

# Economic faculties in turmoil over an editor's alleged racism and an article's colonial attitude

[June 27, 2020 | A turmoil has engulfed the faculties of economics at the University of Chicago and Harvard. A German economist was first suspended on accusations of racism in Chicago, then rehabilitated. An article in Harvard's flagship Quarterly Journal of Economics \(QJE\) is accused of a colonial attitude. The authors justify themselves.](#)

The article describes how a German economist, Harald Uhlig, caused a veritable shitstorm, fuelled not least by Paul Krugman and Justin Wolfers, Even the former president of the US Federal Reserve and current chair of the American Economic Association, Janet Yellen, demanded publicly that Uhlig be relieved of his role as editor of the prestigious JPE, after Uhlig had made a number of callous remarks and provocative comparisons on [his blog](#) and on Twitter about protesters against the violent death of George Floyd and about the Black Lives Matter-Organization.

After a black economics professor tweeted that he had been sitting in Uhlig's classroom in 2014 when Uhlig had first made derogatory remarks about Martin Luther King and then turned to him in a sarcastic manner to ask whether he might have hurt anyone's feelings. The next day, the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago suspended Uhlig's consulting activities and the Chicagos Flagship Journal of Political Economy (JPE) temporarily suspended his role as editor. However, on June 22 he was reinstated, after the [University had judged](#) that he had done nothing wrong.

## A very contentious essay is accepted

Another shitstorm started in parallel on June 15, when QJE announced that the article "[Randomizing Religion](#)" had been accepted for publication, The article has been criticized of subliminal racism and a colonial attitude.

The paper describes a so-called randomized controlled trial (RCT), a field experiment, conducted with particularly poor people in the Philippines. The selected, mostly Catholic Filipinos were randomly divided into different groups. One subgroup was invited to enjoy the full program of a missionary evangelical organization. Others were offered either only the religious education part, the health and practical skills part, or no program at all.

By comparing the results, the researchers wanted to find out whether Protestant faith education is suitable for strengthening grit and willingness of poor people to work hard and thus alleviate poverty.

**Merely the notion that missionary conversion is a legitimate approach to increasing the incomes of the very poor is insulting.**

The authors found that six months after the end of the program, the subjects "treated" for missionary work had a slightly higher income than members of the respective comparison groups. Consumption levels, food security, work performance and life satisfaction were not higher, and the perceived own socioeconomic status was even lower than that of the test persons who were not receiving faith education.

Despite this "mixed evidence", the authors concluded: "This church-based program could be a method to increase non-cognitive skills and thus reduce poverty among adults in developing countries."

Assistant professor of sociology Landon Schnabel twittered: "The underlying question seems to be "does evangelical Christianity improve poor people's economics?" This guiding question is rooted in colonialism, a Western saviour complex, "culture of poverty" arguments, and a quite paternalistic prosperity gospel. How did no one catch this?"

The ethics committee of the elite Yale University, however, had no reservations about the mission experiment and even waved the project through in an accelerated procedure because it was allegedly unproblematic.

The assessment of the South African professor of economics Seán Muller is completely different. "Merely the notion that missionary conversion is a legitimate approach to increasing the incomes of the very poor is insulting, to actually conclude that in a supposedly scientific study is an absurdity that could only result from completely ignoring structural and historical factors."

Muller extends his criticism to the controlled field experiments as a whole, which are mostly carried out on "black and brown people in poor parts of the world", under ethical standards that are far below what is the norm in richer and lighter-skinned parts of the world.

The Norwegian development economist Ingrid Kvangraven also criticizes that the authors seek the causes of poverty in the inadequacies of the poor, instead of recognizing the structural causes of poverty. Moreover, the colonial dimension of the attempt to use religion to educate poor people to greater perseverance and motivation is misjudged.

She further criticized that the test persons were not informed that they were part of an experiment and therefore could not have given informed consent.

Kvangraven also points to the fact that no work from or about the Philippines is listed in the bibliography, saying that this shows an attitude according to which the only reliable knowledge is that of the global North, even when it comes to the lives of people in other parts of the world.

### **The authors defend themselves**

Authors Choi, Byran and Karlan responded in detail to the accusations upon request. "We value the critical responses that we have received. They have prompted us to add a discussion of some of these issues in the final published version of the paper." they write and also that in their long experience with RCTs they never got this kind of response.

They stress that no additional person has been invited to participate in this pre-existing faith based program because of their research. They argue that, regardless of how one judges these programs, it is valuable to research whether they help or harm the poor.

As far as informed consent is concerned, the authors pointed out that the standards for such studies had been adhered to and the ethics committees had confirmed this. Informed consent had been obtained before data were requested. They argue, that the participants were free to decide whether to accept the invitation to one of the courses, and thus it was not necessary to inform them that they were also participants in a field experiment. "We have followed the norms of our field" they insist, but also concede: "Everybody involved in research on poverty and its solutions agrees the poor must remain central to this discussion. As randomized evaluations continue to expand in this space, norms may need to change."

The accusation that they implicitly hold the poor responsible for their poverty is firmly rejected by the three. "It's entirely possible for programs to help people be less poor without saying that being in poverty is their fault", just

as "research that looks at the impacts of cognitive behavioural therapy does not imply that those with depression are responsible for their own situation" they write. They claim that their studying a specific missionary program does not include any endorsement of that program. The last sentence of their abstract, though, does read a bit like an endorsement.

**This church-based program could be a method to increase non-cognitive skills and thus reduce poverty among adults in developing countries.**

They answer to their lack of quoting any Philippine research admitting that it is true that the research findings can only be correctly interpreted in the light of Philippine history and society, but also alluding to "a common understanding of those who work in economic research" that this context does not have to be expanded in every paper. "This leads to papers in economics being typically straightforward, comparatively short, and trying to answer a limited question.."

In response to the criticism that they ignored the historical role and colonial context of religion and mission in the Philippines, which was first a Spanish and then an American colony, the researchers point out that International Care Ministries (ICM), the organization that runs the program under study, was founded by Filipino pastors in 1992.

However, this reference to the organization's Philippine roots is rather misleading in this context. If one looks at the [website of ICM](#), one finds a dominant presence of the former colonial power USA.

The [chairman of the board](#) (supervisory board) is David Sutherland, who built up ICM from a "small charity startup" to an organization with a budget of 10 million dollars starting in 1999, during his time as manager at Morgan Stanley. Sutherland is also one of the six global team leaders, along with Deanne Sutherland and Dale Sutherland, as well as a professor in Canada and one from New York's Columbia University.

**Correction notice** (26. 06. 2020): *I had written incorrectly that Seán Muller is coloured. This was corrected. Also, I had erroneously written that it was Chicago's Journal of Political Economy that had accepted the paper "Randomizing Religion", while it was in fact Harvard's "Quarterly Journal of Economics". I apologize for the mistakes.*