

Fighting Back in the Culture War

by Michael Curtis

History, museums, schools in the Western world are contemporary battlegrounds because they shape and reflect cultural contexts in present culture wars. In response to the BLM movement they have become engaged in reexamining their own histories of slavery and colonialism, as well as developing new policies on restitution and repatriation of objects said to have been taken from Africa and Asia by force or presumed to have been acquired by Western countries. The cancel culture war has already in Western societies led to toppling or defacing of statues, moving of busts, renaming of buildings, removing past figures such as Darwin or Winston Churchill from the hall of fame, decolonizing the academic curriculum, giving priority to the experiences and traditions of minority groups.

One can understand the desire of the directors of cultural and academic institutions to be open and transparent about the

colonial past of Western countries and proposing corrective changes. But that does not excuse tendentious and ideologically driven distortions of history.

Take the new woke analysis at the Tate Britain Museum, the institution that houses the UK's national collection of British art and international modern and contemporary art. The director of Tate Britain, Alex Farquharson, has informed visitors at its latest exhibition of J. M. Turner's work not to "idolize" Turner because he owned one share in a sugar company in Jamaica that employed slaves. This is ironic in a number of ways. In spite of Turner's miniscule ownership, the sugar company went out of business. Turner was a political liberal and an abolitionist whose 1840 devastating painting "The Slave Ship," depicts the horrors of the slave trade in human lives.

The Tate Museum was funded by a legacy of Sir Henry Tate, whose sugar empire was built on the slave trade. Farquharson persisted. Among the nearly 300 oil paintings and 30,000 sketches Turner bequeathed to the Tate are the steam-era paintings, such as the unfinished "The Thames above Waterloo Bridge." Farquharson sees these as "testimony to the beginnings of global warming," steam power linked to climate change, as Britain was at the time the leading transmitter of carbon dioxide. Perhaps museum directors should talk about art, not politics.

Another great museum, the V&A, Victoria and Albert Museum, the world's largest museum of applied arts, decorative arts and design, has created an anti-racism task force as part of its response to BLM. It wants to highlight its connections with slavery and imperialism, and be transparent about the imperial origins of some of its objects, especially its Ethiopian and Assante collections. Among other matters, it organized an exhibition in 2021 focused on the 1868 siege and battle at Magdala, the end of the British invasion of Abyssinia which featured 20 objects including jewelry and a gold crown made in

Ethiopia around 1740. The V&A also intends to expand its collections to include contributions from sub-Saharan Africa. It argues that the possessions it already has, such as the 15th century casket and gold and silver items from wealthy Asante show how “slave profits have seeped into the galleries.”

However, the V&A, in its desire to appease any grievance, real or imaginary, is adopting double standards. It has forgotten that the Asante kingdom was itself a slave owning and slave trading regime, one of militarism, brutality, mass killing of slaves, and terrorism.

The V&A affiliate in Dundee, Scotland’s newest museum., is featuring the links of its holdings to slavery, colonial wars, and cultural appropriation. It indicates that paisley pattern uses mango and teardrop shaped motifs: these were Kashmiri and Persian designed and approved by Scottish firms and then sold to South African consumers.

Cancel culture is changing British academia. In September 2021, one of Britain’s top expensive private schools, Haberdashers’ Aske schools, numbering 13, confirmed it was removing the name of Aske from its title. Robert Aske was a 17th century merchant who held 500 pounds of the stock of the Royal Africa Company, involved in the slave trade. He bequeathed 20,000 pounds for the education of children and for almshouses.

The school is also changing its motto, “serve and obey.” Originally, the motto was prompted by Christian values, but in the present era it is interpreted differently because of possible slave connotations. The schools, whose ex-pupils include Sacha Baron Cohen, are scheduled to introduce plans for a more diverse curriculum that places greater emphasis on ethnic minority history, the impact of colonialism, and the integrating of different faiths, ethnicities, and origins into society.

Cancel culture in the UK as in the U.S. has tried to formulate a narrative of history, one that emphasizes issues of slavery, imperialism, and the exploitation of colonies, and the legacy of "systemic racism." Now, a new group, "History Reclaimed," is challenging this woke analysis, that is driven by ideological distortions and tends to induce shame and guilt. The need is for an objective narrative, one that is not negative and does not center on slavery and imperialism.

A second voice of sanity came on September 1, 2021, from the British Office of Communication, Ofcom, Britain's media regulator, which struck a blow for freedom of speech by vindicating the remarks of Piers Morgan, a well known British TV personality. Ofcom has authority to combat hate speech on the grounds of race, sex, religion, and nationality. The specific case stems from the remarks made by Morgan on his popular TV program, "Good Morning Britain," after the notorious interview of the Sussex duo, Meghan and Harry, by Oprah Winfrey. Morgan said he did not believe what Meghan had said during the interview. More than 50,000 people, including Meghan, complained, and Morgan withdrew from the TV show. However, he persisted in his point of view: "I did not believe a word Meghan had said, and I wouldn't believe her if she read me a weather report."

Ofcom agreed with Morgan's position and rejected all complaints against him. It held that Morgan was entitled to express strong views that challenged the veracity of the Sussex duo. Individuals, it argued, can express strongly held and robustly argued views, including those that are potentially harmful or highly offensive. It was encouraging that Ofcom properly defended the right to voice and opinion, and held that broadcasters can include controversial opinions as part of legitimate debate. Yet, two problems exist the right of an official body to monitor opinions or potentially controversial statements or political correctness; and now that cancel culture has become prominent, people are more

hesitant to say what they really think for fear that someone will be offended.

Another, if minor, success, took place on September 2, 2021, when the British Attorney General was asked to review, an unusual legal judgment. It concerned the suspended prison sentence, considered too lenient, of a 21 year old white student of criminology and psychology, Ben Jones, a supremacist with a neo-Nazi ideology who was convicted of terror offences after being found in possession of 67,788 white supremacist and neo Nazi documents, and information likely to be helpful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism. Normally, an offender would be given a sentence of 15 years for this offence. He was given a two year suspended sentence at Leicester Crown Court.

The judge decided that Jones would not be sent to prison so long as he refrained from white supremacy literature. Instead, he must read classic novels. The judge advised him to start with Jane Austen, "Pride and Prejudice," Charles Dickens, "A Tale of Two Cities," and Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

A related issue in this matter of cancel culture is that of repatriation. The declaration of the UN in 2007 urged states to restore cultural, intellectual, religious, and spiritual property taken from indigenous people without their consent.

In a speech in November 2017 in Burkina Faso, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke of the undeniable crimes of European colonialism: "I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France." A following French study recommended the objects taken by force or acquired through "inequitable conditions" should be restituted. Museums are now developing new policies on restitution and repatriation.

Jesus College, Cambridge has set up a working party to discuss past slavery and restitution of objects. Its China Center,

which is supported by the Chinese regime, has decided to return a bronze statue of a cockerel to the "royal court of Benin." The cockerel had been taken by the British in an expedition in 1897, and later given to the College. The object was not and had never been owned by the College.

History has become a battleground, with a campaign that is essentially negative, focused to a considerable degree on slavery and imperialism. Public institutions have participated in this campaign stressing collective guilt and the need for repatriation. It is a welcome sign that the campaign of double standards to create a narrative of grievance is being challenged.