

## DR JAN GRABOWSKI - Removing Memory one Statue at a Time: Comparing Eastern Europe and Canada

---

### Transcription of questions following the lecture

*Is a printed version of your talk available?*

To be honest with you, I wrote it especially for my visit here, and was on my way here deliberating what to do with it. Probably - as being an historian who treasures his time - I will try to publish it somewhere, but probably within a few weeks it will be published in a shortened version in one of the Canadian newspapers. If you keep in touch with my hosts, I will promise to deliver the information. It will be published in one form or another quite soon.

*I was a little bit surprised in your talk how briefly you dealt with the actual situation of how the decision to remove the statue in Victoria came about. It was actually a year-long process in which the Family of Victoria [the 'City Family'] - which is an organization that represents City Council, Songhees and Esquimalt, and the local urban indigenous population - went through a lot of dialogue about this process, in which they specifically referenced the terms of the TRC, they specifically referenced the fact that the statue is front of a civic building, and that indigenous peoples have to go inside and outside that building in the course of doing basic civic duties. And then that's why the decision was made to remove it from a specific place where it's causing specific harm - to put it into a museum, where it can actually get the contextualization that you're saying is important. And to not see that in this discussion, and to have it suggested that it was actually some consensus-based model that we're moving away from towards a more contentious model, seems to be very disingenuous to the actual history that occurred in this city over the course of the summer.*

Well, you might be right here in telling me that the consequences of this particular decision will perhaps not be far-reaching. My concern is that - looking at this particular phenomenon - given the importance of the historical marker - that you might be wrong. I don't know how thorough these discussions were - from what I understand, they were not as thorough as they might have been - that's a different story, but perhaps you

know the nature of the far-reaching discussions which took place. My greatest concern is that in this speed with which these things occur, you - in terms of creating of decision-makers creating these decisions - do not understand the forces which can be released - forces which polarize the society, as I mentioned - in a way which you cannot even understand at this stage. That's why I brought up Eastern Europe here - you have an extraordinary wave of nativism and populism released by gestures which were meant to serve a good cause. And once again, you might be right that there was a process of consultation. And from what I heard from many other sources - definitely - this consultation was not far-reaching, leaving many people outside of it. And especially if you talk about the spirit of reconciliation, it's something that requires a far-reaching consensus, of course.

*I want to mention something, I live here in Victoria, and I never even heard about this consultation. And only heard about it after the statue was removed, in the newspaper. I just asked the person beside me, he hadn't heard about it either.*

*That's right, I agree with what the woman said, I never heard of it either. It was not public, and these people that were in this alleged 'Victoria Family' are unelected.*

*-That's not true.*

I propose that we have to listen to the questions.

*I've traveled around Europe and Africa, the United States and Canada. And historically, when you go to places like Ibiza, you'll see statues without their head; the Romans went in there and knocked off the Phoenician's heads, the statues remain; nobody really knows what happened. And we'll see history destroyed again and again, the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan were destroyed recently, the Acropolis was bombed, Palmyra in Syria was destroyed, we're destroying history. And if we don't know what our history is, how can we develop the future?*

*One of the problems that one of the speakers brought up was the lack of an active consultation with the community, so that, to many people it appeared that it was an attempt to assume a kind of moral superiority over the vast population of the city. And as such, that's both offensive and insulting to people. And in terms of terms of consultation, it's also disturbing that during these meetings of the family, there are no minutes taken. And when questioned why, Councillor Alto said that they're engaging in*

*another cultural dimension that is purely an oral history culture. And so she deemed that any written minutes would be culturally offensive. This is, I'm sorry, this is like playing at culture; it's not responsible or accountable governance.*

These questions, or rather statements of yours, I must say, are beyond the scope of my expertise, so I'm not going to weigh in. What I wanted to explain is simply that the removal of important historical markers carries crisis, and this is something I can vouch for, and the price to pay is high. But of course, about the internal mechanisms of decisions taken here, I cannot comment because simply this is not my area. However, I can once again draw your attention to the fact that removal of important historical markers is a revolutionary move, basically.

*Following up on just he just said, in Sofia, in Bulgaria, there's a gigantic memorial to the Russian soldier. And the Bulgarians have made no attempt to remove it. The little kids put graffiti on it all the time, it gets washed off and redecorated. And the whole of Sofia - in fact the whole of Bulgaria, has monuments and buildings to every imaginable religion, and the many, many groups that invaded Bulgaria over thousands of years. And the Bulgarians have learned to put that in their tourist promotional literature, and they benefit from it, because everybody can go and see all these different things in the Bulgarian countryside, and that's what attracts people to go there, so they accept it.*

You're entirely right. And Bulgaria is actually one of those quite exceptional, history wise places where these monuments, as you can see, tended to, for a variety of historical reasons, they tend to co-exist,

*And they make very clear descriptions of what the monuments signified; why they were put there, and by who. And people go and see that.*

*I think if we look at the situation from the point of view as just described, I tend to agree with what you're saying, because the consequences of history are not always evident. We live in a time, at this point - at this moment in time - for instance, if we were to say that the John A. Macdonald removal is a microscopic dot, and we stand back, we won't be able to see it. But collectively, I think, if every single nuance of history were put together, we would probably see a line. But we do not appreciate the context of our actions until many, many, many years later. So, in my estimation, history is replete with humanity's enormous accomplishments, but also humanity's incredible, abysmal failures. So my concern is that a wave of solipsism, where individuals believe that their view of reality is*

*the only reality and they will do whatever it takes - by verbal abuse, by physical intimidation, anarchy - to change the minds of those around them, although the others around them is the majority. So why are Canadians willing to cherry-pick events in history, and not really look at history in the fullest of contexts? We cannot be proud of everything that humanity has done, but certainly, we can use history as a road map to a better future, rather than excluding important events that have harmed many others in the past, so that we do not repeat the same mistakes. So John Macdonald is the founder of our country, we could say, and July the 1st is Dominion Day; it is Canada Day. So if you throw John A. Macdonald into the dustbin of history, the entire country becomes irrelevant. So why are we, then, celebrating Canada Day? It becomes incredibly hypocritical.*

Perhaps I should have mentioned at the beginning, before I started my lecture - once again - I feel that I should not be here in the first place, you should have a local historian talking to you - starting this debate. However, on the other hand, perhaps in terms of giving a context: In my work, now, I am faced with a wave of hate from neo-nazi, from extreme nationalistic groups, for one single reason: I am trying to shed light, through my research, on less laudatory aspects of the history of Poland, namely on the complicity of certain segments of Polish society in the extermination of Polish Jews. I'm bringing forward, let's say, not a very comfortable view, that strikes at the heart of certain national narratives. It's a very different situation that we have of course in Canada. However, the question of muzzling different points of view, of a lack of communication, a lack of willingness to listen to the other side - these are the elements that are very universal, and they testify to something I mentioned, the splintering of society; warring groups. And the reason that I'm actually here is trying to - actually I can't prevent things like this - but I basically can give a warning that even someone who wants to do something very, very good, can, in the long term scenario, can trigger reactions which will be deplorable. That's why an historian is needed to show what happened before, or what happens elsewhere, but we are talking about the extraction of memory, or the manipulation of memory.

*Thanks so much for your talk. I really appreciate the points that you've raised, especially giving us an international and continental context. We thank you for that. I'm concerned that we can't fill our classrooms with history students anymore. And at the same time, as you've said, we've moved the debates around history to a public sphere that doesn't have an academic or an intellectual context. How can we explain these two things happening at the same?*

This is actually a very, very loaded question. We are now faced with something that I would call an 'ahistorical' generation. And it's not a qualitative remark; it's not putting a moral judgement on it. It's a factual remark that we are dealing now with the first generation educated on the social media, and this a generation which requires immediate answers to questions - in other words, if you do not find the solution or answer within five minutes, you move on. So that's why I said the sense of ahistoricism inserts itself, combined with something that I find deplorable - I don't know the situation in British Columbia since education is provincially governed, and I have no idea, perhaps your province is one of the happy exceptions - but in Ontario and Quebec - which I know because I work with the textbooks - I'm advising ministries, not that I'm being listened to - but I advise the ministries of education - the situation is tragic: Basically history has been removed out of the teaching arena. There are a few markers, a few historical markers which have a meaning. One of them is John A. Macdonald, another is going to be Louis Riel. And there are a few historical markers which trigger some kind of historical - they are this anchor, somehow keeping the ship where it is - and if you push it, you can - in the context of huge historical ignorance - you are getting very strange, very strange reactions, indeed. So I share your concern.

*I have two points. One is a comment on the discussion of the consultation on the removal. There seems to be a double standard; there is not the same process of consultation when it comes to erecting statues, so I don't know why there, perhaps, would need to be a general consultation about removal - that seems to be a double standard. As you pointed out in your lecture that monuments are basically meant to honour or venerate certain figures, certain events - that's not where people learn history. So this conversation about removing a statue as a destruction of history I think is very much a false equivalency. It's really in the classroom where we learn history, and so I think this fixation on the removal of monuments is actually contributing to the problem.*

Ok. Once again, coming from the side of Eastern Europe, I can tell you that removal of these markers is indeed something - the thing is, we do construe our consciousness around not only what we are theoretically taught about, but something that we see in everyday life. If you remove these things, certain processes of thought - self-questioning - simply will not occur. It's not by accident I brought into the mix the recent transformation of the commemoration of George Washington, which for me, actually, is a sign of how things should be done, perhaps. Not that I would like to impose or suggest the American solution here, but I believe that in the case of

foundational figures, we simply have to behave with extraordinary caution, because it's like extracting two teeth at the same time; I promise you that it will have an effect on your chewing pattern, so this is just a voice of warning.

*I'm from Washington State, down in a small neighbourhood of Seattle, the Fremont district, and the neighbourhood claims that it is the centre of the universe. And it acquired, back in 1995, a 16-foot bronze sculpture by Bulgarian sculptor Emil Venkov. It was originally cast in 1988 and displayed in Czechoslovakia. An American who was visiting found it discarded in 1993 in a scrap yard and he purchased it and had it brought to Seattle, unfortunately he passed away before he did anything with it. But it has been re-installed in this quirky neighbourhood in Seattle since 1995. It's totally out of context - it's a 16-foot statue of Lenin - but it makes one pause when one comes upon it. By looking at it, a discussion comes about. Who was this guy? What is he doing here? And what is his part in history? And it is, for your information, it is for sale.*

*I'm struck by the quotes you gave us from the historian about how the stature of these people ought to be - not impeccable - but on balance, positive, which is problematic for me, because that depends on my perspective. I'm struck, for example, by the fact that you mentioned Indians, Native People, Aborigines, and I'd throw in Indigenous People. That's a history of the white perspective on the indigenous population. I'm Jewish, my mother's family's from the Ukraine. They were all murdered in a particular town near Kiev. I would have a very hard time if somebody went and put up a statue of Hitler. But if I was indigenous, I might have a similar perspective on Macdonald, and how many indigenous people are in the room? So it's a very complicated business. And I want to say I've lived here 10 years, I've lived in the States for 30, and people's attitude to indigenous people in North America is very similar, in my view, to what you're describing - which I totally appreciate - about how a lot of Polish people, especially in the political class, now view Jews. But the thing is, they're not there anymore.*

Your comment is actually very good, and I agree entirely with you. And I'm very glad you detected - I mean it is not by accident that I inserted all possible terms used to describe Aboriginal Peoples up the American Indian - it's a term still used in the United States, as you know. I entirely agree with you. If we had an aboriginal perspective, then the thrust of the argument and the weight of the condemnation lays on his shoulders due to his inhuman aboriginal policies. And the question is, is there are many conflicting points of view, and that's when you have the George Washington debate, once again. You are having here African Americans offering their perspective. It's not

the question of throwing George Washington out with the bathwater, it's a question of restoring him to our memory, in a human way, of preserving the historical record. Again, extracting him from history would not serve anyone's interest at all, it probably would create a battle that would drown the whole debate immediately. So once again, I entirely agree with you: If we had an aboriginal voice, it would be a very strong, a very condemning voice, and I think this voice should be heard loud and clear within the context of the existing monument, allowing us to understand the history of our own country.

*Thank you very much for making the effort to come. What concerns me as a member of our society, with our neighbours in the south, and the rise of extremism in Europe, is a more extreme political environment that we are giving to our children. You had alluded to [the idea that] the removal of statues of this kind may result in a more extreme - when we erase history we do lose that - perspective, because we have to know where we come from to know where we're going. And yes, I know there was consultation done for the statue, I also know that indigenous people, the First Nations People of Canada, look seven generations forward. I asked myself that question then, and now I'm asking you, do you think we're going to have an increased level of extremism in our society from this? It's the referendum, too, that we're faced with in B.C. - again, rushing through things without much thought, and what are the implications if we have a different model of voting. I'm not saying that I'm for or against whatever it is.*

Thank you for this question. The reason that I am here, is I am coming from a bloody battleground. In terms of what is going on in Eastern Europe, there are no prisoners taken. And believe me, if you assume that you are always right, and that everyone who confronts you with a different sort of story is your personal enemy, this is the beginning of the end of a civil society. We are miles away from this situation here, but coming back to Canada from Eastern Europe is a breath of fresh air, and that is why I would like this air to be preserved. That's why I'm here, to alert you, that these things carry a price which can be perhaps visible years down the road, and not necessarily here. It can trigger processes which will move - as you know, they did move - to the east. So I do entirely agree with you, and as someone with experience how memory wars go, I wanted to sound a warning.

*My understanding of what happened in Victoria was a perhaps flawed first attempt at truth and reconciliation by our municipal officials for which our mayor has apologized, I think in the paper, saying that she felt that the process wasn't as consultative. You have*

*said, and I value, and I think we all do, the preciousness of consultation and conciliation as a Canadian value, and that this is something nationwide we're embarking on - something we've never done before - with truth and reconciliation; there will be mistakes. And there's already a lot of hot feeling about what's happened here. And I think we all want to take a step backward and make it better, [and listen] to what recommendations you might have. I realize it's not for you to rule in this municipality, but you do have a vast and worldwide experience with what you've seen that has worked and what hasn't. And I think what happened here was an attempt to have a conversation with our local First Nations who feel that their history is no where; it's not taught in the schools, it's been totally obliterated, and that this was an attempt to do something that was a mark of good faith, as a first step - not that the statue would be gone forever, not that it might not be re-erected with a contextual history around it - but it was a stumble.*

Once again, you're absolutely right, and I don't know exactly what can be done to make your own discussion within your own city more somehow satisfying to everybody. My initial worry was actually the situation in Quebec, where the historical tensions are now dormant, but it doesn't take much to ignite them, with very fatal potential consequences, as we all know. And this is an area that for you seems so distant, as probably a different continent, nevertheless it is Canada, too. And if I look at these memorial battles transported from the west to the east, they can backfire in a variety of ways which I have not even dared to mention here. So once again, I don't know what kind of reconciliation processes have to be elaborated. I simply know that my plea here is to be extraordinarily cautious, and before making a step, thinking ten times about the consequences.

*I'll share an anecdote which was very valuable for my husband and myself when we were in Bremen in Germany. And it was actually one of the first experiences we had there. There's a church there, and there's a plaque or engraving that was quite anti-Semitic... There were two huge bronze doors that were constructed in the late 19th century by a famous Cologne sculptor depicting scenes from the so-called old and new testaments. The depictions of Jesus are beatific as he's being flogged by the soldiers. And there are scenes of the Jews, quote 'the Jews', who were wearing their conical hats, leering from behind, obviously having a sort a certain schadenfreude at the sufferings of Jesus, and they were clearly anti-Semitic. To remove them would be a lot of expense. But next to the doors, erected in around 1985 I think, was an explanation from the church saying: These are anti-Semitic, and we were involved in this kind of thing during the 30s and 40s, and the tone was apologetic and remorseful. And it said: These doors are, and ought to be, an*



*admonition for where we have been, and where we want to get away from; they're part of our history, but they're there. And as a poignant footnote to this, there was an exhibit inside the cathedral of synagogues, paintings of synagogues that were destroyed during the Third Reich.*

I must tell you that I am very happy to see how much of a discussion we have here, and if I have been, you know, this triggering element in the discussion, I can only hope that - I'll be going soon on my flight back to Ottawa - that you can continue, because it's something that should preoccupy all of us.

*I just wanted to say about history, there's an adage: We have to know history so we don't repeat the errors of it. And you said: Out of sight, out of mind; we tend to forget. And I think that is wonderful that this has happened, because it's bringing us all to talk about this. For example, in our Royal B.C. Museum, it's a constant, ongoing battle to keep the labels of a lot of the displays up to date, politically correct, reflecting what, today, is considered the more norm, or using the correct terminology. It has been suggested with statuary such as John A. Macdonald, that instead of removing it, we add: This was believed to be the thinking of time, or a fuller story to put it into a broader context. And I wondered how you'd feel about that kind of addition; leaving it, so it reminds us - unfortunately it offends First Nations, the people who have to go past it - but, for example, in Germany, there is a regulation that all children by the age of 16, all German students, should have visited a concentration camp. So it's a learning experience, and I wondered do you have any thoughts on how we can do it.*

Once again, as I mentioned the idea that I brought here was this George Washington commemoration, which I thought to myself - not that's it's ideal - but if George Washington the slave owner is palatable to African Americans within a new context, then I think there is room here for some kind of new educational tool, if you will. And of course, what you're discussing in Germany is at a higher stage, it's called anti-discrimination education, which in Germany, has been placed right smack in the middle of everything that they do, for very obvious reasons - that this is a very unique situation, the German situation. So once again, if this kind of educational approach has been possible in the States, despite their deep divisions surrounding George Washington, I think that this is something, at least worth thinking about.

*That was our experience, was seeing how the church had erected another plaque to explain the original one, was very powerful, and if they had just removed the doors, we*

*wouldn't have had that experience, and we had a whole different feeling about the community; that the community was open about - this is what happened then, it is not who we are today. And we couldn't have had that had they had removed it.*

Just to give you an example, this kind of historical marker, which is loaded with a very, very horrible legacy, becomes a teaching tool for the bettering of the situation in the future. There is a cathedral in southern Poland in Sandomierz, and they had, for 300 years, paintings of ritual murder committed by Jews on helpless Christian children with blood being drained without any comment, of course, it was just acquired wisdom. Unfortunately, the choice in that Polish church was not to surround it with some educational material, it was simply covered with a little cloth, it's simply not anymore on display.

*This is a more academic question, you cited him once, but a lot of your work seems to hang on the work of Jürgen Habermas. And I would just suggest that Habermas' work tends to presume the existence of social consensus and what he calls an ideal speech community, which seems to be what you're gesturing towards - that we can have this discussion about the nature of our monuments and what we're commemorating - in a situation that's vacated of real power distinctions. And that's something that's actually critically important to bring into reality - and to bring the history of that in. So I would just suggest, as a closing note, that it's critically important to remember that we are 58 years, this year, out from the end of Canada as the end of a formally apartheid state. 1960 is the year that indigenous peoples had the right to vote in this country, which is within the lifetime of my own father, and looking around, many people in this room. So we can't pretend as if this is a community that's been based on consensus up until 2018, and then all of a sudden, the decision to remove a statue has vacated that consensus. This is a community built on colonization.*

I believe that your voice actually dovetails with what we started to talk about here - utter and profound respect for every [point of view]. The lesson from it, is not to discard people who think otherwise, but rather try to include them in discussion, especially given, as you mentioned, the 1960 emancipation and Aboriginal vote. And Habermas, by the way, the reason I mentioned him, was not his consensus-based society, but his very strong opinions on memory legislation, which is very practical territory, very practical terms.