

Campaigners condemn Oxford college for keeping Rhodes statue



The Rhodes statue at Oriel College, Oxford, is to remain – but shouldn't students have more important things to protest about? Photograph: Eddie Keogh/Reuters

By **Peter Scott**
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The Rhodes Must Fall campaign has been linked to other campaigns against alleged hate speech that have targeted rightwing politicians – and those expressing doubts about the campaign for transgender rights. This has already produced the engaging spectacle of old-stager radical Germaine Greer falling foul of this new radical chic.

“Free speech on campus” has produced the usual contortions. Ministers are beginning to grumble about the rising tide of intolerance. The online magazine Spiked produced a “free speech” university ranking, another metric to join all the others. But at the same time the government wants to impose [curbs](#) on anything resembling speech that might conceivably promote an ill-defined Islamic “radicalisation”.

Poor universities! On one flank they have to stop their student unions and societies being nasty to rightwingers. On the other, chilled by the Prevent strategy, they feel obliged to send out discreet forms to invited speakers that aim to pre-censor their talks or, at any rate, offer early warning of “trouble”.

Back to the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in Oxford. Of course, Rhodes was not a particularly nice man, certainly by today’s standards – though plenty of his contemporaries also criticised his bombastic imperialism. He was a racist. But his older contemporary Herbert Spencer, a key influencer of Beatrice Webb and other thinkers, had made some version of social Darwinism almost routine.

If we are to begin a cull not very nice people, there will be a lot of empty statue plinths and a lot of returned, or spurned, bequests. Maybe, as in some central and eastern European countries, we might need to establish poorly signposted out-of-town parks for our equivalent of Lenin and Soviet war memorials.

Student campaigners, of course, will object to such arguments as moral relativism at best and, worse, complacent acceptance of racial discrimination. In its place they seek to substitute a historical absolutism. But to assert the supremacy of 21st-century sensibilities of a nervous politically correct west may not be the best starting place for exploring difference and otherness.

The major objection to “identity politics” is that it can be a displacement activity. There are many more urgent targets than Rhodes’s Oriel statue. The proportion of academic staff from black and ethnic minorities remains dismal. Although the proportion of black and minority ethnic students in UK higher education looks healthy, the great majority are concentrated in big urban post-1992 universities.

Then there is the strengthening entrenchment of social privilege. All the statistical spin about increasing participation by students from lower socio-economic groups cannot conceal the yawning inequality of British society. Precarious and underemployment for some, fast-track paths oiled by internships to over-paid jobs for others.

Campaigning to remove Rhodes's statue is the easy option. He has been dead for more than 100 years and his world is never coming back. Campaigning to abolish fees or set fair access targets with teeth is today's heavy lifting.

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