

Overcoming Cancel Culture

by Michael Curtis



The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

In a letter of December 21, 1817 John Keats wrote of “negative capability,” that is when a person is “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” In his terse remark, relevant to literature, Keats is implicitly rejecting the search for a single truth or solution. The remark is pertinent for challenging present day cancel culture and “wokery” that have been infiltrating their way in the U.S. and the UK with their double agenda: eschewing any uncertainties in their irrefutable mission of boycotting or censoring, ideas and people they find offensive; and erasing memories of past individuals who they want to be condemned.

The need for challenge of this double agenda is clear as two recent happenings in Britain show. One is that a survey published in the “School Library Journal” of January 2021 reports that in Britain woke teachers have called for the

cancellation of teaching of Shakespeare because he is a token of white supremacy, misogyny, and racism, in order to make way for “modern, diverse, inclusive voices.” Farewell? A long farewell to all his greatness.

The second is the decision at Somerville College, Oxford, alma mater of Margaret Thatcher, that all students must complete an “unconscious bias” course to expose innate racism, homophobia, and disability discrimination. The principal of Somerville, Baroness Royal of Blaisdon, claimed there was “irrefutable evidence” that injustice in society was being fanned by unconscious biases we all have. During the test of the course, students have to admit they are susceptible to bias, and must concede that a black lecturer is more likely to be disliked by students than her white colleagues.

This malevolent process of boycotting and erasing is not new and indeed can be traced back at least two thousand years to the Egyptian Pharaohs in the 13th and 14th centuries B.C. In the Roman era it was common for public offices or deposed rulers to be erased from public memory by removing their names and images from public statuary, inscriptions, and coins. Historians have named this *damnatio memoriae*, condemnation of memory. Notable victims were Sejanus, powerful and disliked commander of the Praetorian Guard under Tiberius in AD 31, and Emperor Geta murdered in AD 211 by his brother who banned his name.

The U.S. was not immune in rejecting the perceived enemy of the truth. On July 9, 1776 after the reading of the Declaration of Independence, a mob pulled down the lead statue of King George III on horseback in Bowling Green, New York; later the lead was melted down to make bullets for the war of independence. The witch hunts in the 15th and following centuries, and the 20th century McCarthy era were not glorious moments in the search for truth in the U.S.

Nor is the cancel culture of the present which has led to loss of open debate and to intolerance. This was made plain in the letter of July 7, 2020 in *Harper's Magazine* written by more than 150 individuals, including J.K. Rowling, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and Noam Chomsky, who held that the restriction of debate whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society invariably hurts those who lack power and make everyone else less capable of democratic participation. The writers are properly concerned with the weakening of open debate and of toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. Complex policy issues are dissolved in an attitude of moral certainty. Bad ideas should be defeated by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence them.

Today, we in the U.S. and the UK, are in the midst of self-proclaimed moralists who are as steadfast in their self-assurance as the bright star, who ignore the complexity of life and politics, seek to erase the memories of those with whom they disagree, and to impose their view of the past and the present in an intolerant fashion.

The task of historians is to examine assumptions about the past and to deepen our understanding of what the past has bequeathed us. However, we face the problem that history is being hijacked for ideological purposes. In Britain the National Trust is the latest example of wokery, and has now compiled a dossier of properties for which it is responsible that it sees as linked to slavery and colonialism. If this is not an exercise of self-flagellation, it is perversion of its official role which is to conserve the houses and artefacts it controls, not make them controversial objects.

To start with, a distinction has to be made between slavery and colonization, a distinction which appears to be lacking in the wokery in both the U.S. and UK. Anyone with any knowledge of history is aware that most British colonies and almost all those in Africa were created after the slave trade was ended

in 1807, and slavery was abolished in 1833. The lack of such knowledge can be illustrated by taking just two of the important political figures who have been toppled. The families of the prominent prime ministers, Sir Robert Peel and William Gladstone may have made fortunes from the slave trade, but neither of the two leaders had any link to slavery.

Queen Victoria, born in 1819, twelve years after the abolition of the slave trade, did not own slaves, but was the personification of the British Empire. Therefore, should the railway terminal in London be renamed? The question provides an opportunity to discuss the different motives for colonialism and an interpretation of its results, one that is highly controversial. Undeniably, the dominant economic and military powers, especially Britain, subjugated less developed and more vulnerable areas of the world and exploited them. Yet, with their technical superiority, the colonial powers established systems of government, law, education, and practices of the rule of law, property rights, keeping of contracts, banking and trade procedures, and development of an infrastructure, that had positive effects and were beneficial.

It is significant that the increasing counter culture and wokery is being challenged and that counter measures are being taken or contemplated. This is being illustrated by recent developments in the UK which should be in interest in Washington, D.C.

Potentially the most promising of these developments is the meeting planned for February 23, 2021 by Oliver Dowden, British Culture Secretary who invited leaders of 25 of the UK's main heritage bodies and charities to discuss "how to defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down." It is arguable that these charities and heritage bodies, involved in the assertion that many historical properties have a colonial past or are linked to slavery, are losing track of their official purpose, the protection and promotion of British

heritage.

A second event is the statement by Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary who has expressed concern about the silencing of voices in Britain and the chilling effect of censorship. He has declared that the government will take new measures to strengthen the existing legal protections for free speech. These will ensure that student unions at universities will for the first time have a direct legal duty to ensure free speech for their members and guest speakers. In addition, individuals, academic staff or students, can seek compensation in the courts if they feel they have suffered from impinging of their free speech. This would apply to cases of students expelled, academics dismissed or demoted, and speakers "no-platformed." Freedom of speech in British universities will be protected by these stronger legal measures.

A new feature is to be a Free Speech and Academic Freedom Champion who will foster free speech and academic freedom, impose fines on those student unions and others that restrict speech unlawfully and redress the situation if individuals have been dismissed or demoted for their views. It will deal with disruptive protests that prevent a person from speaking, and will end the practice of refusal to invite speakers because some groups might object.

A third development is that Ofcom, the office of communications, the UK authority for regulating broadcasting, TV, radio, and video, and the Internet, was given power to prevent users of the internet from "harmful and illegal content." It does not have the power to remove specific posts from social media platforms, but it can get Facebook and Google to state what content and behavior they find acceptable, and then see that these standards are enforced "consistently and transparently."

Ofcom has been told by the government to ensure that broadcasters report with "due impartiality." This came after

MPs accused the BBC and Channel 4 of “trying to appeal to a narrow band of north London politically correct lefties.”

It is laudable that these three developments are attempting to avoid or limit silencing, censorship, or erasure of past and present behavior. Bias of course is subjective and difficult to measure, but it is important to try to ensure that controversial subjects are treated with impartiality. It will be interesting to witness whether this will change the way in which institutions and people respond both to interpretation of history and to the current American and British practice of cancel culture.