalized groups that would be affected by this supposed change. But, for reasons given in my chapter, I believe that removing Confederate monuments would minimize undeserved suffering.

Thus far, I have responded to the “consequentialist” component of Demetriou’s argument against *(5)*. In reply, he might fall back on the claim that people have a moral right to this sort of memorialization independent of the consequences of such memorialization. He may appeal to his marriage analogy to capture commonsense intuitions on this point. I am personally skeptical that there is a general right to memorialize. But even granting that there is one, I see no reason to believe there this right extends to cases where memorialization is harmful in the way public Confederate monuments are harmful. To motivate this claim, consider Demetriou’s own marriage analogy. Even supposing that one has a right to memorialize their slave-owning ancestor, it doesn’t follow that one has a right to memorialize their slave-owning ancestor *in ways that harm their partner* (e.g. by placing their picture on a mantle). This isn’t to suggest that one must destroy the picture of their ancestor, only that they should find a non-harmful way to memorialize this person. Ditto for Confederate monuments.

Questions about the ethics of Confederate monuments are complex. The chapters in this text do not cover everything there is to be written on the subject. Hopefully, however, they can serve as one possible entry point into this important, difficult, debate.