

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

*'Education is not indoctrination. Our history is not a blank page on which we can write our own version of what it should have been, according to our contemporary views and prejudices'.*

-- Lord Patten of Barnes, 2016

Consideration of the question of whether history *should* be rewritten in line with modern day views must be preceded with an acknowledgment that it inevitably *will* be. History is an analysis of past events by people who are products of their own society. Contemporary societal values shape the framework within which academic historians, and the broader public, approach historical subject-matter. A concept of 'human rights' lies at the heart of Western morality, deeply embedded in our culture, politics and legal system. It is thus inevitable that history will, subconsciously and incrementally, be rewritten in line with modern views of human rights, as the past is constantly re-examined in light of the views of the present.

The question remains, however, as to what extent we should actively strive to rewrite history in such a fashion. There is a distinction between, on the one hand, historical analysis being subtly and inconspicuously shaped by the framework of contemporary societal values; and, on the other, deliberately attempting to revise our historical consciousness in line with modern-day views of human rights. Recent campaigns, such as 'Rhodes Must Fall', fall into the latter category.

Such an approach is ill-advised. It is antithetical to the very essence of good historical scholarship, which demands approaching the past without pre-formed judgments. The most difficult element of historical analysis is empathy: the attempt to understand why decisions were made and how events were experienced. Historical empathy requires a certain detachment from the present (albeit impossible to achieve completely). It is an imaginative process seeking to place the historian into the matrix of societal values of the period under examination, rather than to judge the past with a pre-conceived moral agenda based on the standards of the values of present society. The importance of upholding this historical

approach extends beyond the realm of academic history. Our collective historical consciousness shapes society in myriad ways, influencing national identity, politics, culture, and our law-makers and judiciary. It would thus be of widespread detriment if historical method and understanding were fatally undermined by attempts to anachronistically rewrite history in line with modern-day human rights.

Alongside diminishing historical scholarship, there is a further danger in the deliberate attempt to rewrite history: the danger of forgetting. If those parts of history that sit uncomfortably with our modern-day views were hidden from view, torn down, and erased from our awareness, we would be left without reminders of the lessons of the past. As a case in point, the presence of prominent Holocaust memorials in Berlin serve as a painful but necessary reminder of the worst historic evils. A statue of Cecil Rhodes reminds us of imperialism and colonisation; the name of the Colston Hall in Bristol reminds us of slavery; Confederate statues remind us of racism. To be reminded of past injustices strengthens our commitment to combat them today.

Historical symbols generate discussion and debate around crucial issues, and provide impetus for fighting against injustices in the present. We should learn from the undesirable aspects of our history, rather than eradicate them from our consciousness. Removing and renaming does nothing to right the wrongs of the past nor to combat the wrongs of the present. It is vital that history and its makers should remain visible, whether in the form of physical symbols, names, books or collective popular memories. Historic symbols do not simply glorify all the positive aspects of history, but also stimulate critical analysis of its negative facets.

That is not to say that historic statues, buildings and monuments, which are potent symbols of national identity, should never be removed and replaced to reflect modern views. Yet such action must be subject to legal regulations which protect against the eradication of history in a single moment of high emotion. 'Who controls the past controls the future', George Orwell wrote in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, recognising the immensity of the power to shape historical narrative. The exercise of that power should not be dictated by protests and

pressure groups, but must be subject to the rule of law. No one owns the past, however justified and passionate their views.

The existing legal framework strikes a desirable balance in providing for discretion whilst strongly emphasising the need to protect historic value. Under planning law for listed buildings, planning authorities must have 'special regard to the desirability of preserving...[any features] of special historic interest.'<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has a wide statutory discretion to schedule monuments for protection on the grounds of historic national interest.<sup>2</sup> In exercising such discretion it should be remembered that whilst dictatorships and oppressive regimes often seek to reconstruct history, a true democracy should be able to accept its past, study it and learn from it.

The irony is that stringent attempts to rewrite history in line with contemporary values would in fact undermine those very values, by removing the most potent reminders of why they developed in the first place. By way of example, recent discussion about imperialism and racism, prompted by historic artefacts, has highlighted the importance of the right not to be discriminated against on the grounds of race, enshrined in Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights. The modern conception of human rights itself evolved, and continues to evolve, from an awareness and examination of the blemishes and injustices of the past. History provides perspective and impetus for change. Rewriting history in line with modern views would thus fatally undermine the ability of human rights to develop and progress in the present and future, by removing from sight the story of where we have come from.

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<sup>1</sup> Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, section 66(1).

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.