

Atoning for the Past

A Response to Rhodes Will Not Fall Alone

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Responding to Abhijit Sarkar's "Rhodes Will Not Fall Alone" the authors argue that the aim of their campaign has been the opposite of "sanitising history." The campaign wants to begin and sustain a long overdue conversation in Britain about its colonial past.

Abhijit Sarkar's article "[Rhodes Will Not Fall Alone](#)" in Vol 51, No 2 makes the case against the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) campaign, which is mobilising, among other things, to remove a statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College. In the midst of logical flaws and factual inaccuracies, Sarkar describes the movement as an attempt to "sanitise our uncomfortable past" and draws wholly unsupported parallels between RMFO and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

No Parallels between RMFO and RSS

Let us begin by addressing Sarkar's simple, factually incorrect statements. His first sentence claims that RMFO is "demanding the destruction or removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes." The literature from RMFO has always been clear. The campaign demands the *removal* of the statue from its glorifying and uncritical elevation on the walls of Oriel, to a museum or a space in which *full contextualisation* can be rendered; preferably in a space dedicated to the memorialisation of the crimes of Empire. It needs to be a space that elevates the victims and those who resisted brutality, as opposed to those who perpetrated it.

Without the deliberate inclusion of this loaded, misleading word, the premise of the earlier article falls apart. Indeed, this is the claim upon which he builds the spurious collapsing of two fundamentally different events—RMFO and actions of the RSS—across space and time. He claims that RMFO methods are similar to the fascistic RSS' demand for the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Not only is this a misrepresentation of RMFO's aim for removal and re-contextualisation, it reveals a lack of perspective, absence of power analysis and a comical level of contextual tone-deafness.

Rhodes' imperialism still percolates Britain's national culture. As recently as last month, a YouGov poll found that [59% of British people are proud of the country's colonial past](#) (Dahlgreen 2014). Perhaps more troublingly, 34% reported that they would like to see the return of Empire. The majority of the British public, according to the poll, do not consider colonialism to be "regrettable" part of history. These are not just views without consequence—they are structurally enforced by a context of ongoing corporate exploitation of labour in the global South, which is in part a continuation of such colonial legacies.

Compare this to the existence of the RSS in India, where Muslims are an oppressed minority, rather than a group with dominant or ruling power. Power commanded by Muslim rulers in India's past bear no continuity into the present power structure or lived experiences of Indian Muslims. However, the struggle to remove Rhodes' statue is intended to strike symbolically against the pervasive institutional racism and an ideological state apparatus within the present undergirded by historical amnesia. This is an oppositional context to the destruction of the Babri Masjid, which is intended as a piece of sectarian warfare, and a strike against an already disenfranchised religious group. It merely counterposes one modern form of chauvinism against a more ancient form. Whereas one is the articulation of an oppressed group against their continued economic, social and cultural subjugation in which the silencing of this history is intimately bound to the subjugation in the present, the other is a re-enforcement of an existing power structure and culture of marginalisation, and the violence embedded within it.

Not Sanitising History

This brings us to what seems to be his central contention; that RMFO's aims—far from limited to a statue—are tantamount to "sanitising" history. When considering the context of historical amnesia demonstrated in part by the aforementioned YouGov poll, Sarkar's argument demonstrates his conceptual failure. Indeed, history is sanitised precisely through the uncritical, but quite literal elevation of the Rhodes statue, underneath which sits a plaque praising his "splendid generosity." This constitutes an effacement of the hundreds of thousands of black South Africans who died, were tortured or disenfranchised by Rhodes' actions, and his legacy as the architect of apartheid.

Rather than trying to 'sanitise our uncomfortable past', the RMFO campaign represents an intellectually rigorous intervention into the carefully constructed sense of comfort that dominates typical historical narratives.

Statues are not sites of learning. They are at best vanity projects, and at worst carefully constructed PR fabrications, established to preserve the uncritical veneration of some of the most exploitative men of modern history, and inoculate them against critique not only by later generations, but by those of their own time. Indeed, Rhodes was condemned for his brutality even within the context of the British Empire. Not only did several of his own peers at Oxford object to his inauguration as a doctorate of civil law in 1899 on the grounds of his

involvement in the illegal and catastrophic Jameson Raid, but also [his 1902 Guardian obituary](#) (Guardian 1902) held Rhodes responsible for an “unbroken sequence of evil.” Of course, a century of the statue’s erection has resulted not in a more nuanced or detailed understanding of Rhodes’ actions and his legacy, but the rise of defensive sentimentality; indeed, the past few weeks have seen an unprecedented wave of whitewashed praise and misinformation.

A Conversation Begun

Indeed, the real impact of RMFO has been the opposite of “sanitising history”; it has been the resurgence of a long overdue conversation in Britain about its colonial past. In the UK context, where this era of history is studiously ignored in curricula at all levels and where the government has withheld [classified files on the end of empire](#)—including on the Mau Mau uprising and Chagos Islanders—this is a rare moment in which some column space is being devoted to an analysis of the brutality of Empire and its manifestations today (Engelhart 2014). It appears that Sarkar does not wish to engage with this history; rather, he calls for the memory of Cecil Rhodes to “sink into oblivion.” The demands levelled by the campaign—for removal and re-contextualisation—represent a far more sincere commitment to history than the forgetting that the establishment is calling for.

References

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