

Dishonorary Degrees

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Abstract: If an honorary degree lacks value to begin with, does withdrawing it deliver a rebuke to the recipient? Is whatever honor that comes with the distinction embedded in the fancy paper, or is it wholly in the eye of the degree holder?

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Was Jacques Barzun right, years ago in *The American University*, when he suggested dumping all academic giveaways to government leaders?

The case of Robert Mugabe gets one thinking about this most peculiar of academic nods, worth less than extra sabbatical time, sometimes a quid pro quo for a free commencement speech or a significant donation.

In June the University of Massachusetts at Amherst rescinded the honorary doctorate it had bestowed on Zimbabwe's longtime president in 1986. Last year the University of Edinburgh similarly withdrew its 1984 degree to Mugabe. And on June 25, in the same spirit, Queen Elizabeth II canceled the 1994 knighthood Britain had bestowed on Mugabe — Britain's Foreign Office described the decision as a "mark of revulsion" at Mugabe's human-rights abuses and "abject disregard" for democracy.

In light of what great countries and institutions might do to murderous dictators, it's difficult to know whether to laugh or cry. Maybe *The Economist* will cancel Mugabe's subscription next.

The gestures hint at the scope of actions universities could take against officials who commit crimes against humanity. Harvard might announce that children of the Myanmar junta are no longer eligible for financial aid. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology could refuse to accept transfer credit from

Chinese institutions. American universities en masse could threaten legal action if they catch the kids of Sudanese or Belorussian officials wearing a T-shirt or sweatshirt bearing the university's logo.

And why didn't powerful German departments in the United States accuse Hitler of plagiarism or, even worse, violating academic freedom? Might World War II have been stopped?

This line of thinking — if sarcasm is thinking — may be unfair. Are honorary degrees really such silly things that we should mock their bestowal or withdrawal? A few years ago, a federal appeals court deemed the value of being an emeritus precisely zero. Is the same true of honorary degrees?

They do seem to lack core importance in the academic enterprise. Search the indexes of more than a hundred thoughtful studies of campus life — books such as Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Idea of the University*, Donald Kennedy's *Academic Duty*, and Richard C. Levin's *The Work of the University* — and you find hardly a mention.

Burrow back to ancient Greece, and there's no record of Plato's Academy offering an honorary doctorate to Alcibiades if he'd give the commencement speech gratis. At the same time, though, honorary degrees have been around as long as the so-called modern university — Oxford started bestowing them in the 15th century.

Harvard, as always, provides some perspective, having started its practice by tapping Benjamin Franklin in 1753. It wraps its *honoris causa* ("for the sake of the honor") degrees in rules and regulations. They must be awarded in person, though they can be given "out of season" (so that an especially desired conferee can fulfill the first condition, such as Nelson Mandela in September 1998). The identities of all but one recipient (the person invited to speak at the afternoon meeting of the alumni association) must be kept secret till commencement day. Yes, these sound more like the initiation criteria for a Yale secret society or a Star Trek fan-club chapter than conditions for an august academic distinction.

Another angle on the seriousness with which we should take honorary degrees comes from Internet commentary. A Dutch blogger, Eric Beerkens, has posted the "Top 15 Controversial Honorary Doctorates." Beerkens, who fittingly works at the Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education, is not entirely disrespectful of the tradition, totting up, for instance, 46 honorary degrees for Václav Havel, all of them, he says, "well deserved."

But some of Beerkens's Top 15 give one pause. Mike Tyson's 1989 doctorate in humane letters from Central State University, in Ohio. Kermit the Frog's doctorate of amphibious letters, in 1996, from

Southampton College at Long Island University. And honorary degrees from the University of Wolverhampton, in 2002, for the glam rockers Slade, possibly for their good spelling on such hits as "Mama Weer All Crazee Now." A longer list might include the gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who snared an honorary doctorate from the Universal Life Church in the 60s.

Barzun arguably had it right in *The American University* (1968; second edition 1993) when he concluded that "the honorary degree as now commonly dealt out has lost its point." Barzun thought a university should stick to what it knows — awarding people degrees for demonstrable intellectual accomplishment — and "not mark with an academic symbol its possibly justified admiration of a business or political career." He wrote, "The Chairman of the Board of General Aphrodisiacs may be all that is said of him in the citation, but it is not a judgment on which the university should set its seal."

Some universities and high achievers apparently get it about honorary degrees. MIT and Stanford flourish without them. Ingmar Bergman, Katharine Hepburn, and Jean-Paul Sartre — the last also nixed the Nobel Prize in Literature — sucked it up and resisted Harvard's offers. On the other hand, eliminating honorary degrees would knock commencement ceremonies down yet another notch, to some still undiscovered level of boredom. As the too-little-appreciated poet and humorist Richard Armour rightly observed, "The bright spot of most commencement addresses is when the speaker's notes blow off the lectern."

Yet for all this history and perspective, indicating that honorary degrees and their nullifications amount to tempests in teapots, the peculiar biography of Robert Mugabe makes the matter more complicated. Recent journalistic attention to Zimbabwe's tragedies, welcome as it is, has provided little context about the man causing them. For that, we're fortunate to have three incisive books on him published in the last decade: *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe*, by Martin Meredith (Public Affairs, 2002); *Degrees in Violence: Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe*, by David Blair (Continuum, 2002); and *Robert Mugabe: A Life of Power and Violence*, by Stephen Chan (University of Michigan Press, 2003).

All paint a portrait of Mugabe that may surprise non-Africa hands ignorant of his prepresidential life. Born in the Jesuit mission station of Kutama on February 21, 1924, the third of six children in a family abandoned by his father (a dyspeptic carpenter who moved 300 miles away and took another wife), young Mugabe could not have been more bookish as he rose to become a teacher.

"All accounts describe him in the same words," writes Blair, "diligent, quiet, studious, introverted."

Mugabe shunned smoking and drinking alcohol and "excelled academically" at every institution he attended, including South Africa's University of Fort Hare, the hotbed of African nationalism from which Nelson Mandela had been expelled earlier. During Mugabe's 11 years of imprisonment, from 1963 to 1974, under Zimbabwe's white-ruled predecessor state of Rhodesia, the future president enrolled in University of London correspondence courses and earned four degrees — a master's degree in economics, a bachelor's degree in administration, and two law degrees — to go with the three bachelor's degrees he already possessed, in economics, education, and history and literature.

Meredith writes of how Mugabe in prison "resumed his studies with fierce dedication, his books piled on both sides of his bed." The prisoner's late wife, Sally Hayfron, then living in London, copied out whole volumes by hand and posted them as letters to her husband. When Mugabe finally won release from prison, in November 1974, he held seven academic degrees.

So even now, after more than three decades in which the former Marxist revolutionary leader — seen as conciliatory toward opponents at Zimbabwe's independence — has evolved into a murderous autocrat, Mugabe's lust for academic credibility may endure. In the paranoid recesses of Mugabe's octogenarian brain, stripping him of degrees may exact a toll few can imagine.

In which case, it's probably time for Michigan State University, which doled out an honorary doctorate to Mugabe in 1990, to step up. And what about those seven earned degrees? Can a university revoke degrees earned in a correspondence course? How? By sending Mugabe a letter? Why not leave him only the eighth academic laurel he famously boasts of — "a degree in violence"?

Now, after Zimbabwe's latest parody of democracy, the man once called "Satan's apostle" by his also-ruthless white predecessor stands as the re-elected president of Zimbabwe. If things keep going as they're going, however, Mugabe can forget about retiring to one of those handsomely endowed chairs at a Florida university, the sort that draw Oxford dons seeking to up their pay in a sunny place.

He simply won't have the credentials.

荣誉学位值几个钱？

卡林·罗马诺

吴万伟 译

摘要: 如果荣誉学位本身就没有什么价值,收回荣誉学位能够给接受者鞭策吗?在这漂亮的荣誉证书中镶嵌了什么样的荣誉呢?在学位持有者眼中是不折不扣的价值吗?

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