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The Racial Offense Objection to Confederate Monuments: A Reply to Timmerman

Travis Timmerman presents an admirably clear argument for removing Confederate monuments. In this rebuttal I deny its first and fifth premises.

Timmerman sees his first premise,

- (1) If the existence of a monument M unavoidably harms an undeserving group, then there's strong moral reason to end the existence of M ,¹

as an application of a more general, "exceedingly plausible" principle:

If x unavoidably harms morally considerable beings who don't deserve to be harmed, then there's strong moral reason to prevent x .

Timmerman sees causing undeserved harm as a strong, although defeasible, reason not to do something. Counterexamples to this principle are abundant, however. Suppose you're basking in the glory that comes with being the starting point guard, but a young Stephen Curry transfers to your school and tries out for your team. Curry's displacing you as point guard makes your life worse, and you didn't deserve that harm, but obviously he has no moral reason not to do so. Or imagine some classmates were distressed by your political opinions—this fact alone wouldn't give you a strong reason to abandon your views or censor yourself. In these counterexamples the innocent parties have been harmed, but not wronged, since they had no moral claim against the harming parties not to be harmed by them in these ways.

The point holds with monuments. Surely some Chinese people feel bad when considering Mongolia's massive, recently-erected monument to Genghis Khan, whose dynasty killed about half of all Chinese (60 million).² But hurt Chinese feelings wouldn't justify removing the Khan monument, for Chinese offense has no moral claim on Mongolia's heritage landscape. The University of Ghana recently removed a statue of (the racist?) Mohandas Gandhi, which may have insulted some Indians, but that hypothetical offense would be irrelevant to Ghana's monumentary rights, too.³ So whether we're talking about erecting or removing monuments, a bare appeal to the harm of racial offense is insufficient.

In my essay, I supplied a "tribal rightist" standard for racist monuments generally. Unlike the Mongolian/Chinese and Ghanaian/Indian cases, black and Southern white Americans should (unless preferring a civic divorce) seriously attempt to forge a new people, analogous to how an interracial married couple from racist families should (unless they prefer to divorce) try to forge a new family. So it's not racism or racist offense as such that makes a Confederate monument problematic, but its potential faithlessness to American blacks, or at least the subset of American blacks invested in being compatriots with Southern whites.

Are Confederate monuments faithless in this way? Remove race from the equation for a moment. At least 647,000 Northerners were killed or injured in the Civil War.⁴ Do, or did, Confederate monuments wrong the descendants or communities of Northern whites by betraying tribal good faith? Maybe. If the monument in question specifically gloried in Union casualties (imagine a statue of Lee sitting atop a pile of Yankee skulls), or if the monument was used only to reinvigorate the Confederacy, then the said monument would be a good candidate for Northern complaint: the aforementioned Battle of Liberty Place monument, which referred to reconstructionist forces as “usurpers,” is a plausible real-life example. Many Confederate monuments passed this test, however, and managed to honor Confederate figures and soldiers without antagonizing Northerners harmed by the war. Reciprocally, Northerners generally countenanced Confederate monuments because they were seen as beneficial for rehabilitating Southern pride, which they saw as essential to healing a divided nation.

By the same rationale, it is consistent with being a good compatriot to black Americans to preserve Confederate monuments as long as the monuments in question do not demand an anti-black interpretation (as the BLP monument once did, by explicitly calling for “white supremacy”) and are reasonably thought to be used to venerate white Southern culture heroes. For again, monuments, like books and family portraits, can have multiple meanings or uses, some wrongly harmful and some not, and the fact that there is a mainstream anti-black interpretation or use does not morally trump other interpretations or uses.⁵ (As leftists remind rightists whenever accused of being un-American for critiquing America,⁶ the mere fact that a compatriot interprets an act *you* see as loyal as disloyal doesn’t entail that you are betraying trust.⁷)

Finally, Timmerman’s premise (5),

There are no countervailing reasons to preserve public Confederate monuments that are equally strong or stronger than the moral reasons to remove them,

is answered by recognizing at least two reasons to maintain monuments (assign books at public schools,⁸ display art in public museums,⁹ etc.) that precipitate racist (sexist, etc.) offense. The first concerns cultural continuity. Monuments are an important form of memorialization, which in the civic case is like a people hanging family photos on the national walls. A multiracial state’s peoples use memorials to build cohesion, inspire pride, and pass down a sense of their history, just as parents do through photos not just of their present families, but the *families they came from*.

Given the facts about American itinerancy and (geographic or racial) interbreeding, in time there will be few people left who feel any attachment to Confederate monuments, at which point their removal will be unproblematic.¹⁰ That point has not arrived. This leads us to our second reason for maintaining the Confederate monuments that pass the tribal rightist standard. The more interracial social distrust, the more likely Confederate monuments will irritate black Americans. But it’s just as obvious that removalism in such a context is likely to be taken as provocative in the other direction: the more culture heroes of Southern whites are equated with Nazis, and the more their monuments are torn down in the manner done to conquered peoples, the less interest they will have in a multiracial future (which, arguably, explains the Charlottesville rally).¹¹ That’s why Nelson Mandela’s strategy of adding monuments to black culture-heroes to the South African heritage landscape, rather than removing monuments to whites, seems advisable for Americans whether interracial trust is running high *or* low.

¹ Travis Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” this volume (*italics in the original*).

² *Wikipedia*, “Destruction under the Mongol Empire,” accessed July 2, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destruction_under_the_Mongol_Empire.

³ Jason Burke, “‘Racist’ Gandhi Statue Banished from Ghana University Campus,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/ghana-academics-petition-removal-mahatma-gandhi-statue-african-heroes>. (Gandhi apparently said some disparaging things about blacks when he was a South African.)

⁴ “American Civil War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed June 21, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War.

⁵ Many black Americans appear to agree. The most recent major opinion polls on Confederate monuments were conducted in August of 2017. According to a Huffpost/YouGov poll, about 47% of black Americans think that Confederate monuments are more symbolic of “racism” than “Southern pride,” while 17% answered the converse, and 35% answered “not sure.” About half of black Americans polled approved of removing Charlottesville’s Lee statue (this poll was taken shortly after the “Unite the Right” rally discussed in both main essays), while 11% disapproved and 40% had no opinion. See Ariel Edwards-Levy, “Polls Find Little Support For Confederate Statue Removal—But How You Ask Matters,” *HuffPost*, Aug. 23, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/confederate-statues-removal-polls_us_599de056e4b05710aa59841c. In an NPR/PBS poll conducted around the same time that asked people whether Confederate statues should “remain as historical symbols” or “be removed because they are offensive to some people,” black Americans responded 44% in favor of maintaining the monuments as historical symbols and 40% in favor of removing them because they are offensive (<http://maristpoll.marist.edu/nprpbs-newshourmarist-poll-results-on-charlottesville/>).

⁶ For instance, many on the right felt that the NFL players who protested police violence by “taking a knee” during the national anthem were being unpatriotic, while leftists saw the same demonstration as affirming American values, e.g.: Conor Friedersdorf, “Kneeling for Life and Liberty Is Patriotic,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 25, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/09/kneeling-for-life-and-liberty-is-patriotic/540942/>.

⁷ I cannot delve into the question of our responsibility to accommodate irrational outrage for the sake of civic cohesion here, but I do think we must take the psychological tolerances of peoples as realistically and non-judgmentally as we do ecological constraints on development.

⁸ E.g., the case of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, which many people interpret as racist or at least too racially offensive to assign in schools.

⁹ Antwaun Sargent, “To Fight Racism Within Museums, They Need to Stop Acting Like They’re Neutral,” *Vice*, May 21, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/pavpkn/to-fight-racism-within-museums-they-need-to-stop-acting-like-theyre-neutral.

¹⁰ The average American moves 11 times in his or her lifetime, so descendants of Old South stock are likely to grow up elsewhere, and lose their Southern white identities. Adam Chandler, “Why Do Americans Move So Much More Than Europeans?,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 21, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/10/us-geographic-mobility/504968/>.

¹¹ Indeed, iconoclasm on these terms will serve as a cautionary example for any nation contemplating diversifying its population or its political power, for very few natives would allow in foreign populations if doing so meant losing the ability to memorialize their own ancestors and culture heroes.