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## **The 'versus' habit: Bristol, Banksy and the Barons**

**Paul Gough**

Little is ever forgotten in Bristol. The historic enmity between the two halves of the city may be well hidden, but it is played out in the psycho-geographies of a 'federal' city. During the eighteenth century, gathered to the north around Georgian Clifton lived the high Anglican, high Tory, merchant class, largely represented by the Society of the Merchant Venturers. Over centuries they became the most powerful mercantile cartel in Bristol and the region; their wealth and status partly founded on the trade in slaves and other 'goods' from the west coast of Africa. On the other side of the city, the Non-conformist, Whig/Liberal industrialists of Bedminster, the separate town that eventually became South Bristol, strongly associated with Dissent and the development of tobacco, sugar and chocolate industries owned by Non-conformist families such as the Frys and Wills, dynasties linked to the Quakers and rooted in manufacturing rather than maritime trading.

The merging of the 'Hundred of Bedminster' with the City of Bristol around 1900 brought the two ruling elites into direct competition for control of the central commemorative landscape of a new Bristol. The built environment is still bedecked with their claims to the high ground. Two edifices mark the skyline: Cabot's Tower, built in 1887 is firmly associated with the mercantile entrepreneurialism of the Italian voyager Giovanni Cabotto. Quarter of a mile away stands the 1925 Wills Memorial Building of Bristol University, which was substantially funded by the eponymous

South Bristolian family, and further aided by the Frys. Elsewhere in the city, other monumental forms perpetuated the adversarial *frisson*. In 1894, the year that William H. Wills was returned to Parliament as MP for East Bristol, he marked the occasion by commissioning a statue to the mid-eighteenth century radical Whig MP for Bristol, Edmund Burke. One year later, by way of response, John Cassidy's statue of Edward Colston, paragon of the city's mercantile and Anglican values, was erected in the centre. Today, the two statues stand a hundred metres apart, continuation of a parallel monologue in the recitation of Bristol's past. Such tensions erupt periodically but persistently. In 2006 the city held the great 'apology debate', a mass gathering of historians, politicians and other public figures, chaired by AC Grayling, intending to arrive at a conclusive declaration. 'It's time the city said sorry', proclaimed *The Bristol Evening Post*, but in the event no clear consensus emerged. On the contrary, the debate stirred up further anger and upset. Seven years earlier, with rather less fuss, Liverpool City Council had passed a formal motion unanimously acknowledging and apologising for the City's part in the slave trade.

It is not difficult to see, then, how the mnemonic landscape of Bristol offers a difficult setting for any monumental intervention. Take for example its war memorial. Given its speckled history of internecine rivalry it will not surprise us that Bristol was the last city in Great Britain to erect its Cenotaph, a monument to the 6,000 men and women from the city who died in the Great War. Designed to unite disparate factions in one inclusive act of mourning it was not unveiled until 1932, the delay due not to costs, design, or inscription but to its location. It stands on a traffic island on reclaimed land over the River Frome, a 'neutral' spot lodged between the mercantile north of the city and the Nonconformist south, a tomb to no one on no one's land.

As major markers in the urban landscape, memorials encapsulate and perpetuate memory. The very sites and spaces they command and control are important. Rarely are they arbitrary assignments, they are ‘consciously situated to connect or compete with existing nodes of collective remembering.’ Containing and conveying memory, memorials exist not only as aesthetic devices but as an apparatus of social memory, as ‘rhetorical topoi’, civic compositions that set out our national heritage and our public responsibilities, positioned in the urban schema as the embodiment of power and memory.

However deeply submerged they may be in the collective sub-conscious of a city, such tensions explain why the rhetorical iconography embedded in monuments is capable of arousing such ire when they are first sited, defaced, removed or threatened with relocation. Statues, their chosen subjects and their positioning in British cities arouses passions that can seem disproportionate to the actual investment in bronze or stone. The livid protests that accompanied the erection of a statue to the RAF commander ‘Bomber’ Harris may seem rather extreme sixty years after the war, but that is to underestimate the role played by public artifacts in sustaining certain power bases, especially in moments of contemporary anxiety or dispute. Power, as Foucault, points out creates its own points of resistance and the power over memory and identity held by any dominant social group is rarely left unchallenged. As Morgan has argued, that which is designed to provide a locus of ‘inclusion’, also proclaims exclusion, and can arouse disruption from a rival faction or from discontented individuals.

It is not surprising then that the anonymous Bristol-bred street artist Banksy chose a provocatively adversarial title for his 2009 retrospective show: ‘Banksy *versus* Bristol Museum’. ‘This is the first show I’ve ever done’, he is said to have

commented, 'where taxpayers' money is being used to hang my pictures up rather than scrape them off.' Indeed, Bristol has had a 'love-hate' relationship with Banksy since he started stencilling on the city's walls in the 1990s. Criticism of his state-sponsored show was anticipated, but evaporated once the queues lengthened and the acclaim spread. However, to a few discerning observers and sensitive city-elders, the adversarial language rankled. It seemed to strike a jarring note in a city that had recently been short-listed for European City of Culture; where the visual arts, music, new media, film, and animation had been courted, sponsored and presented as the authentic face of a city that had largely re-invented itself from an aging port into an environmentally switched-on, culturally diverse, attractive city, hailed in 2009 as 'England's Best City to live In'. So why 'versus'? Did the phrase cause irritation because it scratched at the ill-concealed wounds in Bristol's civic memory?

Cultural historian Paul Fussell has explored these questions. He posits the confrontation between 'us' and 'them' as an example of gross dichotomizing that can best be understood as 'the modern *versus* habit'. One thing is opposed to another, he argues, not in the Hegelian hope of achieving some synthesis, or a negotiated peace, but with a determination that neither side should concede, that total submission of one side or the other is the only resolution.

Banksy's exhibition was clearly attuned to the historical fractures and vexatious histories of his home city. His work is aligned to, indeed perhaps derived from and nurtured by, the spirit of dissent that drives the counter-cultures of Bristol. During this same period – the tail-end of a Blair government and a Bush administration – there was increasing evidence in the city of visual dissent that drew its energy and iconography from the stenciled street art of Banksy and other street 'unknowns'.

A number of these interventions took the temporary form of signs, symbols or letters painted onto road surfaces – the letter ‘H’ appended to the words ‘BUS STOP’ for example, to create the phrase ‘BUSH STOP’, or the outline figure of a corpse marked with the words ‘IRAQ’, painted on the cycle path that runs through the peace park near St Peter’s Church in central Bristol. (Figure 3) Other interventions appear to be more systematic. Some have a poetic air: a doomed pillar-box turned into a shrine and bedecked with flowers and pleas; others are more political, many targeted at the controversial retail development, called *Cabot Circus* – a rather predictable moniker given the link between the city, commerce and capital. Guerilla-artists operating as ‘Subvertise’ regularly re-label and re-word billboard signs on many of its approach roads. The forms used by these interventionists are sophisticated and knowingly applied: the typography mimics the graphic conventions of corporate advertising, and the wordplay links protest with politics, commerce with comedy. The same group may have been responsible in 2003 for depositing a cardboard facsimile of a child’s coffin on the steps of the Bristol Cenotaph, around which were strewn bouquets of flowers some sporting a typed label: ‘For Those Who Died for Oil’. (Figure 4)

Do such gestures constitute an organized counter-culture or are they spontaneous forms of anti-corporate tagging? Are they truly contemporary manifestations of a city that is not at peace with itself or its historic past? The apology debate was inconclusive; Banksy has attained the status of canny anti-hero; *Massive Attack* still refuse to perform at a music venue named after Edward Colston. Should much of this surprise us? Such historical disputes mark every cityscape. In Bristol, however, they are rehearsed repeatedly in proxy through its mnemonic landscape, through the network of sculptures, statues and plinths that already litter its precincts,

and more markedly by temporary and irreverent markers that shadow the official history of the city.

### **Further reading**

Boyer, M. C., *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, 1996)

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Figure 1: Banksy wall painting. Park Street, Bristol, 2009

Figure 2: Post Box, Windmill Hill, Bristol, 2009

Figure 3: 'IRAQ' street marking, St Peter's Park, Bristol, 2004

Figure 4: 'Coffin', Bristol Cenotaph, 2003