

# Up in Arms About a Coat of Arms

Harvard Law School, in abject surrender to student activists, is about to change its escutcheon because its design was derived from that of Isaac Royall, Jr., who endowed the first chair at the school. Royall's father made the family fortune from slave plantations in the West Indies and Massachusetts, a fortune that was therefore tainted (as Balzac said that all great fortunes are).

Since the escutcheon was adopted only in 1937, it hardly counts as an immemorial symbol of the law school. This is not the destruction of Palmyra, but I doubt that the students who agitated for change were great respecters of antiquity in any case. Like the Salafists, they assess the value of anything and everything according to their own inflexible standards, and demand that monuments and memorials be entirely consistent with their own current moral preoccupations.

How long before they suggest the Palmyran-type destruction of the Washington and Jefferson Memorials in the American capital because both historical figures were slave-owners, and of the Lincoln Memorial into the bargain because, in the 1850s, he said he was not at that moment arguing for the political and social equality of whites and blacks?

On the American website of the British liberal newspaper, the *Guardian*, I found a [photo](#) of a Harvard Law student holding a placard in front of him with a beatific look on his face. The placard said:

*(let me put this in language HLS will understand:) whether we've failed purposefully, recklessly, or negligently is of no moment. When it comes to the failure to confront structural racism, we must all hold ourselves strictly*

*liable. [Emphasis in original]*

The psychology of the messenger is, of course, much more interesting than his tedious and tediously expressed message. It is alarming that a student at an elite, or even hyper-elite, college should think so muddily and write so badly.

Who, exactly, were the “We” to whom the self-satisfied youth addressed himself? Surely he could not have meant the combined students and faculty of the Harvard Law School, for he addressed the faculty with an unmistakable air of condescension, *de haut en bas* (recurring to language they could understand, as if the faculty were composed of mental defectives). Who, one is tempted to ask, are the teachers at Harvard Law School and who they taught? To adopt the imperative tone that seems to come so naturally to the young moral giants of that institution, we must presume that the “We” refers only to the students.

Vehemence is here a substitute for clarity.

For what and to whom are the students strictly liable? Is this liability legal or merely moral? Is failure to protest henceforth to be made actionable at law? Who will sue whom? Had students at the law school better protest lest they find themselves having to pay damages? If so, to whom, exactly?

Where is Harvard Law School’s “structural racism”? If it has an admissions policy that takes applicants’ race into consideration, that might be called structurally racist. But it seems to me likely that the institution’s structural racism acts in favor of rather than against hitherto disfavored races. (Of course, you can’t discriminate positively without discriminating negatively.) More likely the deeply smug student with the placard meant that the law school suffered from some kind of moral dry rot that had entered its fabric, so all-pervasive that it needed (after the student’s graduation, of course) to be replaced in its entirety.

What the student really meant is, however, beside the point. He was not intent upon conveying information, much less an argument. He intended to communicate the militant purity of his heart and soul. The world is rotten, he was saying—but I am not. I am pure. If the rottenness continues, it won't be because of me.

Awareness of his own virtue shone from the student's face. He positively glowed with it, virtue for him consisting of the public expression of the correct sentiments. Virtue required no discipline, no sacrifice other than of a little time and energy, instantly rewarded by the exhibition of his own goodness.

The painlessness of virtue as the expression of correct sentiment is, of course, its chief attraction. Who would not wish to achieve goodness merely by means of a few gestures, verbal or otherwise? In that way, you can avoid genuine self-examination altogether. After all, of what importance is your conduct in the little circle around you compared with such enormous wrongs as structural racism?

I have no reason to impugn the young man's private conduct. For all I know, he is an excellent young man except for the shallowness of his prose, and his complacency and self-importance. For many students (if I remember my own past correctly), one's self is one's own ideal.

Then, too, he no doubt felt a youthful impatience with the sheer intractability of the world, and hence a desire that its problems should be solved by purely symbolic means such as a change of escutcheon. This desire partakes of magical thinking: incantations will somehow bend reality in the desired direction.

Still, the moral grandiosity of the student (and those like him) had a distinctly coercive quality. His virtue gave him the *locus standi* to dictate to others for the good of

humanity. The expression he wore was that of someone who had successfully liberated his inner totalitarian.

Much may be forgiven youth. As the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, so wisely put it in a [selection](#) of his speeches and writings published by the Foreign Languages Press, everyone is young once in his life. But it is craven for older people in positions of responsibility to surrender to youth, even if the once in their lives that they were young happened to be in the 1960s.

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