

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!



Issue #18, 1 (May 2019)

Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy Without Borders*

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is delivered online in (occasionally discontinuous) weekly installments, month by month.

Its aim is to inspire critical, reflective, synoptic thinking and discussion about contemporary issues--in short, *public philosophizing* in the broadest possible, everyday sense.

Every installment contains (1) excerpts from one or more articles, or one or more complete articles, that recently appeared in online public media, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further critical reflection or discussion, and (3) a link or links for supplementary reading.

1. “Down With The Decolonisation Movement”

By Joanna Williams

spiked, 2 MAY 2019

Full article available at URL = <https://www.spiked-online.com/2019/05/02/down-with-the-decolonisation-movement/>



The University of Cambridge has launched a new research project. Nothing surprising there: this is what universities do. But this project is different. It is unlikely to result in any scientific breakthroughs or medical advances, because the primary focus of the research is the university itself. Academics will investigate Cambridge's past relationship with slavery – specifically, how the university benefited financially from bequests and donations that originated in money made through the slave trade, and how scholarship conducted at Cambridge might have shaped the racial thinking that, at the time, provided a moral and intellectual justification for slavery. The project aims to acknowledge the institution's past links to slavery and also address its modern impact.

Cambridge is not the only university reflecting on links to the slave trade. Last October, following a year-long investigation, the [University of Glasgow](#) declared it had, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, 'received significant financial support' from the profits of slavery. In response, it announced a programme of 'reparative justice' to include the creation of a centre for the study of slavery and the building of a memorial dedicated to those enslaved.

The University of Oxford is also examining its past sins. A plaque has been laid at All Souls College to commemorate slaves from plantations in Barbados. Profits from these plantations were donated to the college by a former student to cover the cost of building the library. Meanwhile, at [St John's College](#) a new academic post has been created to investigate how the college helped create and maintain Britain's empire. As well as exposing donations from sources and individuals now deemed morally dubious, the researcher will look into the 'monuments, objects, pictures, buildings that evoke the colonial past'. Revealingly, in announcing the post, the college declared: 'The drive to "decolonise the university" or, at any rate, to think through the implications of institutional involvement in the imperial projects of the past, is now a global business.'

We have known for well over a century that slavery was an inhumane, barbaric, murderous practice for which there is no conceivable justification. It has long been considered a stain on our national history. But it is only now that 'decolonising' makes business sense. Universities gain moral authority from confessing past sins and seeking public atonement. This moral authority brings with it positive media coverage, a continued supply of bright young students with their tuition fees, and a new round of donations from alumni keen to assuage their guilt by association. What's more, these newly announced projects have far more in common with global business and charities than they do with academic research. They may be dressed up in the language of scholarship, but their goal is not an intellectual pursuit of truth.

In the past, some academics did indeed promote a supposedly scientific theory of racial difference and inequality that was used to justify slavery and more recent degrading and discriminatory practices. This research is morally repugnant to us now, but, perhaps more importantly, it has also been scientifically discredited. No scholar today could make reference to phrenology, for example, to argue that some groups of people are inherently criminal. Scholars in the past no doubt reflected and contributed to the prejudices of their day. Scholars today have not suddenly become immune to this tendency. The best retort is always for better, more rigorous scholarship that does not simply reproduce pre-determined politicised outcomes.

Knowledge of the past is important, but knowledge in and of itself does not dictate any one particular course of action in the present. Uncovering how institutions gained financially from slavery now often leads directly to demands for reparations. Most obviously we see calls for statues to be pulled down and for buildings to be renamed. There are also growing demands for universities to provide financial compensation for the descendants of slaves, today's students of Afro-Caribbean heritage. [Geoff Thompson](#), chair of governors of the University of East London, has argued that universities known to have benefitted from slavery should contribute to a £100million fund to support ethnic-minority students.

But the idea that funding students in the present atones for the institutional sins of the past raises more questions than answers. If compensation is thought appropriate, then why give it to students, particularly ones who have managed to make it to the most elite universities and who are well on their way to making a success of their lives? Why compensate the ancestors of slaves, but not relatives of other historical atrocities? What about today's teenagers who may have lost a great grandfather in the Battle of the Somme or a distant relative in the Irish Potato Famine? Universities have no doubt received money from all manner of former students who went on to be ruthless industrialists, politicians or warmongers at home and abroad.

A fund for black and ethnic-minority students suggests that this group of people are uniquely burdened by a historical legacy that continues to impact upon them in the present. MP [David Lammy](#) tweeted his praise for the Cambridge project: 'The wounds of that period still reverberate today. Contrition and atonement for a grievous wrong is the only way to face the future.' But at what point do we assume that wounds have stopped reverberating and that people can take ownership of their own lives unburdened by the legacy of history? The risk here is that we rehabilitate a racist double standard in the name of promoting social justice.

Of course, we should know more about the history of slavery, and we should know more about the history of our universities. But the new research being promoted is less about the past than it is about the present. It is driven less by scholarship than by institutional politics and the demands of academic-activists. Afro-Caribbean students risk being exploited as a mechanism for members of today's elite to expunge their feelings of guilt and self-loathing.

2. Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Every violation of sufficient respect for human dignity, especially when it is widespread and systematic, is oppressive and morally wrong.
2. Not only the history of past oppression of all kinds, but also the history of the involvement of institutions of higher education in past oppression, is intellectually, morally, and politically important, and therefore should be researched, published, and disseminated.
3. But, as per the contemporary “decolonization” movement at colleges and universities, elaborate denunciations of, and apologies for, specially selected kinds of past oppression—e.g., slavery, racism, sexism, or anti-LGBTQ-ism—including changing names of buildings, putting up new monuments, [“reparations summits,”](#) etc., at wealthy, elite contemporary institutions of higher education like University of Cambridge and US Ivy League and Cali-League universities, and at contemporary neoliberal colleges and universities more generally, since *none* of this can change the past, in fact has *the primary aim* of thereby attracting even *more* external funding for already-wealthy, elite institutions from wealthy people belonging to the power elite of society, who like to have their egos publicly massaged and their liberal guilt-pangs publicly assuaged.
4. Moreover, *inside* the professional academy itself, *the primary effect* of the contemporary decolonization movement at colleges and universities is to promote the professional academic careers and coercive institutional power (e.g., over the canon, curriculum, and teaching) of activist decolonizers.
5. Therefore, the contemporary decolonization movement at colleges and universities not only does essentially nothing whatsoever to mitigate, reduce, or end contemporary oppression of *the specially selected kinds* outside the professional academy in society at large and across the world, but also essentially nothing whatsoever to mitigate, reduce, or end oppression of *any*

other kinds outside the professional academy in society at large and across the world: e.g., global corporate capitalist exploitation of workers and the commodification of all other individuals embedded within the capitalist system; highly coercive and authoritarian legal justice systems, including systematic police violence and mass incarceration; highly restrictive, xenophobic immigration and refugee policies; or the systematic depredation and destruction of the natural environment, leading to climate change and ecological disaster.

6. Indeed, even systematically admitting specially selected members of contemporary identity groups whose ancestors have suffered past oppression, into these wealthy, elite institutions, not only cannot change the past but also for the most part, only adds new compliant, docile recruits to the global corporate capitalist class or its professional class, and to the power elite more generally, and therefore helps no one who is actually suffering oppression outside the professional academy in society at large or across the world right now.
7. Furthermore, the only “reparations” that would be truly effective and truly rationally and morally justified would flow naturally from a radically transformed social system consisting of Truly Generous Universal Basic Income, Universal Basic Jobs, Universal Free Health Care, Universal Open Borders, and Universal Free Public Education, including Higher Education Without Commodification, that applies to *everyone*, including everyone who is currently suffering oppression of *any* kind, not just to the members of contemporary identity groups whose ancestors have suffered special kinds of past oppression.
8. And above all, the contemporary decolonization movement at colleges and universities systematically deflects reflective, critical attention away from the thing that most urgently needs to be challenged and questioned, namely higher education *itself*, as fully embedded in the military-industrial-university-digital complex that oppresses everyone, worldwide, who doesn’t belong to the power elite class.
9. Therefore, down with the decolonization movement.

3. One Link For Supplementary Reading: [The Crisis in Higher Education: What Is To Be Done?](#)

4. BACK ISSUES

ISSUE #17, 1 (February 2019):

- **ANIMAL CONSCIOUSNESS, ANIMAL PAIN, AND OUR MORAL OBLIGATIONS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue17-1 feb19](#)

ISSUE #16, 4 (January 2019):

- **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR ON NONVIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE, AND KING'S DANGEROUS RADICALISM**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-4 jan19](#)

ISSUE #16, 3 (January 2019):

- **PIRACY AND TRULY OPEN ACCESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-3 jan19](#)

ISSUE #16, 2 (January 2019):

- **THE REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOON**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-2 jan19](#)

ISSUE #16, 1 (January 2019):

- **IS HUMAN NATURE FUNDAMENTALLY BAD?**

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- **MONETIZING MORALITY**

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- **THE DIGNITARIAN CASE AGAINST CAPITAL PUNISHMENT**

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- **WHY WE SHOULD SUBVERT AND DISMANTLE SOCIAL MEDIA**

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ISSUE #14, 3 (November 2018):

- **WHY YOU SHOULD EXIT THE PROFESSIONAL ACADEMY**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-3 nov18](#)

ISSUE #14, 2 (November 2018):

- **BULLETS, CORPSES, DOCTORS, & THE NRA**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-2 nov18](#)

ISSUE #14, 1 (November 2018):

- **CRIME-&-PUNISHMENT INC, USA**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue14-1 nov18](#)

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- **ABOLISH ICE!, AND HUNGARY'S STARVATION TACTICS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue13-2 sept18](#)

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- **UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AND THE FUTURE OF POINTLESS WORK**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue13-1 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 3 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE TRUTH ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, IN SIX AMAZING CHARTS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-3 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 2 (AUGUST 2018):

- **EPISTOCRACY, NOT DEMOCRACY?**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-2 aug18](#)

ISSUE #12, 1 (AUGUST 2018):

- **THE QUANTIFIED HEART**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue12-1 aug18](#)

ISSUE #11, JULY 2018:

- **RESISTING IMMIGRATION & CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE), AUTHENTICITY, RECIPROCITY VS. TOLERANCE, HOMELESSNESS-&-US, & FREE SPEECH VS. JUST ACCESS**

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue11 july18](#)

ISSUE #10, June 2018:

- **JOBS-&-HAPPINESS, UBI IN FINLAND, THE SOCIAL VALUE OF ENVY, THE EDUCATED ELITE'S STRANGE FAILURE, & ARE WE JUST OUR BRAINS?**

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- **DEFENDING LECTURING, CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, HYPER-LIBERALISM, NEO-ROMANTICISM, & PHYSICS-WITHOUT-TIME?**

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HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue2 oct17](#)

ISSUE #1, SEPTEMBER 2017:

- **BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, & CULTURAL CONFLICT**

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