



THE DECLINE OF POSTIVISM: A NEW CULTURE WAR

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The current ideological spasm seen widely in the West has a quasi-religious aspect. The idea of racism as a demonic force operating everywhere fits that. So does the iconoclasm, the attempt symbolically to reorder urban spaces in order to drive home a set of political imperatives.

What is most striking is the suspension of any sense of critique of the new order. Debate is so beneath you when you possess all truth. Much better just to steamroll people into subjugation. Debate is seen as oppressive. Instead, edicts are issued from on high, as befits a cult. Those who hold contrasting views are readily dismissed and shunned: if you do not think you are a white supremacist that means that you are guilty. If you feel uncomfortable about being accused of being a white supremacist – that means you are guilty. This is like a blatantly constructed trap; as is the reference to having “a conversation” when that is the very last thing that is intended.

In practical terms, we are seeing a bringing to fruition of the attack on positivism that has been so insistent since the 1960s, an attack that is bridging from academic circles to a wider public. In particular, there was, and continues to be, a critique of subordinating scholarship and the scholar to the evidence; and a preference, instead, for an assertion of convenient evidence that was derived essentially from theory. Empiricism was discarded, or at least downplayed, as both method and value, and there was a cult of faddish intellectualism heavily based on postmodernist concepts.

Divorcing the Arts and Social Sciences from empirical methods invited a chaos that some welcomed but that others sought to reshape in terms of a set of values and methods equating to argument by assertion and proof by sentiment: ‘I feel therefore I am correct,’ and it is apparently oppression to be told otherwise. The conventional academic spaces, the geopolitics of academic hierarchy and method, from the lecture hall to the curriculum, have all been repurposed to this end.

In this view, the statues that are unwelcome are not isolated residues of outdated and nefarious glories, but a quasi-living reproach to the new order. Indeed, the statue of Cecil Rhodes that decorates Oriel College, Oxford is referred to by its critics as making them feel uncomfortable. So also with crests of arms or stained glass, or the names of buildings and streets. All are to be removed because they are seen not as mute products of the past, but, instead, as toxic reproaches in a culture wars of the present in which there is no space for neutrality or non-committal, or, indeed, tolerance and understanding.

Iconoclasm, therefore, from whatever political direction, is a matter of a set of values that is inherently

anti-democratic, in that the legitimacy of opposing views is dismissed, indeed discredited as allegedly racist, and anti-intellectual because there is an unwillingness to ask awkward questions and to ignore evidence which does not fit in the answer wanted. Examples of the latter might include the extent of slavery and the slave trade prior to the European arrival in Africa or the role of European powers in eventually ending both. It is possible to debate these and other points, but debate is not accepted if it involves questioning assumptions.

However, such questioning is crucial to understanding the past, which is the key aspect of history as an intellectual pursuit rather than as the sphere for political engagement. Historians need to understand why practices we now believe to be wrong and have made illegal, such as slavery or (differently) making children work or marrying them, were legitimate in the past. It is not enough, in doing so, to present only one side of and on the past because that is allegedly useful for present reasons. Nor to refuse to recognise debate in earlier, plural societies.

People in the past believed that they were right for reasons that were perfectly legitimate in terms of their own times, experience, and general view of the world. Imposing anachronistic value-judgments is antithetical to the historical mindset of the scholar, and is inherently transient as the fullness of time will bring in fresh critiques of present-day values, which will also be wrenched out of their historical context, not least by ignoring inconvenient evidence. Thus, iconoclasm will be perpetuated, providing a form of blood of (stone) martyrs to revive revolution, and to the detriment of any sense of continuity, unless, that is, the sole sense that is sought is that of an anarchic presentism.

Again, there are elements that can be traced to the assault on positivism. In particular, the notion of accumulated wisdom, and/or of source criticism based on an understanding of past practices, have in large part been discarded as a consequence of an academic culture being brought into line with those within it who use virtue-signalling to push their views. Iconoclasm is to the fore here.

The theme of a difficult 'conversation' about Britain's past and its legacy in the present was pushed hard by critics, but their view of conversation was only one-way. It encompassed growing calls for iconoclasm, with Rhodes a [target](#) in Oxford from 2015 and Afua Hirsch, in an article in *The Guardian*, [calling](#) for Nelson's Column in London to be pulled down. She described Nelson 'without hesitation' as a 'white supremacist' because he spoke in favour of slavery. Hirsch, who pressed for Britain to face its role in the slave trade and attitudes linked to its empire building, backed the Rhodes Must Fall movement vigorously and, in ['The Battle for Britain's Heroes'](#), a BBC programme on 29 May 2018,

returned to the attack on Nelson and presented Churchill as a racist. Meanwhile, in February 2018, the controversy was over the exhibition '[The Past is Now](#)' at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in which information boards claimed that "the relationship between European colonialism, industrial production and capitalism is unique in its brutality."

The key Birmingham politician of the Victorian period, [Joseph Chamberlain](#), an exponent of a stronger British empire who became Secretary of State for the Colonies (1895-1903), was described as "still revered despite his aggressive and racist imperial policy." One board attacked Britain's 'hasty' departure from India in 1947 for 'trauma and misogyny,' and a second board offers another partisan context: 'capitalism is a system that prioritises the interests of the individuals and their companies at the expense of the majority.'

[Janine Eason](#), the Director of Engagement, said that it was "not possible" for a museum to present a neutral voice, particularly for something as multifaceted as stories relating to the British Empire," and, instead, that the exhibition was both a way to serve the multicultural population of Birmingham and was intended 'to provoke.' Of course, real "provocation" would have been to offer a different account, one that was more grounded in historical awareness; or, even more, two or more accounts, but such an approach is indeed regarded as provocative.

The toppling of statues is far from new in Britain which has had its share of revolutions. Indeed, in addition to those of political and constitutional transformation, which included the execution of a king and declaration of a republic in 1649, and an overthrow of another king in 1688 leading to constitutional change, came those of three religious revolutions: the Henrician under Henry VIII, the Edwardian under Edward VI, and the Puritan one of the mid-seventeenth century. These saw state-imposed iconoclasm in every community in the country, which was far more extreme than political revolution. Church decorations and paraphernalia, from mass-books and roodscreens to wall-paintings and statues, were destroyed, with particular emphasis on the destruction of shrines to saints, for example, that of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. Every monastery, nunnery and chantry was despoiled and terminated. This iconoclasm left the ruined monastery as an abiding image in British culture.

Yet, the brutal iconoclasm of the British past was also left in the past because of the nature of British politics and political culture after the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9. The emphasis switched to one of organic change and a government of consent expressed through, and in, parliamentary accountability. The British came to convince themselves that their politics was one that was far more orderly than

those of most others, and notably so France, where there were revolutions in 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1871, followed by the instabilities of the Third and Fourth Republics.

So also with the British view of their own political culture, society and emotions. Iconoclasm, therefore, was not part of the British design. There were radical movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they were those of minorities, and there was an essential 'lawfulness' about Methodism in the eighteenth and Chartism in the nineteenth.

Attacks on symbols of power and continuity were pronounced in the case of Irish nationalism, but that was a separate tradition and one that did not influence the British one. The continuity of British political culture proved able to absorb the impact of trade unionism and the rise of the Labour Party, while the end of empire did not have the disruptive impact in the metropole that was to be seen in some former colonies.

That was very different to the situation today. In one respect, the disruption of decolonisation is being brought back now into the metropole, and that element is certainly apparent in the case of some members of minority groups from the former empire. Alongside the attempt to use slavery to discredit imperialism, different immigrant sensitivities play particular roles, with those of people of Caribbean descent especially concerned about slavery and those of Indian descent more so about the legacy of imperial rule. Conversely, there is less comparable critique from those originating in Hong Kong about British imperial rule.

In this overall context of contrast, statues in practice have different resonances. That of [Edward Colston](#) (1636-1721), the Bristol merchant who played a role in the slave-trading Royal African Company was one of particular note for the controversy over slavery, and the 1895 statue of him was pushed into Bristol Harbour in June 2020. The statues of [Robert, 1st Lord Clive](#) (1725-74) in London and Shrewsbury had more resonance for empire and India, and petitions in 2020 calling for the removal of the Shrewsbury one had 23,000 signatures between them. A counter-petition argued that removing the statue would erase part of the town's history. Shrewsbury Council decided on a 28-17 vote not to remove the statue, and this decision was criticised on the grounds of supposed racism.

Similarly, there was a petition to remove the London statue, while the highly-overrated historian William Dalrymple, [writing](#) in *The Guardian* on 11 June 2020, declared that Clive "was a vicious asset-stripper. His statue has no place on Whitehall ... a testament to British ignorance of our imperial past.... Its presence

outside the Foreign Office encourages dangerous neo-imperial fantasies among the descendants of the colonisers... Removing the statue of Clive from the back of Downing Street would give us an opportunity finally to begin the process of education and atonement." And so on with the usual attacks on Brexit being apparently a consequence of an imperial mentality that has never been confronted. Leave aside the extent to which Dalrymple is strong on assertion but no evidence, and that "Little Englanders" were of far more consequence in the 2016 referendum, what you get is a running together of past and present with the modern British supposedly trapped by the past. Therefore, in this approach, the statues have to fall, and the libraries and reading lists must be reordered.

The alleged validity of these views is allegedly further demonstrated by the false consciousness adduced to those who do not share them. Other statues then come up for immediate criticism. The most prominent in Exeter, that of [General Redvers Buller](#) on his horse, Biffen, is allegedly rendered unacceptable because he was a general of empire. That Buller was not associated with anything particularly bad is ignored by referring to him as having invented concentration camps during the Boer War of 1899-1902. In fact, one, he was no longer in command then; two, these were not the same as the later German camps, being more akin to detention centres; and, three, such camps had a long provenance, most recently being used by Spain in fighting an insurgency in Cuba in the 1890s.

Why, however, let facts stand in the way? In each and every case, there is misrepresentation in the iconoclastic demands; but that is not the point. We are in the midst of a postmodernist world in which facts are allegedly subjective, an irrational one in which emotion trumps reason, and one of gesture in which the statue is all-too-prominent as a target and the senses of continuity and identity that go with it deliberately attacked. If this is not a culture war, a war on culture, it is difficult to know what is.

The [image](#) shows "*Fraternité Avant Tout (Brotherhood Above All)*," by Asger Jorn, strategically vandalized in 1962.

