

Upfront

"My American friends want to tear down monuments and reject history," Gianluigi said, as we waited in sunny St. Peter's Square, taking a break between visits to the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican's massive basilica. Gianluigi was leading me on a private tour of the museums and majesty of the city-state that Christendom created in its own honor. He is Roman by birth and progressive by choice, earning a Ph.D. at UCLA, proud of his "Catholic heritage" but at odds with the Church's stance on modern social issues. "They (his cohorts in the U.S.) don't understand that to erase the past is to eliminate the opportunity to learn from it."

I was quiet as I considered his point, one I have heard argued often back home, but in the vacuum of American historical context. 'My country is a couple hundred years old,' I thought to myself. Gianluigi and I were looking at things that are 10 times older, mixed in among of-the-moment inventions and conveniences of the modern world. My house was built in 1854, a relic of the antebellum South. Some Roman ruins make the mid-19th century seem like a few hours ago.

"You know Mussolini's balcony?" he both said and asked. "We don't wish to return to Fascism, but we would never destroy it (the window from which the dictator rallied Italians to embrace Hitler, the site where he declared war on Britain and France)."

Much of Imperial Rome and the wonders of antiquity were built on the backs of slaves. Emperors were cruel, gluttonous, egomaniacal and motivated by greed. Popes and cardinals were corrupted by the temptations of physical pursuits, hypocritically dismissive of the vows from which they derived their moral authority. In other words, men (in the gender a-specific sense) were men, naturally human and imperfect, one and all. Flawed, but not forgotten, both the sinners and the saints.

"I don't understand your movements," Gianluigi said. The ones that seek to sanitize the American story, are the "movements" to which he referred.

What he said made perfect sense. In the U.S., one's perspectives on statues and school teachings typically align with his or her political predispositions. Romans look past the biases of their adopted dogmas and suspend the desire to "be right" in favor of the need "to know." They revere history. They believe that its artifacts provide foundation for philosophical discussion and collective advancement. To sanitize it would be an act of arrogance, in a dispassionately logical sense.

Deciding, at a particular moment in time, what is worthy of preserving and what isn't, presumes that we, today, have the right to determine what the past looks like from the perspective of future mankind. Is that a burden that any of us are worthy of carrying? Gianluigi would say, "No, signori. Assolutamente, no."



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