Rehabilitating the Accused, Past and Present

by Michael Curtis

Adam Smith

Are we fighting struggles of the past in the context of being fed a diet of misinformation about the present? Simultaneously, we are experiencing expressions of regrets and recognition of responsibilities, if not apologies for past actions by Western leaders, and reevaluations, usually condemnation of individuals accused of racism and colonialism, by iconoclasts fueled by widespread protests of the BLM movement.

In one week in May 2021 confessions of the past came from leaders in France, Germany, and Belgium. French President

Emmanuel Macron recognized France bore a heavy responsibility for the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, in which there were 800,000 victims, ethnic Tutsis, and moderate Hutus. But this white light of truth was not an apology. France was not an accomplice in the genocide, but bore responsibility by its silence. In Germany, foreign minister Heiko Maas did apologize for German colonial past. Its actions in Namibia were a genocide, in which thousands of Herero (80%) and Nama (40%) people were killed between 1904 and 1908. King Philippe of Belgium on the 60th anniversary of its independence expressed "his deepest regrets" to the Democratic Republic of the Congo for colonial abuses, but again no exact apology.

One would not have thought that regrets or apologies were needed when referring to two icons of the mainstream Scottish Enlightenment, but Adam Smith and David Hume are now being investigated, apparently for their constraint in criticism of slavery and racism. Adam Smith is best known as the author of classical economic theory in *The Wealth of Nations,* with its analysis of the capitalist system, the invisible hand of the free market, free markets, the division of labor, self-interest, but he was also concerned with sympathy, benevolence, and advancing the common good. All this is irrelevant in this cancel culture environment, and the grave of Smith is linked in the Edinburgh City Council dossier to slavery and colonialism. Smith argued that slavery was "ubiquitous and inevitable" but it was not as profitable as free labor. Yet, Smith in general was a strong critic of slavery.

David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and historian, died in the year that *Wealth of Nations* was published. He is best known for his *Treatise of Human Nature* 1739-40, a significant contribution to philosophy, for his philosophical empiricism, his refutation of intolerance, and his discussion of the role of religion in morality and political stability. These however are not the reasons why his statue in the Royal Mile in

Edinburgh was defaced by protestors, and why after a petition at University of Edinburgh to remove his name, initially temporarily, from the David Hume Tower, this has been done.

The University explained: “It is important that campuses, curricula, and communities reflect both the university’s contemporary and historical diversity and engage with its institutional legacy across the world.” Edinburgh’s concern is that Hume’s comments on race might cause distress today. However, that distress is supposed to come from a rarely, if ever, read passage. Five years after Hume had written his essay, *Of National Characters,* discussing national differences*,* he added a footnote that stated that he suspected “the negroes and in general all other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures, amongst them, no arts, no sciences.”

Researchers found in a newly discovered archive that he had, in a letter of March 1766, advised his patron Lord Hertford to buy a slave plantation in Grenada, and he lent 400 pounds to one of the main investors in the plantation.

Debate about interpretation of racism of historic individuals continues. Hume, though he was opposed to slavery and in 1748 wrote an article denouncing slavery in ancient Rome, may be complex, but so is history. By coincidence, there are current exhibitions of two figures, Nero, “the man behind the myth,” and Catherine de’ Medici, both subject of misinformation. Nero, fifth emperor of Rome, is usually associated with tyranny, religious persecution, and debauchery; Catherine de’ Medici, Queen Consort of France, 1547-59, is often blamed for the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre of 1572.

The initial issue is whether he was the young ruler trying to maintain order in a divided society, or was he the ruthless megalomaniac of legend, stemming from the negative images of

him written by Tacitus and Suetonius as a bloodthirsty pyromaniac ? Was he the man who fiddled while Rome burned, an image conveyed by a bearded Peter Ustinov in the 1951 movie *Quo Vadis?*

Nero had the misfortune of being the son of Agrippina, who was ruthless and ambitious, killed two of her three husbands, and was eager to participate in running the empire. She had the third husband, Emperor Claudius killed at a banquet by a plate of poisoned mushrooms, clearing the way for Nero to become Emperor in AD 54 at age 17, the youngest emperor.

The popular image of Nero is of a tyrant, a killer, the burner of his capital city, the lover of his mother, the murderer of his mother with whom he may have had an incestuous affair, his wives, Octavia and Poppaea, his fifteen year old step brother Britannicus, the persecutor of Christians, an exhibitionist who indulged in eccentric behavior as an artist, religious worshipper, and competitor in wrestling, chariot races, and the theater. As a talented musician, he performed publicly playing the lyre, and locked the doors so no one could leave. He lived lavishly, with extravagant banquets in his rotating dining room at which peacocks, swans, and stuffed sow's wombs were on the menu, and sex , often bisexual, during courses, and travelled with a thousand carriages with mules shod with silver.

Nero was cruel but he was popular with the people, plebs urbana. He organized relief operations, paid for emergency food supplies, introduced new fire regulations. He was a populist, gave tax breaks, sponsored public works, ordered the construction of amphitheaters, and promoted athletic games and entertainment shows.

He did not burn Rome since he was at his villa, 35 miles away during the fire, nor did he order the conflagration. However, he used some of the remains in the destroyed districts to build a stunning palace Domus Aurea, (Golden House).

Neither did he play the fiddle, an instrument which did not appear in Europe until centuries later.

Nero put an end to secret trials, and banned capital punishment. He ended contests involving bloodshed. After pollical disputes., high taxes and high spending, he was forced at age 30 in AD 68 to commit suicide by stabbing himself in the throat. He is supposed to have said, “what an artist dies in me.” The real Nero behind the myth remains to be discovered.

Catherine de’ Medici , an Italian noblewoman born in Florence in 1519 of parents who died within a month of her birth, was protected by her uncle Pope Clement VII, put in convents, and then at age 14 in 1533 was married to Henry, son of King Francis I. She became queen consort of France from 1547 to 1559, had ten children, and mother of three kings. She became a “serpent queen,” a ruthless manipulator, desperate to keep her family in power, glorify the monarchy, and preserve French unity in the midst of theological disputes between Catholics and Calvinist protestants or Huguenots. She was one of the most influential women in 16th century Europe.

Her marriage to king Henry II was unhappy, a 16th century version of “three in the marriage,” since the king took a number of mistresses, especially Diane de Poitiers to whom he gave castle Chenonceau, and who dispensed patronage. Yet she had a long regency, she became a skilled ruler against political and personal obstacles, became governor of France , and organized a stable of 80 women aides. At first, she wanted to protect the rebelling Protestants, and be a compromiser, but was unable to control the civil war between the two religions.

Catherine supported the Edict of Amboise 1563 to end the civil war, but after hostilities continued she gave up the policy of compromise and became hard line. The most violent hostilities

occurred after the assassination attempt on Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, military leader of the Huguenots, targeted by the Catholic Guise family.

Two days later, St Bartholomew Day massacre, to which Catherine is believed to have agreed, broke out with large casualties, and the slaughter spread throughout France. Estimates are that some thousands of Huguenots were killed.

Catherine was a patron of the arts, a keen collector, supporting French renaissance culture , including portraits by Jean Clouet, organizing entertainments celebrating fetes, picnics, and battles, and employing the leading artists and architects of the time. Among other works she built two palaces in Paris; the Tuilleries and Hotel de la Reine. The mystery remains of a complex individual, a powerful woman, an Italian trying to govern a people as unruly as the French, and successful in protecting her sons, the kings of France.