

Challenging the Delusion there is an Absence of Diversity

by Michael Curtis



Gypsie moth

It's not easy being white, having to spend each day being clean and serene, when it could be nicer being red, or yellow, or gold, or something much more colorful.

Colors tend to convey different meaning and symbolism, illustrating emotion and reactions in different societies. In Western culture red may symbolize passion and courage, but also danger and aggression. Yellow may convey happy and optimistic, but also fear and depression. Blue may signal serene and trustworthy, but also aloofness. White has been associated with a variety of qualities, purity and neutrality but also coldness. However, it is rather startling that, according to a supposition of Cambridge University, England, white may exemplify the unholy trinity, imperialism, colonialism, and entrenched racism.

Oxford University, founded in 1263, according to Matthew Arnold, the 19th century poet who attended Balliol College, Oxford, was the home of "lost causes and forsaken beliefs, no popular names, and impossible loyalties." Its fellow comparable elite university, Cambridge University, founded in 1209, and home of 90 Nobel Prize winners, recently engaging in correcting the reprehensible acts of history, has entered the fray of "causes and beliefs" in a new and novel fashion.

At Cambridge, Churchill College, established in 1958, held an academic panel on the "Racial Consequences of Mr.

Churchill," in which the former Prime Minister was termed the "perfect embodiment of a white supremacy." Churchill, who was involved in the exigencies of World War II, was accused of racism and complicity in the Bengal famine of 1943 which killed three million Indians.

One panelist even argued that the British Empire that Churchill led, was "far worse than the Nazis and lasted far longer." For him, Churchill illustrated the problem of "lionizing dead white men." One extravagant, even incomprehensible, criticism on the panel was that Churchill, in his history books, used the language of white supremacy, the veiled terms, "English speaking Peoples" and "Anglo-Saxon."

From insects to historical figures purportedly connected with slavery. Gladstone, Robert Peel, Winston Churchill, and to institutions in academia and museums, such arguments are common, driven by allegations of ideological distortions or exaggerations, or biased readings of history.

This is being illustrated in Cambridge University. Its Archaeological Museum is planning to explain the whiteness of its sculpture plaster casts, as part of its anti-racist strategy. The plaster casts in the Museum and lecture rooms are said to give a misleading impression of the whiteness and absence of diversity of the ancient world.

The Cambridge Classics faculty says it will draw attention to the diversity of those figured in the casts, to the ways in which color has been lost and can be restored, and to the role of classical sculpture in the history of racism. These plans have met with strong reaction. One of the finest departments of the humanities in the Western world is giving official credence to the allegation of more than 200 students, academics, alumni, and even some of the staff, who in an open letter to the Classics faculty board called for an acknowledgment of the existence of systemic racism within the

Classics department.

The Classics faculty responded with a statement of plans to address the accusations of racism. It will erect signs to explain the whiteness of the plaster casts. Faculty will be encouraged to include content warnings in course material, lectures and readings. Tutors will receive training on how to discuss sensitive issues, even if they are uncomfortable. The present proposal is that all members of the Classics faculty should be given implicit bias training every three years, and their teaching should be monitored. Is Cambridge becoming biblical: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow?"

White plaster casts are not the only cause of concern. Birds have it, insects have it, over educated moths in your rugs have it, what's the use of moth balls? British and American scientists are beginning to change the common names, first given in the early 20th century, of plants, insects, and animal species, that perpetuate negative stereotypes, unnecessary cause of offense or provoke emotional reactions. The Entomological Society of America says many of the names of insects are problematic, venerating questionable people or are unacceptable racist slurs. The Society gave the examples of the Gypsy moth, and Scott's oriole, and has removed the word "gypsy," which is often regarded as a pejorative term and may refer to negative stereotypes of the group.

The Entomological Society suggests that people use the scientific names, *lymantria dispar*, and *aphenogaster araneoides*, for these two creatures until new common names has been chosen. Scott's oriole is to be changed because Winfield Scott, 19th century U.S. General, in 1838 led the military force that removed Native Americans, Cherokee Indians from their land to the West , in a march, the Trail of Tears, that led to the death of thousands.

Language is being chosen by the Entomological Society that reflects contemporary values. According to guidelines of the Society the new names for insects should exclude words that unnecessarily incite offense or fear or promote emotional reactions, or are unacceptable depictions of cultures, populations, ethnicity, race, and industries, or perpetuate harm against people of various ethnicities and races. The Society is particularly concerned about the term "gypsy" which is the word in English to refer to the people, history, culture of the Romani people, Roma, the Indo-Aryan group, the largest ethnic minority in Europe. For jazz lovers, that culture includes the virtuoso guitarist, Django Reinhardt, the Belgium born gypsy of Manouche Romani parentage, who made "gypsy jazz", with its arpeggio, broken chords notes, fashionable.

The work of the Entomological Society has been preceded. Some of the names given to species have already been changed. The name "squawfish" was regarded as derogatory to women, and was changed in 1998 to "pikeminnow." The name "jewfish" was felt to be culturally insensitive, and was renamed to be goliath grouper in 2001. The new name is not meant to refer to the Philistine Goliath killed by David, but to the fact that the fish with its flaky fillets can grow to 700 pounds. However, the Philistine lobby is unlikely to issue a claim of being persecuted or slighted.

Yet, the issue of renaming controversial words remains. There are at least nine islands or bodies of water, named for the jewfish, including jewfish Creek Bridge, near Key Largo, and Jewish Point in Los Angeles. And what to do about other non-Jewish names, Spanish mackerel and Irish lord?

And then there are some who refuse to take yes for an answer. An exhibition, "Our future planet," is being held at the Science Museum in London, exploring the cutting-edge techniques being developed that could help climate problems by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and reducing

greenhouse emissions that are said to cause the rise in global temperature.

The exhibition has been criticized both by scientists and public activists, for the same reason, the fact that much of the funding has come from Shell, the multinational oil and gas company. On opening day a group of scientists, members of the "Extinction Rebellion," protested inside the Museum. The Extinction Rebellion is an international movement, using direct action and civil disobedience to push action on ecological issues, to halt biodiversity loss, and to reduce grandiose emissions.

Again, on August 28, 2021, environmental activists, including the irrepressible 18 year old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, demonstrated against the exhibition, blocking roads, attaching themselves to railings, playing drums, blowing whistles, because the exhibition has been partly funded by Shell. The activists call on the Museum to drop sponsorship by Shell, but they ignore reality. Shell and other companies have the resources, the people and the logistics, to be important players in the search to find solutions for the challenges of climate change. The dilemma will remain: "Is Shell part of the solution or part of the problem?"

Those engaged in the struggle against racism are unwise to adhere to the view of "All or nothing at all." They tend to see, as Winston Churchill said on another issue, the difficulty in every opportunity.