

**Staging Uncivility, Or, The Performative Politics of
Radical Decolonial Iconoclasm**

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Krisis 42 (1):61-75.

Abstract

This article reflects on the deployment of crude and destructive modes of iconoclasm in contemporary decolonial and anti-racist struggles, as exemplified by the campaign against Belgium's colonialist patrimony in June 2020. Through a consideration of sympathetic and internal critiques of such modes, I postulate a tensional interplay, within the said struggles, between two opposing approaches focused on the performance of civility and uncivility respectively. While the first is grounded in Rancière's theory of emancipatory politics, arguments by Benjamin, Žižek, Jameson and especially Fanon are deployed to elucidate the rationale, modus operandi and efficacy of the more controversial second approach.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.42.1.37173>

Keywords

Decolonisation, Iconoclasm, Colonialist Heritage
Performative Politics, Frantz Fanon, Jacques Rancière

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Staging Uncivility, Or, The Performative Politics of Radical Decolonial Iconoclasm

Matthias Pauwels

Travelling Activism from #BlackLivesMatter to #LeopoldMustFall¹

One of the remarkable aspects of globalisation is that activist movements and campaigns travel globally from one locale to another, generating transnational ructions overnight – a phenomenon that one might denote with the term travelling activism, as a variation on Edward Said’s “travelling theory” (1983, 226–47). The anti-racist protests in the US in the wake of the death-by-police-brutality of George Floyd at the end of May 2020 are a case in point. Under the banner of Black Lives Matter, these protests spread almost instantly over the globe, intersecting with unresolved issues of anti-black racism and colonialism in many places. This confirms a characteristic feature of contemporary social struggles noted by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, namely, the way in which they tend to “leap vertically and touch immediately on the global level” (2001, 54–5).

In Belgium, the 2020 Black Lives Matter campaign once again turned the country’s troubled colonial past and the related, residual racist attitudes and practices into burning issues, instigating a radical challenge to the blatant silence and inaction on these matters. In addition to anti-racist Black Lives Matter rallies, which occasionally escalated into rioting and looting, there was a widespread iconoclastic assault on the country’s colonialist public patrimony, especially that glorifying King Leopold II.² Statues, plaques and street names commemorating Belgium’s highly problematic second king were spray-painted with crass slogans, paint-bombed, smeared with cement, hit with sledgehammers and toppled.³ The symbolic revenge thus inflicted had been a long time coming and clearly provided a much-needed release of the pent-up anger and frustration among several generations of Belgo-Congolese.

This was not the first time that Belgium’s colonialist heritage was contested.⁴ In 2004, an anonymous collective chopped off the hand of a bronze statue of a Congolese child in the city of Ostend.⁵ Part of a larger configuration of sculptures centred around an equestrian statue of Leopold II, the statue depicts one of a group of Congolese slaves which, as the inscription states, “express their gratitude to Leopold II [described as their “ingenious protector”] for having freed them from enslavement by the Arabs”. The collective lambasted the monument’s blatant hypocrisy as Leopold II’s henchmen treated the Congolese as slaves on his rubber plantations, meting out cruel punishments to ensure productivity, such as chopping off hands and arms. By mutilating the statue, the collective’s professed aim was to make the sculpture more historically accurate.⁶ In 2008, activist-philosopher Théophile de Giraud had mounted an equestrian statue of Leopold II on Brussels’ Throne Square, defacing it with red paint – symbolising the bloodshed during Leopold II’s reign – and staging a lynching. The same statue was daubed with red paint in 2013 and 2015.⁷ In 2017, photographs of abuses during Belgian colonialism were pasted on a statue of Leopold II in Mons, and in January 2018 the Citizen’s Association for a Decolonial Public Space removed a bust of Leopold II in Duden Park in Forest.⁸

Although the recent Black Lives Matter protests were the immediate incentive

of the surge in decolonial contestations of Belgium's patrimony, their inspiration and roots can thus be traced back further in time. However, the worldwide outrage over the umpteenth instance of racially driven police brutality in the US no doubt contributed to the unprecedented urgency, scope, and intensity of the contestations. It might also partly explain why, this time around, the campaign of decolonial iconoclasm was quite efficacious, resulting in some short-term victories, its impact magnified, no doubt, by global moral and political pressures as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. On a national level, politicians voted in favour of establishing a parliamentary committee on Belgium's colonial past. It also led the current king Philippe to officially express his personal regrets for Belgium's colonial misdeeds, although stopping short of issuing an apology, which would have been more consequential in terms of reparations to the Congolese people. More generally, media debates ensued on the persistence of racism – blatant and covert – in Belgian society with regard to job opportunities, housing, education, or stop-and-search practices by the police.⁹ All this came about in a matter of weeks.

On a local level, iconoclastic acts against colonialist monuments often led to their removal – even if mostly to prevent further damage – which can be seen as a victory for decolonial activists. However, if the dominant way in which the local authorities in question proposed to remedy the contested nature of colonialist monuments in the long term is anything to go by, it remains to be seen if this feat will not prove to be merely temporary. Such proposals displayed an insufficient awareness of the offensiveness of the monuments as well as the gravity of their contestation, with authorities mostly emphasising the need for providing more factual information and a proper contextualisation, for instance by adding a critical commentary. Surely such a minimalist approach is inadequate as textual accompaniments cannot possibly undo the visual impact of colonialist statues in the public space. Such discursive additions are likely to have the same dubious status as the proverbial fine print in a contract, and will do little to trouble the white Belgians public enjoyment of their colonialist past. As such, it merely enables them to continue to have their colonialist cake and eat it.

To Hell with Your Documents of Barbarism!

While shocking to the average white Belgian, the crude and destructive means of contestation were not unanimously approved of even among those sympathetic to the decolonial cause, and became a matter of debate. A commonly held position in this regard was well expressed by a previous Brussels mayor in response to the aforementioned theft of a bust of Leopold II in 2018. Although understanding the motivations behind the action, the previous mayor regretted the resort to what he described as “Taliban behaviour”, as well as a “rather primal vandalism [...] under the cover of humanism” (Belga 2018).¹⁰ An extremist, intolerant, and barbaric type of behaviour is thus attributed to radical decolonial iconoclasts, blemishing and delegitimising a justified cause.

On a first approach, the choice for crude, “barbaric” methods of contestation can in fact be found to be highly pertinent. One can take heed here of Walter Benjamin's verdict, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (2007, 253–64) on

the status of a nation's "cultural treasures" or "documents of civilisation", as part of his historical-materialist reflections on culture. Benjamin (2007, 256) regards such treasures as the "spoils" of a nation's past conquests that are "carried along" in the "triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate." Of their origins, Benjamin (*ibid.*) says that they cannot be contemplated "without horror", leading him to famously claim that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism", or again, that no such document is "free of barbarism".

In Belgium's post-colonial context, Benjamin's statements concerning the intimate connections between civilisation and barbarism – although not specifically related to colonialism – gain extra force and significance. It is difficult not to regard the cultural heritage memorialising and glorifying a nation's colonial past as anything but highly problematic documents of barbarism, as the spoils and sublimated insignia of colonisation built on the suffering and toil of generations of Congolese people. To be sure, the barbaric roots of colonialist monuments are carefully obfuscated by a mystifying, euphemistic discourse that shamelessly lauds the colonising nation for its civilising efforts abroad.

A Benjaminian demystification of colonialist monuments as documents of barbarism allows one to counter criticisms of the rudimentary methods of radical decolonial iconoclasts. The latter can be seen to merely reciprocate and match the barbaric nature of Belgium's colonialist endeavour, conform to a tit-for-tat logic. It should be clear that if anyone comported themselves as brutes and savages it was the colonisers themselves, and not the contemporary decolonial iconoclasts, as some contend.

Moreover, Benjamin's claims of a relation of complicity between today's rulers and their predecessors – or, as he puts it, "those who conquered before them" (*ibid.*) – offer a firm rejoinder to criticisms of the recent spate of decolonial activism as being mere symbolic politics or yesteryear's struggles. It was not uncommon, for instance, to hear white Belgians dryly remark that they do not understand all this fuss about colonialist monuments, downplaying the latter's contentiousness by regarding them as relics of a long gone past. It was emphasised that it has "after all" been sixty years since Congo's independence and over 110 years since the end of Leopold II's reign over Congo. It should be clear, however, that Leopold II's colonialist venture gave Belgium a vital head start in securing a strategic spot in the then emerging global world order, enabling it – up to this very day – to punch above its weight as a tiny country of eleven-and-a-half million people. It has made Belgium deeply complicit in the founding of a state of "global apartheid", as Patrick Bond (2004) calls it, established through Western countries' colonialist and imperialist drives which resulted in the massive disparities in wealth, opportunities, and rights between those in the West and the Global South that persist to this day.

More specifically in relation to on-going contestations of colonialist patrimony, the "spoils" of Leopold II's colonial enterprise allowed the Belgian capital of Brussels to position itself as a thriving, modern, Paris-style metropole by adorning its public spaces in imperialistic splendour with grand boulevards, triumphal arches, and monumental statues. This urban-architectural capital no doubt played an important role in

later establishing Brussels as the seat of powerful transnational institutions such as the EU or NATO.

The spate of iconoclasm against Belgium's "documents of barbarism" is thus more than a narrow, belated manifestation of symbolic politics. It is a contestation of much broader economic and political processes of oppression and exploitation of the "wretched of the earth", to use Frantz Fanon's famous expression (1963), that have been unremittingly wreaking havoc for many centuries all over the world. Rather than inoperative time capsules of merely antiquarian interest, colonialist monuments are emblematic of problematical geopolitical processes, and of the accompanying mindset of those that enforced or benefited from them. As Joëlle Sambu Nzeba of the Belgian #BlackLivesMatter movement declared, "These monuments are present not just in public space, but also in people's mentalities" (Thamm 2020).

"We Are Better Than This"

Behind the aforementioned objections against resorting to basic and violent means of cultural contestation, one can identify the fundamental structure of what might be called the sympathetic critique of radical decolonial iconoclasm, whereby the latter is regarded as "understandable yet deplorable". It concerns a type of critique that understands or supports the decolonial or anti-racist cause, yet takes issue with the means deployed to further it, which are condoned at best, but more often condemned. This sympathetic critique will be found to underlie other key objections to the recent campaign of decolonial iconoclasm in Belgium, which will be discussed in what follows.

From a cultural-political perspective, discussions and disagreements regarding different forms of cultural contestation and their legitimacy, efficacy, strategic value, appropriateness, or performativity, are of key importance. In this article I critically assess some paradigmatic instances of the aforementioned sympathetic critique. In doing so, I offer possible interpretations and defences of radical decolonial iconoclasm which act as a counterweight to such critiques, and thereby enable a more nuanced and balanced appreciation.

Most interestingly, objections against the deployment of extreme, destructive means of cultural contestation were also raised from within the decolonial and anti-racist movements themselves. In a remarkable action, members of the Belgian Youth Against Racism (BYAR) removed the red paint poured by decolonial activists on a bust of king Baudouin, the last Belgian king to have ruled over Congo before its independence.¹¹ They thus dramatised their call to fellow activists to stop defacing and damaging monuments. BYAR spokesperson Aimé Schrauwen motivated the action as follows: "It is important for us to demonstrate that minorities in the country are better than this, and that we merely ask for equal rights [...] like all Belgians, which includes an accurate narration of history."¹²

Here, one thus has a grouping of decolonial, anti-racist activists attempting to undo the presumed reputational damage done to minority groups and, the Belgian-Congolese population in particular by iconoclastic acts of fellow activists. Although not explicitly stated by BYAR, one could take such acts to confirm prevailing racist stereotypes concerning people of colour among white Belgians, such as being hot-headed,

overtly sensitive, demanding preferential treatment, or reacting in a violent and illegal way. In contrast, the disciplined, painstaking manner in which BYAR members removed the sticky paint from the statue, as well as the placid, collected tone in which the above statement was delivered, was well-chosen to disprove such biases. It seemed geared towards demonstrating that decolonial and anti-racist activists – and black communities and other ethnic minorities in Belgium – are entirely reasonable human beings who pose only modest demands such as being treated like anyone else.

Similar pleas were made, at the time, within the Black Lives Matter movements in the US. In response to the oftentimes violent protests involving looting and arson, prominent figures advocated the adoption of non-violent, serene, and dignified modes of protest. To be sure, incidents of vandalism, damage, or destruction of property and plunder were covered disproportionately in the mainstream US media, thereby manipulating the public into thinking that such modes of protest were all-pervasive, which was not the case.

Formulated more generally, the question can be asked, however, of whether decolonial contestation through crude acts of iconoclasm does not run the risk of hardening stubborn racist-colonialist biases. If so, such acts, despite their short-term gains, might engender significant adverse side-effects, including scaring off sections of the population which, although having been largely incognisant of, or indifferent to, colonialist issues up until now, might have come to sympathise with the decolonial cause.

Such a potential backlash can be detected in an extreme form in the predictable protest against recent decolonial activism by the far right, as happened in London, for instance, around the same time as the events in Belgium. A protest march was organised in response to contestations of colonial-era monuments in the UK in which, most spectacularly, a statue of the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled, vandalised, and thrown into a dock.¹³ Right-wing groups subsequently saw it as their patriotic duty to defend the mementos of their nation's past imperialist-colonialist glory against attacks by the proverbial barbarians at the gate. Such a right-wing counteroffensive is deeply contradictory and hilarious for sure, as the honour of British civilisation is defended by a raucous rabble of hooligans – not exactly Britain's finest – who seem over-eager to start a riot and engage the police in a fist fight. As such, decolonial contestations might seem to have degenerated into a clash of "uncivilisations" – to modify Samuel Huntington's infamous phrase – with decolonial "vandals" at one extreme, far-right skinheads at another.

Sublimate Your Black Rage

Another type of sympathetic criticism of radical decolonial iconoclasm can be detected in a commentary piece by Marc Reynebeau (2020) in which the necessity of "destroying" statues of Leopold II is queried, while suggesting it to be more "interesting" to "chop off his hand". Somewhat similar to the aforementioned action in Ostend, this would deliver a witty, poetic kind of decolonial justice on Leopold II, inflicting on him – post-mortem and symbolically – the same horrid punishment of dismemberment that was notoriously imposed by his henchmen to punish "unproductive" Congolese workers, enforce docility, and create a reign of terror.

Other than in the BYAR's case, the issue here is not so much the acceptability of iconoclasm as a mode of decolonial activism, but rather its plain, indiscriminate, and overzealous deployment. Or again, one objects to iconoclasm as simply geared towards damaging or removing the targeted objects, which is dismissed as uninteresting and dull. In this second kind of sympathetic critique one can detect a call to activists to practice iconoclasm in a more precise, refined, and creative way, in line with, say, the Situationist art practices of the 1960s with their trademark misappropriation and repurposing of existing objects so as to subvert their original meaning and function. In the case of Reynebeau's suggestion, the removal of a hand on a Leopold II statue would suffice to radically change its status and function from a device for glorifying colonialism into its countermonument.

The fact, moreover, that such minimalist subversions do not themselves effect or prompt the removal of the monuments – as often happens in extreme cases of iconoclasm – could be levelled as a key argument in its favour. If colonialist statues are removed, so is the evidence of past colonialist misdeeds, allowing their perpetrators to get off lightly, being spared the deserved public humiliation that would be their fate if they were kept in their place in slightly mutilated form. In the latter instance, they would serve as a constant, inconvenient testimony to Belgium's scandalous colonial past and the continuation of racist and neocolonial attitudes in the present. Or again, they would act as permanent reminders to white Belgians of the sins of their forefathers, and the dubious historical roots of their privilege, both within Belgium and globally. For those at the receiving end, the subverted colonialist monuments could function as a proverbial moral shot in the arm, as a source of support in their daily struggle against colonialism and racism, or as levers for decolonising Belgian minds and society.

Pleas for more refined modes of decolonial iconoclasm can also be interpreted as an enjoinder towards activists to sublimate their outrage in the psychoanalytical sense of expressing one's immediate, gut feelings in more elevated, thoughtful, and imaginative ways. Apart from making decolonial iconoclasm more socially acceptable, such a sublimated mode might also be taken to elicit more delicate, rich, and enduring forms of decolonial enjoyment, as opposed to the instant emotional relief and adrenaline rush of simple acts of disfiguration or destruction. Over and above considerations of strategy or efficacy, specific cultural preferences and prejudices can be seen to underlie such pleas. Restrained, cerebral, and artistic iconoclastic gestures – and the concomitant subtle delight – are implicitly posited as superior and preferable, both strategically and aesthetically, to the supposedly base, spontaneous, and philistine actions and pleasures of “vandal-activists” toppling or sledgehammering away at a colonialist statue.

An implicit hierarchisation of activist modes of contestation is thus upheld based on assumptions regarding taste that are neither self-evident nor innocent in a postcolonial context. One of the basic operations of colonialism can be described through Jacques Rancière's (1999, 2004) key concept of the “distribution of the sensible”.¹⁴ This concept refers to the differentiation and classification of groups of human beings based on the assumption of their different sensible capacities. The latter can range from those considered to be most developed, refined, and rational, to those regarded as less so, even entailing, in some instances, the denial of specifically human forms of sensibility

to certain groups. For Rancière, the latter fate befell the slaves or so-called barbarians in ancient societies, but one can just as well think of the status of the enslaved and colonised non-European people since the so-called Age of Discovery. A base, animal type of sensibility was attributed to these populations, being thought to be receptive mainly to physical pain and sensual pleasure. Such distinctions, hierarchies, and exclusions on the level of sensible and aesthetic capacities have played a key role in legitimating the colonial project, particularly its pretence at being a civilising mission.

The sympathetic critique of the crudity of decolonial methods of contestation, and the implicit plea for more refined ones, can be seen to inadvertently endorse the same colonialist “division of the sensible”. It thereby risks appearing as a misguided, patronising attempt to aesthetically educate and uplift decolonial activists. The clever or “culturally correct” forms of decolonial iconoclasm that are often proposed as an alternative to its straightforward applications might, in any case, be a tall order for those whose lives are negatively impacted by systemic racism and neocolonialism. Its proponents seem to wrongly gauge the current mood of acute outrage in the wake of blatant incidents of racist violence in the US, making the suggestions somewhat of a mismatch.

Staging Civility...

Considering the aforementioned internal and sympathetic critiques, the question poses itself of how decolonial contestation through blunt iconoclastic acts is to be assessed. That is to say, in other than the somewhat condescending terms of an “understandable yet deplorable” fit of “primal” rage on the part of decolonial activists who supposedly lose their self-composure and dignity, discarding all strategic considerations or concerns about public perception. Or again, how can radical decolonial iconoclasm be understood more positively, as a legitimate and efficacious strategy in its own right, rather than merely something to be condoned? Apart from the earlier defence in Benjaminian terms, what other defences could be levelled? And furthermore, if extreme forms of decolonial iconoclasm can thus be defended, how should one understand and mediate the disagreement between decolonial “vandal-activists” and their internal and sympathetic critics concerning the most appropriate means of contestation?

In order to address these questions, I cast this disagreement in terms of a tensional interplay between two opposing approaches to decolonial and anti-racist struggles, each with its own rationale, *modus operandi*, and efficacy. I do not contend here that activists consciously adopt these approaches. Rather, they are hypothetical-theoretical constructions and interpretative devices that, if nothing else, may serve some purpose in focusing, furthering, or boosting the debate on the means and ends of decolonial activism.

First, I interpret the sympathetic and internal critiques discussed earlier in terms of a more general approach towards oppositional, emancipatory politics as theoretically articulated in Rancière’s political work (1999, 2007). In relation to a particular distribution of the sensible, and the hierarchies and inequalities posited and perpetuated by it, Rancière argues that oppressed groups contest this distribution by demonstrating what it denies, namely, their equal intelligence, sensibility, or morality. Such demonstrations of equality by the oppressed are identified as central to emancipatory struggles. Rancière offers paradigmatic instances of such demonstrations in different contexts and

with regard to different problematics – e.g. class, sex, race, citizenship – and different, oppressed subjects such as the Greek demos, the Roman slaves or plebs, workers and women in nineteenth-century France, as well as “people of colour” (1992, 59). What is found to be a similar, central component in the struggle of these diverse groups against their exclusion or marginalisation is how they disprove the ruling assumptions concerning their inferior human status by acting and presenting themselves as their oppressors’ equals. Since this happens in a context in which such equality is firmly denied, unthinkable even, such “disprovals” have a highly performative character in Rancière’s theory, in the sense of acting out the equality that is demanded. Hence, Peter Hallward’s (2006) formulaic characterisation of Rancière’s emancipatory politics in terms of the “staging [of] equality”.

BYAR’s concerted effort to demonstrate that the Belgo-Congolese and other minority groups in Belgium are “better” than the crude iconoclastic attacks on monuments or the looting of shops, can be understood in such Rancièrian terms of proving the civility and dignity of the said groups and, by extension, their equal humanity in a racist, neocolonialist context. The action seems designed to signal that despite being discriminated against, minorities are not therefore vindictive and keen to strike back by violating the majority group’s patrimony, or by intimidating them through violent protest. On the contrary, minorities communicate that despite enduring racial discrimination, they do not pose exorbitant demands, but only reasonable ones, such as being treated equally, and neither do they expect any exceptional treatment, such as being exempted from laws against the destruction of public property. Recommendations of more refined methods of decolonial contestation, such as Reynebeau’s, can also be seen to conform to a Rancièrian politics of equality–civility–dignity. In the face of the outrageous persistence of racism and colonialism, activists are encouraged to contain their spontaneous emotive responses of anger and vengeance, and express the latter in more restrained, clever ways, thereby demonstrating a high degree of culturedness and self-composure.

Key to this politics of civility is thus the refusal to lower oneself to the racists level and get embroiled into the logic of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, for instance by retaliating and answering racist violence with commensurate anti-racist violence. Or, as argued earlier with Benjamin, by reciprocating the monumentalised barbarism of Belgium’s colonialist run with a live barbarism. In contrast, by keeping one’s composure and conducting oneself as a reasonable, civil being in the face of blatant racism, black activists demonstrate that they are all but the inferior human, or even animal-like beings that racist ideologies make them out to be, displaying an almost super-human capacity of self-restraint.

Fact that the BYAR’s action is directed, to an important degree, to fellow activists – thereby seemingly taking the moral high ground over their “unruly” or “short-fused” colleagues by literally “cleaning up their mess” – illustrates a further, key aspect of Rancière’s theory of emancipatory politics emphasised by Todd May (2009: 113–4). Namely, that demonstrations by the oppressed of their equality or civility are not only geared towards the oppressor – in this context, the racial adversary or ex-colonisers – but also function, importantly, as “self-demonstration[s]” (May 2009:

114). Appropriating and excelling in modes of sensibility of which an oppressed group is considered to be incapable, is thus also seen to serve as “a proof given to oneself” (Rancière 2007, 48) or to one’s own grouping.

... Or Uncivility?

The sympathetic and internal critiques of the recent decolonial protests in Belgium can thus be seen to be undergirded by a Rancière-style performative politics of civility. Within such a conceptual framework, the rudimentary iconoclasm and resort to looting must appear as self-defeating in terms of fighting racism because of reinforcing persistent racist biases of the white majority, instead of disproving the underlying racial “division of the sensible”.

However, the decolonial and anti-racist protests in can be seen to be driven precisely by a sense of disillusion with such a politics of equality and civility, by frustration at not being treated equally despite all one’s distinctions and accomplishments. At Black Lives Matter rallies, a commonly voiced complaint was that the Belgo-Congolese have to perform twice as well as their white counterparts in order to prove their equal worth, whether academically or professionally. Black activists deplored the unwarranted burden that is thereby placed on them. Understandably, the resulting frustration, stress, and fatigue can bring Belgo-Congolese to the extreme point of altogether abandoning efforts to try and prove the seemingly unprovable – i.e. one’s equal humanity – even if momentarily. In demonstrative acts of destructive iconoclasm or looting by activists, one can see such a suspension of the politics of civility played out and staged. The underlying rationale seems to be that if white-Belgian society keeps on treating its black citizens as inferior human beings despite all proof to the contrary, then they will stop behaving at their best and do away with all civilities.

Inversely to the anti-racist or, decolonial politics of civility, and premised on a more realistic sense of how black people are consistently treated as inferior human beings no matter how many times they have proven to be the racist’s equal if not superior, one can thus postulate another, strand of such politics, characterised by the staging of uncivility. The latter can be seen to be driven by the sobering insight that racism is, ultimately, not a matter of proof or logic, but of power and irrational biases, and that racists are neither genuinely interested nor susceptible to proof of black people’s equal humanity. Based on this, one no longer bothers to offer such proof and stops playing the racists or colonisers “civilisation game”, which is denounced as a fraud and a ruse. For one thing, the colonisers’ or racists’ civilisation is clearly structurally tainted by barbarism in line with Benjamin’s aforementioned claims. For another, the civilisation game can be found to be stacked in favour of the racists or (ex-)colonisers, with any success achieved by black people being devalued and undercut by the fact of race.

The latter was commonly argued by Black Lives Matter activists in the US in the wake of Floyd’s murder. Namely, that it does not matter whether a black person is, say, highly educated or economically or professionally successful, the mere fact of being black trumps all possible achievements and distinctions. It makes him/her/they as vulnerable as any other, less accomplished black person to being treated as a second-rate citizen by the police, for instance. In a racist society, race thus functions as the great

leveller, reducing every black person to the lowest common denominator of the racists anti-black stereotypes. Again, the anger and despair with this enduring injustice – i.e. the fact that one's race functions as the bottom-line in determining one's humanity and achievements – can easily be seen to cause anti-racist activists to switch from a politics based on staging one's civility, to one geared towards the staging of uncivility.

Postulating a performative politics of uncivility as a counterpoint to a Rancièrian politics of equality-civility, and interpreting demonstrative acts of crude decolonial iconoclasm on the basis of such a politics, might allow one to gauge the possible, underlying rationale and logic of the resort to such acts and other forms of violent protest.¹⁵ Moreover, it might, allow for a more proper and positive assessment of radical decolonial iconoclasm, that goes beyond evaluations in terms of a deplorable lapse of self-composure on the part of activists, causing them to smash things up in total disregard of strategic considerations or a possible public backlash and, as such, something to be avoided or minimised. Instead, such acts become intelligible and reasonable as components of an activist approach with its own efficacy and rightful place and time in decolonial, anti-racist struggles.

The Paradoxical Efficacy of Performing Uncivility

How now should the efficacy of performances of uncivility in furthering anti-racist, decolonial struggles be assessed, especially in light of the aforementioned concerns about confirming deep-seated biases and, the related, counterproductive effects, with the ends being undermined by the means? Against such instrumentalist objections, one could level Fredric Jameson's argument concerning the kind of "pure", or "excessive" violence that Slavoj Žižek (2006, 380–81), in reference to Fanon's thoughts on the close connection between decolonisation and violence, has affirmed as "unavoidable" in "revolutionary" situations, and to be valued as a "liberating end in itself" beyond, utilitarian or strategic calculations.¹⁶ In specifying the value of such violence, Jameson contends that even if "it has no intrinsic value, it is a sign of the authenticity of the revolutionary process, of the fact that this process is actually disturbing the existing relations" (Žižek 2006, 381). In other words, the demonstrative suspension of, or irreverence toward, strategic, means-end considerations in violent acts of protest is here taken to be the "message" and a key, intrinsic part of decolonial struggles. One thus encounters a paradoxical mode of efficacy attributed to the very discarding of any thinking in terms of efficacy. Or again it concerns, a form of protest whose strategic and performative value lies in the wilful suspension of all strategic thinking.

In a similar vein, the brutal assault on Belgium's colonialist patrimony sends out a clear signal that nothing less than a final reckoning with colonialism and racism will be accepted this time around, with no more delays or half-measures. It does so in a way that more restrained, creative forms of cultural contestation – such as the one proposed by Reynebeau for instance – do not. Against the internal and sympathetic critics, it can thus be objected that one cannot have the decolonial ends without the violent or destructive means and the possible reputational fall-out. It can further be understood how demonstrative acts of uncivility function to an important degree as self-demonstrations, – apart from provoking the racial adversary – in line with the earlier point concerning the

staging of civility. Such acts – say, decolonial activists smashing up a colonial statue – can similarly be regarded as a way to communicate to fellow activists and community members that one resolutely rejects the racial adversaries civilisation game.

More specific to the context of decolonial struggle, another explanation for the efficacy of the staging of uncivility could be deduced from Fanon's essay "On National Culture" (1961, 197-224) written during the first wave of African peoples' liberation struggles from the 1950s onward. Remarkably, this efficacy is attributed here to the confirmation of racist stereotypes, which makes for an equally, if not more paradoxical logic of, efficacy compared to the Žižekian-Jamesonian account. At one point, Fanon (2004: 158) reflects on a phase that, based on his observations, many colonised intellectuals and artists go through in their quest for an effective way to contribute to their people's struggle for liberation. This comes after an initial period in which many colonised artists and intellectuals assimilated the colonisers culture – one might say, in an attempt to demonstrate their equality and civility, and conform to the first mode of decolonial politics distinguished earlier. In a second phase, an about-turn is seen to take place in which the colonial culture is rejected and colonised intellectuals rediscover and assert their own, native culture. Fanon notes, however, that this does not always concern the native culture's highest civilisational achievements. In their initial focus on the latter, colonised intellectuals would still experience a sense of alienation from the common people whose everyday struggles to survive under conditions of colonialism made them far less splendid and heroic in comparison, if not downright miserable. In a final attempt to become one with the people, some colonised intellectuals are said to give up all idealised notions of their people and adopt their far less glorious, often "wretched" ways of life. Of this attempt, Fanon (*ibid.*) says that it "sometimes means [...] wanting to be a 'nigger,' not an exceptional 'nigger,' but a real 'nigger,' a 'dirty nigger,' the sort defined by the white man." Fanon's word choices might be shocking, yet he here merely quotes the colonisers' racist terminology.

Within the first round of decolonial struggles, one thus encounters a strategy in which colonised artists and intellectuals, in their desire to unite with their impoverished people, adopt some of the latter's manners and values which, as they undoubtedly know, confirm the colonisers' racist-colonialist stereotypes. My main interest here is how Fanon describes the subversive effects of such this peculiar self-positioning on the colonisers and the colonial enterprise as a whole. Although not intended as such, Fanon observes that the adoption of the perceived, uncivilised, "barbaric" ways of the native culture by the educated, cultured elite among the colonised has a damaging psychological impact on the colonisers. The latter are said to experience this as a scandal and an affront, signalling their failure at "civilising" the colonised – or at least, its most "evolved" artistic-intellectual echelons – and at convincing them of the superiority of, Western European, culture. As Fanon (*ibid.*) puts it, "Once the colonists, who had relished their victory over these assimilated intellectuals, realise that these men thought saved have begun to merge with the 'nigger scum,' the entire system loses its bearings." He further says that it is experienced as a "setback for the colonial enterprise", as a demonstration of the "pointlessness and superficiality of the work accomplished" and as a "radical condemnation of the method of the [colonial] regime" (*ibid.*).

Fanon also observes how this demoralising effect on the coloniser in turn has an invigorating effect on the colonised. The more the colonisers are dismayed and dispirited by what to them cannot but appear as an inexplicable regression to an inferior, primitive way of life, the more the colonised are said to be “strengthened” in their “determination” to fight colonialism (ibid.). As Fanon phrases it, “the uproar it causes justifies his [the colonised intellectual’s] abdication [of the colonisers civilisation] and encourages him to persevere” (ibid.).

The Psychopolitics of Chopping Off One’s White Wings

Considering these subversive and morale-boosting effects, and apart from the original motivation of becoming one with the common people among the colonised, one could see how the adoption of their “uncivilised” ways and, thereby, the self-confirmation of the colonisers’ racist-colonialist stereotypes, might acquire a performative dimension and provocative purpose. It might become a way for the colonised to demonstrate to the colonisers how far they are willing to go in rejecting the latter’s culture and civilisation, namely to the extreme point of knowingly degrading themselves in the colonisers’ eyes. If Fanon (2004, 158) describes this move in terms of colonised intellectuals becoming “unrecognizable [for the colonisers], and [...] cut[ting] off those wings that before they had allowed to grow”, there is a clear suggestion of such a provocative effect and intent. The demonstrative “clipping” of one’s white “wings” or tearing off of one’s “white mask” by the colonised and, inversely, the adoption of a way of life and type of behaviour that one knows will only confirm the colonisers worst racist stereotypes, thus comes to function as a strategy to shock the colonisers and provoke the above-mentioned feelings of despair and disillusion.

From this remarkable passage of a canonical text in the decolonial corpus, the paradoxical efficacy of the staging of uncivility in decolonial and anti-racist struggles can be deduced. To be sure, there are key historical and contextual differences to take into account in transposing Fanon’s observations and insights from the first wave of struggles by colonised peoples for national liberation after the Second World War, to twenty-first century postcolonial Belgium. Still, the resort to crude iconoclasm and violence by members of a long-standing minority in Belgian society, which I have interpreted in terms of the staging of uncivility, can be seen to exert similar psychopolitical effects on the ex/neo-colonialist nation. It is ideally suited to inflict a narcissistic injury on the (neo)colonialist-racist adversary. Colonialist heritage is clearly designed to self-congratulate the colonising nation for its so-called civilising mission, which is often unapologetically and shamelessly stated in inscriptions.¹⁷ The brutal assaults on these monuments visualise in spectacular fashion the blunt, ex post facto rejection of the colonising nation’s claim to superiority by its supposed beneficiaries or “converts”, exposing this claim as a farce. This forces the post/ex-colonialist nation to reckon not only with its failure to “win over” the “hearts and minds” of descendants of its previous colony’s population, but also with the illegitimate nature of its colonial endeavour to begin with – what Fanon called the “method” of colonialism. This refers to the claim that, one cannot “civilise” people in an uncivilised, oppressive, and offensive manner, by treating them as structurally inferior or as eternal novices to the colonial culture.

Bold acts of decolonial iconoclasm thus offer a firm rejoinder to the often heard sentiment among some white Belgians, especially those that have lived or worked in the colony, that Belgium's colonial legacy is not entirely negative and that valuable things were also achieved. By basically giving (post)colonial Belgian society the middle-finger and saying 'To hell with your culture', radical decolonial iconoclasts send out the unmistakable message that nothing good can ever come of any project that is enforced through violent, illegitimate means, partially good intentions notwithstanding.

Several arguments can thus be advanced in defence of straightforward, destructive iconoclasm – understood more generally in terms of the staging of uncivility – as a legitimate and efficacious form of decolonial contestation. It engenders specific effects that are key to the decolonisation cause balancing out potentially unfavourable side-effects in terms of public imaging. Over and above the obvious aim of inflicting damage to monuments or removing them, such acts fulfil other strategic functions and evoke less straightforward meanings, some of which were specified in this article. In addition to Jameson's point that they signal the decolonial movements' authentic or radical character, they stage the rejection of a post/ex-colonising nation's alleged civilising efforts by its former "beneficiaries" and their descendants as indicated by Fanon. Rather than discarding crude iconoclasm as counterproductive or detrimental to the decolonial or anti-racist cause by confirming stubborn stereotypes, as some maintain, its necessary functions and paradoxical efficacy must be acknowledged.

How then, in closing, should one assess the disagreements and reservations with regard to the deployment of extreme iconoclasm or other forms of violent protest, as voiced by sympathetic critics and fellow decolonial activists alike? Or again, how should the relation between what I have called the performative politics of civility and uncivility be conceived? Despite their opposing rationales and *modi operandi*, the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible and they may complement each other in important ways. On the one hand, continuous frustration, exhaustion even, with the politics of civility may result in the suspension of civilities, which might pressurise the racial adversary into conceding to black people's claim to equal humanity. On the other hand, the staging of uncivility may only be sustainable for a limited period of time as the reduction to the racial adversary's stereotypes might come to be experienced as self-depreciatory. In order to counterbalance this, recourse might be taken, in turn, to the politics of civility. A recurrent chronological sequence and oscillation between the politics of civility and uncivility could thus be postulated, with a proper function and moment for each. Moreover, despite my somewhat dialectical presentation, the two types of decolonial, anti-racist politics might, in reality, function as the extreme poles of a spectrum of activist means and strategies with different degrees of both types.

However, the relation between both politics always seems to be an uneasy and perhaps unacknowledged one, evidenced by the aforementioned internal debates regarding crude acts of decolonial iconoclasm, or regarding the resort to looting and arson in the US context. From the perspective of the politics of civility, such actions and behaviour must always appear self-defeating and self-denigrating, its "perpetrators" undergoing an unfortunate process of desublimation, blindly giving in to their most base impulses for violation and retaliation, and, as such, "letting the racists win".

Inversely, from the perspective of the politics of uncivility, performances of civility will no doubt come off as hopelessly naïve, harmless, and upright. And yet, despite their tenacious, agonistic relation, the two approaches might not be able to do entirely without one another. Each could be seen to need the other to compensate for the inherent limitations of its own logic of resistance, which makes it neither possible nor desirable to choose one over the other, lest one reduces the efficacy of the struggle against racism and (neo)colonialism as a whole.

Notes

- 1** The hashtag #LeopoldMustFall was first used in 2016 by student-activists at London's Queen Mary University fighting for the removal of a plaque commemorating Leopold II (QM Pan-African Society 2018).
- 2** One occasion of looting occurred in Brussels' Louise district on June 7, 2020.
- 3** For a classic exposé on the horrid acts committed in the Congo Free State during its reign by King Leopold II, see Adam Hochschild (1998).
- 4** For a comprehensive overview and in-depth treatment of the problematics of colonialist monuments in public space in Belgium, as well as different and changing attitudes and approaches towards these, see Stanard 2019.
- 5** The Flemish-Dutch name of the collective is De stoeten Ostendenaere, which can be translated as the "naughty or brave resident of Ostend". The sculptural ensemble is called the "Ruitenstandbeeld Leopold II".
- 6** The collective also made the return of the bronze hand conditional on adding a panel to the monument offering accurate historical information concerning the horrendous practices in Congo, including historical pictures of mutilated Congolese people.
- 7** In the second instance, this was part of protests against planned celebrations of Leopold II's urbanist legacy centred on the equestrian statue on the Throne Square.
- 8** The original French name of the collective is Association citoyenne pour un espace public décolonial.
- 9** Excellent studies on the challenges faced by Belgo-Congolese and other minorities are Mazzocchetti 2012 and Demart 2013.
- 10** The ascription of vandalism to acts of decolonial iconoclasm is consistent with a key distinction made in the scholarship on iconoclasm. As Dario Gamboni summarises it, "Whereas the use of 'iconoclasm' and 'iconoclast' is compatible with neutrality and even [...] with approval, 'vandalism' and 'vandal' are always stigmatizing [sic], and imply blindness, ignorance, stupidity, baseness or lack of taste" (1997, 18). The key criterion for using the term iconoclasm instead of vandalism, further, is the "reckoned presence [...] of a motive" (Gamboni 1997, 18) that can be religious or, in case of decolonial activism, political in nature. Since the article's aim is to interrogate critiques of decolonial iconoclasm in terms of vandalism, I mainly use the term "radical decolonial iconoclasm" to denote the straightforward, crude and destructive forms of decolonial iconoclasm under discussion. In the few cases where I refer to such forms in the problematic terms of decolonial vandalism, I use scare quotes.
- 11** The statue in question is located in the public park in front of the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula in the centre of Brussels. The action of BYAR took place on June 12, 2020.
- 12** On the 7 pm news bulletin on the Flemish public broadcaster VRT on June 12, 2020. Own translation.
- 13** The protests against the statue took place on June 7, 2020, the right-wing protests on June 13, 2020.
- 14** "Le partage du sensible" in the original French.
- 15** Although acts of destructive iconoclasm and extreme forms of protest such as looting or arson within anti-racist protests can be seen as instantiations of the same performative politics of uncivility, there are also significant differences that complicate their assessment. One such difference is that in the former case public property, while in the latter case it often concerns private or commercial property is targeted, thereby inflicting damages on parties that are not directly party to the conflict. Also, in the case of iconoclasm against colonialist heritage, the choice of the targets as well as the motivations are rather clear (i.e. decolonial contestation). In contrast, in the case of looting for instance, the targets are mostly contingent and other motives play a role such as discontent over structural socio-economic deprivation, if also, most likely, a certain degree of opportunism.
- 16** Jameson conveyed this point in a private conversation with Žižek, as indicated in an earlier version of this passage (2004, 118).
- 17** Think, for example, of the inscription underneath a bust of Leopold II in Auderghem, which reads "A tribute to those who brought civilisation to the Congo" (my translation from the French).

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Biography

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