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Bygone!

Sébastien Tremblay

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Bygone!

Following an unwanted pandemic-related long absence, I finally had the chance to travel back home to Montréal during the summer of 2022. Little did I know—and this says a lot about work-life balance—I was bringing Reinhart Koselleck with me in my luggage. After years of working on monuments, symbols, and analyzing his thoughts on memory, I saw him in every equestrian monument and could not help but notice temporal layers all around me. Yet it is in political debates regarding Canadian coloniality that I found myself discussing with Koselleck the most.

Recent uproar following the unveiling of Indigenous mass graves in Canada was a reconfirmation of the country's colonial genocidal past.¹ It was also quite peculiar to read coverage of reconciliation and amends when the state of Canada, the entity of Canada, is still a present-day colonial project.² Obscuring coloniality in the present by discussing violence in the past is a kind of Canadian national sport. It starts in schoolbooks and permeates the dominant settler society.³ Yet some episodes of memory politics remind us that political pundits are not necessarily ready to deal with the lionization of white settler heroism, joining in as tenors to an increasing choir of political actors in the Euro-American world denouncing “wokeism” and “cancel culture.”⁴

Critiques of colonialism, some say, seek to erase the past, vandalize history, and—the ultimate historical crime—anachronistically judge the past. Presented as a form of banishment (*bygone!*), direct actions against concrete colonial representation, against its casting into stone, are dismissed and denigrated as emotional and iconoclastic reactions, as uncivilized, moralistic, and irrational acts of violence. From the protest pushing the statue of Edward Colston into Bristol Harbour to the toppling of a statue of John A. Macdonald in Montréal, I agree with Melanie J. Newton that acts of vandalism, of destruction, are actually democratic speech acts.⁵ They are also connected to what Koselleck framed as *politische Sinnlichkeit*, the plurality of history, and the importance of the so-called “material turn.”⁶ Koselleck might have been surprised to travel to Canada after his death, but as a way of celebrating his centennial, his understanding of the past, and the way recent literature has reinterpreted his writings, I want to suggest that it is possible to leave Bielefeld for Montréal via Bristol.⁷ *Bygone* (!), I argue, is the opposite of destruction, of banishment. It is a new beginning, questioning the casting into stone of one narrative while excavating fragments of memory from the sediments of historical experience.

Petrified Colonialism

John A. Macdonald was Canada's first prime minister from 1878 and 1891, popularly remembered by the dominant settler society as one of the Confederation's heroes.⁸ In recent years, following decades of Indigenous activism, an anticolonial appraisal of his legacy also highlights his role as an architect of Canada's genocidal atrocities, namely his role in the creation of Canada's residential school system and the so-called "Indian Act," a piece of legislation at the core of Canada's colonialism.⁹ Amidst antiracial protests in 2020, activists and scholars also pointed out to his role in anti-immigration policies.

During a demonstration demanding for the Montréal's police to be defunded, and echoing demands across the continent following the murder of George Floyd, protesters unbolted the statue of Macdonald by sculptor George Edward Wade from a monument on the Place du Canada, a public square at the center of the metropolis. Falling from its socle, the head of the statue fell as demonstrators cheered, a scene reminiscent of events in Bristol in 2020, when activists threw a statue of slaveholder Edward Colston into the river. The events in Montréal were highly mediatized, with Quebec premier François Legault stating, "Whatever one may think of John A. Macdonald, destroying a monument like this is unacceptable. Racism must be fought but destroying parts of our history is not the answer."¹⁰ Other former Quebec politicians underlined that even if they were *indépendantistes* and criticized Macdonald for his views on French Canadians, it was not up to "a group of protesters" to decide whether a statue should be destroyed.

Urban Interaction and politische Sinnlichkeit

Koselleck once wrote that "monuments, set to last, testify to impermanence more than anything else."¹¹ Motionless, they become agents of oblivion. Parts of the urban landscape, extravagant pedestals for pigeons, they are static. Indeed, Koselleck continues, "numerous monuments of the past century are not only covered by patina [...] they have fallen into oblivion, and if they are cared for and visited, it is rarely only to redeem the original political meaning." So not only do they petrify and canonize one experienced aspect of memory, they also relegate other fragments or events to the vaults of the archive. However, this would imply that every passerby is included in the dominant part of society that erected the monument.

Here we need to push Koselleck's thoughts a little bit further. Like cultural memory, the Macdonald monument on Place du Canada is collective and sensual.¹² On their way to work (Place du Canada is situated in the Downtown area), snapping a photo for their own private collection, or just walking by, people enter into relation with the statue, with Macdonald, with his legacy, with what is known of him. For some, glimpsing the monument, a standardized part of their commute, would translate into indifference. The statue can be received and interpreted as part of the country's past. Routinely passing by, this indifference would divide the past from the present, situating the prime minister in a bygone era of "early" Canadian history. *Bygone* the past! For those who do not have the luxury or privilege of pushing Canadian colonial violence to the oubliettes of history, the presence of the monument was a constant reminder. However, canonizing one of Canada's architects of genocide was not the only act of violence. For anti-settler-colonial activists, this could mean being annoyed, offended, or angry; an act of memory translated into emotional outbursts of solidarity with Indigenous critiques. For Indigenous inhabitants or passersby, the monument was a token of the petrification of their oppression in the present, a refusal to relegate coloniality to the past.

Politische Sinnlichkeit and memory are connected through a conception of time (past and present).¹³ Koselleck refers to these multiple temporalities and new layers of meaning in his analysis of monuments. Beyond their original considerations, Koselleck underlines how static monuments diachronically intervene in the present. He writes, "monuments that long outlive their first purpose can be preserved in a community of historical tradition, but even then their expressive power changes gradually."¹⁴ Therefore, by intervening, contesting, and eventually destroying the monument, activists (settler or Indigenous) re-periodized the monument. *Bygone* the murky multilayered relation between past and present! The broken statue and the empty socle remind of the present and imagined an anticolonial future. The intervention is not only an act of speech, but an act of memory. The fact that populist politicians either vowed to repair the monument or put it elsewhere demonstrates settlers' desire for temporal and colonial immobility.¹⁵ It also underscores their claim to monopolize memory, ignoring the plurality of history and framing the past exclusively through their social hegemony. This approach completely misses the multisensory aspects of history channeled through monuments as they passively intervene in the urban landscape.¹⁶

Memory in the Plural

Koselleck also emphasized that history is written in the plural. One of his concerns regarding monuments was indeed the impossibility of total representation.¹⁷ Taking for example an episode during his incarceration in a prisoner-of-war camp at the end of the Second World War, he wrote that some memories, “lava memories,” are impossible to cast into stone because they are impossible to transfer; they are congealed and beyond meaning. Lava memories, like traumatic experience, are simply *there* as petrified magma, and defy interpretation.¹⁸ Monuments, Koselleck tells us, will never succeed as total representations of the past, because they cannot be shaped from the igneous rocks of all possible experiences.¹⁹ Following Koselleck, the generational trauma of Canadian genocidal and colonial violence defies a transfer of meaning; it cannot be cast into stone in the same monument as the [denial of colonialism](#)²⁰ of white settlers. Ironically, most of Eastern Canada, the “Canadian Shield”, is made of igneous rock, a fact we spent more time analyzing in school than Macdonald’s colonial legacy. *Bygone*, said those who break down the immutable rock of memory! This political act of destruction is an intervention. It is not “erasing history”; it intervenes. The act of destroying stone breaks the singularity of one experience and forever links it to another narrative, the specter of the plurality of history. Rebuilt or not, the monument, the statue, and the socle remain bonded with another perspective, another experience, another history. *Bygone* is not a destructive impulse to erase the past, it is a creative yearning for change. It connects the singularity of the immutable with the plurality of haunting alternatives.²¹

It is still unclear whether the statue will return. Montreal’s mayor, herself a museologist, has clashed with Quebec’s premier regarding the future of the monument, imagining other possibilities for creating a space of dialogue on the Place du Canada.²² By its absence, by its destruction, or by talking about the intervention, the object leaves another mark in political consciousness, surviving through time.²³ Other statues of the former prime minister became entwined in similar discourses across the country, inspired by the toppled statue in Montréal, just like other toppled statues had haunted the mind of journalists covering the act on the Place du Canada.²⁴ Even if restored, a statue of Macdonald would no longer be a simple statue, it could not remain a singular representation of settler history. By breaking stability, and as a provocation, *bygone* (!) is a forced transition, an act of commemoration. Even if restored, the statue would now remain a reminder of injustice, the rebuilt version of a mnemonic intervention.

Neither the first nor the last symbolic action, impulses to destroy mark a new beginning for cultural memory in Canada. As I found out this summer, Koselleck's writings on monuments, *politischer Totenkult*, and *politische Sinnlichkeit* can help us understand the potential of memory conflicts and offer productive interpretations of iconoclasm without falling prey to the reactionary sirens of "cancel culture."

Dr. Sébastien Tremblay is a postdoctoral research associate and lecturer at the Europa-Universität Flensburg. Born in Montreal/Tiohtià:ke, he obtained his doctorate from the Graduate School of Global Intellectual History in Berlin in 2020. He has published several articles, book reviews, and blog posts in French, English and German. His first monograph, *A Badge of Injury. The Pink Triangle as Global Symbol of Memory* is due to be published later in 2023 with De Gruyter. In constant conversation with Koselleck, Sébastien paired up with Margrit Pernau in 2020, opening a dialogue between the history of concepts and affective memories, offering new ways to link experiences, emotions, and practices while underlining the limits of communication and collective memory. DOI:

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Email: sebastien.tremblay@uni-flensburg.de

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¹² Reinhart Koselleck, “Politische Sinnlichkeit und mancherlei Küste,” in *Politische Inszenierung im 20. Jahrhundert. Zur Sinnlichkeit der Macht*, ed. Sabine R. Arnold, Christian Fuhrmeister, and Dietmar Schiller. Wien et al.: Böhlau, 1998, 25–34.

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