

## Rhodes Must Fall: Oxford and Movements for Change

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The call to decolonise the university is not a new one. In her essay 'Feminism and Fragility' Sara Ahmed talks about the 'chipping away' of institutional change: 'Chip, chip, chip. Things splinter. Maybe we can turn that chip, chip, chip into a hammer: we might chip away at the old block.'<sup>1</sup> For decades, teachers and students have been chipping away at the coloniality of the university, in an attempt to make it more critical, rigorous and democratic.

The metaphor of 'chipping away at the old block' is particularly apt, because it is important to look at the role the university plays in the broader decolonisation call with sober perspective; to understand the possibilities and limitations of trying to effect change from within the academy. Of course, the university is a site of knowledge production and, most crucially, consecration; it has the power to decide which histories, knowledges and intellectual contributions are considered valuable and worthy of further critical attention and dissemination. This has knock-on effects: public discourse might seem far from the academy's sphere of influence, but 'common sense' ideas of worthy knowledge do not come out of the blue, or removed from the context of power – and the university is a key shaping force in this discursive flux.

Within decolonial movements, the centrality of knowledge production to colonialism as it existed historically and as its legacies appear today are clearly known and understood. It is within this context that decolonial workers in the academy have for years sought to bring the marginalised to the centre-stage of scholarly labour; to memorialise and elevate their perspectives, histories and struggles, which would otherwise be lost in the throes of oppression; conceiving this as one part of the broader struggle to decolonise the interlocking social, economic and political systems in which we find ourselves. Indeed, this is the central, unresolved contra-



diction of the call to decolonise the academy: how to use the resources and position of the institution, while recognising, accounting for and undoing its inherent exclusivity.

While this chapter cannot address this with the comprehension and directness it needs, it will use the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) campaign as a case study to do three things: (1) explicate the role of formalised education in the process of knowledge production, and its importance; (2) confront how the British Empire and its legacy is both normalised and trivialised in education; and (3) call for a reorientation in the anti-racist framework from diversity to decolonisation, and explore what this might look like.

### *Erasing history, creating 'safety'*

The RMFO campaign brought the urge to decolonise from the nooks and crannies of academic departments to sensationalised newspaper headlines and heated arguments at family dinner tables. The campaign had three broad areas in which it committed to work towards decolonisation within the University of Oxford: iconography, curriculum and representation. By making these interventions in an institution that holds such unique capital as a centre of knowledge production, the campaign aimed to bring about a knock-on effect at other institutions. It was also anticipated that Oxford University's centrality to Britain's intellectual and cultural identity would enable these interventions to ripple through the public consciousness. The demand that captured the British public's imagination, however, was one inspired by the movement's namesake in South Africa: the removal of a statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes – widely considered to have laid the legislative groundwork for South African apartheid – from the front of Oriel College's main building.

From the outset, the campaign's most well-known demand fell victim to the problem of narrative control. Indeed, the call came at a critical juncture in student politics; campus organising had been growing globally – from Jawaharlal Nehru University in India to Amherst College in the US. However, the counter-reaction was also growing, and had a louder, wealthier voice; newspaper columns across the political spectrum – particularly in the US and the UK – bemoaned the death of free speech and academic enquiry on campuses at the hands of over-sensitive, easily triggered student activists. This phenomenon was not limited to one or

two articles; it became a meme that garnered unprecedented traction throughout the commentariat.

The need to repeat and sustain this narrative of student activists as incurious, navel-gazing millennials pampered by 1990s soft parenting – rather than an energised, highly informed generation that know they deserve better than the future of precarity and debt awaiting them upon graduation – led journalists down a 'fake news' rabbit hole. Consider this example from the tail end of 2016: reports that a leaflet produced by Oxford University Students Union (OUSU) told students to refrain from using gendered pronouns 'he' and 'she' in favour of the gender-neutral 'ze' picked up pace across the British broadsheet and tabloid media.<sup>2</sup> Seemingly plucked out of thin air, the union categorically denied having ever mandated against the use of gendered pronouns, or the existence of such a leaflet – stating that such a move would in fact be 'counterproductive'<sup>3</sup> to their initiative against misgendering.

However, the intended work of the article had already been done; a delicious anecdote to further satiate the rabid hunger of confirmation bias, racking up clicks and shares at the expense of an authentic portrayal of reality. A *Telegraph* article published the day after OUSU publicly refuted the claims said as much: 'the fact that Oxford has possibly been a victim of incorrect reporting isn't the biggest worry; it argued, because 'fact or fiction, the (categorically fictional) story was symptomatic of a student bubble culture of safe spacing, no-platforming and the generally surreal atmosphere of mollycoddling'.<sup>4</sup> The desire for evidence – the desire to strengthen and legitimise particular assumptions about students campaigning around particular things – became more important than the existence of actual evidence. Indeed, the feeling that such a culture existed universally among student activists – and that it deserved wholesale dismissal because it reflected anti-intellectual childishness – became more credible than what the students actually had to say for themselves, and what they were actually doing.

Student-led decolonisation movements have faced similar reporting tactics. To name just one example, an early 2017 *Daily Mail* article expressed panic and anger at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) student union's declared commitment to decolonisation and 'confronting the white institution'. 'Students at a University of London college', it bemoaned, 'are demanding that such seminal figures as Plato, Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Bertrand Russell' – without whose work, 'understanding philosophy' is 'all but inconceivable' – be 'dropped from



the curriculum simply because they are white.<sup>5</sup> The statement in fact invited an academic and student-led review of the curriculum, in light of the 'histories of erasure prevalent in the curriculum' and 'with a particular focus on SOAS' colonial origins and present alternative ways of knowing'.<sup>6</sup> It called for greater representation of philosophers from the global South and its diaspora, and a critical engagement with the colonial context in which many canonical, white philosophers wrote. What began as an intellectual claim around curricular erasure, and indeed the very processes behind the formation of curricula, was deflected into a well-trodden story of zealously 'PC' students hysterically 'censoring' the parts of intellectual history they do not 'agree' with. It is important to note here that this discourse of unwarranted sensitivity and lack of reason was – and continues to be – almost exclusively reserved for students raising issues associated with marginalised identities and struggles.

The knee-jerk impulse to paint the RMFO campaign as yet another example of immature students unable to engage in debate, led to a very particular framing of the call for Rhodes' statue to fall. From the outset, it was posited as a call for a 'safe space' in which the history of colonialism was erased in favour of comfort; that the students were demanding the removal of Rhodes' statue, because its presence evoked trauma that caused distress. The *Telegraph's* Harry Mount slammed the students and their 'hypersensitive, unsophisticated, uneducated [attitudes]', recommending they undergo a lesson in '[dealing] calmly with things [they] disagree with'. He summarised the alleged objectionable outlook of the students: 'don't like the politics of a visiting speaker? Well then just no-platform them. Worried about rude passages in a classic novel? Demand trigger warnings that certain scenes may cause offence.'<sup>7</sup> Classicist Mary Beard criticised the campaign as a 'dangerous attempt to erase the past'.<sup>8</sup> *Times Higher Education*, although sympathetic to the questions raised by the campaign, referred to its demands as potentially trying to '[tear] down history',<sup>9</sup> framing it as an issue of censorship.

The campaign was immediately inserted into pre-existing conversations around no-platforming, safe spaces and campus censorship, despite none of this language coming from its original call to action, which was working towards something much deeper. Indeed, it implied that students had – in a sense – called for the 'no-platforming' of Rhodes, out of trauma. This, of course, was the precise opposite of what the students set out to achieve: the goal was never to 'no-platform' or 'erase' Rhodes – it was to platform the coloniality he represented and its lasting impact

in seminars, university lectures and public discourse, subjecting it to the critical scrutiny it has thus far eluded. However, this framing tactic allowed the media to discuss the RMFO campaign without discussing the actual demand of decolonisation.

A cursory look on the movement's own website concisely summarises its aims: to 'remedy the highly selective narrative of traditional academia – which frames the West as sole producers of universal knowledge – by integrating subjugated and local epistemologies ... [creating] a more intellectually rigorous, complete academy'.<sup>10</sup> The argument was always that European colonialism was and continues to be a shaping force of modern history and pedagogy, and that this is overlooked – particularly in Britain – in our education system out of discomfort with the truth that it harbours and the reality it reveals. This was not a matter of 'disagreeing' with mere opinions held by Rhodes – it was about critically examining the power struggle that underpins hegemonic knowledge production, and the material structures that make this possible; about bringing them into the light, and exposing what knowledge is made invisible as well as what is made hyper-visible, by being put forward as universal, or canonical.

### *What does it mean for Rhodes to fall?*

There is a considerable gap in Britain's public knowledge of its modern history. Indeed, the curiosity that was cultivated in the RMFO campaign – albeit incredibly fraught to say the least – led to a crucial development in this conversation. For the first time in my lifetime, heated discussions around the significance and details of the British Empire were drawn out into several weeks of front-page headlines and filled hours of broadcast media. However, most interestingly, data collected the year before concerning how British people understand and relate to the British Empire regained relevance. Some subsidiary questions in a YouGov poll about the 2014 Commonwealth Games revealed that 59 percent of British adults (aged 18–60+) view the Empire as 'more something to be proud of', with just 1.9 percent considering it 'more something to be ashamed of'. Forty-nine percent of surveyed adults viewed countries colonised by Britain as being 'better off for being colonized' and just 45 percent could categorically say they would not like Britain to still have an Empire.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, that this has not been the subject of a more extensive qualitative



study, and that it was not considered news upon its initial publication, is testament to the level of importance typically given to such information.

This perception of Empire through either rose-tinted glasses – or through indifference – has several root causes; from the representation of Empire in mainstream culture (or lack thereof), to the general stigmatisation of discussing Empire in public – and particularly in public political discourse. What happens as a result is the preservation of a particular notion of both Britain's present, and of global North–South relations. The education system, from primary to higher, is a key player in what Michel Rolph-Trouillot calls 'the production of history'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Rolph-Trouillot points out, in Europe and the US, the public's sense of what history is remains influenced by positivist tendencies, whereby the role of the historian is to simply 'reveal' facts about pasts that are worth revealing, in a process removed from power. This epistemological insistence on history as a positivist endeavour functions as a useful tool of coloniality in the institution, as it effaces the power relations that underpin what the 'production of history' has thus far looked like. Indeed, the question of who decides what is important to whom is profoundly unfamiliar. The final educational 'product' – the curriculum – appears in a self-justifying manner, and the processes of its construction are concealed. As such, the issue of coloniality in education is not just a question for researchers – it has ramifications far beyond educational institutions. Indeed, what happens in the institution feeds back to establish a particular notion of 'objective' historical fact, which has profound consequences for perceptions of the nation's past and its present.

Seeing how this has taken shape in the historical context of education policy in the UK, the English National Curriculum, in particular, presents a fine case study as to why such questions around the production of 'common' knowledge – and particularly 'common' historical knowledge – are important. From the ideological inception of a national 'core' curriculum in the mid-1980s, struggle over what it included and why has been rife; and nowhere was the debate more heated and fraught than in the history syllabus. Indeed, education scholars describe the struggles around what they call the 'great history debate' as 'nothing less than a public and vibrant debate over the national soul'.<sup>13</sup> Gavin Baldwin too identifies that 'the National Curriculum codifies the knowledge, skills and attitudes which "the nation" holds to be important, or more likely it is decided by a few that these values are good for "the nation" whatever that

might be'. Within this, the 'ferocity' of debates around what a National History Curriculum must include, demonstrates 'the strength of the belief that the History Curriculum could reinforce a sense of national identity';<sup>14</sup> in other words, there is of course an intimate connection between national identity and collective historical remembering (and forgetting). As it currently stands, a British student can study history to A-level standard, without gaining more than a lesson's worth of time studying Empire.

Given this context, it is unsurprising that attempts to subvert or question conventional teachings of history – particularly of British history – are met with such defensive fervour. Tabloid and mid-market newspaper columns have long been racked with anxiety that 'children in state schools have been taught to be ashamed of our history', an anxiety explicitly connected to the idea that Britain's Empire – 'one of the greatest, most benign empires the world has ever known' – is being 'denigrated'<sup>15</sup> in the National Curriculum. When discussions around curriculum content resurfaced in 2013, there was specific focus around reworking the English literature and history syllabuses to include even greater emphasis on a particular kind of 'British' history and 'English' literature. The history proposals – which were eventually scrapped following a considerable counter-reaction from scholars – looked to shift the tone of the already minimal teaching of 'Britain and her empire' away from a 'negative and anti-British' slant, and free it from the burden of 'post-colonial guilt'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is particularly interesting that a recurring motif in the commentary around RMFO's statue demand, was that 'history' must be protected from those who wish to 'erase' it or 'tear it down'; to interrogate the statue's presence was to threaten, somehow, 'history' itself.

Here, 'history' is not the ongoing and deeply contested process of narrative building around the past; a process over which the present has agency, and which is often – in its most mainstream form – shaped in the image of dominant ideological frameworks. Rather, 'history' is fixed, unquestionable and precious because it preserves a particular reading of the past, which reinforces a particular understanding of the present; like the statue, its objectivity rises above the emotional, hand-wringing rable, who are declared intellectually unfit to participate in the process of its production. What this demonstrates so clearly, is that the construction of a curriculum at any education level is the product of a power struggle; however, it is not perceived as such. Rather, it appears as a 'natural' process, in which disciplinary canons and narrative framings come into





being through apolitical, 'rational' means that do not themselves need to be scrutinised; indeed, the very claim to apolitical greatness is itself the defining feature of the canon.

It was this assumption that RMFO threw into question. It asked: what is omitted from curricula in all disciplines, and what does this tell us about the purpose of education as we see it? Any curriculum must, by definition, exclude – the question is what is excluded and why, and whether the purpose of our education system should be to perpetuate existing power structures and norms, or equip students with the critical tools to question them. Furthermore, RMFO made connections between these knowledge gaps, and the structural, material inequalities they engender both within the academy and, most importantly, beyond the academy. As this volume will elaborate, these interrogations are not just relevant in history departments – although their importance comes to light with particular starkness here. The significance of Empire in shaping institutions of knowledge production and disciplinary canons spans the entire academy; every discipline carries with it colonial modalities of thinking that have eluded adequate scrutiny.

#### *Rhodes rises, who is forgotten?*

In a sense, the battle over Rhodes' statue became itself emblematic of the entire struggle at hand. The statue stands on one of the busiest streets in Oxford, and yet, positioned high atop a college building, it hovers out of plain sight; much like the legacy of Empire, it occupies a position of simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility. It is an always present, shaping political, economic and cultural force, but goes unnamed and unseen. When it occasionally appears in the public eye, it is as a nostalgic relic of a distant, irrelevant past. The statue had been standing for over a century by the time the campaign threw it into question, yet its presence, and by extension the conditions of its emergence, remained unrecognised in any substantial form. Indeed, critics often mocked the campaign as being much ado about nothing – that the statue was hardly noticeable and therefore unimportant, while simultaneously arguing that it was of such historical significance it must be safeguarded at all costs.

When the statue was erected in 1911, it was at Rhodes' behest, and he signed away a considerable part of his fortune to Oriell's endowment; in other words, the social and capital accumulation that made the statue possible – that put Rhodes in a financial and social position to buy

his place on Oriell's building – was acquired directly from the colonial exploitation of Southern Africa's black population; in a literal sense, owes its very existence to this exploitation. However, in order for the statue to stand above the glowing inscription 'by means of the generous munificence of Cecil Rhodes', the heart of what Rhodes represented – settler-colonialism and the blueprint of South African apartheid – must be forgotten. The sterile language with which he is spoken of – as a 'benefactor' and 'businessman' – actively erases the history of violence that enabled his 'generous munificence'. Where great concern was expressed over whether the removal and recontextualisation of Rhodes' statue would erase 'history', little curiosity was ever shown towards what histories were and continue to be suppressed by the statue's very existence as a glorifying tribute. Indeed, the lack of any working knowledge about Rhodes among the general public – despite his significant role in Britain's colonial history – underscores the obvious fact that statues do not exist as sites of historical learning and therefore scrutinising them does not constitute a violation of historical understanding; in fact, they can often exist to obscure full historical reckoning. It was this obstacle to reckoning that the movement was trying to dislodge; an ossified, rose-tinted, 'Great Man' theory of history that squashed the perspectives of those outside European elites and was almost perfectly embodied by the crumbling statue.

So why is this project a worthy one? In the same way that colonial violence and Rhodes' wealth are decoupled in the statue's form, despite being intrinsically connected, so is the relationship between coloniality and the making of modern Europe. Tales of industrial revolutions are forcibly separated from the colonial trade routes and colonised labour that made such rapid development possible; the Enlightenment is geographically mapped as a self-contained, European project, rather than constituted through and alongside imperialism and slavery.<sup>17</sup> The Enlightenment not only forged and reproduced modalities of colonial thinking, it would not have been possible without the intellectual contributions of the Islamic translations (and therefore preservation) of Greek and Persian philosophical and scientific writings, or numerical systems originating in South Asia.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, these twin processes of both effacing the importance of the Enlightenment's colonial emergence (presenting it as a 'pure' intellectual project, separate from its material and historical context) and the racialising of these values of 'reason' and objective knowledge pursuit as white and European are foundational



principles of contemporary framings of 'East' and 'West'. Sometimes, the consequences of this colonial modality of thinking are overtly worrying. White nationalist Richard Spencer, a figurehead of the 'alt-right', which has recently gained public prominence, responded in a 2016 Al Jazeera interview to a question about why non-white people are not part of America's 'greatness':

Only Europeans could be the first ones to go to space; only Europeans could build something as magnificent as St Paul's Cathedral; only Europeans could engage in the kind of scientific discovery that we engage with, that will to keep going, to follow reason to its very limit, even if it shatters everything you thought before; only Europeans went through these tumults of Reformations, of Enlightenment ... only Europeans can be like this.

He goes on to describe being an immigrant as someone who 'washes up on someone else's shores' and '[takes] advantage of what other people have built, making them 'pathetic'; 'I wouldn't be proud of a nation of immigrants, I would be proud of a nation of frontiersmen, a nation of colonizers, a nation of conquerors'.<sup>19</sup> While it may seem extreme, this framework of argument – which is gaining some populist traction – relies on a common lack of knowledge not only around the intellectual and material contributions of non-Europeans to 'world' history, but of the integral role played by non-Europeans in European history itself. However, this historical reality is flattened, in favour of a reading that portrays the global South as the passive recipient of other people's innovation and development. It also relies on a lack of understanding around how colonialism's power dynamics have shaped contemporary global inequalities, and uneven access to resources, development and democratic agency. The vast majority of the time, the consequence of this gap in understanding does not rear its head in a form as ugly as Spencer's, but rather come to the fore as a sense of confusion and resentment that people who did not participate in the 'building' of modernity are unrealistically trying to participate in it on an equal footing; to 'take advantage' of it, to use Spencer's terms.

Indeed, one wonders how differently public discourse around issues such as immigration, borders, war, national identity and global inequality might be conducted if the classed and racialised dynamics of colonialism were fully integrated into everyday historical reflections

and representations; and, most crucially, if the full political history of the entity known as 'Britain' was reckoned with. In particular, what would this do to prevailing understandings of, and indeed the very preoccupation with, what it means to 'belong' to Britishness and to have entitlement to public resources on the basis of this claim. Indeed, it is no coincidence that online messages directed towards the RMFO campaigners were so centred around suspicion over whether these black and brown faces really deserved to be at Oxford University, or in Britain at all.

How would the long-term realisation that 'Britain' emerged through and alongside imperialism complicate what it means to 'put Britain first', a claim of Britishness that relies on selective ideas of who was implicated in its construction and how. Indeed, how would key events such as the 1948 *Windrush*, often pointed to as the genesis of 'multicultural' Britain and, for some, the project of malignant, cheating brown and black people 'washing up' on Britain's shores, illegitimately stealing the fruits of hard-working British labourers, be re-read in light of such an education? The racial watertightness of these terms of national belonging – of invested labour or inheritance of a national claim – start to fall apart when the history of Empire is taken into account. This is of course not to argue that an educational turn would see the end of racism – which operates at a deeply structural and material level – rather, it is to propose that such a shift in consciousness could change the terms and assumptions in these defining debates of our time in a way that has powerful ramifications.

### *Don't diversify, decolonise*

RMFO's call to decolonise was, in itself, deeply unfamiliar outside very specific academic circles. This unfamiliarity – and the fact that it could not be resolved within the bureaucratic, human resource channels typically reserved for grievances around race – was a critical part of the struggle to have the campaign's demands understood. It also raised the question as to whether the decolonial demand can ever be fully met within the institution. Indeed, at its heart, decolonisation is about recognising the roots of contemporary racism in the multiple material, political, social and cultural processes of colonialism and proceeding from this point; this involves the laborious work of structural change at several levels of society – a far cry from the administering of welfare and representation services that has typically been the response to racialised grievances.



When looking at the history of anti-racist organising in the UK, the significance of this resurgence of decolonial language comes to the fore. In his seminal essay 'The End of Anti-racism',<sup>20</sup> Paul Gilroy perfectly captured how the theoretical focus of, and therefore demands made by, anti-racist movements in the UK went through drastic transformations as they moved from the post-war era through the establishment of neoliberal consensus in the 1980s. Writing in 1990, Gilroy identified many of the issues that would arise out of these conceptual shifts. Moving away from collective, political and indeed resource-based demands, Gilroy identifies the rise of an ideological framework, led by a 'cadre of anti-racism professionals',<sup>21</sup> which forgoes mass mobilisation in favour of individualised, self-help models of change. Most crucially, Gilroy identifies this shift as itself a mechanism of power:

Meanwhile, many of the ideological gains of Thatcherite conservatism have dovetailed neatly with the shibboleths of black nationalism – self reliance and economic betterment through thrift, hard work and individual discipline.<sup>22</sup>

For Gilroy, this occurs in part because of a 'crisis in organizational' forms – in other words, the shift from the movement to the individual as the primary social unit and organising category. However, more importantly, it occurs because of a 'crisis in political language', whereby race itself becomes viewed almost exclusively 'in terms of culture and identity rather than politics and history'.<sup>23</sup> Gilroy argues that while, of course, culture and identity are 'part of the story of racial sensibility'<sup>24</sup> race is not reducible to these factors; it has an historical core in processes of material and political domination. A major consequence of this language crisis has been a notable shift in anti-racist discourse, towards a concession of the idea of 'race' as a politically and historically contingent category.

This rendering of race as an identity category removed from politics and history is most apparent in the consensus that has been built around a particular kind of 'multiculturalist' framework, where race is based in essential differences and where the problem lies solely in the hierarchisation of these differences, which itself arises from the purely cultural and social hostility to such difference. These differences are not only perceived as essential and therefore insurmountable, but to attempt to surmount them is itself seen as undesirable. As such, grievances and demands – be they for recognition, representation or inclusion – are

made from this position of dearly held, fixed identity categories. The overall goal becomes mere tolerance – or 'recognition' – of difference as it appears in its most minute form. This has seen the growth of 'increased diversity' as the primary, and most familiar anti-racist demand. Indeed, the breaking down of the social unit from movement to individual occurs through and alongside this shift from political to culturalist understandings of difference.

As Gilroy identifies, this move entails a process of divorcing the causes of racism from wider systemic processes. Racism itself becomes something 'peripheral to the substance of political life',<sup>25</sup> a circumscribed phenomenon that can be dealt with while leaving the basic economic and political structure of society intact. The core demand shifts from the end of race, to the end of 'racial discrimination', and the conceptual problem lies in the idea that such a decoupling of race and racial discrimination is possible. It conceals the history of race itself as being borne out of processes of domination that have occurred at multiple points in history, and that continue to reinvent and reshape themselves in light of contemporary needs. The preoccupation then becomes diversification – in other words, individual betterment – within existing structures, rather than the interrogation of how these structures came to be, and the inequalities that are engendered and reproduced by and within them. As such, demands within higher education institutions – particularly elite ones such as Oxford University – have been centred entirely around representation and admissions.

Framing student demands within a 'decolonisation' framework marked a reorientation away from this kind of politics. First, the call included within itself – in its very terminology – identification of the immutable importance of coloniality in any contemporary conversation around race. It centred Empire and slavery – as projects of economic, political and material, as well as cultural, domination – at the heart of its explanation of racialised inequalities, and its understanding of the kind of structural change needed. Of course, this is not to argue that the call for better provisions around representation – for example, blind admissions and investment in outreach – is not an important one that is worth making. However, it is not sufficient to express grievances about diversity and representation as a circumscribed issue; it is necessary – and more difficult – also to demand recognition of, and reparative action in light of, how and why this came to be the case, and to connect it to other, more urgent, forms of structural racism.



Furthermore, it situated what was going on in Oxford University in a broader context; in other words, it moved the responsibility of Oxford student campaigners outside the space of the university itself. This intention was conveyed in part by the movement's deliberate deployment of the name 'Rhodes Must Fall' from its South African namesake, and the conscious echoing of their critiques around the statue and decolonisation. In evoking these terms, the campaign positioned itself as not just concerned with what was occurring within the institution of Oxford University, but the role Oxford as a centre of knowledge consecration – and, historically, the heart of colonial knowledge production – plays in the wider world. This was part of a broader trend of student activists deliberately plugging themselves into a global network of anti-racist activity. Indeed, just prior to the founding of the RMFO campaign, Oxford students were holding solidarity marches and teach-ins with Black Lives Matter in the US – particularly around the time of the 2015 Ferguson protests – and organising talks by figures such as Dennis Goldberg – a prominent anti-apartheid activist, who spoke about contemporary Palestinian solidarity. This increase in anti-racist activity at Oxford University started with what Nancy Fraser would identify as a classic struggle for recognition; it began promptly after the university became the focus of a nationwide scandal for admitting only one Afro-Caribbean student in its entire undergraduate intake. However, the students did not circumscribe this event within the four walls of the institution. Over the next five years, the boundaries of the conversation morphed into a much more systemic set of demands, which recognised themselves as being at once global and local.

However, this is not to argue that the movement did not come up against its own internal struggles and conceptual limitations. As has been outlined, RMFO came into being at two crucial junctures: the prominence of 'safe space' and trauma discourse as the framing narrative of student activism, and the prevalence of diversification as the primary anti-racist demand made in educational institutions. As time went on, it became increasingly difficult to keep the movement's decolonisation demand from becoming subsumed under these categories. This is entirely unsurprising, as the process of bringing unfamiliar political language into public life is difficult and fraught. Indeed, this is why, despite these struggles, a sustained commitment to these principles of locating the historical and material core of racism is worth pursuing. However, it became difficult to not internalise the terms of the debate as they were

set by the media's preoccupation with individual trauma and grievances. Questions asked by journalists were almost exclusively framed around individual students' experiences at Oxford, almost in an attempt to frame the university as having a unique, Oxford-specific problem; this framing therefore took up the bulk of airtime given to RMFO spokespeople. Indeed, even sympathetic headlines argued in support of the campaign on the basis that the statue violates the university's duty of care to students of colour because of the discomfort it creates; that Oxford cannot expect to become a hospitable place for people of colour if it continues to glorify figures such as Cecil Rhodes.

This may well be true, particularly for the university's black Southern African students. Nonetheless, framing the intervention entirely in these terms has problematic consequences. First and foremost, the integral notion of the statue being a *metaphor* for wider historical, material, cultural and economic processes – and not the issue *tout court* – starts to get lost. Second, the conversation can get easily stripped of its core of political, social and economic justice, and pushed into the realm of administering welfare provisions (which is of course falsely divorced from the former). Crucially, as Robin Kelley writes, 'managing trauma does not require dismantling structural racism'.<sup>26</sup> In this way, focusing political energy into framing things like the Rhodes statue as a 'trigger' or a violation of safe space – although media-friendly – ultimately backfires on core, long-term anti-racist aims. While trauma is often an entry point into understanding these issues, and can be an introductory way of communicating how these structures come to light on an everyday, human level, it cannot be the basis on which a politics is developed. If for no other reason, this is because, built into the idea that RMFO existed purely to address issues around the welfare of Oxford students of colour is the assumption that issues within the university affect only those within it; however, it is far more powerful and compelling to address how these issues of a white curriculum affect – and implicate – the world outside the institution.

In other words, the movement cannot be only about students – particularly students at a university of great privilege such as Oxford – and claim an analytical framework of decoloniality. It is crucial for any student and academic-led decolonisation movement – many of which are already emerging up and down the country – not only to rigorously understand and define its terms, but also to locate the university as just one node in a network of spaces where this kind of struggle must be engaged with.





Such a movement also needs to understand its position as responding to live issues of inequality, colonialism and oppression – rather than just being a matter of legacies, or unearthing historical accounts for the sake of it. To do this kind of work in the university is to dig where you are – where you have access – rather than to view the university as the primary space where transformation happens. It is to enter the university space as a transformative force, to connect what is happening inside the institution to the outside, and to utilise its resources in the interest of social justice.

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## Race and the Neoliberal University: Lessons From the Public University

John Holmwood

Higher education in the UK (more specifically, England)<sup>1</sup> and the United States is undergoing a process of rapid change, following the application of neoliberal public policy. In each country, these changes can be traced back to the 1980s, but they have accelerated since the financial crisis of 2008. The crisis gave rise to considerable amounts of government debt in order to 'bail out' banks and other financial institutions, entailing cutbacks to other programmes of public spending to balance the books and maintain a tax regime favourable to the wealthy and big business.

The financial crisis called into question neoliberal policies of deregulation from which it derived yet had the paradoxical consequence of reinforcing those policies and, indeed, of extending them into new areas. For example, government reforms to higher education in England since 2011 have involved the introduction of marketisation with full student fees for undergraduate courses in the arts, humanities and social sciences and the removal of all public funding.<sup>2</sup> The intention is that students should regard their education as an investment in human capital with an eye to its returns in the labour market. Continued support for higher cost STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects is justified only by their significance to the economy. At the same time research is directed towards having impact for specific 'users'.

There are similar developments in the US, despite higher education being highly disaggregated, varying by state and not forming a single system as it did in the UK prior to devolution in 2000 and the reforms to English higher education after 2011. Nonetheless, in a recent book, Newfield describes reductions in public funding and a dramatic rise in the student debt burden, research increasingly directed towards commercial interests through co-sponsorship involving cross-subsidies from teaching revenues (from the humanities and social sciences),

