

The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall

After the nation's long retreat from multiculturalism and the return of a rose-tinted memory of empire, it is no accident that the Rhodes Must Fall movement has come to Britain

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Protesters demand the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue from the front of Oriel College, Oxford. Photograph: David Hartley/Rex/Shutterstock

The movement known as Rhodes Must Fall, which began with a protest action at the University of Cape Town on 9 March 2015 and quickly spread to other campuses in South Africa, and then to Oxford University, is barely more than a year old. Yet it feels like it has existed for longer, perhaps because of the enormous public attention it has attracted – or because its battles have resonated far beyond the universities where they have been staged. The first of these battles led swiftly to victory, with the removal of the large statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town a month after the campaign began; the latest, to frustration, given Oxford University's

resistance to doing the same with the statue of Rhodes at Oriel College, where it still stands, on the facade of a building bearing his name, as an acknowledgement of the £100,000 he left the college in his will.

But another reason one might think this movement has a longer history is the nature of its ambitions *beyond* the removal of these statues, though it is the issue of the statues, and allegations that the students involved wish to rewrite history to suit their sensitivities, that have attracted controversy, particularly in the British media. These larger ambitions of the movement – that is, to bring out into the open institutional racism in university life in South Africa and Britain, and to decolonise education – speak to concerns that many have had for a while. These concerns, by now, have a long itinerary, but they have been awaiting a forum for articulation.

Most of the controversy generated by the movement has revolved around the figure of Cecil Rhodes – but Rhodes himself is not really central to its aims. What is at issue is an ethos that gives space and even preeminence to such a figure, and hesitates to interrogate Rhodes's legacy. That legacy does not merely include Rhodes's financial bequests and their educational offshoots, like the Rhodes scholarships, but the vision embodied in his will, which called for:

“the establishment, promotion and development of a Secret Society, the true aim and object whereof shall be for the extension of British rule throughout the world, the perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom, and of colonisation by British subjects of all lands where the means of livelihood are attainable by energy, labour and enterprise, and especially the occupation by British settlers of the entire Continent of Africa, the Holy Land, the Valley of the Euphrates, the Islands of Cyprus and Candia, the whole of South America, the Islands of the Pacific not heretofore possessed by Great Britain, the whole of the Malay Archipelago, the seaboard of China and Japan ...”

For the movement's vocal critics, it has been commonplace to observe, euphemistically, that Rhodes was “a man of his time”, by way of suggesting that his time has nothing in common with our own. But if you replace the word “British” with “western” and “United Kingdom” with “the west”, you find this statement in his will encapsulates not only Rhodes's vision but a vision of the world today, one that has had a fresh lease on life in the last two decades – in which unequal access to opportunity and mobility is structurally embedded as the norm; in which the west should still have free passage to, and control of, the rest of the world, whether via

business, expatriation, or military intervention – while those travelling to the west must be viewed as potential refugees or people posing as asylum seekers.

From its start in South Africa, Rhodes Must Fall announced that it intended to address this unequal vision of the world as it manifests itself within universities – declaring itself “a collective movement of students and staff members mobilising for direct action against the reality of institutional racism at the University of Cape Town. The chief focus of this movement is to create avenues for REAL transformation that students and staff alike have been calling for.”

The well-worn but enigmatic term “institutional racism” is important here. It is worth recalling that its history is more British than South African. It came into play in Britain in the 1990s and its full import was felt by many when it was used to expose the failures of the Stephen Lawrence case. Lawrence was a young black student who was murdered while waiting for a bus in south-east London on 22 April 1993. Five suspects were arrested but not convicted, and there was a general downplaying by the Metropolitan police of racism as a motive. A public inquiry took place in 1998, and Sir William Macpherson, who was in charge of it, used the term “institutionally racist” in his report to account for the grave shortcomings of the police investigation. He defined it as “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

The word “unwitting” is key. It points to a moral economy in which it is possible to plausibly claim, and believe, that one is not a racist, while benefiting from a system that consigns many to invisibility. In this, “institutional racism” is a resurrection of the colonial order, which was by no means managed exclusively by racist individuals, but by people who believed that a skewed system was normal.

Those who are bewildered by the movement should place it in the context of the historic reversals that define our age. The first has to do with apartheid. Not that apartheid has been reinstated in South Africa. But it can hardly be claimed that it led to the opening up that was expected in 1994, given that, 21 years later, a black professor at the University of Cape Town, Xolela Mangcu, could tell the Cape Times newspaper that only five of the university’s 200 senior professors were black. Without creating an equivalence between South Africa and Britain, one must note the gradual extinction, in the latter, of the ideals of multiculturalism. These have

largely died without a requiem. Given this context, the emergence of Rhodes Must Fall is at once unsurprising and overdue.

In June last year, I was asked to address students involved in Rhodes Must Fall at Oxford. In Cape Town, the statue of Rhodes on the university campus had clearly been unmissable – an immense likeness, seated in a posture reminiscent of Rodin’s Thinker. The night watchman-like Rhodes in Oxford, by contrast, occupies a crevasse in an Oriel building overlooking High Street, unobtrusively, and insidiously, guarding an always-shut door below him. Neither I nor my wife, who was once a graduate student at Oriel, could recall the existence of a Rhodes statue at Oxford (though she vividly remembered a large portrait of Rhodes glowering down on students inside the college) – a reminder that imperial legacies are not necessarily less pernicious because they may be less obviously visible.

The audience that I spoke to included students of all races, including Ntokozo Qwabe, a South African who had brought the movement from Cape Town to Oxford. At the end of my talk, the students were keen not only to ask questions, but to discuss their experiences of racism – in the university; on the street, where it can be both intangible and palpable: a glance; a name or a chicken bone thrown at you. Humiliation is always difficult to own up to, and the effort it required to make these statements was evident. Rhodes hardly came up, except when some students asked me what I thought of the movement’s name – presumably because they were not certain that it accurately represented their concerns. I said I liked it for its conceptual cheekiness – there can be no politics without quixotic energy and levity.

Yet levity has receded in the last two months as the movement has escalated and its immediate aim – the statue’s removal – has been halted. It is as if the movement must stand or fall by the success or failure of this ambition. But the students have persisted, which suggests, again, that their campaign transcends a battle over Rhodes’s legacy. So we might consider why has it erupted at this time, in this place.

I should admit that one of the reasons I was happy to give that talk at Oriel was that I was revisiting it after 25 years. I met my wife in 1990, and she was the main reason for my daily excursions to the college. It was through her that I became aware of its slightly retrograde status in Oxford at the time, its old-fogey students with monarchist enthusiasms, its conservatism. We both found this ethos uncharming but weirdly funny.

As if to confirm its courtship of the anachronistic, I discovered, one evening, that Enoch Powell was giving a talk there, about – what else – some aspect of a classical text; I forget which one. I recall peering in through a window with a mixture of amusement and horror to catch a glimpse of a learned man [whose 1968 speech](#), in anticipation of a debate on the Labour government’s race relations bill, became synonymous with a dark moment in British history – and is perhaps more striking today because its prediction was so wide of the mark. “The River Tiber will flow with much blood,” Powell had said, quoting Virgil, moved to prophecy because of an annual influx of 50,000 migrants, and because one of his constituents had told him: “In this country in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.” For a moment, I observed, agog, the students listening, rapt. I could have walked in, but didn’t. The scene was so unrepresentative of Oxford that I paused to take it in and then moved on.

Why did Powell seem so irrelevant when I saw him at Oriel more than a quarter-century ago? Why, for that matter, were we unaware of Rhodes above the gate to Oriel? When is it possible to ignore or laugh at statues or symbols, and when does it become hard to do so? Let me widen the scope of the question by applying it to the city in which I live much of the year, Kolkata – a city with a turbulent political history and an extraordinary cultural one, once the capital of India under the British, demoted from that status in 1911 because of its confrontational nationalism.

I go sometimes to the Bengal Club, which once had a plaque saying “Dogs and Indians Not Allowed”, and still has one attesting to the fact that Thomas Macaulay – a man famous for his dismissive remarks about Indian civilisation, including the claim that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” – once lived in the building that stood formerly on the site. Today we can view this history with detached irony, as evidence of the antediluvian, a museum-piece that does not require to be confronted since it no longer has the power to threaten. I feel the same wonder as I did when looking upon Powell in 1990: once these figures, symbols, and words were central, and it is incredible that they should have been so, and equally incredible how they have lost their potency.

What, on the other hand, has made the Rhodes statue suddenly intolerable? For an answer to this, we must look beyond the students, the statue, and the colonial past, towards the contemporary historical moment and to Britain today. It is a Britain in

which, in the last 25 years there has been an extraordinary narrowing down, a closing of ranks, in favour of class and colour. This retrenchment has been accompanied by an atmosphere of denial. It has given rise to a mentality in which there is so much elision of the past and subtle prevarication about race that the bogus breast-beating about the necessity of accommodating historical complexity by leaving the statue in place frankly sounds insulting to many.

In 1990, I could afford to report my fleeting encounter with Powell to my wife with a smile because, at the time, the multicultural experiment seemed to have worked astonishingly well in Britain. This was a country that, barely a decade earlier, under Thatcher, had seriously considered subjecting South Asian women who arrived as spouses to “virginity tests” in order to prove they were genuinely married. (Real South Asian brides in an arranged marriage must be virgins, it was argued.) Now there was a new acknowledgement that respecting ethnic diversity within Britain – mosques, temples, non-European languages – would not lead to a collapse of British life. In this, Britain was singular, and was able to create a cultural context – a context of regard and equality – that, whatever its failings, had no parallel in continental Europe. A striking contrast was presented by France, which would not budge from an astringent and classic definition of what comprised the secular: a strict separation of religion from the state, or, for that matter, from the public domain.

Britain’s redefinition of the secular – multiculturalism – was partly achieved through ordinary battles that were not so different from the one ensuing now over Rhodes in Oriel: for instance, Muslim women employees at shops such as Boots being permitted to retain the hijab, a measure of tolerance that would not have been admissible in France. The secular was redefined as soon as people realised that hijab-wearing employees did not transform Boots into an Islamic colony or a place of worship. You could still buy perfumes and condoms there. British multiculturalism resembled another remarkable experiment – post-independence “secularism” in India – which attempted to fashion the nation as a space that did not proscribe religion, and, while not being religious itself, allowed a multiplicity of worldviews, communities, and religions to cohabit within it.

The nature of democracy in India and the country’s large Muslim minority left political parties open to the charge of constant and cynical electoral calculation based on appeals to religion and caste. By the late 1980s, it led to the coinage of a rightwing term, “pseudo-secular”, to describe liberal pandering to minorities – meaning Muslims – for electoral gain, an accusation that included the suggestion of tolerance towards Muslim religiosity, but not Hindu expressions of faith, in the name of

secularism. This was, in other words, the now familiar sentiment of a majority that believes it has been oppressed by excessive accommodation of the minority.

In comparison, it would seem that British multiculturalism was, in its earlier career, possibly more idealistic than its Indian counterpart. It had no substantial ethnic constituency to keep in mind for electoral gain. Asians and black people traditionally voted Labour, but, under the free market, neither working-class nor minority votes seemed to do very much for Labour's fortunes. The fight for multiculturalism was begun by deeply committed and fearless people, white, black, and brown, in organisations that 21st-century Britain should be proud of – like the [Anti-Nazi League](#) – and was, ironically, consolidated under the Tories. However implausible it might sound, humanitarianism appears to have played a greater part in sustaining the project than an awareness of the ethnic vote. By 1990, it was, therefore, possible for me to look dispassionately into the window at Powell – as I would upon a relic.

My admiration for multiculturalism as an intellectual project and a political solution is a qualified one: like Indian “secularism”, its view of what constitutes the cross-cultural encounter can be superficial (chicken tikka masala). And yet some version of it is always going to be politically fundamental to a multi-ethnic country: and can one deny Britain, like India, is a culturally hybrid nation? The reason for this in both cases is simple: history. Can you suddenly extricate yourself from your history, and start from scratch? Britain, around 1990, seemed to have adjusted to its multicultural past and present; today, it is in denial.

Here one must wonder if some of the less high-minded aspects of democracy – what in India is derisively called “vote-bank” politics, or electoral calculations based on ethnic constituencies – could have played some role in slowing the retreat from multiculturalism. A political system attuned to the votes of minority constituencies would never have entertained a plan as scandalous as the one Theresa May came up with in 2013, to send vans into ethnically diverse neighbourhoods warning people with no legal status to depart the country at once. (“Go home or face arrest,” was the warning painted on their sides.)

Why does the political significance of the non-white minority in Britain seem so negligible today, in a way that they can be repeatedly ignored, by May and other politicians who make pronouncements on immigration, Britishness, and race, as if it did not matter how minorities perceived the issue? How is it in a country that prides

itself on its party political debate having a powerful bureaucratic component – that is, a fulsome reliance on facts, figures, and policies – that politicians get away with providing very little real data about immigration and its effects?

About 10 years ago, it began to be apparent that the affirmation of multiculturalism that was noticeable in Britain from the 1970s through the 1990s had failed to evolve in the way one would have predicted. I first visited London as an 11-year-old in 1973, returned a few times that decade as a visitor, and then came here as a student in the early 1980s. I experienced threats that were both verbal and physical. I also saw the country emerge from the depredations of the National Front into one in which a greater variety of voices was heard. The print media had, for the first time, a small handful of journalists from immigrant backgrounds. Television emphasised multicultural programming: some of these shows were superb. Popular entertainment had a few nationally known minority figures.

From that vantage-point, one would have thought that diversity would become entrenched and even substantially extended by 2015. This did not happen. For instance, the print media still has only a small handful of journalists from immigrant backgrounds. The number of MPs, national treasures, entertainment icons, QCs, journalists and commentators, and top academics (to make a random selection) from ethnic backgrounds has either not gone up noticeably since 1990, or has decreased. We have not witnessed a growing intimacy in the last four decades with minority cultures; instead, the old clichés have proved astonishingly tenacious.

‘A political system attuned to the votes of minority constituencies would never have entertained a plan as scandalous as the one Theresa May came up with in 2013, to send vans into ethnically diverse neighbourhoods warning people with no legal status to depart the country at once.’ Photograph: Rick Findler

As Britain distanced itself, over the course of the 1990s, from its historic ties with its former colonies in favour of a new and eager cultural subservience to the United States, there emerged a new fantasy of Britishness that was meant to echo an American’s romantic notion of “England”. This utopian ideal could be found in films such as *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, in which London was almost entirely white; it was supplemented by heritage recreations of the essence of an older England in films such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*. These films were a blithe rebuttal of the critic Edward Said’s insight that, in a novel like *Mansfield Park*, the “English” story necessarily concealed the story, located elsewhere but inextricable from the main narrative, of a West

Indian sugar plantation. In these films, however, what was being concealed by the soft-focus romance (very distant from Jane Austen's shrewd knowingness) was not the workings of empire, but the first stirrings of its recuperation, as a remnant of very distant history that would be tacitly acknowledged but never regretted.

When change happens and things close down for the ethnically peripheral or the less powerful, those who are being excluded – especially if they are fairly successful in their own field – will find it difficult to pinpoint the airbrushing or whitewashing. When I spoke with two British friends of Indian origin – a young, well-known journalist and an award-winning scientist – about this development a few years ago, they recognised a closing of ranks by the rich in Britain, but were not wholly sure how it affected diversity. People in Britain prefer to keep their heads down about the question of race: not just those in the majority, but minorities too, who do not, for various reasons, want to think of themselves in racial terms. In a context of persistent institutional racism, this is part of what allows one-sided declarations about immigration and integration to go unchallenged; it allows the unsettling official pronouncements of Theresa May and Ukip alike.

At least two factors have contributed powerfully to the closing of ranks I refer to. The first is free-market globalisation. Not only does it further empower the rich, it – by privileging the right to be *seen* to be rich as much as the right to *be* rich – legitimises retrograde desire. Moral judgment about a product that satisfies the customer is seen to be bad form, an attempt to constrain a market – or an inheritance – that should ideally be, in every sense, unregulated. In Britain, beneficiaries of the legacy of empire began to resurrect that legacy as a powerful and legitimate form of capital. At the forefront of this recuperation was a new kind of aspirational history-writing – not a history written by and for rulers, but by a new kind of revisionist historian, such as Niall Ferguson or Andrew Roberts, who sought to legitimise the previously unmentionable, and in so doing to transform their approval of the imperial past into a form of present-day cultural capital, and forge their own careers in the process.

The forces of globalisation have also enabled a new international elite to take shape, as a kind of family cocooned from the rest of the world. Dynastic privileges – in the seat of the empire but also in its former colonies – begin once more to be celebrated over the modernist narratives of individual achievement that characterised the last century. Lineages – who knows whom, who's related to whom, who went to school with whom – are busily fashioned and recovered. It is also in the context of such

recovery that we must place the protectiveness towards the Rhodes statue: as a family heirloom that, in spite of its provenance, has immense cultural and sentimental value to certain present-day networks.

When there is a threat of damage – such as the body-blow of the world financial crash in 2008 – the family of elites is, oddly, most insulated from it: though the privileged should have lost greatly with the crash, given their moral and financial investment in the market, they actually, as we now know, lost the least. In this claustrophobic atmosphere of self-perpetuation and self-interested and hugely productive friendships, the Rhodes Must Fall movement seems like the breath of fresh air that a place such as Oxford University has been waiting for.

When I spoke to the students involved in Rhodes Must Fall at Oxford last June, I suggested that their project presented an opportunity to go beyond Rhodes to address the inequalities of global privilege and the networks that sustain it – networks in which institutions such as Oxford play an essential role. I realised with alarm when I went to Oxford in 1987 that the vast majority of Indian students there came from a very tiny number of colleges and universities in New Delhi. What had been a featureless capital, insignificant in terms of its organic cultural life, was then being primed to become the centre of India's new intellectual and academic ruling class. The formation of this class – members of which returned to India in the late 1980s and early 1990s from places such as Oxford and took charge of the new national media emerging from Delhi, and centres of higher education there – was linked directly to political access, and to a continuous give-and-take with historic western educational institutions. Meanwhile, within Britain, the fact that Oxbridge dominates so utterly points surely to the failure of higher education here, and its absorption into those networks. Why do so many prime ministers, chancellors, and ministers in this country still come from Eton and Oxford? It is a huge embarrassment for Britain.

The Rhodes Must Fall movement's ambition to decolonise education and to get Oxford to widen its curriculum is salutary. Yet decolonisation has to be a complex business when global privilege has so many platforms, including nations that comprised the erstwhile empire. The project of decolonisation in the humanities was taken up vigorously in the 1990s by postcolonial theory. Its principal text was Edward Said's polemic, *Orientalism*, whose central insight – that the west exercised power over the east in the time of colonisation by studying it to take ownership of it,

and then misrepresenting it – is still pertinent and illuminating today. But there is a critique of postcolonial theory that cannot be wholly discounted: that it held sway in elite western institutions and was itself embedded in privileged networks. It makes Rhodes Must Fall’s message about decolonisation, especially at a place like Oxford, at once particularly difficult and urgent.

One must, today, take on the legacies of empire; one must also take on the legacies of global privilege. There is also the problematic fact that postcolonial theory has, in its account of the colonial encounter, focused almost exclusively on the matter of imperial misrepresentation: it largely ignores what non-western cultures were up to in the last two centuries, unless they were seen to be actively engaged in rebutting the coloniser. Postcolonial theory, then, implicitly frames a question – “Did the empire do any good?” – to which it answers in the negative. It is a question that has now been appropriated by revisionist historians including Roberts and Ferguson. Their answer is a resounding “yes”.

What enabled this turn? This brings me to the second reason for the closing down I referred to earlier: 9/11 and, in Britain, the bombings on 7 July 2005. These events gave the green light to a certain kind of reactionary opinion and self-justification, in the guise of being a much-needed riposte to political correctness. Donald Trump’s remarks about refusing Muslims entry into the US have been greeted with a mix of outrage and laughter; but they were anticipated in Britain in 2007 by none other than Martin Amis, who pointed out that the “Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order”, and spoke of the necessity of “not letting them travel” – words he now regrets.

Regret, though, is not the defining tone of those who make such observations, or, for that matter, of those who defend the Rhodes statue. Regret for empire was never expressed by the descendants of those who undertook the colonial project. It is precisely this lack of regret, this ignoring and skewing of history, that might be termed “institutional racism” – or, as David Cameron put it in an uncharacteristic article about racial inequality in Britain earlier this year, “something ... ingrained, institutional and insidious”.

Institutional racism, however, is not specific to certain nations or institutions, but characterises the parameters of the world in which we live, work, and travel. It is another name for a present-day colonial order that is weighted against the non-European, and seldom owns up to regret. In fact, 9/11 has permitted western commentators’ triumphal reconfiguration of human values as western values,

constantly under threat from the non-west and from Islam. It allows journalists in Paris, New York, and London to mourn attacks upon the “way of life” in their cities, as if Beirut and Baghdad had no way of life. This persistent asymmetry is what it means to live in a colonial order.

The question of whether or not imperialism had a benign side is besides the point. The question is framed misleadingly. Colonial projects do not set out to do “good”; their primary intention is to exploit the ruled on behalf of the coloniser. This does not mean that an unprecedented creative period might not emerge as a consequence of the cultural encounter that colonialism involves. For instance, the history of India in the last 200 years is an extraordinarily rich one, in science, the arts, and in politics. What kind of understanding would we have of a city like, say, Kolkata, if its history described only its colonial institutions and colonial officers, and knew nothing of the transformation that made artists like Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray possible, or of a scientist such as Satyendra Nath Bose, whose pioneering statistical method enabled quantum mechanics, or of the intellectual changes that led to social reform and the freedom struggle? What does it mean, in the context of such ignorance of what was truly exciting and unprecedented in that period, to claim that empire was “good”?

The decolonisation of British education is not just necessary: it is long overdue. Decolonisation has to do with not only openly discussing the various transgressions, and shameful moments and ambitions, that comprise colonial history. It asks for a remedy that will cure us from viewing western history as a history of culture, science, and modernity, and non-western history solely as a history of conflict and race. It would make us hesitate before we situated western politics in a history of constant evolution and redefinition and non-western politics in a history of constant borrowing and reaction. For example, the Indian parliamentary system is not a gift made by Britain to India. Not only did it have to be wrested from the British by Indians, it had to be subjected to its most radical and experimental transformation: giving the vote to everyone, including the illiterate and poor. These facts, and others, are already out there. It is just that there is no adequate framework within which to incorporate them. Decolonisation is about imagining such a framework.

In a context that points to the need for new ways of thinking about the history that we are products of, it is particularly unfortunate that those in Oxford who would have students embrace its traditions of free speech and unfettered thinking should have found, by a peculiar twist in events, an emblem in Cecil Rhodes. But it would be

equally sad if Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford became identified with the statue in Oriel College alone, because it has long-term work to do.