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Imperial History and the Human Future

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Abstract

The inaugural lecture which underlies this article examines the past and future of Imperial history as a subject and its relationship to both imperial power and projects of human emancipation. It explores the origins and history of the Rhodes Chair of Imperial History at Kings College London, and locates its new incumbent as both opponent and heir to different aspects of its tradition. It examines how British imperialism, as a regime for extracting

extraordinary benefits from the wider world, was entangled with the history of the humanities in the British isles, shaping both their material possibility and their global view. In particular, it shows how an 'Imperial Studies' movement emerged in early twentieth-century London, which had a profound impact on the University of London, with the Rhodes Chair being only one of its consequences. It asks how, today, might we learn from that foundational period, as we think futures for world history in London? It argues that two important lessons are the need for a commitment to interdisciplinarity and to co-operation across all the scholarly institutions of London. It proposes that there should be a post and anti-imperial emancipatory purpose to this enterprise of research and teaching. We must, in each generation, rescue the dream of a shared economic and cultural commonwealth from those who would use it as the mask behind which they hide oligarchical power, tyranny and exploitation.

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