Transforming problematic commemorations through vandalism

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, progressive activists around the world have fought to remove “problematic” commemorations – typically, monuments commemorating and honoring individuals responsible for injustice, or even unjust events. Many of these problematic commemorations are vandalized before they are eventually removed. In this essay, I consider how the vandalism of problematic commemoration can transform the public honoring of a target, to a public repudiation or humiliation of that target. I discuss four obstacles to realizing the transformative potential of vandalism, and how they may be mitigated or overcome.

Introduction
In recent years, progressive activists around the world have fought to remove “problematic” commemorations – typically, monuments commemorating and honoring individuals responsible for injustice, or even unjust events.¹ The process of getting problematic commemorations removed are often long-drawn, not least because many of them receive special protections from heritage or preservationist laws. Until problematic commemorations are eventually removed, it is common to see some forms of vandalism of them – including defacement, partial destruction, or modifications. Indeed, vandalism appears to be among the earliest responses to such commemorations. Vandalism, however, has a bad reputation. Vandals are often regarded and treated as ignorant or reckless about the value of that which they vandalize, or as antisocial or radical (or radicalized) individuals who do not care about the values that a community purportedly holds. In public discourse, it is typically sufficient to dismiss activists’ political actions – and the messages they wish to convey – by describing them as vandalism.

Two opposing views about how we should treat problematic commemorations dominate public discussions – to remove or to preserve them. Elsewhere, I suggest that these views may be understood, respectively, as undergirded by two demands – to protect the self-respect of members of certain groups (especially those which were historically oppressed or marginalized), and to facilitate learning from our past mistakes. I argue that vandalism can, in principle, satisfy the two demands. Vandalized commemorations can mitigate or even eliminate uncertainties and insecurities about whether a community genuinely respects members of certain groups as equals.
By leaving the problematic commemorations in place, vandalism can also serve as constant and prominent reminders about our past mistakes (Lim 2020). I suggested that the vandalism of problematic commemorations “can transform a tainted commemoration from a public honoring of an inappropriate target, into a public repudiation of its being an appropriate target or even into a public humiliation of the target” (2020, 208; my emphasis).

In this essay, I provide an elaboration of how such a transformation of problematic commemorations can occur. First, I discuss four obstacles to transformation. They concern the (i) standing of vandals within the community, (ii) illegibility of vandalism as protest, (iii) common view that what is part of our heritage is positive, and (iv) complaint against “ugly” public artifacts. Vandalism does not, on its own, bring about the transformation of problematic commemorations. Next, I outline the steps that may be taken to overcome these obstacles. Among other things, the standing of vandals and the status of vandalism must be rehabilitated, and there must be concerted public educational efforts to reconceptualize heritage and public spaces. I conclude with a brief discussion of the commemoration of Qin Hui and Lady Wang in China, which suggests that the obstacles to transformation are not, in principle, insurmountable.

A quick clarification is necessary. In this essay, I am not seeking to rehabilitate vandalism, simpliciter, as a type of content-neutral political action. I focus only on those acts of vandalism which are directed at problematic commemorations. In this way, my discussions here do not open the door to defending, for instance, racists who vandalize commemorations of members of minority groups. This restriction is connected to the two demands which are served by transformative vandalism – racist (and other hateful) vandalism neither protects self-respect nor facilitates learning from our past mistakes. My focus on problematic commemorations also means that I am not, here, concerned with damages to or destruction of property that sometimes occurs during protests.

Obstacles

The vandalism of problematic commemorations has several good things going for it. It indicates a heterogeneity of views, within a community, about the target of commemoration. At the very least, it declares that not everyone within the community agrees that the person or event in concern is worthy of honor or commemoration. It also conveys its message in a way that is as accessible, public, and prominent as the problematic commemoration itself (Lai 2020, 6-7; Lim 2020, 207-208). Compared to the common strategies of adding contextualizing plaques or counter-commemorations beside problematic commemorations, vandalism (and the messages it sends) cannot be easily ignored or misunderstood (Lim 2020, 208). With these in view, it is tempting to think that vandalism, on its own, secures the transformation of problematic commemorations from the public honoring to the public repudiation of a particular person or event. This is, however, a mistake. To see this, consider the four following obstacles that vandalism faces in fulfilling its transformative potential.

First, vandals are typically regarded and treated as people who are ignorant about the value of that which they vandalize (Gamboni 1997, 18-19). Furthermore, vandals are typically presented as
ant-social or extremist individuals who simply do not care about the values that the community holds. By being regarded as deviant or transgressive in these ways, vandals are not judged to be persons who are (or who represent) members of good standing within the community. Because of this, they are not regarded as having the requisite standing within the community to speak on behalf of the community, or sometimes more drastically, to speak about political matters at all. The refrain is all-too-commonly heard that vandals are not part of us, and do not represent what we stand for. They are often regarded and treated as exemplars of who we are not, and of how things should not be done. Because of this, their speech and actions may be – and often are – easily dismissed.

Second, and relatedly, vandalism – as an act – is typically stigmatized. It is often regarded as a wanton or gratuitous action that does not convey any particular message (or any message that we need to pay attention to). Vandalism often implies “blindness, ignorance, stupidity, baseness or lack of taste” (Gamboni 1997, 18). Given this view of vandalism, it may not be immediately and always legible as an act of protest or even as an act of communication. Indeed, it is common to hear from public officials and political commentators that, regardless of what activists wish to protest against or convey, vandalism is not the right way to do so. Such statements are often undergirded by the view that political discourse and conduct has to be civil rather than uncivil (Lai 2020, 9-10). Indeed, vandals are often urged to engage in civil dialogue with other members of the community. In some extreme cases, the messages that activists intend to send through the vandalism of problematic commemorations may not even receive any uptake within the community. Their actions are instead understood as senseless crime, as simply doing the wrong thing (Calhoun 2016, 36-38).

Third, there is a pervasive view of heritage as something positive. According to this view, our heritage is something that we should regard as good and be proud of. As Erich Matthes argues, this view results in at least two moral problems. Individuals who hold this view may disown or downgrade the importance of historical injustices. While they recognize these injustices as negative aspects of our past, they refuse to incorporate these injustices into our heritage. The injustices are not regarded as important to our trajectory in becoming, or as being constitutive of, the people we are. Even worse, some of those who hold this view of positive heritage may end up embracing historical injustice (Matthes 2018, 90-94). For instance, a significant portion of people in the United Kingdom are, alarmingly, proud of the British empire – despite the evils that were committed during colonialization (Dahlgreen 2014). This attitude is not unique to the British. Pride in the “founding” of nations is commonplace, despite the general recognition that they involved the exploitation, displacement or even massacres of indigenous populations. The pervasiveness of this positive view of heritage is an obstacle. Individuals who hold this view are likely to reject (or at least resist) activists’ claims that we should regard some aspects of our heritage as negative and that we should denounce them. Even if vandalism were properly understood as a form of protest, it may nonetheless not be accepted.

Finally, there is a common complaint that vandalized artifacts are “eyesores”. This complaint is heightened especially when the vandalism contains expletives, or if it results in problematic commemorations being damaged. The underlying idea appears to be that public artifacts (including
buildings) ought to be beautiful rather than ugly. At first glance, this may seem to be a trivial concern. However, complaints and controversies about the ugliness of public artifacts have shaped the construction or organization of public spaces, and, at times, even government policies (Hyde 2019). I leave the specification of the normative force of such complaints to another time. For now, we may say that these complaints constitute an obstacle to the vandalism of problematic commemorations.

The transformative potential of vandalism has to be seen, and tempered, in light of these obstacles. The transformation of problematic commemorations is not secured by vandalism alone. In contexts where these obstacles are not mitigated or overcome, the vandalism of problematic commemorations may not only fail to be transformative, but may even be counter-productive to activists’ goals. Thus, we should be cautious about claiming in an unqualified sense that vandalism can “undo” or alter the messages conveyed by problematic commemorations or the harms to which those commemorations contribute. Before proceeding, a quick clarification is important. My claim that vandalism alone does not secure the transformation of problematic commemorations, is distinct from the claim that vandalism is an appropriate communication – as a form of counter-speech – to the messages conveyed by problematic commemorations. The vandalism of problematic commemorations can be communicative without being transformative. 4

Remedies

We must not be led by the obstacles presented in the earlier section to a dim view of the value of vandalism as a way of dealing with – transforming – problematic commemorations. There are various ways through which we can mitigate or overcome the obstacles. I outline some general suggestions in this section. How these suggestions are to be realized in specific circumstances, and how the goods secured by these suggestions are to be weighed up against more “local” concerns, will be the task of future work.

First, the status of vandals may be rehabilitated. We should avoid relying on caricatures or extreme descriptions of vandals in public, and especially in the media. This may be helped if the vandals receive support from other activists and civic organizations that are regarded as possessing the requisite standing within the community (Lim 2020, 210-211). These individuals and groups may declare their support of the vandals, as a way of addressing the problem that the vandals lack the requisite standing to speak within and on behalf of the community. When these statements are made public, there is some assurance that the vandals are in fact part of us, and may even speak for us. The obstacles may be further mitigated, or even eliminated, if the state or public officials refrain from describing vandals as lacking the requisite standing, or even by explicitly declaring that they possess such standing. In some cases, such assurance may be secured by even the simple fact of presenting the names of the vandals and stating their goals in neutral ways, rather than as nameless outliers whose motives are either unclear or ludicrous. Note that the actions of these individual, collective and state actors do not – and need not – imply their endorsement of acts of vandalism. Indeed, it is possible for them to affirm the standing of vandals within the community, while at the same time rejecting their actions. Here, some helpful parallels may be drawn with the
protection of citizens’ right to free speech. While we may disagree or even denounce the contents of some citizens’ speech, we do not deny that they have the standing to speak.

Second, the status of vandalism as an act may also be augmented. One way is for representative individual, collective and state actors to support the act as a legitimate protest against, or response to, problematic commemorations. As already discussed, this support can come in the form of public statements – this time, explicitly endorsing the acts of vandalism. This support is strongest if the state allows the problematic commemoration to stay vandalized, and when it protects the vandalized commemoration from private efforts – especially by groups comprising individuals belonging to groups of former oppressors – to restore its appearance (Lim 2020, 211). If the state does not wish to permit illegal acts of vandalism, it can invite activists to vandalize (or, more generally, modify) problematic commemorations. Such endorsement may go a long way – not only for the specific act of vandalism that the state invites, but perhaps also for other unsanctioned acts of vandalism. If the state has a practice of inviting activists to vandalize problematic commemorations, unsanctioned acts of vandalism would be more readily legible as acts of protest, or at least as potentially meaningful responses to problematic commemorations.

Two further responses are available, both of which may be included in public educational efforts. One is to broaden our understanding of what counts as civil. For instance, Kimberley Brownlee argues that the communicativeness of actions – including political acts of disobedience – is a crucial component of their civility (2012). If vandals take steps to ensure that their vandalism is communicative rather than evasive (Lim 2020, 209-210), their actions could even be in some respects be considered civil. This reconceptualization may be bolstered by recognizing that our ideas of what counts as civil discourse or actions have changed significantly over the years, and are always shifting in response to political pressures and power dynamics, among others (Bejan 2017). Being reconceptualized as a civil mode of engagement may well weaken the view of vandalism as a senseless crime.

Alternatively, and if reconceptualizing vandalism as civil action seems implausible, we may wish to rehabilitate our perceptions of uncivil and radical action, including uncivil disobedience. For instance, Candice Delmas argues that insofar as uncivil action can also be principled – morally or politically motivated – responses that seek to mitigate the injustices within a society, they may also be justified forms of action (2018). This rehabilitation may be bolstered by remembering that even celebrated political movements at times include and rely on uncivil actions. On this issue, efforts made to “de-sanitize” our history textbooks and museums may prove to be helpful – a clear view of our past can help with seeing the present clearly. A broad recognition of the fact that even uncivil or radical action could, in some circumstances, be justified and bring about progressive change, could contribute to rendering vandalism legible as an act of protect, despite its uncivil or radical character.

Third, and as Erich Matthes argues, we should find space to regard historical injustices and mistakes as part of our heritage (2018, 94-101). In practice, we may put into place educational reforms that allow us to not only value the positive aspects of our past, but also to own up to its
negative aspects. We should try to ensure, for instance, that our history textbooks and museums, among others, not only present our victories but also our failures and mistakes – and without sugar-coating the latter. That is, we should aim to have more accurate and extensive historical education. If we succeed on this front, it becomes easier for us to accept that we can (and often should) critically engage with negative aspects of our past. This could pave the way for the general acceptance of vandalism as a way of making visible, and as a form of protest against, historical injustices (especially those which still have ongoing ramifications).

Finally, similar education efforts may be made to highlight how concerns about the aesthetic quality of public spaces have shifted over the years, and, more generally, how those aesthetic concerns are often connected to political concerns. These could help to open the possibility that things that used to be regarded as ugly could nonetheless one day be regarded as beautiful. Or, even if their aesthetic features cannot be rehabilitated, the possibility is nonetheless open for them to be regarded as important to a community’s past. On this issue, the example of our changing attitudes towards illegal graffiti in our neighborhoods could be instructive – even if many of them are initially rejected as eyesores, some of them eventually are grudgingly accepted by the community. Some of them are even celebrated as crucial and unique aspects of a neighborhood, as indications of their local histories and cultures. The possibility, then, is open that at least some vandalized commemorations could eventually be accepted or even celebrated in a similar way – rather than immediately cleaned up or restored to their original appearances.6

Conclusion
As we have seen, while vandalism can in fact transform a problematic commemoration from a public honoring of an inappropriate target into a public repudiation of its being an appropriate target or even into a public humiliation of the target, such transformation occurs only if several obstacles are overcome. To reiterate: vandals need to be regarded as having the requisite standing to speak; vandalism needs to be rendered legible as a form of protest; critical modes of engaging with the past need to be generally accepted; the potential ugliness of vandalized commemorations needs to be accommodated. If these obstacles are not overcome or at least mitigated, the vandalism of problematic commemorations is unlikely to fulfil its transformative potential.

By way of concluding, I would like to briefly discuss the commemoration of Qin Hui and his wife, Lady Wang, in China. Qin Hui was a Chinese politician (1090-1155AD) during the Song dynasty. According to public understandings of history, Qin Hui and Lady Wang orchestrated the arrest and eventual murder (under trumped up charges) of a military general, Yue Fei, who was leading the army in a war against a neighboring state. For their role in bringing about Yue Fei’s death, statues were made of Qin Hui and Lady Wang in a kneeling position, typically with their hands tied behind their backs. Typically, these statues are put in front of a statue of a standing Yue Fei, or of temples built in his honor. Even till today, their statues are regularly vandalized, and often even spat and urinated upon.

Setting aside the fact that these statues are explicitly intended as public humiliations of Qin Hui and Lady Wang7 – and thus may not be problematic in the ways that I have discussed – they
nonetheless provide some assurance that the four obstacles discussed in this essay are not, in principle, insurmountable. Until recent efforts to prevent the vandalism of the statues and to preserve them, ordinary citizens were regarded as having the standing to speak on behalf of the community through their acts of vandalism. Acts of vandalism directed at the statues are also easily understood as expressive of the negative attitudes that people have towards Qin Hui and Lady Wang’s actions, as well as towards the more general idea of being disloyal to, or betraying, one’s country. Indeed, references to Qin Hui and Lady Wang are still frequently made in contemporary discussions of betrayal and disloyalty. While people recognize Qin Hui and Lady Wang’s role in history, they neither neglect nor embrace their actions. There also appears to be general public acceptance of the fact that the statues can be – and often are – vandalized and thus aesthetically displeasing.

With sustained effort at tackling the obstacles discussed in this essay, the problematic commemorations of individuals responsible for injustice or even unjust events may be transformed in just these ways.

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Notes
1. In a previous paper, I describe these commemorations as “tainted” (Lim 2020). However, and upon further reflection, I realize that the terminology of ‘taint’ has problematic associations with ideals of purity, and that in many contexts, these ideals take on racial overtones. Given this, I am unsure that the choice of this term is on-the-whole appropriate given the potential costs of furthering these negative associations. My thoughts on this issue were helpfully clarified in conversation with Joanna Burch-Brown.
2. In this context, see, for instance, the language that is used to describe activists in US President Donald Trump’s Executive Order on Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence, issued on June 26, 2020. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-american-monuments-memorials-statues-combating-recent-criminal-violence.
3. On this issue, see Jose Medina’s discussion of ‘infelicitous subjects’ – people who are distinguished by their deviation or transgression, such that what they say and do become paradigms of how not to behave (Medina 2007, 9).
4. This being said, obstacles similar to those I have discussed are likely to beset the communicative function of vandalism – especially when we consider whether vandalism is successful as counter-speech.
5. There are two related worries pertaining to state support of vandalism – that it neutralizes the rebellious message of vandalism, and that it is a pernicious form of co-option of protestors. I lack the space to discuss them here.

6. Elsewhere, I argue that the vandalism of problematic commemorations is a better response to them than removal, insofar as the latter may render the issues surrounding the commemorations less visible (Lim 2020).

7. Here, I take no position on the issues of how these statues and the popular narratives about them contribute to establishing the common ground of the community’s everyday practices, and their roles in social control more generally.

References
Dahlgren, Will. 2014. “The British Empire is ‘Something to be Proud of’.” YouGov survey. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire