

Trying to tear down the master's house with 1970s-style anti-imperialist (secondary) antisemitism and censorship: the call for a Commission of Inquiry into the Histories and Legacies of British Colonialism and the British Empire

Most years have 365 days. This year even has 366. Plenty of days on which to launch a call for a Commission of Inquiry into the Histories and Legacies of British Colonialism and the British Empire. Yet for its initiators, only one day will do: the 27th of January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, widely recognized as Holocaust Memorial Day.

Not so long ago, an attempt was made to establish a MA programme on 'race' at UCL. UCL provided a year's funding for an expert in the field to develop this initiative. A second plank of this initiative was to force UCL to confront its own history and legacy in terms of racializing research and institutional racism and, not least, its disturbing role as a flag ship of eugenics in the twentieth century. Neither project came to fruition and neither the institution nor the initiators came out the process smelling of roses. UCL greedily seized on every opportunity to let itself be wrong footed and suggest its commitment to the negotiation process was half-hearted at best. The initiators—my judgement here is based on the, admittedly limited, extent to which I was able to observe and participate in the process—were torn between more focused, substantive academic concerns and public advocacy, and seemed to have illusions about the extent to which an institution like UCL might ever be genuinely committed to the critical agenda they proposed.

On several occasions I urged systematic coalition building and made specific suggestions regarding interested parties with whom substantive collaboration might be developed, yet the initiative never moved beyond ad hoc mobilizations. It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the ways in which universities work that controversial new degrees are established not by public campaigning but by finding the most suitable enclave in the university that might host the degree and then carefully building reliable alliances with the relevant decision makers. I have been at UCL in one capacity or another since 1998 and there is little doubt in my mind that it would have been perfectly possible, indeed relatively easy, to build a small but durable coalition sufficiently motivated and determined to get the desired MA programme off the ground. One of the departments that I imagine would have been open to suggestions is my own home department, Hebrew and Jewish Studies. In the light of recent developments it seems uncomfortably clear to me now, why this option was never pursued, even though I repeatedly suggested it.

When approval for the envisaged MA programme was not forthcoming, the unrealistic optimism that had previously characterized the initiative promptly gave way to recriminations and denunciation. One can only marvel at the decision of the powers that be at UCL to facilitate this initiative in the first place without ensuring its success. They must surely have foreseen the backlash this would create. With the benefit of hindsight I suspect, though, that those now heaping recriminations on UCL were actually not at all dissatisfied with the outcome. They had successfully set UCL up and UCL could not have made it easier for them to do so. As one of the more simple minded supporters of the initiative who thought the initiative was genuinely designed to gain an academic foothold for a crucially important but fatally under-represented field of study at UCL, I am not only extremely disappointed but also angered by the way in which the mishandling of the initiative has done untold harm to the agenda it supposedly propagated. Barring a miracle, the academic engagement of 'race' will be a poisoned chalice for the foreseeable future and I suspect that most colleagues sympathetic to the cause will think twice before allowing themselves to be drawn into a similar initiative again.

As UCL morphed from the promised land into the pit of Satan, those who had been receiving email circulars on the initiative at UCL were signed up to a new email list, tdmh: tearing down the master's house, a very busy and pretty wild ragbag. It turned out that the suggested way of unsubscribing circulated at the foot of each of the many postings did not in fact work. In short, various colleagues who had signed up in the context of a specific project at UCL found themselves trapped on a list of little direct interest to them but which they had no means of leaving. This exploded some months ago into a vicious row when substantial numbers of subscribers lost their patience and, given that they had no other means of opting out, posted their request to unsubscribe via the list. This led to the decision henceforth to moderate the list and the promise to unsubscribe those who had requested to opt out. I cannot speak for others but I can say that, despite having expressed my desire to opt out in no uncertain terms and several times over, I continued to receive postings to the list until this week. On Monday (25 January 2016) the following posting came through:

Apparently, 44% of 'British people' say we should be proud of British colonialism and 43% say that the British Empire was a good thing. Indeed, we are told that 59% of 'British people' say the British Empire is more something to be proud than ashamed of, 49% say it left its colonies better off, and 34% would like it still to exist.

By contrast, on 27th January 2015, following a national call for evidence that generated nearly 2,500 responses, a cross-party Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission published Britain's promise to remember what *German* colonialism and what the *German* Empire did.

This double standard is unacceptable—at the very least for the reasons that Yasmin Ahmed, David Olusoga, and several other decolonial scholars explain. We therefore call upon decolonial scholars to collaborate on and to co-sign a short statement, insisting that our Prime Minister launch a Commission of Inquiry into the Histories and Legacies of British Colonialism and the British Empire. If you are able to collaborate or are willing to co-sign, please reply to both our emailing addresses. We plan to publish this open letter on 27th January 2016.

This was followed an hour later by a posting from an individual subscriber reading simply: 'Thank you for this important message. Please add my name to your statement.' Clearly an important contribution that needed to be seen by all subscribers. Not in the habit of mincing my words, I responded to the initial call as follows:

Dear Colleagues,

This is pure demagoguery. The cited document makes no references to German colonialism or to the German colonial empire in the traditional (i.e. extra-European) sense of the word. As anyone who isn't totally oblivious to reality will appreciate, given the name of the commission and the date on which the document was issued, it focuses on the Shoah.

That some people equate British colonialism with the Holocaust is not news. Surely, though, those who do so should have the intellectual honesty to say so in as many words. To denounce the memorialization of the Shoah by claiming it hinges on a one-sided critique of German colonialism when in fact it doesn't even touch on the issue, is deeply reprehensible.

I have devoted my life to fighting Holocaust relativization, a strategy that has turned out to be infinitely more dangerous than Holocaust denial, and will be no party to any initiative that engages in it. I have asked several times (and in no uncertain terms) to be removed from this list. Maybe I can finally be granted this mercy?

I wouldn't be at all surprised if this message falls prey to censorship but I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't at least try.

As it turns out, on the final point I was entirely right. I was informed that I 'might wish to reconsider and revise' my original message 'in light of' one of the list editor's 'engagement with what you have said'. That 'engagement' read as follows:

Some fifty persons, so far, many members of the public, most untenured and tenured academics, do not agree with you that this call for a commission is 'pure demagoguery'.

We have nowhere 'denounce[d] the memorialization of the Shoah'. The report's repeated reference to 'the Nazis' and to 'Nazi persecution' focuses our attention on German Colonialism and on the German Empire. There is no need for you to describe this report as 'one-sided'. It may well be that one of the problems underpinning our society's selective remembering and selective forgetting is the very euocentric [sic] idea that it continues to be meaningful to speak of 'colonial empire in the traditional (i.e. extra-European) sense of the word'. Even Ireland was/is a colony of Britain. You know that, Lars.

Now, this 'engagement' of my argument would be perfectly valid if we were debating what the most suitable and desirable definition of colonialism should ideally be. But this is not the issue here. We are dealing with a statement designed for publication, and thus for a wider audience, most of whom, for better or for worse, will subscribe to the traditional understanding of the term. That I myself referred to it as 'traditional' might give an indication that I am not perhaps quite the Satanic creature as which my interlocutor would like to present me. As a Jewish Studies scholar, I certainly do not need to be told about the concept of internal colonization in Europe. It has been forcefully articulated, in the Jewish context, by Susannah Heschel and applied in intriguing ways, *inter alia*, by Jonathan Hess.

Yet not only are the initiators of the statement far too intelligent not to know what most readers will assume they mean; this is, of course, precisely the point. The text is designed to mobilize support by giving potential supporters the wrong impression. Quite frankly, if the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission really had dedicated substantial resources to examining Germany's track record in its (few) overseas colonies prior to the First World War without developing any sort of comparative perspective and reference to the British Empire, I would be the first to sign this call. Ironically, the initiators of this call both want to buy into the legitimacy attached to Holocaust Memorial Day and denounce its focus on the Holocaust at the same time.

This is not a matter of free speech but simply of intellectual honesty. It is no secret that some people (probably more than most of us would care to admit to ourselves) consider colonialism, British or otherwise—indeed, going by the interlocutor ‘engaging’ with my argument, even the present state of affairs in Ireland (‘Even Ireland was/is a colony of Britain’)—to be on a par with the Shoah. To be sure, I do not and would not want to inhabit the same moral universe as these people and there is no room for meaningful dialogue across this divide. What, though, would be the point in attempting to stop them from articulating their position and trying to make their argument? But, conversely, they really should have the courage of their convictions and say so! Their current strategy is eerily reminiscent of the way in which party communism used to build front organizations. Luckily, of course, most members of communist front organizations ran a mile when push came to shove and it became clear to them what the party actually expected of them.

Lars Fischer

London, 27 January 2016