
ICONOCLASM: PAST AND PRESENT ISSUES

Introduction

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Since Ancient times, iconoclasm – or the destruction of images or monuments for religious or political reasons – has been a recurring phenomenon throughout the world. From Egypt to China or India, in the Christian, Muslim or Judaic traditions, iconoclasm has been the pretext for destruction, to erase unwanted objects of worship and, at the same time, to reassess the principles of conceptual belief.

But iconoclasm has also been the manifestation of a recurring *damnatio memoriae*, the ancient Roman practice of official obliteration of the memory of a specific individual or event.

The current negative trend of ‘political correctness’ political fracturing and manifestations, such as ‘no platforming’, ‘historical re-interpretation and educational exclusions’, has given a new dimension to such a practice and an urgency in undertaking an in-depth systematic and scholarly analysis of these issues in a modern post-colonial and post ‘authoritarian’ societal context.

The international conference, ‘Iconoclasm: Past and Present Issues’, conceived and organized by the History and Archaeology Section of *Academia Europaea*, thus set out to analyse iconoclasm from a decidedly interdisciplinary perspective, with interventions from historians, and archaeologists, as well as from specialists in literature, political science, geography, architecture and art history.

The conference, which took place in Wrocław (Poland) in October 2021, after nearly two years of COVID-motivated postponements, brought together, during three days, thanks to the sponsorship of the *Riksbankens Jubileumsfonds* and, under the efficient aegis of the *Academia Europaea* Wrocław Knowledge Hub as organizers

and hosts, a distinguished panel of international academics. Various aspects of past and present manifestations of iconoclasm were subsequently presented and analysed.

In a thought-provoking opening keynote speech, Hans-Ulrich Jessurun d'Oliveira, presents the case of how subsequent waves of dramatically different ideologies leave their impact on existing value-systems. Destruction of a prevalent legal system thus leads to the building of a new order. The example developed is that of Germany, from the Weimar Republic days to the present: how subsequent iconoclasm found their origins in a previous legal system and left their traces in the next one. However, as Professor d'Oliveira asks, with justified concern: are we about to witness a new legal iconoclasm, away from democracy and the rule of law?

The first section of articles considers the more specific 'historical' aspects of iconoclasm as a recurring phenomenon. Helene Whittaker discusses the case of the chryselephantine statue that was recovered in excavations at Palaikastro in eastern Crete in the 1980s, and has been henceforth known as the *Palaikastro Kouros*. Archaeological evidence suggests that the statue and the sanctuary building in which it stood had been deliberately destroyed. It does appear, therefore, that the pattern of the mutilation and destruction of images has had a long history in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Francesco Stella then stresses the importance for Western culture and art of the *Libri Carolini*, an odd and complex treatise comprising four books, which claims to represent the official position of Charlemagne on the issue of iconoclasm: freed from its ritual and cult value, and returned to its artistic use, the icon may thus bring about the larger freedom of figurative representation that characterizes western religious art as compared with the Orthodox one. Barbara Crostini then introduces the case of Pope Gregory the Great's correspondence with the bishop of Marseilles, Serenus (AD 599–600), concerning the use of images as a form of 'didactic book for the illiterate'. The Pope's concern was that all members of a given flock of faithful be 'kept on board' and that therefore iconoclasm was not to be resorted to as a means to fight idolatry.

Skipping over the centuries, Sverre Håkon Bagge then outlines the conflict over images that took place in the churches in Bergen (Norway) in the 1560s, about 30 years after the Reformation. A brief period of iconoclasm, inspired by Reformed – particularly Calvinist – theology affected the then Kingdom of Denmark-Norway. Soon, however, mainstream Lutheranism took over and statues and pictures were reintroduced. Their theological differences as to the use of images enables the two Protestant confessions – Lutheranism and Calvinism – to assume diverging attitudes with regard to modernization. A religion that abstains from the medium of image representation is faced with the challenge of finding a replacement for it: science then appears as a possible new didactic pursuit.

For Pieter Emmer, decoloniality, has become the new ideological paradigm for questioning colonization, settler-colonialism, racial capitalism, modernity and, most recently, neoliberalism and the ways in which these phenomena have displaced an array of modes of living, thinking and being in our natural world. Several examples concerning the case of the Netherlands are then presented: from *zwarte Pieten*, Saint

Nicholas' black helper, to statues of public figures of colonial rule, such as Jan Pieterszoon Coen, or the names of Boer leaders given to streets or squares. But trying to erase all visible traces of colonialism, racism and male dominance may lead to dangerous alienation in the proper understanding of history: the past, after all, is a foreign country, where things did happen differently.

The following two articles in this section deal with the changes to collective memory brought about by the ideological appropriations of historical events. For Amélia Polónia, the Salazar regime in Portugal extensively used the topic of Portuguese Overseas Expansion as a founding myth for justifying its own colonialism. Myths were created (Henry the Navigator or the so-called 'School of Sagres'), while key-personalities, such as Magellan, were for a long time defamed as anti-heroes. Yet, even today, these myths and twisted interpretations remain commonplace, and many Portuguese still feel that, in times of crises, these fictions may be legitimately used to create a sense of national identity and self-confidence. These same political needs on the part of governments, political parties, armed groups, etc., accompany the making up of a past that may justify a specific present for these groups. The resulting strong perversion of history is then recalled by Rosa María Martínez de Codes when discussing the deep implications of the 2019 European Parliament Resolution on 'The Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe' and comparing these implications with the case of the Colombian FARC guerrillas in their attempt to rewrite recent Colombian history.

A second section of articles, also presented at the conference, centres on an often overlooked aspect of iconoclasm as a phenomenon. Beyond the destruction of images with its subsequent *damnatio memoriae*, changes in a given landscape, whether rural or urban, can have a direct effect on the way a given society relates both to its physical and mental environment. Wojciech Bedyński considers the case of the former German lands attributed to Poland after the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. New inhabitants, who in the majority came there from former Polish territories in the East, found themselves in a 'land without landscape', where everything needed new names and reinterpretation.

Svend Erik Larsen then considers the interdependence of event and process in iconoclasm as an intervention in collective memory. Examples from post-war Germany, revolutionary France or post-colonial India – the latter being considered through a fictional point of view – show that iconoclasm acts both as a singular event and as a moment in an ongoing historical process. Along similar lines, Xavier Costa-Guix examines the significance of recent architecture and urban demolitions in Berlin, centred upon the demolition of the Palace of the Republic (*Palast der Republik*) which occupied the site of the original Berlin Palace, or *Berliner Schloss*, the residence of the Hohenzollern dynasty between 1701 and 1918. The reconstruction, on the same site, of a replica of the eighteenth-century *Schloss*, but now intended to house the new Humboldt Forum, a museum dedicated to non-Western art, appears as a calculated and well-orchestrated operation to redefine the presence of the past through built artefacts.

Reflecting upon the interconnectedness between the destruction of a monument in Norway after the Second World War and iconoclasm, Tonje Haugland Sørensen calls upon a consideration of iconoclasm through interdisciplinary cultural analysis, which might enrich, as such, our understanding of the term and its practices, in both historical and contemporary perspectives. In her article, Katheen Gyssels addresses the touchy issue of the passing over of black, or mulatto, female heroines in the collective mind of the French Caribbean population at large. The particular example considered is that of Guadeloupe's 'female Black Jacobin', the former slave Solitude, who still appears to be permanently banned from the island's cultural heritage exhibits.

Renate Lachmann, on her part, deals with the different intertwined mnemonic layers and entangled memories of contemporary Russian society and its legitimate demand to come to terms with its own heritage. The imperialistic era, the Soviet era and the Putin-era tend to fuse into one picture. This means that essential components of Russian history seem to be banned from cultural memory. Yet, what is forgotten can be culturally reactivated: latent mnemonic components may be uncovered at a later stage, re-appearing as factors which stir up a given political and intellectual context. 'In the long run, hidden layers always turn up being "excavated"'. Finally, using instruments of geographic perception, Gideon Biger analyses the case of the holy city of Jerusalem, occupied by different religious regimes, each regime changing the landscape of the city according to its own perspective and needs.

These articles presented at Wroclaw are but a mere sampling of the complexities involved in the consideration of iconoclasm, both as a historical and as an ongoing phenomenon in our current societies. They seek to present innovative viewpoints on the subject and may, hopefully, trigger renewed and constructive debates for future conferences and scholarly publications.

About the Author

Nikita Harwich is a specialist in Latin American economic history, Latin American history of ideas and Latin American historiography. Emeritus Professor of Latin American History and Civilization, Université de Paris Nanterre, Nanterre, and former fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford, he is currently Section Chair of the Academia Europaea History & Archaeology Section. Among his numerous publications, the following recent ones can be mentioned: 'Barcelona beyond the Seas. A Catalan Enclave in Colonial Venezuela', *European Review*, 2017, Volume 25, Issue 1, pp. 69–80; 'Las guerras de Independencia en Ocumare de la Costa. Continuidad y cambios estructurales: 1800 – 1830', *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia*, 2017, no. 393, pp. 29–56; *Historia del chocolate* (Barcelona: Ediciones Pensódromo, 2018, 338 pp.); 'Turmoil in the Cocoa Groves: Slave Revolts in Ocumare de la Costa, Venezuela, 1837 and 1845', in: L. Aje and C. Armstrong (eds), *The Many Faces of Slavery. New Perspectives on*

Slave Ownership and Experiences in the Americas (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); “Enrique Morton de Keratry” y el “Dios y Federación”. Origen y permanencia de una Mitología Nacional’, *Revista Montalbán*, 2020, No. 56, pp. 465–505.