

Historical Legacies and the Politics of Memory: Examining the Oglethorpe Pledge



1 Overview

Context ► Newcastle University is currently faced with the prospect of receiving a substantial legacy donation to advance the subject of Politics, in the name of complex historical figure James Edward Oglethorpe.

Relevance ► Recent activism on university campuses has resisted the memorialisation of contentious historical figures (e.g., #RhodesMustFall). This global movement questions who and what universities choose to remember and which narratives of history they, thus, render visible. The link between political theory and the challenge of ethical memorialisation on campus remains unexplored.

Aims ► (1) Propose a theoretically supported guidance model to inform universities' handling of legacy donations
 (2) Advise Newcastle University on the Oglethorpe pledge
 (3) Start a dialogue on the implications and possibilities of the selective construction of a multi-faceted past

4 University Guidance Model

What should be standard policy for universities to follow when offered a historical legacy donation?

Legacy donations should help universities (1) uphold their present values and (2) materialise their future vision.

Step (1): Accept or reject the offer?

Does offered donation align with university's core values?

Consider the following factors:

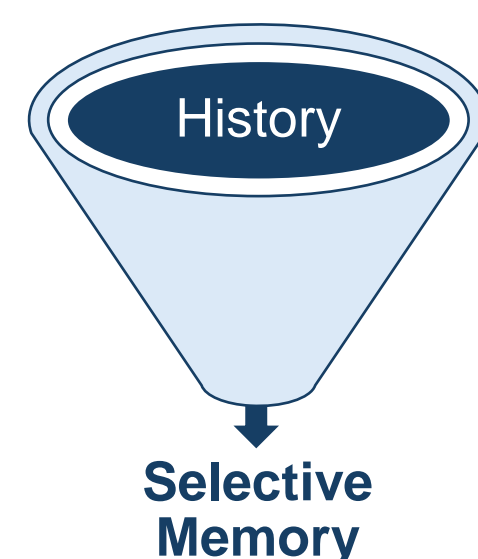
- Donor
- Motivations for donation
- Origin of donated wealth
- Historical figure(s) to be acknowledged

Step (2): Make the legacy meaningful for the present.

- Research and memorialise interconnected narratives
- Apply the donated fund to a long-term purpose
- Emphasise the long-term benefit in a *site of memory*
- Consider format of memorialisation and its implications

2 Theory of the Politics of Memory

A theory on our collective, selective, politicised memory of the past.



- Selective Memory vs. History: What we remember of the past is not the full history
- We remember what we collectively deem valuable
- A shared selective memory defines the community
- Our selective memory exposes our present values
- When we modify what/who we consider valuable, the focus of our selective memory shifts

Intersections between apparently disjointed identities → community unity

Sites of memory (monuments, plaques, etc.) = aids to public memory

Physical reminder to remember certain histories and, by relative absence, to forget to remember others → simplification of history

The Politics of Memory has not yet been applied to the case of legacy handling in the university setting. The present project draws the link. The legacies that a university endorses reflect said university's values.

5 Recommendations to Newcastle University

How can Newcastle University responsibly handle the Oglethorpe Pledge?

Critically examine Oglethorpe's legacy: **Can we make it meaningful?**

Take accountability: **Acknowledge complexities and highlight intersections**

Memorialise **Oglethorpe + communities** with which he exchanged impact

Consider how to allocate the donated fund: **Newcastle's vision for the future**

Align the donor's expectations with Newcastle University's values: 'Advance the subject of Politics' in a way that reinforces the University's commitment to academic freedom, and Equality, Diversity, Inclusion.

Research scholarship fund for Undergraduate summer projects and Postgraduate studies on the politicisation of 'identity'

Student community-building on campus as long-term purpose of the donated fund

Memorialisation: plaque emphasising Newcastle University's dedication to advancing *Politics*; website housing scholarship projects

3 Legacy of James E. Oglethorpe

Complex historical figure, founder of British Colony of Georgia. May be memorialised by Newcastle University.

Oglethorpe (1696-1785): widely memorialised as an early abolitionist and a progressive Enlightenment figure; Politics of Memory analysis shows this is a simplification.

- Parliamentary advocacy for debtors' rights → acquittal of ~10,000 imprisoned debtors
- Built diplomatic ties with local indigenous community
- Georgia = only British colony in America to ban slavery before American Revolution

- Used classist stereotypes to gain elites' political support
- Assumed indigenous land to be a *blank slate* whose History began after colonisation
- Stated that slaves threatened 'white manners' – a circular argument, racialises the 'slave'

Acknowledging the **complexity** of Oglethorpe's legacy emphasises the **multi-faceted intersections** among identity groups and exposes **persisting power relations**.

6 Key Takeaways

Contributions ► All aims were achieved as follows:

- (1) Proposed a novel guidance model, theoretically informed by the Politics of Memory, to support universities in handling historical legacy donations.
- (2) Advised Newcastle University to establish a research scholarship scheme with the donation to advance academic freedom + community-building.
- (3) Called for dialogue on the relationship between selective memory and present community identity.

Future Research ► Understudied application of Politics of Memory theory to historical legacy handling:

- 'Benign' vs. 'malign' memories
 - Qualifying the value of remembering certain pasts
- Audience-centred *sites of memory*
 - How does the format of memorialisation (plaque, statue, digital, ...) affect audience interpretation?

Key sources

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