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THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMES

John Moretti

Why do we name things?

At St. Paul's, this question entered student conversations earlier this year with the news that the Pepys Theatre - long named for alumnus Samuel Pepys, whose diaries famously chronicled the Great Fire of London in 1666 - was being renamed the "Dorfman Theatre," for the alumnus Lloyd Dorfman, who helped to fund its construction several years earlier. Some students questioned why the name of a historically significant alumnus was replaced by that of a more recent donor. Others were indifferent to the change. This is reflective of a debate that is occurring in various contexts and societies: the question of names, which might seem as ordinary or ever-present as anything else in our lives, and the way they define our world.

Naming, perhaps unsurprisingly, is something that we as humans have been doing for as far as records go back-and likely even longer. Pottery shards and other artefacts from China, dating back to between 6600 and 6200 BC, contain possibly the earliest examples of names. The simple sketch drawings found on these artefacts - known as Jiahu Symbols (pictured below) - were not part of any written language but were simply individual symbols used to identify the owner of an item. While these symbols may have had little meaning other than their simple purpose of identification, names later became something with much more meaning. The name of Nefertiti, the Ancient Egyptian Queen who lived from 1370 to 1330 BC, means "the beautiful one has come". The era of the Ancient Greeks (which was at its peak during the Archaic Period of 750-480 BC) brought 'compound names' - made up of two distinct words - which were often used to describe human qualities. The name Alexandros means 'defender of mankind', Georgios means 'worker of the earth' and Phillipos means 'lover of horses'. In the centuries that followed, religion began to have more of an impact on names. The advent of Christianity (around the first century AD) brought about the vast majority of popular western names, most of which are related to God: John means 'God is gracious', Samuel means 'God listens' and Matthew means 'man of God'.

In Europe, surnames arose around the 11th century due to a need to distinguish between individuals with the same first name. These surnames can largely be grouped into four main categories: patronymic names, occupational names, locative names and nicknames.

Patronymic names indicate paternal lineage. Names like Harrison, Jackson and Johnson were simply formed by adding 'son' to the end of common first names like Harry, Jack and John. While, in Europe, these names eventually stuck and were, from then on, used for the entire family, in some regions, such as the Middle East, a patronymic system of naming is still used to this day (Muhammad bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, is Muhammad, son of King Salman).

Toponymic names - ones derived from geographical locations - also have fairly simple origins, with names like Atwood (at wood), Brook and Marsh all originating from topographical features indicating where the person in question lived. Geographical names were also often used by aristocrats: the Marquis of Lafayette, famed for his role in the American Revolution, was named Gilbert du Motier; European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is another example of this.

Another example of a type of name used as a social marker are names linked to occupations. Now fairly ordinary surnames like Cook, Potter, Bowman and Archer were all initially chosen due to the profession of the bearer. The last of the four categories, nicknames, were chosen to reflect an aspect of the person's appearance or character like Long, Little or Blunt.

All of these are early examples of how names, the most basic way in which we address one another, could provide or reinforce social barriers.

More recently, it has also become common practice to name places and things after people - such as roads, buildings or even entire countries. How many times have you thought of the country Bolivia or the city of San Francisco and considered the Venezuelan freedom fighter Simon Bolivar, or Saint Francis of Assisi? If you pause and think about it, you may discover that even the streets that you walk down every day are named after people whom you have probably never heard of: Lonsdale Road, home to St. Paul's School, is named after the fairly obscure Earl of Lonsdale (who was simply a local landowner).



At St. Paul's, the intentional naming of buildings and other spaces is more of a recent phenomenon, according to the school's archivist, Kelly Strickland. Before the school moved from Hammersmith to Barnes in the 1950s, Ms. Strickland told me, buildings were not typically named after anyone in particular (the boarding house, for example, was simply named "High House"). Now, Ms. Strickland said, "There is more naming after people." This trend began in the 1950s, with school houses - and later buildings and rooms - being named after notable Old Paulines such as Pepys, Montgomery (who helped to plan the D-Day landings) and Milton (a famed poet).

In these cases, almost all of these names - usually those of either religious figures, important politicians or wealthy or high status individuals - are meant to honour the legacy of that person through attaching their name to something. However, given the fact that we use these names on a daily basis without giving much thought to who or what they commemorate, how effective is this? Perhaps, after some time, a building or country becomes more associated with the memories and experiences of the place than with its namesake.

So does it matter when a name is changed? With the more recent trend of naming buildings for donors - such as the Kayton Library and the new Dorfman Theatre - the question remains of whether the namesake of a building is really that significant to those who use it every day, as opposed to just a vehicle for memories, or merely a word. In any case, naming is a practice that has evolved massively over the course of human history and will only continue to do so in the future.

