

Should history be rewritten in line with modern day views of human rights?

The rewriting of history in line with modern day views of human rights involves condemning actions that were once celebrated. It is a response not to the emergence of new evidence, as most revisionism is, but instead to a 20th century political development. The primary purpose of such rewriting is not greater historical accuracy; rather, its aim is to achieve inclusivity in a multicultural society and to prevent divisions within communities along the same fault lines as existed in the past.

Appeals for statues of Cecil Rhodes or Confederates to be removed have been premised on the idea that these statues celebrated men who committed what today would be condemned as serious violations of human rights. A society that celebrates an influential imperialist who *inter alia* disenfranchised black Africans cannot be a truly equal society. At a deeper level, a society that honours such individuals cannot, without some degree of hypocrisy, condemn other nations for human rights violations.

Such arguments presuppose, however, that our perception of the world today is the correct one, that we have somehow reached a philosophical 'truth' that our ancestors have strived towards for centuries. Yet throughout history decision-makers have assumed that what they are doing is right - only for revisionist historians to reconsider their actions later. Revisionism is subjective, it varies according to the present context as well as the past, and it is impossible to predict for what our actions will be condemned. Cecil Rhodes' statue serves as a reminder that even those who believe that they are doing good, who act largely with the support of society, and whose philanthropic work and legacy had a positive impact for the next hundred years, may post-death be condemned as being wrong.

Plato in 'The Apology' narrates the story of the oracle of Delphi describing Socrates as the wisest person because Socrates accepted that he lacked knowledge and wisdom on many matters. Such a degree of humility in our attitude towards the past would be prudent. Future events could show that even the most well-intended people were wrong to make certain decisions. We should view the past with the same degree of compassion that we would want to be viewed with in two hundred years' time.

Even Plato, for instance, is not without fault according to modern standards. Given he argued in favour of some races being superior to others and included slaves in his ideal state, should we remove his Republic from libraries? This would prevent learning being passed down to future generations purely because certain statements in his literature reflect a belief that conflicts with today's views of human rights.

As for buildings, should All Souls College's Codrington Library be renamed given it was built on profits from Caribbean plantations? The British empire was responsible for many atrocities. Those cannot be erased and nor should the products of them be. Rewriting history, in the sense of pretending that such buildings were not built on the exploitation of slaves, is a greater insult to the victims of such exploitation. It whitewashes over the darkest parts of British history and pretends that Britain was not built on such violations of human rights. Moreover, if the USA and UK are prepared to condemn other nations for human rights violations, they should be acknowledging not erasing the records of their own breaches.

If we start removing the relics of anything associated with violations of human rights, there is no limit on how many paintings and writings would have to be removed from the public's

access and how many buildings would have to be renamed. The arrogance of such a decision, premised on the idea that what we believe today is without doubt correct, could have detrimental effects in the future.

Our ability to make decisions based on where mistakes have been made in the past would be hindered by the sanitisation of history. E.H. Carr in his seminal 'What is History?' (1961) described history as "an unending dialogue between the past and present." The past provides a lens through which to view the present and vice versa. Removing the symbols of the past that are associated with actions of which modern-day society disapproves removes the indicators of where we were in the past and how much further we have come.

Replacing pictures of white male benefactors of universities and with images of women or ethnic minorities aims to make all current students feel represented. However, it in fact undermines the aim of ensuring equality as it whitewashes over the fact that the inclusion of women or ethnic minorities at university is a very recent development. The removal of evidence of the exclusion of women or ethnic minorities at university could lead to our grandchildren's generations assuming that there was never a time when education was only available for certain members of society. Those mistakes of the past will have been eradicated from memory.

The response to that that there will never be a risk of moving towards a less inclusive society in future is hubristic. We cannot know what future internal and external pressures may be placed on society. In the wake of World War Two, the consensus was no doubt that the world had learnt from the mistakes of extreme ideology; nonetheless, today we are observing a growing wave of nationalism throughout Europe in response to economic and social tensions.

We would do well to remember that, while the past is a different place, the characters in it were fundamentally human, as flawed as we are today. Recognising, with some humility, that Cecil Rhodes was a complex man, neither pure evil nor pure good, allows us to acknowledge that the decisions that we believe are right may one day be condemned as despicable too. Education, rather than eradication, should be our priority.