

MAY 2017

**HISTORICAL
MONUMENTS**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“MONUMENTS TO
CONTROVERSIAL
HISTORICAL
FIGURES SHOULD
REMAIN”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Key terms

The Historical Monuments debate in context

Essential reading

Backgrounders

Organisations

In the news

KEY TERMS

[American Civil War](#)

[Cecil Rhodes](#)

[Colonialism](#)

[Confederate States of America](#)

[Imperialism](#)

[Rhodes must fall](#)

INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

NOTES

1
1
2
4
5
6
6

On the 9th April 2015, the University of Cape Town removed a statue commemorating the 19th century British imperialist Cecil Rhodes [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. This was the culmination of a month long campaign by both students and academics as part of the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ movement, which argued that Rhodes was more than just a symbol of past oppression - that he represented an institutional racism which continues to exist within the university today [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Since then, the debate surrounding the legitimacy of certain historical monuments has gathered pace, with the American city of New Orleans recently voting to remove statues of prominent Confederate figures of the American Civil War, such as Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis in an attempt to confront the South’s racist past [Ref: [CNN](#)]. At Oxford University, a campaign began for the removal of a statue of Rhodes at Oriel College, with supporters observing that any steps to address the lack of black and minority students and lecturers at the institution were undermined by the monument [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For supporters, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, “operates on the premise that these present discrepancies are rooted in history, and the present and the past must, together, be critically engaged with.” [Ref: The [Guardian](#)] However, a number of critics have begun to express concern at campaigns to ‘whitewash’ history, with columnist Matthew D’Ancona arguing that: “There is a modernist urge to wipe away the past and replace it with the new, but we should resist it.” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] At its heart, the debate is about our relationship with history, and whether removing statues and monuments has a role to play in reappraising historic wrongs, or whether they encourage us to airbrush out difficult and contentious parts of our history, rather than engage with and understand them. Should monuments to controversial historical figures remain?



THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

2 of 6

NOTES

Do historical monuments matter?

“Public statues are intensely political” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] notes writer Martin Gayford. He outlines the nature of public memorials and statues, and observes that over time, our appraisal of individuals changes, for instance as with the thousands of statues of Lenin and Marx brought down after the fall of the former Soviet Union [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. From this perspective, historical monuments do matter as they can be seen as symbols of norms and values we agree to commemorate, as historian Professor Christopher Phelps argues [Ref: [Chronicle Review](#)]. He says that: “History is one thing, memorials another. As tributes, memorials are selective, affirmative representations. When a university names a building after someone, or erects a statue to that person, it bestows honour and legitimacy.” [Ref: [Chronicle Review](#)] However, the moral value of historical monuments is fiercely contested. For critics, in removing these statues we are in danger of symbolically removing distasteful aspects of history which allow us to understand the present. As one South African student notes in reference to Rhodes: “Removing him omits an essential part of the institutions history that has contributed to everything good, bad and ugly about it” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In the case of the Rhodes statue at Oxford, some attempt to place the monument in its historical context, and note that Oriel College was founded in 1324, and as such, its statues serve as a repository of history, good and bad. More importantly, they argue: “A salient fact about the Oriel statue of Rhodes is its date: 1911. It is an echo in stone of a different time.” [Ref: [New York Times](#)]

Why do people want to remove them?

Advocates of removing statues of controversial figures, suggest that these monuments represent individuals whose actions and legacies should not be celebrated or memorialised. And while not agreeing that the statue of Cecil Rhodes should come down at Oriel College Oxford, author and columnist Timothy Garton-Ash concedes that, “this is a perfectly legitimate debate about the politics of memory” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For some, the statue of Rhodes represents the glorifying of a “racist mass murderer of Africans” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and serves to further alienate black students who study at Oxford and elsewhere. As one Rhodes Must Fall campaigner argues: “While these histories continue to be forgotten, a sentimentalised, whitewashed statue stands in the way of academic rigour.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Moreover, our understanding and interpretation of historical norms and values changes over time, which means we should be constantly re-appraising historical monuments. “To reconsider, to recast, is the essence of historical practice. It follows that altering how we present the past through commemorative symbol is not ahistorical...on the contrary, it represents a more thorough coming to terms with the past and legacies, a refusal to forget.” [Ref: [Chronicle Review](#)] Viewing historical figures through critical eyes is vital for supporters who do not see statues and memorials as benign and meaningless symbols. Instead, they argue that in the case of the Confederate statues in New Orleans, for example: “The statues serve less as a testament to the men they depicted than to the cause they represented, as propaganda to a particular point of view that dominated a particular time.” [Ref: [The Advocate](#)] Historian David Olusoga claims that the movement to bring down statues of certain historical figures



THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 6

NOTES

has a broader aim, beyond the statues themselves, and that it is about former colonial powers such as Britain accepting past atrocities, and realising that there are aspects of history which, “should not be uncritically celebrated”, asking if, “we really want to be a society that uncritically memorialises a 19th century racist.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Ultimately, supporters argue that we should morally judge figures such as Rhodes – and in that judgement, decide whether or not we should still have public memorials and statues to them [Ref: [London Review of Book](#)], because “parts of the past are not dead and symbols matter.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]

Re-writing history?

Historian and broadcaster Professor Mary Beard contends that instead of tearing down memorials to controversial figures, “more important is to look history in the eye and reflect on our awkward relationship to it...not to simply photoshop the nasty bits out.” [Ref: [Times Literary Supplement](#)] In a similar vein, some are cautious about the idea of subjecting historical figures to modern standards of moral judgement [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and question what good removing a statue of Rhodes will do in a practical sense, as: “Rhodes cannot be expunged from the history of Oxford, Britain and South Africa.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Opponents of campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall are critical of attempts to infantilise students and the public by claiming that statues of historical figures in some way have an impact on social issues today. One commentator argues that: “Campaigners are deluding themselves if they think that removing a flag or statue will make any difference to inequalities of race, class or gender” [Ref: [The Conversation](#)], and suggests that rather than insisting that

statues should come down, they need to engage in the politics needed to bring about real change. Furthermore, for these critics the act of understanding history relies on recognising how the past informs the present, and not editing out parts we don't like. Which in turn means that the individuals and events of the past are legitimate parts of the narrative and fabric of history. Allowing these monuments to stand isn't to legitimate the views of 19th century slave holders or imperialists or Confederate Generals, but rather, it is part of the “challenge of history” to debate the moral questions the monuments may present, and confront them head-on [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. Additionally, the problem with attempting to eradicate problematic aspects of history, critics argue, is that campaigns such as Rhodes Must Fall are emblematic of a wider contemporary fixation with pathologising the past [Ref: [spiked](#)], with writer Brendan O'Neill maintaining that: “What is most notable about Rhodes Must Fall is its treatment of history as a source of psychological trauma.” [Ref: [spiked](#)] In light of the arguments on both sides, should monuments of controversial historical figures be removed, or does this do a disservice to history, and make us victims of history rather than subjects who can understand and engage with it?



ESSENTIAL READING

[Why is Cecil Rhodes such a controversial figure?](#)

BBC News 1 April 2015

FOR

[The trouble with people who lived in the past](#)

David Mitchell *Guardian* 16 March 2016

[Must Rhodes fall?](#)

Matthew D'Ancona *New York Times* 28 January 2016

[Racism at Oxford goes deeper than a statue of Cecil Rhodes](#)

Dena Latif *Guardian* 4 January 2016

[Cecil Rhodes and Oriel College, Oxford](#)

Professor Mary Beard *Times Education Supplement* 20 December 2015

AGAINST

[Removing Confederate monuments in New Orleans is the right thing to do](#)

Stephanie Grace *The Advocate* 21 March 2016

[Oxford's Cecil Rhodes statue must fall – it stands in the way of inclusivity](#)

Yussef Robinson *Guardian* 19 January 2016

[Removing racist symbols isn't a denial of history](#)

Christopher Phelps *The Chronicles of higher education* 8 January 2016

[The University of Cape Town is right to remove its Cecil Rhodes statue](#)

David Priestland *Guardian* 13 April 2015

IN DEPTH

[Under Rhodes](#)

Amia Srinivasan *London Review of Books* 31 March 2016

[The real meaning of Rhodes must fall](#)

Amit Chaudhuri *Guardian* 16 March 2016

4 of 6

NOTES



BACKGROUNDERS

[Cecil Rhodes colonial legacy must fall – not his statue](#)

Siya Mnyanda *Guardian* 25 March 2016

[Not all racist monuments should be torn down](#)

Zachary Fine *New Republic* 10 March 2016

[Rhodes hasn't fallen, but the protesters are making me re-think Britain's past](#)

Timothy Garton Ash *Guardian* 4 March 2016

[New Orleans says goodbye to its Confederate status](#)

Economist 4 February 2016

[Students who say Rhodes must fall should be celebrated – not sneered at](#)

Dan Hodges *Telegraph* 4 February 2016

[History is not a morality play: both sides of the Rhodes must fall debate should remember that](#)

Cheryl Hudson *The Conversation* 30 January 2016

[Finally! Oriel College should have stood up to Rhodes must fall long ago](#)

Harry Mount *Telegraph* 29 January 2016

[Will Rhodes must fall fail?](#)

BBC News 18 January 2016

[Defending Robert E. Lee](#)

Barry D. Wood *Huffington Post* 11 January 2016

[A short history of statue toppling](#)

Martin Gayford *Spectator* 9 January 2016

[Topple the Cecil Rhodes statue? Better to re-brand him a war criminal](#)

David Olusoga *Guardian* 7 January 2016

5 of 6

NOTES

[Never mind Rhodes – it's the cult of the victim that must fall](#)

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 28 December 2015

[The statue of Cecil Rhodes like that of Saddam, must fall](#)

Chi Chi Shi *The Times* 26 December 2015

[Message to students: Rhodes was no racist](#)

Nigel Biggar *The Times* 2 December 2015

[Cecil Rhodes was racist, but you can't readily expunge him from history](#)

Will Hutton *Guardian* 20 December 2015

[Confederate monuments will come down in New Orleans](#)

Kevin M. Levin *Atlantic* 17 December 2015

[Don't tear down Confederate monuments – do this instead](#)

Jack Hitt *Reuters* 23 July 2015

[Why we shouldn't pull down all those Confederate memorials](#)

Alfred L. Brophy *Newsweek* 10 July 2015



IN THE NEWS

[Oxford University must decolonise its campus and curriculum, say students](#)

Guardian 18 June 2016

[Head of Rhodes Trust backs rights of Rhodes must fall in Oxford movement](#)

Independent 2 June 2016

[Oxford University rejects call for expulsion of Rhodes must fall scholar](#)

Telegraph 5 May 2016

[Rhodes statue removed in Cape Town as crowd celebrates](#)

BBC News 29 April 2016

[‘Take it down!’: Rhodes must fall campaign marches through Oxford](#)

Guardian 9 March 2016

[Over a third of Oxford students want Cecil Rhodes statue removed](#)

Guardian 15 January 2016

[Oxford is institutionally racist, say Rhodes must fall campaigners](#)

Telegraph 14 January 2016

[Cecil Rhodes statue row: Chris Patten tells students to embrace freedom of thought](#)

Guardian 13 January 2016

[Students trying to ‘write Rhodes out of history’](#)

The Times 4 January 2016

[Oriel students want Rhodes statue to stay](#)

The Times 4 January 2016

[Mary Beard raps zealots in Oxford row](#)

Daily Mail 21 December 2015

[New Orleans votes to remove Confederate Civil War memorials](#)

CNN 18 December 2015

6 of 6

NOTES

ORGANISATIONS

[Oriel College Oxford](#)

[University of Cape Town](#)



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS
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FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**