How Philosophy Can Support Community-Led Change: Reflections from Bristol Campaigns for Racial Justice

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Abstract

How can philosophy expand to be a discipline via which young people from diverse backgrounds feel they can make a direct and positive contribution to their communities? In this chapter I suggest some creative methods by which philosophers can support community-led change. Collaborators and I have been developing the approaches described here through work on issues of racial justice, but they can be applied to campaigns or public debate on any topic. Developing more community-led, socially engaged methods has the potential to make philosophy a more attractive discipline for young people from diverse backgrounds who are keen to use their skills to make a positive difference to their communities.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to share some of the ways in which I have been approaching my role as an academic and philosopher working on issues of racial justice. Over a number of years, I have been involved in community organizing and campaigns for racial justice in Bristol, England. This has given me the opportunity to learn from leaders from a wide range of social locations and backgrounds, and to learn how to apply philosophical training to campaigning and community organizing. I distil here some simple methodological insights and ideas which I hope may inspire other philosophers, and in particular young people or mature learners coming into philosophy from backgrounds currently underrepresented in the discipline, with a desire to make a positive change in their communities.

I would like to see my home discipline grow in new directions. When I was younger, I found it perplexing that great social movements that have transformed society – movements for gender equality, race equality, LGBTQ+ pride, urban development and so on – had barely begun to be discussed in my home discipline. These have been amongst the most significant social movements of the

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past century and have transformed the shape of society in numerous countries, and yet ethics, political philosophy, and social philosophy seemed to have had relatively little to say about them. Those who were tackling these topics, like Lewis Gordon, Sally Haslanger, and Tommie Shelby, were pioneers. Like many others coming into the discipline in my generation, I wondered why relatively few philosophers were engaging with questions emerging from these social movements. Consider, by contrast, the formidable tradition of American sociologists studying race and class dimensions of concentrated urban poverty, such as William Julius Wilson, Alford A. Young, Robert Sampson, and Annette Lareau (e.g., Wilson, 1987; Young, 2011; Sampson, 2012; and Lareau, 2018).[1] These sociological literatures raise important questions for ethicists and political and social philosophers, and yet philosophers are only beginning to address these topics in a meaningful way (see for instance, Shelby 2005, 2016 and Haslanger 2012, 2014).

I have wanted my own work to make a meaningful contribution to social and cultural change for racial equality. I am hopeful about the possibilities for practice-based, socially engaged philosophy. There is no need for philosophy to be detached from our rich social movements. We should be growing into a discipline which says to young people and mature learners – particularly learners coming from non-traditional backgrounds – that this is a place where they will be able to hone their skills to make significant contributions to their communities.

This paper outlines opportunities for philosophers to do socially meaningful work, supported by shifts in outlook and methodology. Social change takes place through whole ecologies of activity. Working on community campaigns and community organising can open the opportunity for philosophers to collaborate with community leaders, youth workers, poets, film-makers, graphic designers, web developers, events organizers, artists, dancers, historians, educators, politicians, institutional leaders, everyday people, and academics from other disciplines in the arts and humanities, sciences, law, or social sciences. I am curious to see how philosophy grows as a discipline as a critical mass of philosophers begin working in more community-led ways; with more philosophical researchers coming from disadvantaged communities; greater direct guidance from disadvantaged communities about what is needed to make things better; and greater input from social science methodologies.

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2. Methodologies

Philosophy can support community campaigns through purpose-driven and community-led research questions, with action-based research, and input from a wider range of methods from social sciences such as discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews and ethnography.

Philosophers often take their conversations with each other as the starting point for their research questions. One approach I have found fruitful is to instead take conversations in the public sphere as the starting point for my work, with the contours of public debate as it exists scaffolding the directions tackled and the topics to be addressed. When I first got involved with the Countering Colston campaign, I had what I now recognize as a simplistic view of the contours of the debate. It seemed common sense to me that the Colston Hall should be renamed, and I could not understand why anybody would disagree unless they were overtly racist. Surely only an overt racist would want to enjoy their music in a concert hall named after Edward Colston, an individual who had been involved in bringing tens of thousands of African people into slavery in Caribbean plantations. I did not initially foresee the range of ideas and views people would bring in challenge to the idea of renaming the Colston Hall. If asked at the time what the main counterarguments would be, I would have given a very undeveloped summary.

Over the course of the Countering Colston campaign, fellow campaigner Mark Steeds gathered hundreds of letters that came to the (then right-leaning) regional newspaper, the *Bristol Post*, almost all of which opposed renaming the Colston Hall. I analysed 55 of these letters in detail. As I did so, my understanding of the contours of public debate grew and changed. I created a spreadsheet, and every time a letter-writer made a new kind of argument, I created a column; and I then ticked or added quotes each time a new letter-writer made the same argument. I identified 27 different arguments being made, and I clustered these into groupings. The most common kind of argument concerned political culture and universalizability; these included concerns that it was 'PC gone mad', that it was 'a slippery slope' (if we rename one building we'll have to rename them all), that it was 'elites or non-Bristolians deciding' and so on. The next most common kind of argument was about history and included the idea that we should not erase or sanitize history, that we cannot change the past, that it is our heritage and we should learn from it 'warts and all' and that changing the name was an injustice to a great Bristolian. The third most common kind of argument focused

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on parity, and included arguments that white people were exploited too, that it is unfair that injustices to black people are being highlighted while class injustices to white people are ignored, that Africans sold fellow Africans and are therefore the real ones to blame, and that changing place names or removing statues is a waste of energy that could be better spent on contemporary issues like modern slavery.

Clearly, many of the arguments were inflected with racist attitudes. Others were not inflected with racism and reflected genuine concern with the best method for a society to educate new generations about the most difficult parts of its past. Crucially, the range of arguments was not what I would have predicted if asked beforehand. By doing this analysis we were able to ensure that our arguments and efforts directly addressed the questions that people on the opposing sides of the issue were finding salient.

I wrote a short article for the local press, in which I gave simple, neutral statements of the ten most common objections, with simple replies (Burch-Brown, 2017a). This informed many conversations with members of the public across the political spectrum. I expanded on this material in academic articles (Burch-Brown, 2017b, 2020), but it was crucial that the public exchange and action-based learning came first and underpinned those articles. The benefit of starting by studying the contours of existing public debate was that it helped make the research useful for institutional decision-makers who were needing to navigate demands from a fractured public, and they were better able to anticipate how different actions might be perceived in different corners. This in turn supported the campaign objectives. For instance, I worked with the editor of the *Bristol Post* to look at their editorial strategy in covering the Colston topic including the Colston statue fall; I was amongst those advising the Dean of the Cathedral around measures to address Colston in the Cathedral, and amongst those advising the Colston Hall as they went through the process of renaming to become the Bristol Beacon. These activities then fed into developing guidelines for public bodies reviewing contested heritage (Burch-Brown, 2021a, 2021b).

The basic model described above would be an easy methodology for philosophers to pick up and develop more fully. It would be straightforward for philosophers to gain training in social scientific or historical methods of discourse analysis, carry out social scientific research relevant to an initiative identified by a community as important, and then work philosophically with findings. The model requires a willingness to attentively listen to views on opposing sides

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of a debate, then state key views in simple and neutral terms, work through arguments and counterarguments and share these back to collaborating groups, institutional partners, and a wider public.

Another approach I have found meaningful is to start by finding community partners who are doing promising work on the ground, and listening to what they say are the most important priorities locally. I then get involved in initiatives that community-based partners have identified as top priorities. I pay attention to philosophical questions as they emerge and get worked through. This can be thought of as 'action-based' philosophical research.

The method of listening and investing resource into what community partners say is important is built into the main project I am now working on, which is the development of a public educational project and social enterprise called 'Bridging Histories'. We began developing Bridging Histories as part of the work of the Bristol History Commission, in response to the task we were set by the Mayor after the fall of the Colston statue in 2020, to 'help the city understand where we have been, so we can better decide where we want to go'. Bridging Histories approaches this task in a grassroots-led way by inviting people anywhere to join in six activities – writing poetry on the theme 'I am from', sharing recipes, street history, and family history, being a monument detective, and being a person or community changemaker. Anybody can get involved and then share what they make in public events or our online gallery. With funding from the ESRC, UKRI, AHRC, and the London Mayor's Office, we have sponsored a growing community of 30 Bridging Histories Ambassadors, who have each been awarded grants to get people from their different communities involved in creative activities related to any of the six activities.

Bridging Histories gives a framework through which anybody can join in learning from the past and making positive change for the future. The structure was inspired in part by conversations with Esther Stanford-Xosei on her theory of reparative justice, which emphasizes the importance of community empowerment alongside financial compensation in holistically repairing the harmful legacies of injustice. It was also inspired by Bree Picower's *Using Their Words: Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design for the Elementary Classroom* (2012) which suggests that social justice education works best when it starts with priming learners with self-love and respect for others, before looking at a historical injustice and learning how people overcame that injustice, then sharing learning more widely and finally inviting people to engage in their own concrete changemaking activities on a present-day issue that matters to

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them. Bridging Histories is co-directed by George Francis, a community organizer and youth worker from St Pauls, Bristol, who initially became involved as an ambassador, and together we have been developing methods for asset-based community development, involving both community-based and university-based collaborators (Bridging Histories, 2021). The team are in continual communication around the ideas, ethos, and practicalities of the projects we are doing. This collaboration gives direction to my philosophical research questions and the contours of my academic work.

You might similarly find you slot into a team of collaborators and can then start working together. As you work, you might then keep an eye out for a) philosophical questions that are pivotal to the issues at stake, which you may be able to help reason through, b) philosophical understanding that is being generated by campaigners or organizers through their ground-up efforts, which you may be able to support, for instance by amplifying voices, and c) the opportunity to help systematize a messy public debate, which can often generate a sense of relief and open the door to greater mutual understanding amongst parties on separate sides of an issue.

It is crucial in such work that skilful judgement and sensitivity are exercised to navigate both practicalities and social positions to achieve genuinely egalitarian collaboration. Class, ethnicity, educational background, professional background, university regulations and the highly localized, unique network structures of communities all play a role in the power dynamics around collaboration. For an introduction to key considerations around power and positions, see *Common Cause Research: Building Research Collaborations between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities* (2018), and *Creating Living Knowledge. The Connected Communities Programme, Community-University Relationships and the Participatory Turn in the Production of Knowledge* (2016). There are also more topic-specific resources, like the *Principles of Participation* developed by the International Network of Scholars and Activists for Afrikan Reparations (2021). It can also be beneficial to look at how colleagues in adjacent disciplines are creatively working with participatory methods. In Bristol, a UKRI grant has brought together four 'citizen science' projects on reparative justice, which has given us a chance to learn from each other's methods (UKRI, 2021). Jessica Moody, Cleo Lake, and Kwesi Johnson are working with community dancers to create a 'decolonizing memory' project involving dance memorialization (Decolonizing Memory, 2021); Marie-Annick Gournet is working with a team of school teachers to develop inclusive pedagogies for teaching history

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of enslavement; Richard Stone and Cassandra Gooptar are working with community-based historians to trace compensation records from the 1838 Abolition of Slavery Act; and George Francis and I are facilitating grassroots-led reparative initiatives via Bridging Histories (University of Bristol, 2021). Philosophical methods for working with community initiatives are less well developed than methodologies in these other disciplines, but can be informed by their examples.

It is possible for academic input to help campaigns and community initiatives succeed. I have heard from both campaigners and institutional leaders about the benefits of bringing philosophical input to a public debate or a campaign. Institutional leaders have explained that having philosophical analysis of views helped them more easily assess the arguments and address them with other institutional leaders in a way that had previously been difficult because of how polemical the debate had become. Having neutral, simple statements of the most plausible versions of key arguments in a public debate is helpful for institutional decision-makers.

Campaigners, on the other hand, have said that it is valuable to have the contribution of time and reasoning power to work through topics within a campaign. Most campaigners have short windows in which to carry out the research for a campaign. Academics have dedicated time in which to give campaign questions a sustained focus, so they can take advantage of this to contribute to the intellectual footing of a campaign. What is not helpful to campaigners is having researchers who drop in for their own interest, purely to address a research question set independently, study what is happening, and then leave without a contribution in return. By contrast, what is helpful is when a researcher asks what is needed and directs research towards helping organizations achieve those socially important aims. For philosophers, a contribution is a particular kind of clarity of thought, so a significant contribution that philosophers may be able to make is to listen attentively to different considerations, think patiently through counterarguments, and reflect back to their collaborators a simplified, clarified outline of the key positions and issues. In doing so, it is important not to see the academic as the main expert. Instead, often it is the campaigners or community leaders who are the most acute critical thinkers, with the most long-standing expertise on the topic at hand, and they will have worked through many subtle philosophical issues in the course of their organizing. However, the community group may or may not be able to articulate their insights in a way that is easily absorbed or seen as legitimate to decision-makers. A philosophical researcher who takes the time to listen attentively over a sustained time can

synthesize key insights and expertise from the group, lobby for that group, and put their insights in terms, styles, and formats that institutional leaders are more likely to learn from and take on board.

For scholars to whom these approaches sound intriguing or attractive, my suggestion is to start by listening closely to what people say are the live issues in a community with which you have some natural connection. Get involved in an effort that seems worthwhile, and then look for where the philosophical questions are within the issue as it is playing out on the ground. Look at the contours of the public debate and see if you can give simple statements of views that capture the positive intentions behind opposing sides. Look at who is having a hard time making themselves understood by institutions, regardless of where they are politically, and articulate those views to help them be better heard.

Above, I highlighted potential for action-based methods in practical ethics and social philosophy. It is also worth thinking about the ways in which we could make better use of the core methodologies of social sciences. Recently, philosophers have taken an interest in 'ex-phi', or philosophy informed by experimental psychology and cognitive science. However, to date it seems to me that philosophers have not yet appreciated the philosophical potential in standard qualitative social science methods, such as use of semi-structured interviews (interviews using open-ended questions) or ethnography (being based in a particular community over a period of time, and writing on this basis).

Semi-structured interviews and ethnographies are both ways to gain a vivid detailed understanding of a particular social world. Experiences that are described in semi-structured interviews could be a fertile basis for philosophical reflection and exploration. Without such source materials, we often tackle social philosophical topics from our own standpoint without sufficient input from others. We end up reflecting philosophically based on our own experiences or abstract suppositions about other people's experiences. This can feed into the tendency for philosophical debates to become detached from common sense and from real-world problems as people actually face them. More use of qualitative methods as a source material for philosophical reflection might lead to social philosophy, ethics, and political philosophy that stays anchored in common sense and is more answerable to people's everyday lives and the problems that need addressing.

Qualitative social sciences differ from quantitative social sciences in that quantitative research collects data to be measured and counted, whereas qualitative research seeks to generate more nuanced and

fine-grained understanding. You can generalize from a well-designed quantitative study to a whole population; but for the study to be tractable, you have to stick with predefined answers (yes or no, multiple choice, scale of 1–5 *etc*.) or else be prepared to go through resource-intensive processes of coding qualitative answers to arrive at quantitative results. By contrast, qualitative methods are open-ended and give rich information about a small number of individuals or environments. For instance, they include semi-structured interviews, where people are asked open-ended questions which they then discuss freely; and ethnographic methods, where a researcher is based within a community over a long period of time and writes about it. It is often impossible to generalize from qualitative surveys to claims about whole populations, because the sample size will not be statistically significant. However, they give 'possibility' proofs, vivid examples of how an individual might see or experience things, or of how dynamics and patterns might sometimes play out in lived experience. They allow researchers to develop richer descriptions and insight into subtle details that cannot be captured in quantitative data.

We used both qualitative and quantitative research in shaping recommendations to the Bristol City Council about the future of the Colston statue. In 2021, the Bristol History Commission worked with Bristol City Council to do a survey of what people wanted for the future of the Colston statue. The survey was promoted alongside our temporary exhibition of the statue at the MShed museum. We had displayed the statue lying down with graffiti intact, beside a wall of BLM placards and a timeline explaining the history of the statue itself, from the time it was put up to the time it was brought down. Above the statue, we projected a series of three-part dialogues designed to help people reflect on their own views and those of others. For instance, one voice would be projected on the wall over the statue saying, 'I was euphoric when the statue came down'. The next said, 'Really? I was horrified'. The first voice returns and says, 'For me it was like a great weight was lifted'. Then finally a question is posed to the viewer, 'How did you feel when the statue came down?' The series of dialogues were drawn based on the ideas we knew were common at the time in Bristol (Burch-Brown, 2021b).

In the survey, we asked people what they wanted for the future of the Colston statue, what they wanted for the Colston plinth, and how they felt when the statue came down. 14,000 people replied, the largest survey to date carried out by the Bristol consultation and engagement team. The most striking result was that there was a high level of agreement, much higher than might have been expected

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from treatment in the media. 1 in 5 (80%) of Bristol-based respondents said that the statue should be in a museum, and 5 in 8 (65%) said they felt positively about the statue coming down. The other most striking result was that age was the key factor determining how people felt. Ethnicity made little difference to whether people felt positively or negatively about the statue coming down; and their feelings also couldn't be predicted by whether they lived on a wealthier street or a less wealth street. Age, on the other hand, was a great predictor of attitude. Young people were almost universally positive about the statue coming down, whereas about 7 out of 10 people in the oldest cohort felt negatively about the statue coming down. Age mattered; ethnicity didn't (Burch-Brown and Cole *et al*., 2022).

Reflecting on these findings as a philosopher, what is striking is that there are ethical upshots of our findings that age mattered to people's attitudes while ethnicity didn't. If there is a social conflict over statues, it is not between people of different ethnicities, but between people of different ages. This suggests that there is a civic need for space for intergenerational communication and exchange, healing and understanding. Such findings can be very useful for informing ethical, political, and social philosophical conclusions.

We also were able to learn from the comments people wrote in response to open-ended questions, which often revealed more about their thinking than the quantitative survey did. The open-ended comments were also a source of valuable statements of views: 'It should be in a museum. Statues are celebratory, museums are educational'; or 'It is not 'rewriting history' to remove a statue if its preserved in a museum in an appropriate context'; 'The law is the law and must be respected'; 'Direct political action accomplished what bureaucracy couldn't'; 'It was hard for any black person to walk past every day'; 'It shouldn't have been vandalized as it is a work of art'; 'A beautifully powerful act' (Burch-Brown and Cole *et al*., 2022, pp. 20–25). Qualitative surveys used judiciously can be a way of gathering ideas from the crowd, and the most important ideas can then be explored philosophically. These are just a few examples of how philosophy can engage in supporting community-led initiatives, campaigns, and public debates.

3. Conclusion

To return to my starting point, I would like to see my discipline expand so that young people who want to make a difference in their communities recognize a place for themselves within philosophy,

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and see that they can use it to make a difference. One of the important features of entrenched inequalities is that people affected by concentrated disadvantage often have difficult experiences with the education system. One in four children in Bristol is growing up in poverty, rising to one in two children in our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In the least well-off parts of Bristol, there are schools where not even a single child in the history of the school has been to university. The most acute forms of disadvantage are the most important ones for society to address. The people experiencing that disadvantage have situated expertise about its contours that nobody else has. Yet in the absence of formal further or higher education, it may be impossible for many people to make their views heard, understood, and taken seriously by people in institutional roles. There is a collective responsibility to overturn entrenched inequalities, including supporting people to transform their own circumstances in ways that empower them, and one step is to create more bridges between people who are experiencing the effects of entrenched inequalities and people who have greater access to institutional resource and influence. If philosophy as a discipline began to grow a cohort of young scholars developing methods for community-based scholarship in an egalitarian and collaborative way, we could greatly increase our direct contribution to communities we serve. I imagine the disciplinary conversations would broaden, and the discipline itself would start to be much more attractive to diverse young people interested in making positive change in communities, who would be able to see how their disciplinary skills can support community-led change.

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