



The “Woke” Bite Back!

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In a pre-pandemic life I was asked at a social event the obligatory question about what I *do*. I replied that, having been made redundant after 25 years in the business world, I went to university to study undergraduate history. Subsequently, having discovered a love for research and writing, I completed my MA and, recently, received my PhD. “And what will you do with that?”, asked my interlocutor. “Well”, I replied, “I’ve put it in a frame on the wall.”

A flippant response, but I was heading off the inevitable. A request to defend spending seven years achieving something that could not be directly monetised; not, anyway, in the sense that my previous life as a Commercial Director could be leveraged for financial gain. Of course, I could secure a position as a university academic, but in a climate where even entry level positions are given to module convenors with several years’ experience and a slew of books and articles, that is unlikely.

Hold your sympathy, though. I have my dream job! I was recently offered the opportunity to edit a journal I co-founded 3 years ago: the one you are presently reading, *The MHR*.

“Ah!”, exclaimed my dinner-party host, “I expect that pays quite well.” “Precisely nothing!”, I replied. “Oh! Well, that’s the problem”, they responded, “there’s not much one can *do* with those humanities degrees.” We both shook our heads knowingly and they wandered off to find someone with a proper job to talk to.

This was an experience to which I have become accustomed. Perhaps, you have too? Why study History? Or even worse, Art History or Philosophy? American Studies? What can you really *do* with these degrees? What do they even *mean*?

When my teenage daughter suggested she, too, might be interested in studying history, that she had enjoyed our visit to the National Gallery in London and our subsequent lunch discussion of the ways in which gender roles had been assigned in art, someone quietly reminded her that “what your Dad does isn’t *really* history.” Quite. She might be advised to “do a *proper* subject.”

Such disdain does not seem justified. In fact, the reverse. In the twentieth century, thirteen out of the nineteen British Prime Ministers awarded a degree were humanities graduates. More recently, P.P.E. (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) is the humanities degree of choice for an [astonishing proportion of those who rule over us and those who explain how we are ruled](#), whether senior politicians or prominent political journalists. And what about those who implement policy, the civil service? Andrew Greenway, a former senior civil servant who writes regularly for *Civil Service World*, argues that P.P.E is *not* necessarily the ‘[golden ticket to the top of the political and administrative elite](#)’. In his list of post-war Prime Ministers and Cabinet Secretaries, only three studied P.P.E. Still, between the P.M. who, as Greenway puts it ‘chooses the route’ and the cabinet secretary who ‘drives the car’,

of the eighteen he lists with a degree, thirteen studied history or a mix of classics and philosophy. The outliers were a few lawyers, economists, and a chemist.

It seems, then, that we might complicate the debate on the relevance of a humanities degree. An education providing little apparent value for the likes of thee and me, appears to be an almost ubiquitous preparation for a career at the highest levels of public life.

Let's unpack this a little further. Back in the nineteenth century, studying classics at Balliol, Oxford, under the college's Master, Benjamin Jowett, was *de rigueur* for a career as a senior administrator in British India. Young men were trained, Jowett claimed, 'by cold baths, cricket, and the history of Greece and Rome.'¹ The British did not simply take their management of India from classical Greek and Roman precedent, they *were* the new Greeks and Romans. A classical education was not merely a useful preparation for colonial administration, it was central to justifying 'the historical experience of overseas domination.'²

Generations of British school children have been taught British history as a discrete list of the actions of, mostly, white male elites, often described by gentlemen amateurs and retired statesmen who regularly wrote about the very policies they themselves designed and implemented. As Churchill noted, 'history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.'

The most influential historian of his generation, Thomas Babington Macaulay, wrote his 1848 seminal work almost entirely as a justification of the cultural, economic and political authority of the English middle-classes. This was 'the smug message of Macaulay's *History of England*.'³ Nor was he informing only his own generation. As he wrote to a friend, 'I have tried to do something that will be remembered; I have had the year 2000, and even the year 3000, often in my mind.'⁴ Macaulay would probably have been reasonably satisfied with his efforts. These are histories of glorious nation that are, at best, incomplete and de-contextualised and, at worst, a carefully crafted narrative of British (English?) exceptionalism to justify and lionise tyrannical imperialism and global domination.

Is this a fair and balanced assessment? Of course not. For a start, Churchill never made such a statement. Although, he did say 'for my part, I consider that it will be found much better by all Parties to leave the past to history, especially as I propose to write that history myself.'⁵ A damning indictment? Well, that's the problem with woke lefty historians: no sense of humour. Churchill was probably just joshing. A bit.

The more serious point is that, as David Ludden puts it, 'the veracity of statements about reality is not at issue so much as their epistemological authority, their power

¹ P. Woodruff, [= P. Mason], *The Men who Ruled India: The Founders* (London, 1953), p. 15.

² E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), p. 114.

³ F. Bédarida, *A Social History of England, 1851-1975* (Paris, 1976), p. 49.

⁴ T. Pinney, *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay* in four volumes (Cambridge, 2008), p. 216.

⁵ Speech in the House of Commons, *Hansard*, Volume 446 (23 January 1948), Column 557.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1948-01-23/debates/b9704861-e9ed-40d9-ab92-4477a26e25f5/CommonsChamber>.

to organize understandings of the world.⁶ More simply, the study of human affairs is not so much about what happened and when, although events and chronology are important, but how and why the past is and has been interpreted differently.

So, back to my central question. Why are the exponents of academic humanities, once respected for their knowledge and trusted to pass on their understanding of Britain's and, more broadly, the 'West's' contribution to concepts of 'progress' and 'civilisation', now castigated as 'typical of the open-toed, sandal wearing, bearded geography teachers at the heart of all the problems in modern society.'⁷

For two key reasons: on the one hand, because they present an existential challenge to many Britons' understanding of themselves and their nation's place in the world, past, present and future; on the other, because they potentially strike down a central appeal of politicians to the voting public, namely their right to rule based on defending that same understanding.

Most academics today contend that there is a strong *prima facie* case to suggest that the interpretation of the humanities for educational and public consumption has tended to be selective and aimed at presenting a particular view of the past that tends towards a certain British exceptionalism and national superiority. In recent decades, scholars of the humanities have taken to analysing and deconstructing the comfortable and self-congratulatory picture of the past taught for more than a century.

Are they right? Can we have that discussion? Not a very sensible one when government ministers trivialise the issues with populist headlines such as ['We will save Britain's statues from the woke militants who want to censor our past'](#).

Let me close with an example of just how misleading such headlines can be, the 2020 removal of the statue of Edward Colston, in Bristol, the paradigmatic example of cancel culture, imposed by woke militants intent on erasing our history.

The reality, I contend, is almost exactly the opposite of what has been popularly proposed. The argument has been made that Colston, an acknowledged beneficiary of colonial oppression and slave trading, may have profited from activities considered unacceptable today, but that when his statue was erected in 1895, such practices were less proscribed. To remove his statue is to impose a modern moral standard not subscribed to at the time, and is thus a distortion of history, the classic example of 'cancel culture'.

In fact, the removal of Colston's statue had little to do with historical debate and more to do with the frustrations of local protesters. Their legitimately gained democratic mandate, to [have a plaque attached which offered some more context](#) in terms of Colton's slave trading activities, has been continually blocked. It is also

⁶ D. Ludden, 'Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge', in C. A. Breckenridge & P. van de Veer (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, PA., 1993), p. 250.

⁷ As said to me at the same dinner party described above. Ok, it's a great line!

demonstrably the case that slave trading was, largely, as unacceptable in 1895 as it is today.

That, however, is not my point. The proposal to erect Colston's statue back in 1895 was [a local political response to the growing protests of Bristolian workers](#) objecting to poor rates of pay and working conditions. Political activists argued in public speeches, influenced by the political tracts of Karl Marx, that those workers were as much victims of their merchant masters as the slaves and the colonised that had been such a source of enrichment for the commercial elites of Bristol. These were arguments that gained some traction with the voting public of the city. Such concerns and the potential for unrest, common to many British cities, prompted local businessman, James Arrowsmith, to try and raise a statue to Colston, a well-known Bristolian philanthropist, by public subscription. Arrowsmith's strategy was to counter criticism of Bristol's colonial merchants through a demonstration of public support for the civic benefits brought to the city by those engaged in colonial trade. In this, he largely failed. Although some public funds were raised, the statue was eventually erected mostly at his own cost.

The background, then, to the Colston statue is not one of ubiquitous popular support for a merchant philanthropist Bristolian, but a fascinating insight into nineteenth-century [‘open class warfare’ and public support for ‘the formation of a “labour party” to represent working people’](#). Which aspects of history are being erased by substituting a mature debate on this subject with trivialising accusations of woke cancel culture? In many ways, Arrowsmith's nineteenth-century tactics are being replicated by twenty-first century politicians.

The past will always be contested. If you are reading this, you are probably engaged in that process to some extent or another. Practitioners of academic humanities are, perhaps, not naturally suited to confrontation. But our voices are not just important, they are key. As Orwell pointed out, critically thinking about the past is an essential part of the present and, by extension, the future.

The MHR aims to be a part of that debate, through the voices of our contributors. We look forward to hearing from you.

