Full Marx

Are Marxists iconoclasts?

Statues and other icons can enforce power and domination but they can also help us challenge that power, writes the **Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School**



ICONOCLASM has a dual meaning – literally tearing down icons (particularly statues) and also metaphorical; challenging what were previously unchallenged or at least hegemonic (dominant) ideas. Marx and Engels were particularly effective at the latter – and the revolutions they inspired frequently involved the former.

Let's start with statues. The Morning Star's caption under its picture of protesters throwing an effigy of Edward Colston, a 17th-century slave trader and Tory MP, into Bristol harbour during a Black Lives Matter protest read: "About time." Most readers of the paper (including this author) would agree.

By contrast there was a chorus of horror from the right. The Daily Telegraph declared: "We cannot let these Marxist vandals humiliate us in their mindless iconoclasm." Four of the protesters were charged with criminal damage. They were acquitted by the jury. Subsequently the Tory government has introduced new legislation (the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022) to close what it called a "loophole" that allowed the jury to act according to its conscience.

The role of statuary (as of other icons) depends on circumstance. Erected by those with power, particularly by the state, they can act to sanitise the past, cover up misdeeds, reinforce hegemony (the power of authority) and act as an instrument of repression. Their destruction or removal may mark a change of rule but it can also be a symbol of resistance and can draw attention to how things must change.

Sergei Eisenstein's film October opens with images of the crowd toppling a statue of Tsar Alexander III. Statuary always has a political significance. However that significance may not always be the one intended by its creator, and can sometimes be lost or disregarded over time. It may be revived as the antithesis of the original, as in the case of the toppling of Colston's statue. It also raises the issue of what to do with existing monuments of oppression. Colston, as with much of the statuary removed during the French Revolution, lies today in a museum with an explanatory history for visitors. During the American Revolution, the gilded statue of George III was melted down to be recast as ammunition.

The statue of British prime minister William Gladstone outside Bow Church in London's East End, has a permanently red hand. This was painted on in 1988 to commemorate the 1888 matchwomen's strike (when the strikers smeared it with their own blood). Whenever the paint wears thin, or the local council attempts to restore the hands to their original colour, someone locally restores it to its properly bloodstained red. Similar acts have accompanied the independence struggles of most ex-colonial territories.

Iconoclasm can also be artifice as in 2003 in Baghdad when US troops staged the fall of Saddam Hussein's statue, in an attempt to disguise their occupation as a popular uprising.

Discussing iconoclasm also raises the issue of whether the left should sanction new physical icons of people or events. Socialist states themselves have sometimes indulged in iconophilia (erecting rather than taking down statues) and even socialists sometimes succumb to iconolatry (reverence or deference to images or statues as representations of socialist heroes).

Lenin's The State and Revolution opens with a warning against the "canonisation" of great revolutionaries into "harmless icons." When he died in 1924 aged 53, Joseph Stalin set up a "Committee for the Immortalisation of Lenin's Memory." Contrary to Lenin's own wish for an ordinary funeral, and against the protests of Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), his body was embalmed and put on public display – described in this paper as a "quasio-religious relic" – in a mausoleum from which Soviet leaders observed military parades.

Statues (and images) of Lenin, often together with those of Marx, Engels and Stalin himself, proliferated. At the same time, as in socialist Yugoslavia, memorials to partisan and anti-fascist fighters were generally abstract in design – not to denigrate the heroism of individuals, but to emphasise their collective endeavour.

Often there is good reason to celebrate individuals, particularly where they symbolise resistance, or pose a challenge to repression or complacency. Monuments can be a gesture of defiance.

The statue of Sylvia Pankhurst, to be erected on Clerkenwell Green outside the Marx Memorial Library is important, not just because of her position in British feminist and labour movement history, but because it will emphasise her political distance and her exclusion from the existing monument to her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel next to the Houses of Parliament.

In Britain, perhaps the best-known socialist monument is Karl Marx's tomb in London's Highgate Cemetery – a giant bronze bust of the man himself on the summit of a huge marble-clad pedestal, unveiled in 1956 by Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain. But this isn't Marx's original resting place. Some 50 metres downhill is Marx's original 1883 burial place, in the grave of his wife, Jenny (who died two years earlier). It's marked today by a flat tablet announcing the relocation of their remains in 1954 together with those of their grandson Harry Longuet and their housekeeper Helene Demuth. The ashes of their daughter Eleanor were added when the new monument was constructed.

The original plaque marking the grave had been selected by Marx himself after Jenny's death. Engels was a vehement opponent of icons (he chose to be cremated and his ashes were scattered off Beachy Head near Eastbourne, where he and Marx often holidayed). He opposed plans by the German Social Democratic Party to erect a larger monument. He wrote to August Bebel that the family was against this since the simple headstone "would be desecrated in their eyes if replaced by a monument." The plaque was inserted in the new tomb and is currently replaced by a replica due to vandalism.

Marx's (new) tomb was designed by the communist sculptor Laurence Bradshaw, to be a monument not only "to a great mind and great philosopher" but to convey "the dynamic force of Marx's intellect." Below the bust there's the slogan, "Workers of all lands unite" in gold. Since 1974, the bust and headstone have been designated a listed monument, assigned the highest Grade 1 status in 1999.

Like other icons its symbolic representation is both political statement and tourist attraction; a place of pilgrimage and the focus of the annual Marx Oration which takes place on the nearest Sunday to March 14 – the anniversary of Marx's death.

And iconic events – like the annual May Day rally last Wednesday outside the Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School on Clerkenwell Green – are important statements of resistance and of commitment to building a better world.

Icons – physical and metaphorical – can have power over us. They can also help us challenge power and celebrate advances to date – one reason why Marx's new monument is so often attacked by fascists. For every icon we should ask: who created it? Why? Who paid for it? It's interesting how many Victorian statues say "erected by public subscription" – is this simply false consciousness or coercion?

Yes, Marxists should be iconoclasts, and they should not become iconodules – uncritically substituting new icons for old ones. But sometimes physical symbolism can be important, as historical reminders and a focus for debate and action, particularly when, as with Marx's monument and May Day, they emerge "from below" as part of a movement for progressive change.

■ *The Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School programme of on-site and online events continues on Thursday (May 9) with a panel discussion on the role of the law, the state and communities in the 1984-5 miners' strike and the following Wednesday (May 15) there's an examination of how archivists & historians preserve the Strike's heritage, accompanied by a display. On Wednesday May 22 there's a special MML Open Day on radical art and design. Details of these and more on www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/events.*



Pic: Gordon Joly/Creative Commons

MAKING A POINT: William Gladstone's statue in Bow, whose hands are painted red by persons unknown, and (top) people outside Bristol Crown Court after Jake Skuse, Rhian Graham, Milo Ponsford and Sage Willoughby were cleared of criminal damage for pulling down a statue of slave trader Edward Colston