

Workshop series "Recontextualising Bismarck"

Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg - Ministry of Culture and Media, Department for Museums

Workshop 2/2021 (12.08.2021)

„What makes the monument so difficult? Examples for dealing with colonial heritage and ideas for the Bismarck monument in the Alte Elbpark“

Susanna Jorek

Toppling Statues - Decolonising Public Spaces?

Last year the world witnessed the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests erupting in the Western World that not only expressed frustration about the murder and mistreatment of Black people in the US but pointed towards ongoing discrimination of Black diasporic individuals and groups in other Western countries and underlying structural reasons. The entanglement between structural discrimination and public commemoration was highlighted when the Edward Colston (EC) statue was toppled during a BLM protests in Bristol on 7th June 2020.

EC was commemorated in Bristol throughout the city as a historical figure and narrated as a philanthropist who had contributed his wealth to charity and hence contributed to the prosperity of the city. However, as a slave trader, he had gained his wealth from the trafficking of human beings and the enslavement of Africans during the so-called Transatlantic Slave Trade (TST). This legacy and the gradual disclosure of it made EC a controversial figure and contestation against his public commemoration grew.

There were two main reasons why the statue was increasingly contested, firstly because it glorified EC and failed to mention his involvement in the trafficking of enslaved Africans. According to the M Shed Museum in Bristol, he was responsible for trafficking 84,000 people, including 12,000 children, while 19,000 people died on his ships on the middle passage (M Shed 2021). As a Bristol MP he also ‘campaigned to keep the slave trade legal and on

favourable terms for traders' (ibid.), securing that the trafficking of humans remained profitable for him and his peers. As many people involved in the TST during that time, he gained enormous wealth through trafficking of human beings and therefore was able to leave £71,000 to charity when he died in 1721 (ibid.). This sum, which today approximately amounts to over £16 million, not only shows his 'generosity' but also the enormous wealth he gained from trading in humans.

A second criticism was levelled at the statue because when it was put up in 1895, it was not based on a democratic vote or because of his important historical contribution, but because a small group of merchants wanted to cement their role and influence in the city and had a clear political agenda behind putting up the statute. This group, the merchant venturers, were and still are highly influential and secretive society of traders who interfered in the politics of the city throughout their existence. John Arrowsmith, one member of the merchant venturers campaigned for putting up the statue of EC and tried to find sponsors but eventually failed. The statue was eventually paid for from one single anonymous source, and it is very likely that the source was the merchant venturers or even John Arrowsmith himself (Dresser 2020). It is believed that the statue was erected to 'big up' Bristol as well as glorify the role and influence of the merchant venturers in a time of declining empire and increasing class upheaval throughout Europe. This contradicts the idea that statues are erected 'naturally' and highlights that there is often a political agenda behind it: securing power and power relations, preventing social distortion or changes to societal orders, perpetuating narratives, and 'naturalising' orders. Ever since the statue was put up there was debate and contestation, however the Festival of the Sea in 1996 led to a wider debate from Bristolians and growing opposition of the public commemoration of EC. Local artists and activists, many of whom were and are of Afro-Caribbean descent, increasingly criticised the statue, such as the painting by late Tony Forbes: *Sold Down the River* (1999) that was commissioned by the M Shed museum and depicts the author enchained by the EC statue floating on the river Avon. Other groups that have opposed EC are the Countering Colston group, the Bristol Radical History Group and finally the BLM protest of 2020.

It can be said that there was an increasing public criticism of the statue which finally culminated in the toppling of it, not only because EC was associated with pain and trauma of those who were enslaved and their descendants, but also because it showed that monuments and statues perpetuate narratives and influenced how we define ourselves as a society. The display of historical figures in public often leads to the glorification of their achievements but lacks

contextualisation or scrutiny. It hides the entanglements of wealth and power, downplays contributions of others, overwrites other histories, and magnifies contributions of some. Particularly in compromised spaces such as statues the default mode is glorification without providing critical examination. In some cases, statues are even erected by the people that are depicted or their families. This shows how wealth, power and public commemoration are intertwined.

The BLM protests of 2020 have increasingly led to calls for decolonisation from inside and outside of public institutions. Decolonisation can be understood as a critical lens to examine the past and the present, as well as the past in the present. It holds the underlying assumption that if we do not carefully scrutinise remnants of the past, we will continue to produce inequalities in the present, and more so the same 'victims'. It highlights that monuments and statues, as well as museums, collections and exhibitions are not 'natural' as they sometimes seem to be but have been selected in a certain period of time with a certain agenda and *zeitgeist*; and are eclectic, biased, and interpretative. In particular during colonialism and enslavement, mindsets need to be carefully scrutinised and re-examined as they usually aim to narrate the grand achievements of Western figures while legitimising or ignoring the fate of others, even concerning the suffering from over 400 years of enslavement. Statues create a certain narrative and perpetuate how and what a society should remember about the past. They therefore influences our understanding of who we are as a society, what and who we value and which stories we want to tell. This *modus* of statues makes it necessary to examine statues of the past carefully in order to prevent creating the same mindset and structures in the present.

There are two important questions that can serve as a departing point for critically examining statues: **Who set up the statue and why?**

One year after the toppling of the EC statue, it is now on display in the M Shed museum in Bristol where the city hopes to generate public debate and conversation and democratically decide the fate of the statue and its empty plinth. This is an attempt to democratise a process that has been decided by a small group of people in the past. However, it also shows some backlash and particularly in the first few weeks after the opening of the display it felt highly politicised because not everybody agreed with the idea of toppling a statue and putting it on display in a museum. Some felt their own history (the narratives they preferred) had been taken away.

Literature

Dresser, Madge (2020): Colston Revisited. <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/colston-revisited/>, last checked 29/06/20.

M Shed (2021): <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/m-shed/whats-on/the-colston-statue-what-next/>, last checked 13/08/21.