

TOPPLING A MONUMENT

The (post)colonial case of Alfred Escher (1819–1882)

*Talk given at «The Lady Boss» by Hans Fässler, St.Gallen *) for the attention of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent on the occasion of their country visit to Switzerland in January, 2022. In the WGEPAD chair: Dominique Day.*

Madam Chairperson, members of the UN Working Group, friends, colleagues, comrades! Thank you for the invitation. It is an honour for me to be here, an obligation and a pleasure. The title of my talk is to be understood both in its proper (some want to see the monument removed) and in its figurative sense (ideologically, it has already been toppled).

Where the monument is

It is located in front of the southern facade of Zurich's Main Railway Station, where historically the main entrance to the platforms was. Zurich was defined as «kilometre zero» of the Swiss railway network. Escher symbolically faces south, towards the Alps and the Gotthard Tunnel, but also towards «Bahnhofstrasse», one of the world's most expensive shopping streets, leading to «Paradeplatz», called «Pig Market» in the 17th century. The «Paradeplatz» of today – I would argue maliciously – is only slightly less dirty, as it is the heart of Swiss capitalism, with the seats of Credit Suisse and UBS, and a number of other banks close by.



Photo: Hans Fässler

The monument was created in 1889 by Swiss sculptor Richard Kissling (1848–1919), who incidentally also designed the Manila monument to José Rizal (1861–1896), the Philippine's national and anti-colonial hero of liberation. But that is another story.

When Escher's monument was inaugurated in 1889, the same year as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, its class aspect became immediately obvious: The more radical Zurich workers saw it as a provocation, took to the streets, and it had to be protected by the army during the inauguration ceremony on 22nd June.

Why Escher was important

Alfred Escher was called «King Alfred I.» in his time, and rightly so. The list of his achievements is long, and so I want to limit myself to the most important ones.

=> In 1856/57 Escher created or co-created the «Schweizerische Kreditanstalt» (today: «Credit Suisse», one of the world's nine leading multi-national investment banks) and the «Schweizerische Lebensversicherungs- und Rentenanstalt» (today: «Swiss Life», one of Europe's leading life and pensions and financial services providers).

=> Escher was instrumental in the founding of the «Eidgenössisches Polytechnikum», today «ETH», the «Swiss Federal Institute of Science and Technology», ranking fourth in the world among universities of engineering and technology

=> Escher was a railway magnate: He presided over the «Swiss Northeastern Railway Company», created by merging the «Northern Railway Company» (nicknamed «Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn») with the «Zurich-Lake Constance-Company», he initiated the Swiss trans-alpine railway line, and he launched the Gotthard Tunnel project.

=> Escher was one of the most powerful and influential politicians of his age: He first was a member of Zurich's cantonal legislature, then a cabinet member of the Canton (government member), then for 34 years a Federal MP. He presided over the National Council, the people's chamber of the Swiss two-chamber parliament, four times.

Why Escher still matters

I am not listing the achievements of Alfred Escher to convince you that he was a great guy, but in order to explain what happened in the summer of 2017. In 2017, news of the entanglement of the Escher family in the Transatlantic slavery system shook to its ideological foundations a great part of Zurich (and Switzerland). It was that part which – in a spirit of exceptionalism and white innocence – had always considered itself small, Alpine, neutral, landlocked, and «far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife» (to quote Gray's «Elegy written in a country churchyard»). It was the story of a slave plantation in Zurich hands that all of a sudden pitted itself against the picture of a rural, bucolic, and self-sufficient Switzerland, which the Bernese poet and intellectual Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777) had created in 1729 in his literary work «Die Alpen» and in which, lamentably, so many still believe in this country today.

I would even go so far as to call the following – in the terminology of Sigmund Freud – the fourth narcissistic insult meted out to the Swiss and particularly Zurich elites: After Copernicus («We are not the centre of the universe»), Darwin («We are not the crown of creation»), and Freud («We are not masters in our own house») came Michael Zeuske («Our own house was built on the blood and sweat of slaves»).

Escher's entanglement in the slavery system had already been rumoured in the 19th century by his political opponents, but it was only in 2017, when I managed to motivate the eminent German slavery historian Michael Zeuske to do research in Cuban archives, that it became clear: Escher's uncle Friedrich Ludwig Escher (1779–1845) had owned the Cuban coffee plantation «Buen Retiro» near Artemisa. Artemisa is located in that part of the island which historians of slavery call «Cuba grande», the world's most advanced and most efficient plantation complex in the 19th century. Escher's uncle also owned 87 slaves, and when he died in 1845, the plantation worth 40,000 Silver Pesos went to his brother Heinrich Escher (1776–1853), Alfred's father, in Zurich, and through the sale of that plantation by his father, some of that slavery-based wealth ended in Alfred Escher's pockets.

And of course, this is not only a story of money. It is also a story of – to use the terminology of the French sociologist Bourdieu – of economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Even if we do not yet know exactly how many Pesos or Swiss Francs the sale of «Buen Retiro» yielded to the Escher family of Zurich, we know a great deal about the colonial background of the family: Alfred's grandfather was a banker and an officer in Russian services, his grandmother came from a family known for plantation ownership in the Caribbean and North America. Alfred's father Heinrich worked for the Parisian bank «Hottinger & Cie.», which helped the French government to finance the expedition against the Haitian Slave Revolution. «Hottinger & Cie.» had, of course, Zurich roots. Heinrich then became Hottinger's agent in the United States, where he acquired an immense fortune by dealing and speculating in real estate and colonial goods (cotton, tobacco, rice, coffee). He owned a share in one of the best Virginian tobacco plantations on the James River and communicated with such American greats as Secretary of War John Armstrong, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

So, while it would certainly mean going too far to say that the Gotthard Tunnel was built on the blood of slaves, there can be no doubt that the skills which Alfred Escher, the man with the statue, needed for his projects (forging alliances, creating political networks, raising money, negotiating national and international deals) were partly rooted in the colonial history of his family.

What shall we do with the slavery profiteer?

Since 2017, Alfred Escher's statue has become a wonderful symbol, a fascinating centre of interest, and a point of crystallisation of at least three ongoing debates in which anti-racist activists, universities, political institutions, urban planners and the media either want to or cannot but participate. The murder of George Floyd on 25th May 2020 in the streets of Minneapolis and the ensuing «Black Lives Matter» movement have only intensified everything.

The first debate is over Swiss participation in slavery, the slave trade and the European colonial project between the 16th and the 19th century. There is by now an academic and – I dare say – a general and political consensus that Switzerland, or rather Swiss bankers, merchants, mercenary officers, administrators, investors, family businesses, intellectuals, etc. played their part in a crime against humanity. They owned or administered plantations, they owned or traded in slaves, they financed or insured slave-ships in the triangular trade, they invested in colonial companies, they produced and traded those *indiennes* textiles that have come to be called the «currency of the slave trade», they traded in and profited from colonial goods, they administered colonies, they helped to control the enslaved workforces in the Caribbean or to suppress their revolts and revolutions, they created or elaborated the anti-Black racism needed to justify and defend the crime against humanity that Durban defined in its final declaration in 2001 and which text Switzerland has signed. I have tried to quantify the Swiss share in the Transatlantic system of plantation and chattel slavery and have estimated it at around 3%. So far nobody has seriously doubted that figure. Alfred Escher is just one tiny fraction of those 3%. But an important and a symbolic one.

The second debate is over representations of the colonial in the public space. What to do with problematic or contaminated statues, street-names, names of houses and mountains, paintings, facades, sculpted elements, memorial stones, busts, frescos, memorial plaques, and the like? Here again, the statue of Alfred Escher in front of Zurich's Main Railway Station is just one of many places. But an important and a symbolic one. Let me give you some guidelines first, principles that are my personal ones and that may even occasionally put me at odds with some of my anti-racist friends. a) I think that there must always be a debate. Needless to say, this must always include the BIPoC communities. b) I think that «All Monuments Must Fall» is a problematic demand. I have therefore criticised point 7 of a catalogue of demands put up by «Exit Racism Now», which reads, «removal of all statues and renaming of all streets, mountains, squares that refer to racist/colonial figures». I dare say that we can do better than that and we can do it more creatively. c) We must allow ourselves to differentiate: The statue of Alfred Escher is not the same case as that of David de Pury. David de Pury is not the same case as Robert E. Lee. Robert E. Lee is not the same case as Edward Colston. And Edward Colston is not the same case as Leopold II. In other words: A politician responsible for the death and torture of some 10 million Congolese or a merchant responsible for the enslavement of some 80,000 human beings is not quite the same as a man who inherited some slavery profits from his father, but also has some merits concerning the creation of institutions on the way to a modern industrial Switzerland.

But before running into more dire straits with my arguments, I want to finish by presenting to you my proposal for what to do with the statue of slavery profiteer Alfred Escher. It is an idea that I have already communicated to the Zurich authorities, who are presently looking into problematic places and representations of the colonial in the city and who are developing strategies as to what to do with them.

I have a dream that one day, the statue of Alfred Escher in front of Zurich's Main Railway Station will be confronted with another statue. Escher will be forever looking in the eyes of a slave girl, a statue created by a female Afro-Cuban artist selected from among the participants of an international art competition. The slave girl – we shall learn from a clearly visible memorial plaque with a QR code for further reference – is called Albertina. She was fathered – as Michael Zeuske has convincingly shown – by Alfred Escher's uncle, Friedrich Ludwig with his enslaved washer woman Serafina. According to the documents, Serafina was worth 300 Pesos, and Albertina, the 14 months-old «little mulatto girl», Alfred Escher's Afro-Cuban cousin, 100 Pesos.

Alfred forever and a day looking into Albertina's eyes instead of into one of the most expensive shopping streets in the world – I am quite excited by my idea.

The third debate, incidentally, is slavery reparations long-overdue, but that is for another time. And now I look forward to taking your questions and critical remarks.

St.Gallen and Zurich, 19th January, 2022

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