
Can We Change History? The Ethnocentrism of Presentism

By Philip Carl Salzman

Recently I participated in a surprising conversation. At dinner with three anthropologists and a professional in the financial industry, one, an American, complained that Donald Trump, who did not win the popular vote, was elected to the Presidency illegitimately, due to the Electoral College, which elects according to votes of the majority of states in the American Federation. This is standard fare for disappointed voters; it was what came next that was interesting. The argument was made that the Constitution and its provision establishing the Electoral College to elect the President should be abandoned, set aside, annulled, because its authors were slave owners.

To be disappointed with the results of an election is understandable, but to argue that the constitution should be thrown out is egregious. And the rationale that the authors were slave owners is highly anachronistic. It is true that asserting connections to slavery is not unknown as a tactic in discrediting individuals and policies. But to argue that all works of slave owners must be discredited and abandoned is, well, rather extreme. When I objected, I was accused of being in favour of slavery!

Around the world, and through world history until around 1800, slavery was the norm; it was a desired and important institution. The reason for this is simple: in pre-industrial and labour intensive economies characterized by low productivity, slaves provided uncompensated labour, allowing the accumulation of a surplus to support political, military, and aesthetic, and literary elites and to finance armies, architecture, and art.

All state societies and many tribal societies relied on slaves to do much of the work. This is why tribal raiding and imperial expansions were in part oriented toward capturing people to serve as slaves. The ancient Persians enslaved the Hebrews, as did the Egyptians. The population of ancient Athens was perhaps half slaves. The same was true with Rome, each imperial expansion feeding multitudes of slaves into Rome. The Arab Muslim Empire enslaved infidels, hundreds of thousands from India alone. The Ottoman devshirme system took Balkan Christian boys to serve as slaves of the Caliph. North African Muslims raided Europe for slaves up to the 20th century.

In India, for its part, half of its population was untouchables, a largely uncompensated population. In Russia serfs filled that role. West Africans slavers raided for their own use, and later fed captives into the North Atlantic slave trade. American slavery was a late development, and relatively short lived. Slavery continues to be allowed in Islamic sharia law, and to be practiced in the Middle East, in massive numbers in the Sudan and just recently by the Islamic State. Slavery has been forbidden in Western countries since the 19th century, and is expressly forbidden in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The idea that we must reject all the works of people whose views and practices we disagree with, would lead us to reject everything that was accomplished throughout history. Today we disapprove of most of what went on in history—slavery, patriarchy, religious wars, imperialism and colonialism. Celebrating gender equality, we must reject all of history until the last quarter of the 20th century. Insisting on the virtue of diverse sexual preferences, we would reject historical attitudes, laws, and practices prior to 1990. Rejecting slavery, we disassociate ourselves with its almost universal practice through most of history. Perhaps we are uniquely virtuous; but, in

any case, we do have the right to assert and defend our current values. However, should we reject all the works of those whose values and activities disagree with ours, and, if so, what are the consequences?

Shall we give up reading Plato and Aristotle, Sophocles and Aristophanes, Homer and Sappho, because Athens was a slaving society? Shall we repudiate democracy, because Athens of 500 B.C. did not live up to 21st century values? Should Roman law and its descendants be rejected because slaves were an integral part of Roman society? Shall we stop eating Indian curries because of the suffering of the untouchables? Should we reject British literature, common law, and parliamentary structures because Britain participated in the North Atlantic slave trade and held slaves in the Caribbean? Should we repudiate everything that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John A. Macdonald accomplished because they did not see things the way we do?

To suggest any of this is to offer an insufferable presentism, a crass ethnocentrism, and a dense ignorance of historical and cultural diversity. Are those who condemn our ancestors for their beliefs and practices unaware that they are setting the precedent for their grandchildren, who will have new perspectives and values, to look back at their grandparents and condemn them as bigoted and immoral?

To condemn our ancestors for doing what we would not do today is to violate cultural relativity, the beloved doctrine of anthropologists and progressives that proclaims that judgements are always cultural, and thus cannot be logically and justly applied from one culture to other cultures.

Following this doctrine, the American Anthropological Association rejected the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on the ground that it was based on Western values. But anthropologists have nothing critical to say about head hunting, cannibalism, polygamy, caste hierarchies, and untouchables, honour killings, and slavery, as long as they happen in non-Western countries. What today's critics of our ancestors do not realize or acknowledge is that Colonial America and Canada, Revolutionary America, and Confederation Canada of the British North America Act all had their own cultures, culturally different and distinct from ours, cultures that derived from their historical circumstances. Nor do these critics recognize that our society and values, about which we are so self-righteous, were built on the foundations of those earlier cultures, and could not have developed without those foundations.

So it is an anachronistic violation of cultural relativism to apply 21st Century values to the 18th and 19th century cultures of our ancestors. Condemning our ancestors for their values, takes a reasonable idea, that we should defend our own values, to such an extreme as to make it an absurdity. It also reflects a double standard, acceptance of any cultural practice non-Western, and condemnation of any Western culture or practice, which is the central idea is the dominant theory of academia, Marxist-Leninist postcolonialism, which attributes all ills of the world to Western imperialism.

At any given moment, the ideas in a society seem clear and fixed. But over time people change their ideas, expand their meanings and applications, test their borders, push ideas to their logical conclusions, even to their extremities. Partly this is human creativity, and partly a social process in which aspiring leaders, academics, and intellectuals compete for prominence and influence by advancing new meanings. Unfortunately, the process often ends with extreme formulations, such as anachronistic and ethnocentric ones, which, in attempted application lead to policies and programs that result in disaster. There is a long record of such extreme ideas, such as Nazism and communism, leading to a great upsurge in human misery. That is why we must be on guard against extreme ideas.

Unfortunately, we are never short of extreme ideas. The latest in academia and beyond is to divide the world into oppressors and oppressed: males, whites, and heterosexuals are designated as oppressors; females, people of colour, and gays are designated victims of oppression. All individuals are reduced to their category, and should in practical policy be treated accordingly. In application, this means marginalizing and punishing those in oppressor categories, while prioritizing and rewarding those in oppressed categories.

This is applied to the achievements of our ancestors by dismissing them as the work of "dead white men," a phrase usually spoken with contempt. Thus we have seen students rebelling over courses such as ancient

history, because the protagonists are all “dead white men.” Students have complained to me as a professor that the assigned reader in political philosophy had only one female author. Universities have been replacing great figures of the Western tradition, such as Shakespeare, with contemporary black, gay, female poets.

Of course, the marginalization of “oppressors” is applied not only to figures of history, but also to contemporary individuals, as in “progressive stacking” by progressive and feminist professors, who commit to favouring females, people of colour, and gays, and ignoring white, heterosexual males. Can “progressive grading” be far behind? But that is already here: only progressive ideas are acceptable; other opinions are downgraded.

All of this is a violation of individual human rights, but individuals are not recognized by progressives, and “oppressors” are deemed by progressives not to have any human rights. Progressives can feel happily righteous because they hate people in their assigned oppressor categories, including all of the “dead white men” whose achievements make the great part of the Western cultural tradition.

And unfortunately that is what passes for virtue in our time.

About the Author



Philip Carl Salzman B.A. (Antioch), M.A., Ph.D. (Chicago) is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, appointed in 1968. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years he has also served as Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney. Extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) provided the foundation many articles in academic journals, and for book publications such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitr–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3rd Ed.* (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and *Areo Magazine*.