

Seeking Sense On Culture

by Michael Curtis



In every generation objects of the past tend to be devalued by those ardent on enforcing their own judgement of the past and cancelling part of it. Today, monuments and individuals are being displaced on the contention they are incompatible with present day values and ideas, and irrelevant to changes in politics and international relations. Long ago, there were scapegoats, sent into the wilderness after the sins of the people were laid on them. Now, scapegoats tend to be the objects of prejudice and the victims of cancel culture by those blaming others for present or past problems. They are the victims of those eager to limit or suppress free expression by shaming or ostracizing or demonizing the culprits, who may be seen as “evil.”

The concept of “culture wars” was propounded, if not coined, by James Davison Hunter in his book, *Culture Wars*, 1991, to suggest not simply disagreements but a perception of two incompatible views, originally orthodox and progressive, of

the culture which existed. In recent years this difference in perception has underlaid a variety of disparate political and social issues. Social media has emphasized the expression of these points of view and the conflict for dominance of values, beliefs, practices. Because of its prevalence, the debatable issue is whether cancel culture is a tool of social justice or a form of willful intimidation.

The main issues in the present culture wars are race, slavery, ethnicity, empire. These cultural divisions are present in discussion of many organizations, and in historical interpretation. A few cases are here discussed.

Let's start with the theater. The Globe, the reconstructed Elizabethan playhouse on London's South Bank is preparing to "decolonize" the plays of Shakespeare, addressing the "problematic gendered and racialized dynamics of his plays." For the planners at the Globe, Shakespeare is the promulgator of "whiteness:" white/fair connotes good, and black, dark connotes bad. In this, there is no indication whether Shakespeare, say in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the *Tempest* was expressing the prejudices of his time, or drawing attention to racial injustices and racial stereotypes, or colonialism.

Cancel culture and woke politics has affected other British elite institutions. One example is a website report and support that was set up by the University of Cambridge, but which, after criticism, was temporarily removed after a few days. The website purported to create a community which nurtured a culture of mutual respect and consideration for all.

According to the now deleted web page, the report allowed students to "anonymously" report teachers for "micro-aggressions." These were defined as slights, indignities, putdowns, and insults against minority groups. Among the offences mentioned were: turning one's back or raising an

eyebrow when a black person is speaking; giving backhanded compliments, or calling a woman a girl; behavioral or verbal slights; changes in body language when responding to those of a particular characteristic . In general, the report argued that this form of behavior would communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to persons based solely on their group membership.

However, critics can regard this website as a threat to traditions of free speech. Indeed, the Cambridge vice-chancellor admitted the list was a mistake, and a new website was put up. The anonymous reporting tool was eliminated, but students and staff can make "named reports" about inappropriate behavior by others. The danger still remains of a system of controlling speech and daily interactions.

By its proposals for reporting micro-aggressions, Cambridge is following Oxford whose equality and diversity unit in 2017 issued similar guidance. In this advice, issues mentioned were not looking someone properly in the eye, or asking someone from a minority background where they are "really" from.

Oxford University used to be indecisive, now it's not so sure. No final decision has been made in Oxford where in 2017 its equality and diversity unit introduced rules to protect oppressed minorities, forbidding behavior such as not looking someone properly in the eye, or asking someone from a minority background where they really came from. After a considerable number of protests, calling for the removal from Oriel College, Oxford, of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the philanthropist and prominent imperialist who had called for the British Empire to seize control of much of South Africa, an independent commission was set up to examine the future of Rhodes. The majority of the commission and the leader of the Oxford city council, voted to remove the statue, a decision that the College accepted. But on May 23, 2021, the governing board of the College changed its mind, and stated the controversial statue would not be taken down, ostensibly

because of the complex challenges, the length of time, and costs in its removal.

It has become axiomatic since the death of George Floyd that names of individuals said to be involved in racism or slavery or colonialism would be removed from institutions and monuments where they are being honored. As a result, in the U.S., Confederate flags and statues have been removed in many cities. So have statues of Christopher Columbus, whose former October holiday is now Indigenous People's Day. Statues of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington who are among those possibly flawed persons, are being considered for demolition.

The latest possibly flawed individual in the U.S. is John Marshall, fourth Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court 1801-1835. As the result of newly discovered research in May 2021, the board of trustees of University of Illinois decided to remove his name from the John Marshall Law school in Chicago. The U of I proclaimed it will continue to be a place where "diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity" are supported and advanced.

Marshall can be considered as one of the most, if not the most, consequential jurist in American history. All recognize the importance of his decision in Marbury v. Madison, 1803. that upheld the principle of judicial review, whereby courts can strike down federal and state laws if they conflict with the Constitution. He declared the basic principle that the federal judiciary is supreme in the exposition of the law of the Constitution.

But for the U of I, Marshall is a flawed person, a slave owner of hundreds of slaves, holder of racist views, whose court decisions supported slavery. It therefore voted against him.

In the UK similar purification of the supposed undesirables is occurring. The list is growing. Liverpool University has renamed its Gladstone building. The great 19th century,

four times prime minister, and reformer, is a new member of the hit list because he spoke in Parliament at the age of 23 in defense of the slave trade in which his family had an interest. Forgotten or ignored is the fact he soon opposed the slave trade. Churchill College, Cambridge recently held a conference at which the great leader and founder of the College was denounced for racism.

The latest villain is Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, and the “father of capitalism.” In response to the BLM movement his grave in Edinburgh is on the list of sites of those linked to historic racial injustice. Smith, who had written that slavery was evil and inhumane, is apparently listed because he had not campaigned for the abolition of slavery.

At another elite institution. a rebellion by a group Restore Trust in May 2021 has halted the effort to tarnish, even demonize, British history being advanced by the National Trust, the charity whose official objective is to promote the preservation and public access to building and places, of historic or architectural interest and land of natural beauty under its protection. However, in September 2020 the Trust published a 115-page report which indicated that 93 of its estates had links to the UK’s colonial and slavery past. The report can be seen as a weapon of identity politics.

The Restore Trust held that the National Trust had lost sight of its real purpose, and was preoccupied with the views of a woke minority. More than 50 members of the NT said they had no confidence in the leadership of the chairman of the board, Tim Parker. He, and three other senior figures who were said to have a “highly woke agenda,” were forced to quit. The direction of the agenda of Mr. Parker seemed obvious but is somewhat befuddled. He had written approvingly of the BLM movement as a human rights movement with no political party affiliations, but at the virtual annual meeting of the NT on November 2020 he said “we are not members of BLM.”

A sensible view has come from UK Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden who called for cultural institutions to adopt a more balanced view of Britain's history. That history is one of moral complexity, and one should not be selective, neither air brushing or whitewashing the past, nor denigrating the history. One should explain and "contextualize" problematic public statues or historical objects rather than removing them from display.