

The Distortions of Woke Martyrdom

by Theodore Dalrymple



Haiti is one of those countries that you can leave after a visit, but that never quite leaves you. Its history is so heroic and so tragic, its present condition often so appalling, its culture so fascinating and its people so attractive, that even if it does not become the main focus of your intellectual attention, you never quite lose your interest in it, or in its history.

That is why, recently in a Parisian bookshop, I bought a book about the Battle of Vertières, the last gasp of the expedition sent out by Napoleon to Haiti, or Saint-Domingue as it was still known (“The Pearl of the Antilles” by those who profited from it), to return it to the condition of a vast slave plantation. General Leclerc, Napoleon’s brother-in-law, commanded, and 50,000 French soldiers, including Leclerc, lost their lives in this ill-fated and, from our current moral standpoint, malign expedition. Six weeks after its final defeat at the hands of the former slaves, Haiti, or Hayti—

under the first of its many dictators, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who made himself emperor and was assassinated two years later—declared its independence from France.

The book, titled [Une arme blanche: la mort de George Floyd et les usages de l'histoire dans le discours néoconservateur](#) (*A Dagger: the Death of George Floyd and the Uses of History in Neoconservative Discourse*). It is directed mainly at a French-Canadian journalist named Christian Rioux, who wrote six articles on the subject of George Floyd in *Le Devoir*, one of Quebec's most important newspapers. But obviously, M. Rioux is a figure who is intended to symbolise all those who do not toe the Black Lives Matter line on the whole affair. Professor Le Glaunec employs his quotation marks again on the term "conservative thinkers," as if no person who thought could be conservative and no person who was a conservative could think.

At least he writes clearly, which is praise indeed of an academic nowadays, and no one could very well mistake his style of historiography, history being for him the story of exploitation and oppression, and of resistance to exploitation and oppression, and of nothing much else. It is true, however, that he catches out M. Rioux in some historical assertions so dubious that even I, who am no historian, would not have made them.

But he goes further than pointing them out, clearly implying that his sloppy and even dishonest use of historical material is typical, necessary, and intrinsic to a conservative outlook. Conservatives politicise history for their own ends, while people like the author come to their political opinions by means of the objective study of history. Unfortunately, those who accuse others of sloppiness or dishonesty make themselves hostages to fortune, for few accusations are more often returnable to sender.

Although the book mentions George Floyd in its title, in actual fact there are really only three references to him,

other than the fact that he was killed by Derek Chauvin, the policeman now awaiting sentence. The first is in the dedication: To the memory of George Floyd. Then he is called a gentle giant, and finally innocent.

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Now it is true that the character of a person wrongfully killed is not germane to the wrongfulness of his death. The law does not distinguish between saints and sinners as victims of murder. It is no defence to a charge of murder that the victim was a swine.

But there is a rule in English law according to which, if the defence attacks the character of witnesses for the prosecution, the prosecution may do the same for the witnesses for the defence. This rule is no doubt intended to keep *ad hominem* attacks in court to a minimum.

Be that as it may, it is surely extraordinary that a man who prides himself on the objectivity of his view of history by contrast with that of someone with whom he disagrees should describe George Floyd as, in effect, an innocent gentle giant. He didn't have to be that to be wrongfully killed, and he wasn't.

I doubt whether the pregnant woman into whose house he once broke and to whose abdomen he held a gun while demanding money would describe him as "a gentle giant"; and indeed to do so might risk running feminist rage, who could accuse the author of a typically male minimisation of the suffering of a victimised woman. I doubt also that she would be very strongly in favour of the abolition of the police, whatever their crimes or misdemeanours.

George Floyd had fentanyl in his blood when he died. This suggests that at the very least he must have associated with people of doubtful reputation, and that his commitment to the straight and narrow path was not rock solid. When a person with a long criminal record takes fentanyl, there is at least a *prima facie* doubt about his innocence, as Professor Le Glaunec calls it as if it were an incontrovertible fact. Of course, it is possible that George Floyd's resort to fentanyl involved him in no other criminal activity, and that he paid for it honestly (though buying it from criminals) with his hard-earned money; but I doubt that many people would be willing to place a large bet on this point.

In other words, Professor Le Glaunec, who makes much of his dispassionate resort to historical evidence by contrast with his opponent, reveals himself to be at least as *parti pris* as that opponent. He displays a lack of curiosity about George Floyd that surely derives from his political standpoint. As for the dedication to the memory of George Floyd, it is morally obtuse: for a man does not become good by being wrongfully killed. A mother loves her son because he is her son, not because he is good, and therefore the grief of his family is understandable and easily sympathised with; but for others to turn him into what he was not, a martyr to a cause, is to display at once a moral and an intellectual defect.

The connection between historical explanation and individual morality is nowhere more complex than in Haiti. The victor of Vertières, the former slave Dessalines, was declared dictator for life, with the right to choose his successor, in the very document that announced the independence of Haiti and the freedom of its population. Dessalines then undertook a policy that today would be called genocide: he ordered that every white settler, man, woman, and child killed (about 6000 in all) who remained in the country after the last of the French troops should be killed, and his orders were carried out. The truly atrocious conduct of the French explained this genocide

no doubt, but did it justify it? To answer in the affirmative is to claim that there are good, or justified, genocides; to answer no is to be accused of a lack of psychological insight into the righteous anger of Dessalines and others, or of a lack of sympathy for the state of mind of the victims of slavery.

The death of George Floyd was similarly wrong; but that does not mean that the reaction to it was right.

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