Pandemos 3 (2025)

https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/pandemos/index
ISBN: 978-88-3312-170-3
presentato il 26.7.2025
accettato il 27.7.2025
pubblicato il 30.7.2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13125/pan-6712

Present Discontents

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Abstract

This essay critiques the modern re-evaluation of the British Empire, arguing that contemporary debates – driven by identity politics, decolonisation rhetoric, and critical race theory – often reduce complex histories to simplistic moral judgments. It highlights how events like protests in Australia and exhibitions in Britain reflect broader cultural battles over imperial legacy. It calls for a more balanced, evidence-based approach to imperial history that acknowledges context, diversity of motives, and indigenous agency, warning against politicised narratives that distort the past to serve present-day agendas.

You committed genocide against our people. Give us our land back. Give us what you stole from us. Our bones, our skulls, our babies, our people. You destroyed our land. Give us a treaty. We want a treaty. This is not your land. This is not your land. You are not my King. You are not my King.

The heckling of Charles III at Australia's Parliament House on 20 October 2024 by Lidia Thorpe, a Senator for Victoria, was an abrupt display of the continued anger of some of the indigenous population of Australia; but also a reminder that most of the Australian people are not descended from this population. Indeed, the complaint is really as much about inter-

nal Australian politics and culture as about the link with Britain. This politics had been seen with the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum, in which the proposal for a constitutional referendum to prescribe a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice was rejected, with 60 per cent of those voting opposing the proposal. As so often, discussion of empire was largely really about post-imperial politics.

Meanwhile, back in Britain, the 2024 exhibition at Tate Britain for the Turner Prize included a display by Pio Abad on the legacy of empire, looting and ill-gotten gains, not least a sequence of screenprints in which drawings of Benin bronzes seized by British forces in 1897 and now held in the British Museum[1] sat side by side with objects from Abad's flat that also have origins overseas, for example Tate and Lyle sugar. The question of return is one that invites differing views as does the assessment of British policy toward Benin which became a part of Nigeria. Economic motives played a major role in policy, notably a determination to control palm oil production, while the British abolition of slavery was matched by the establishment of forced labour practices. The character of Benin itself invites consideration, not least the killing of people as an aspect of rituals, a killing represented in some of the art.

In turn, the 2024 Tate Britain exhibition «The 80s: Photographing Britain» claims that photography was a valuable tool for imperialism, creating racist stereotypes, only to have its «colonial gaze» and «sexist and racist past» challenged by its account of the period 1976 to 1993[2]. In other genres, such as cinema or travelogues, there is now a far more hostile account of empire[3].

Less vivid, but as pointed was the Royal Historical Society's Race, Ethnicity and Equality Report in 2018 which claimed a serious bias in the teaching and practice of history in British universities. Works on Black British history also repeatedly argued a case for White neglect and hypocrisy[4]. There were frequent calls for «a conversation» about empire but this

[1] For highly critical accounts, D. Hicks, *The Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, Pluto Press, London 2020; P. Docherty, *Blood and Bronze. The British Empire and the Sack of Benin*, Hurst, London 2021; B. Phillips, *LOOT. Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, Oneworld, London 2022.

[2] For a less tendentious account of a related topic see A. Jackson, D. Tomkins, *Illustrating Empire. A Visual History of British Imperialism*, Bodleian Library, Oxford 2011.

[3] I.F.W. Beckett (ed.), *Army, Empire and Cinema. British Imperial Conflict on Screen*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter 2025; C. Fowler, *Our Island Stories. Country Walks through Colonial Britain*, Penguin, London 2024, emphasises slavery.

[4] H. Adi (ed.), *Black British History. New Perspectives*, Bloomsbury, London 2019.

is rarely a conversation being usually a one-sided diatribe, as in the 2024-5 British Museum exhibition «What Have We Here?», or in pressure to "diversify" the curriculum[5].

Such a critique drew on an approach to the past that sees it as inevitably bad because the past, as well as on related patterns of Black and White criticism within Britain and its former empire. This criticism is of both imperialism and aspects of modern Britain[6]. The criticism was more than replicated within government, as in the report on the official gov.uk website «The Historical Roots of the Windrush Scandal: independent research report», a piece commissioned by the Home Office that presents Britain as pursuing hostile immigration policies based on historical White Supremacy. In 2003, Jack Straw, the Labour Foreign Secretary from 2001 to 2006, blamed British colonialism for many of the world's international disputes.

The idea of humanitarian governance as an aspect of past British imperialism is now one that is criticised more than discerned. In part, this criticism is an aspect of an attacks on liberalism and Christianity from the stance of modern identity politics. Indeed, a criticism of empire is central to the latter and notably so with the presentation of empire as an inherently racist project and one that deployed knowledge-formation accordingly[7]. Linked to this are the totally mistaken, but oft-repeated, views that Western imperialism somehow created capitalism and the slave-trade, and that its settler-colonialism was inherently genocidal with slavery an important driver of the Industrial Revolution[8].

This critique replaced a former type of progressivism. These were Whiggish accounts of imperial rationale, development and justification, accounts that had played an important role in the "national story" of Britain. They now can be presented as liberal and reactionary, or as liberal or reactionary, with liberal now treated as a critical description referring to international capital flows and free trade.

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[5] See, for example, *University of Oxford. Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29* (2024), «Intervention Strategy 6: Race Equality Actions» section, https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/university-of-oxford-app-2025-26-v1-10007774.pdf

[6] R. Waters, *Thinking Black. Britain, 1964-1985*, University of California Press, Oakland CA 2019.

[7] S. Seth, *Difference and Disease. Medicine, Race, and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

[8] For contrasting views, K. Niemietz, *Imperial Measurement. A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Western Colonialism*, Institute of Economic Affairs, London 2024; W. Hutton's opinion piece in «Guardian», 5 May 2024; R. Tombs's opinion piece in «Spectator», 20 April 2024.

A problem, however, with this "either … or" account remains that it underplays greatly the diversity of factors involved in imperialism, notably the drive for security and religious factors, as well, as a related matter, as the need to focus on particular conjunctures when assessing imperial motivation and activity. The latter were a matter not only of chronology but also of geography: it is a mistake to argue that imperialism had a common drive, because it meant so many different things in particular areas and to specific communities. A later parallel is the alleged role of the «national security state» in accounting for what to others is «American imperialism». The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 drove intervention in Afghanistan and encouraged action against Iraq, but critics found it easier to allege other «neo-imperialist» reasons including, in the latter case, a determination to control oil production.

Then, and at other times, the emphasis on materialist factors needs to be qualified. For example, missionaries were not always the assistants of empire that they can be seen as, and sometimes complicated matters for imperial rulers. Missionaries helped to develop the notion of universal human rights[9], and left much good in their wake, especially in the domain of education, literacy, and the establishment of standard written languages, in part as a consequence of publishing the Bible. All of this is an important corrective to crudely drawn materialist accounts of empire and is an issue that recovers something easily forgotten in our increasingly secular societies: religion really mattered to people and religious values greatly affected institutions, national identities and politics.

Criticism of the British empire, however, is incessant as well as an aspect of a wider critique of Western imperial links. Thus, in 2021, Andrés López Obrador, the Mexican President, repeated his 2019 demand for a formal apology by both Spain and the Papacy for the conquest of the Aztec empire in 1519-21 and for the subsequent colonial rule by Spain. Spain's Foreign Ministry rejected the demand, arguing that the conquest should not be «judged in light of contemporary considerations». Discussion of the British empire in practice feeds into these considerations and is affected by them, and this contextualises all writing about British imperialism[10].

[9] P. Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism. Religion, Empire, Advocacy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013.

[10] D. Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars. Debating the British Empire*, Bloomsbury, London 2018.

As a related, but also different, matter, there are also the tensions between the (very varied) approaches to the past offered by historians, however defined, and those that derive from other subject specialists. This is very much the case with the politicised debates of the present. Yet, rather than blaming these other specialists, it would be foolish to ignore the direction of historical work, particularly the move of much of popular history from being celebratory of empire to being aggressively critical.

Take, for example, as indicative of a wider tendency, William Dalrymple's *The Anarchy. The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (2019), «a timely cautionary tale of the first global corporate power», published by Bloomsbury, a major publisher, at a very reasonable price, which betoken the pricing economics of confidence, advertising, and a large print run. The book was extensively and largely favourably reviewed, and was selected as a book of the year. The profits that arose from Company activity and the disruption that resulted attracted repeated attention in the book. That, however, is an approach that tells us very little about the general tendency in eighteenth-century imperial activity, and particularly what was distinctive about that of the British. Thus, the EIC (East India Company) was one of a series of "national" East India companies, including those of France, the Netherlands and Sweden. Moreover, for Britain, there was the Hudson Bay Company, the Royal African Company, and the chartered companies involved in North America, as well, for example, as the Bank of England. Delegated authority in this form, or shared state/private activities more generally, were a major part of governance. To assume from the modern perspective of state authority that this was necessarily inadequate is misleading as well as teleological. Was Portuguese India, where the state had a larger role, "better"?

In India, after the death of the mighty Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), there was, under his weaker successors, the development of a tier of powers within the sub-continent, for example the Nizam of Hyderabad. In the latter perspective, the EIC emerged as one and, eventually, the most successful of the successor powers. This raises questions of comparative efficiency, notably how the EIC succeeded in the Indian military labour market, this helping in defeating the Marathas in the 1800s and 1810s[11]. An Indian power, the EIC was also a "foreign" one; although

[11] R.G.S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India. The Struggle for Control of the South Asian Military Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.

foreignness should not be understood in modern terms, and the EIC, in practice, was an Anglo-Indian hybrid entity. The EIC was not alone among the successful players, and was not even particularly successful in India, other than against marginal players, until the 1760s. Compared to the invading Nadir Shah of Persia in the late 1730s, or the Afghans from the late 1750s, the EIC was limited on land. Moreover its activity was part of a longstanding pattern of the invasion of India. This is a context that generally receives inadequate attention or is presented as if the other invaders brought benefits and the British disadvantages[12].

So also for eighteenth-century Asia as a whole. Dalrymple and others can be highly critical of the form of capitalism the EIC represented; but it was less destructive than the Manchu conquest of Xinjiang in the 1750s, or, indeed, the Afghan destruction of Safavid rule in Persia in the early 1720s. Such comparative points raise questions about the conceptualisation and methodologies of cross-cultural and diachronic comparison, but also show the selectivity involved in the criticism of the British empire, a selectivity that is partly based on ignorance.

Focusing anew on India, the extent to which the Mughal achievement in subjugating the Deccan in the late seventeenth century was itself transient might be underlined, and, alongside consideration of the Maratha-Mughal struggle in the late seventeenth century, that provides another perspective on subsequent developments. The disruptive character of British activity can again be contextualised. The extent to which Bengal, for example, did not know much peace prior to takeover by the EIC from 1757 is also worthy of consideration. It helps explain why so many local interests, there and elsewhere, found it appropriate, as well as convenient, to ally with the EIC which brought a degree of protection for the regional economy and offered defence against Maratha, Afghan, and other, attacks and/or exactions. Furthermore, the terms of entry into a British-led global economy were less unwelcome than later nationalist writers might suggest.

In current debates relating to imperial conquest, imperial rule, decolonisation and post-colonial problems, there is a clear emphasis on resistance to empire, from without and within[13], as well as a critique of the rhe-

[12] W. Dalrymple, *The Golden Road. How Ancient India Transformed the World*, Bloomsbury, London 2004.

[13] See, for example, D. Veevers, *The Great Defiance. How the World Took on the British Empire*, Penguin, London 2023.

torics and practices of British imperialism[14]. Many works reflect a strong anger at a form of disempowering humiliation, almost a kind of historicised castration. This, however, is present-day narcissism masquerading as historical judgment and certainly a flawed response to the more complex and interactive processes of empire. Indeed, with reference to the latter, emphases on agency, transnationalism and co-ownership, as well as on the attempt by the British to legalise an order opposed to despotism[15], challenge this anger and the related demands for reparations.

The latter is an aspect of a wider strand of pressure for «equality, diversity and inclusion» that in practice entails wealth redistribution with a smokescreen of diversity. As a contemporary instance of the fluidity of interests, assumptions and attitudes, there was a tendency to underplay the wider implications for the understanding of empire of the increasing role of ethnic minorities in modern Britain. In 1987 three Black Britons entered the House of Commons and in 2002 Paul Boateng became the first Black Cabinet Minister. By 2019, there were six Black and Asian Cabinet ministers and in 2022-4 Rishi Sunak became the first British Asian to be Prime Minister: his parents were of Indian descent and emigrated to Britain in 1966 from East Africa.

Emphases on agency, transnationalism and co-ownership are unwelcome because of history's place at the fore of culture wars, part of a total assault on the past, one that is explicitly designed to lead the present, and determine the future. This assault is a long-term process that owed much to the Marxist side in the "Cold War" that began in 1917 and continued until the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91. However, the attack on empire was by no means limited to Marxists. Thus, on 22 November 1962, Arthur Bottomley, leading for the Labour opposition in the House of Commons in supporting the Kenya Independence Bill, referred to «the burden which belongs to all of us Europeans who first invented racial discrimination», an inaccurate remark that he linked to his more understandable criticism of White settlers there, notably their «privileged position in the past». A trade unionist, Bottomley had been Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (1946-7) and then Commonwealth Relations (1947), and was to go on to Secretary of State for the latter in 1964-6.

[14] L. Benton, *They Called it Peace. Worlds of Imperial Violence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2024.

[15] L. Benton, L. Ford, *Rage for Order. The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800*-1850, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2016.

This process has been revived and given new direction in recent years. The relentlessness of the struggle, the Leninist approach, that the core true believers and committed will lead the rest, that there is to be no compromise, no genuine debate, and that the end-result must be power for its own sake, attacks in part through prejudging groups as inherently racist and treats imperialism accordingly. The «long march through the institutions», culminating in a Cultural Revolution, succeeded, in part because conservatives devoted insufficient attention to trying to contest this march.

In particular, the degree to which institutions controlled by, and for, the "soft left" could become the means for propaganda, indeed indoctrination, by the "hard left", while appreciated by many right-wing commentators, was given far too little attention by conservative governments. This was true of Reagan/Thatcher/Bush senior, all of whom understandably focused on international relations and economic affairs, including the development of neoliberalism, and then again of Bush junior/Cameron and their successors. Other issues thus came to the fore, but so also did an understandable wish, drawing on both conservative and liberal principles, not to use the power of the state in order to limit the autonomy of institutions such as museums and universities, or to affect freedom of speech.

This situation was very much of concern before the storm of protest and aggressive virtue-signalling associated with the «Black Lives Matter» movement of 2020. However, the latter helped rapidly to drive forward the pre-existing tendency, not least by leading many organisations, institutions and companies to endorse and adopt attitudes and policies that were at best tendentious and at worst extremely damaging to any practice of rational enquiry. Thus, a survey circulated by Oxfam in June 2021 to its staff in Britain stated that racism was deeply embedded in society and that «all echelons of power, to some degree, exist to serve whiteness (whether by legacy, the presence of neo-colonialism or cultural imperialism)». The past was thereby defined in terms of a hostile legacy. The emphasis throughout was on Whiteness and Blackness in oppositional terms and with a clear primacy for both across time. This is fundamentally ahistorical as it acts to downplay all other identities and causes of tension, most notably rivalry within these supposed opposites, for example the conflicts within both Africa and the West both of which were so important to imperial history and to non-imperial history.

The abandonment of any support for rational enquiry was unsurprising, as there was an explicitly anti-Enlightenment argument at play, and notably and aggressively so with Critical Race Theory. This theory acted to deny rationality, presenting it somehow as racist and an imperialising project, whatever that was held to mean. In a resumption of the postmodernist hash, objectivity became a term of abuse and objection. The wash of protest in 2020 was given concrete form by being taken on board in mission statements, hiring policies, and other such mutually-supporting practices that were backed by the designation and filling of new posts. Thus, ideology was focused accordingly. Decolonisation was theme and means, policy and rhetoric.

In Britain as a result, historical issues, such as the slave trade, empire and the reputation of Churchill, received critical attention to an unaccustomed degree, and history of a type was thrust into public debate. However, the conceptual, methodological and empirical bases for criticism were flawed and, in particular, there is a tendency among critics, for example of empire, to write in terms of undifferentiated blocs of supposed alignment, to move freely back and forth across the centuries without a due awareness of context, and readily to ascribe causes in a somewhat reductionist fashion.

Thus, Dalrymple, writing in «The Guardian» on 11 June 2020, linked the continued presence in Central London of John Tweed's statue (unveiled in 1912) of Robert Clive, a valiant as well as self-interested hero and maker of empire, to the Brexit vote: «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»[16].

This idea, that education has to lead to atonement, captures the extent to which those writing were not interested in critical debate, nor indeed in the previous mantra of reconciliation or indeed the concept of «conversation». For Dalrymple and many others, Brexit was a consequence of an imperial mentality that has never been confronted[17]. Leave aside

[16] See also N. Robins, *The Corporation that Changed the World. How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational*, 2nd ed., Pluto Press, London 2012; *The Londoner*, «Evening Standard», 9 June 2020.

[17] S. Ward (ed.), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain*, Bloomsbury, London 2019.

the extent to which Dalrymple was strong here on assertion rather than evidence, and that "Little Englanders" and specific issues of the moment, such as Cameron's lack of popularity, were of far more consequence in the 2016 referendum than any supposed hankering after empire. What, instead, you get is a running together of past and present with the modern British supposedly trapped by the past. This was differently seen on 19 November 2024 when Vasily Nebenzya, the Russian representative to the United Nations, cast Britain as a malign power seeking to ensure that the Ukraine war continue, because, allegedly, it was a former colonial power affected by «phantom pains for the empire over which the Sun never used to set» that sought to meddle in the war out of a «longing for lost dominion». The British Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, presiding at that session of the Security Council, criticised Russia for «Imperialism» and for waging an «imperialist war of conquest», while Nebenzya referred to malign British imperial actions in Ireland, South Africa and Kenya.

In rejecting a supposedly malign past, the statues have to fall, and the reading lists and libraries must be reordered, and, indeed, renamed. «Decolonisation» becomes a catch-all that can be employed to castigate whatever is disliked and then to demand support for a purging. In August 2024, in addressing the «dominant paradigm of whiteness», Welsh librarians were advised by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals to avoid holding meeting sin «racist» buildings, as part of the effort to conform with the Welsh Labour government's 2022 Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, which pledged to «eradicate» systemic racism by 2030 and to provide a «decolonised account of the past».

Academic historians and museum directors, the majority of whom ironically are clearly on the Left, themselves find they are subject, as part of "history wars", not to the usual rational and empirical conventions and constraints of intellectual debate, but to an increasingly more intrusive and even controlling attitude on the part of colleagues as well as the broader world, not least the «university authorities». Those who set policy in the latter do so by the finger-in-air method, one that senses what is fashionable among those who will affirm their prejudices. That, indeed, threatens a closure of the space for free thought and expression. Demands for «anti-racist» affirmation and/or training can compound the latter issue. In 2024, teachers on school trips to the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool were advised online by the museum to acknowledge

their limitations «especially if you come from a white privileged background».

Given the bullying approach, tone and stance adopted by some universities, not least anonymous denunciations, those thus attacked will be anxious. In part, this is a struggle for mastery within the Left, but conservative academics are frequently attacked. With some universities apparently endorsing the idea that the workplace is the mission field, there is the language of impatient revivalism, as in concepts and rhetorical claims such as needing to grasp the moment, condemnation, and the endlessly reiterated language and idea of decolonisation.

This issue pushes to the fore the question of whether some stages and types of British imperialism were more benign or less malign than others. In particular, alongside the ending of the slave trade and then slavery, the empire from the nineteenth century was less maritime and commercial in character and more a matter of territorial conquest, racial ideology and imperial mission. This was an empire that presented as much more hierarchical, exploitative and destructive, and therefore often wasteful and non-instrumental. That left many conquered societies with a set of conditions unfavourable to post-imperial peace and prosperity. Whereas some countries profited from imperial tutelage, many more were badly hurt. Informal empire would have been a better option, for the British and the conquered, in Africa and much of Asia. In part, success bread hubris and smugness, in part there was a concern about the imperial drive of other powers, notably France and Russia, in part a militarisation of imperial governance, one seen with the decline of the political role of trading companies. At any rate, the character of empire changed, although that was very differently the case in Latin America and, separately, the settlement colonies.

The biggest problem in the teaching of Humanities according to Catherine Hall, Professor Emerita of Modern British Social and Cultural History at University College London, in a notice sent to History UK subscribing departments on 6 June 2019, was that «the discipline urgently needs decolonisation!» *History Workshop* published a blog in 2019 in its learning and teaching section: Radhika Natarajan's «Imperial History Now», which claimed that «calls to decolonise curricula are more than a matter of addition, subtraction, or replacement of authors and texts. Instead, they are calls to address the relationship between the forms of knowledge we value in the classroom and the inequities and violence that

exist on our campuses and in the world [...]. Decolonising the curriculum is not an end, but the beginning of a longer process of transformation».

History as a subject proves particularly important, as the past is used as a necessary basis for the "decolonising mantra". Unfounded claims, such as genocide by Europeans in Africa and the Americas, are repeated. Old ideas, such as World Systems Theory, are taken out of storage, given a racist dimension and thus anti-racist value, and deployed without care or context. The latter is particularly regrettable as world or global history, which became more active as a field from the 1960s[18], was a qualification of earlier Eurocentric models, and one on which much effort was expended. It proved particularly valuable in demonstrating links between civilisations and in undermining any "zero-sum-game" of cultures. Instead, empires were presented as collective undertakings in which those who were subjects had a significant role and indeed to a considerable extent agency or semi-independent action. Similar points were made about the slave trade[19]. These approaches are now rejected. As a related point, it is striking how few commentators on the British empire or the Atlantic slave trade are able seriously to compare their development and activities with those of non-Western empires and slave trade of the period. The latter are an aspect of world history, but most commentators prefer simply to focus on British.

There are many contextual aspects that deserve thought. The historian will note that the direction of travel, the apparent attack on White male «privilege», has little to do with the most obvious and persistent «bias» in university entry in Britain, that toward a pronounced majority of female students, and notably so in the Humanities, including History, whether state or private schools are the issue. A middle-class background to the British undergraduate population is also far more noticeable than any supposed «White supremacism». As far as staff is concerned, and notably so in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the lack of «diversity» and «inclusion» are also most obviously the case as far as the representation of conservative staff are concerned as this representation is very limited and generally a case of "getting in under the radar".

What is possibly most striking is the apparent suspension of any real sense of critique of the new intellectual order. Those who hold contrast-

[18] J.H. Bentley (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

[19] J. Miller, *Way of Death. Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison WI 1988.

ing views are readily dismissed and shunned: if you do not think you are a «White supremacist», which is the subtext of the term White «privilege», that means that you are inherently 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, of course, that is the very last thing that is intended. And notably so in terms of the past, for there is no attempt to understand the values of the past, and, without understanding, there can be scant rational discussion of it. Perish the thought that empire might be explained and contextualised, an approach that is regarded as a symptom of colonial «denial».

In practical terms, we are seeing a bringing to fruition of the attack on positivism that has been so insistent from the Left 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 from then was discarded, or at least downplayed, as both method and value. Instead, there was a cult of faddish intellectualism heavily based on post-modernist concepts, and that despite the weakness of the latter, a weakness that is conceptual, methodological, empirical and historiographical, all liberating the present from the past.

Divorcing the Arts and Social Sciences from empirical methods and the constraints of understanding past contexts meant less work for the staff and no real standards other than those of virtue-signalling. This approach invited a confusion that some 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, in a world of calling out whatever is presented as micro-aggression, it is apparently oppression to be told otherwise.

This is a one-dimensional history, a simpleton's uni-directional account of heroes and villains. Whether or not you welcome the specifics of contemporary one-dimensional history, that is history simply as propaganda. It is a world away from debate. The conventional academic spaces, the geopolitics of academic hierarchy and method, from the lecture hall to the curriculum, have all been repurposed to this political end, and very deliberately so. And so also with public spaces, notably museums, while the statues that are unwelcome are treated not as isolated residues of al-

legedly outdated and nefarious glories, but as a quasi-living reproach to the new order in a culture wars of the present[20] in which there is scant space for neutrality, non-commitment, or, it might seem, tolerance and understanding. The pursuit and punishment of so-called «microaggression» represents the triumph of academic Maoism.

In part, possibly, and as an aspect of «decolonisation», 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 into the answer wanted and already asserted. Examples of the latter might include the extent of enslavement and the slave trade prior to the European arrival in Africa; or the major role of European powers and America in eventually ending enslavement and the slave trade on land as well as at sea. Indeed, the extension of British imperialism was frequently linked, as in Nigeria and Sudan between 1860 and 1905, with the ending of slavery.

In contrast, much of the resistance to imperialism in these areas was linked with slaving interests. This does not make imperialism or resistance "good" or "bad", but should ensure that complexity is offered when explaining the past. Complexity does not prevent the opportunity to offer judgment, but that requires a degree of contextualisation that is too often absent. 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. As such, the theory described as «decolonisation» has absolutely no place other than as a proposition and one that emerged in a particular conjuncture and to specific ends.

Historians need to understand why practices we now believe or argue to be wrong and have made illegal, such as enslavement, or (differently) making children work or marrying them, or conquest, were legitimate in the past. It is not enough, in doing so, to present only one side of, and on, the past simply because that conforms to present-day values. Nor is it pertinent to refuse to recognise debate in earlier, plural societies. (Some) people in the past believed that they were right for reasons that were legitimate in terms of their own times, experience, and general view of the world. These elements deserve consideration and should not be written

[20] For very different approaches cf. N. Biggar, *Colonialism. A Moral Reckoning*, Harper Collins, London 2023, and A. Lester (ed.), *The Truth About Empire. Real Histories of British Colonialism*, Hurst, London 2024. On this last see also *The British Empire in the Culture War: Nigel Biggar's Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, «Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History», 51 (2023), pp. 763-795.

away solely in terms of a somewhat mechanistic account of economic self-interest.

The answer clearly will not be provided in the «decolonization» approach, which is explicitly antithetical to academic methods in that it proclaims its engagement as its rationale. In a classic instance of Herbert Butterfield's definition of anachronism – making the study of the past a ratification or attack on the present[21], the past is to be used, in the form of a supposedly exemplary «decolonisation», as part to an attempt to recast ideas to match an account of society designed to provide an exemplary future; or at least to defend the role of universities and the careers of particular academics[22].

The accompanying view of being an historian appears to be of spending their time wishing that people in the past did not think as they in fact did, and converting this into a platform for socio-political activism in the present. This approach has no analytical substance, and, indeed, both threatens to dissolve the discipline and leaves the student not so much short-changed as totally cheated intellectually and pedagogically, which indeed is an aspect of a current-day civilisational malaise.

Imposing anachronistic value-judgments is antithetical to the historical mindset of the scholar. The practice is also inherently transient, and in every respect, as the fullness of time will, in turn, bring in fresh critiques of present-day values, which, possibly, will also be wrenched out of their historical context, not least by ignoring inconvenient evidence. There is a somewhat fantasist approach at present in academe in the assertion of present-day values and, even more, definitions, as if these are transcendent universals, but, maybe, that approach is part of a religious imperative in a secular milieu, one very much seen with "mission statements".

In practice, the supposed universal verities are reduced to a particular conjuncture. Fuelled by a grievance of the past, they amount to a quest for utopian outcomes alongside an abject failure to understand the granulated and historical character of the world as it is. This account could be sharpened in terms of political tensions at present, not least within the British Left. At the same time, there is room for an analysis of a shared

[21] H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Norton, New York 1965 [1931].

[22] See, for example, K. Yusoff, *Geologic Life. Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 2024.

spoils system in the shape of jobs, promotion, grants and status. The degree of "sharing" causes tension and helps fuel differences.

«Decolonisation» might sound good to some and silly to others, but it is certainly a programme, and a requirement for change, one that is authoritarian in its methods and totalitarian in its objectives. Moreover, it has become more potent due to the way in which institutions seek to determine the parameters of thought within which society is perceived. This approach has a corrosive effect on society and politics in general as in growing British public criticism of the past. The British Attitudes Survey found 86 per cent of respondents in 2013 «proud» or «very proud» of Britain's history but only 64 per cent in 2023.

The significance of the issue can be seen in the furore in Britain in the summer of 2021 when the government sought to offer some, rather modest, pushback. It was variously accused of meddling for political advantage, provoking a culture war, *et al*. In practical terms, the governmental response in Britain has been patchy, whereas, in France, President Macron in 2021 was more robust in stigmatising what he has presented as a challenge to French identity, an issue to which he later returned not least in criticising antisemitism.

For both "sides", there is a civilisational dimension, whether against «racism», which has become a universal catch-all, or in defending continuity. The historical connections can go very far. The Oxford University debate about the commemoration of Cecil Rhodes centred on criticism of the retention of that legacy, notably the Rhodes' statue erected in 1911, Daniel Dorling, Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography, gave an interview with «Spiegel Online» on 31 May 2019 in which he made a number of simply erroneous remarks, as in «He [Rhodes] happily watched thousands of young black children die in his mines [...] we depopulated almost the entire continent of Africa». Praised earlier in 2010 in a *Guardian* editorial, Dorling had written in 2016 in support of Jeremy Corbyn's «moral clarity». For «Spiegel Online», he mused that a German invasion of Britain in World War Two would have «helped us get rid of the empire idea of greatness»[23], which somewhat ignores the extent to which, at a key moment of civilisational conflict, the empire gave Britain the strength to continue to oppose the Axis powers.

[23] J. Schindler and D. Dorling, *The Empire was Celebrated as a Great Thing*, «Der Spiegel On-line», 31 May 2019, https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/oxford-professor-on-brexit-s-colonial-roots-a-1270238.html.

Western liberals who do not see views such as those of Dorling as a serious challenge to their civilisation are foolish in the extreme. While that civilisation has always encouraged debate, which indeed is part of its strength, the type of criticism that is now at play is deliberately intended as revolutionary. It is not debate, but aims at the end of discussion, and should be treated accordingly. Thus, "history wars" are not some opt-out from the real issues of the present.

Indeed, they are doubly a challenge because the West, its liberal humanism, and the very concept of humane reason, is under a grave threat from external changes, notably the rapid rise of the Chinese system and China's energetic attempt to propagate its views around the world. China's path is greatly eased by the stigmatisation of the West as racist and imperial, a stigmatisation made more damaging by the extent to which domestic audiences within leading former colonial powers are willing to endorse this approach and to ignore China's imperial past and present. This situation is a clear indication of a cultural geopolitics that has important political consequences. For the West to take debate so far as to institutionalise the trashing of its culture, institutions, civilisation and legacy, is very serious.

For some parts of the current empire, if that is not too anachronistic a term, the British link is what preserves their difference, most obviously the Falklands and Gibraltar. Bermuda voted against independence in 1995. In Britain, however, the empire, both past and surviving, is no longer seen as a community. Instead, there is a degree of amnesia, so that, for example, in 2008, when Liverpool was European capital of culture, the major role of empire in its history (for good and ill) was largely ignored[24]. When empire is addressed, the ambiguities of its past and heritage are increasingly stressed, and with the tone generally hostile. There is scant public interest in the assets, strategic and economic, it offers, though Gibraltar and Falklands each have a public resonance. The British bases in Cyprus, sovereign territories, have a significance in Middle Eastern power politics, but most colonies are of scant interest to government. The commitment, instead, frequently reflects contemporary concerns that are refashioned for particular colonies as in 2016 when a marine reserve was announced for Pitcairn Island in the south-east Pacific, while in the

[24] S. Haggerty, A. Webster, N. White (eds.), *The Empire in One City? Liverpool's Inconvenient Imperial Past*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2008; J. Belchem, *Before the Windrush. Race Relations in Twentieth-Century Liverpool*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2014.

Atlantic there were the same for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (2012), Ascension (2019) and Tristan da Cunha (2020).

At the same time, there continues to be a process of imperial recessional, within former colonies, however acquired and whenever granted independence, and with the commitment to existing colonies. There was a political dimension with this, with the Conservatives more inclined to stick to empire and the Labour Party far less so. Thus, in October 2024, Britain announced it would cede sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago to distant Mauritius, and that the treaty would also «address wrongs of the past and demonstrate the commitment of both parties to support the welfare of Chagossians»[25]. Prominent Conservatives criticised the decision, James Cleverly, a former Foreign Secretary, calling it «weak, weak, weak»; although, in office, the Conservative position had been more ambivalent and the process had been set in motion.

Complicated by the American-run military base on Diego Garcia, the dispute itself reflected the problem of agreeing parties, as the Chagossians, who preferred to remain British, themselves were not principles in the negotiations. Indeed, the outcome threatened a new iteration of colonial rule (now from Mauritius) and geopolitical competition (with China), each key elements in imperial history. So also with the revival in 2024, thanks to this settlement, of the Argentinean claim to the Falklands.

Criticism of empire in its former parts varies greatly in type, intensity, chronology and consequences. Thanks to the introduction of «power-sharing», the Irish situation became less violent from the late 1990s. In Scotland, «power-sharing» was introduced, with the Scottish Parliament established in 1998 following a 1997 referendum. This did not stop a Scottish nationalism that rejected Britishness as much as the English from flourishing in the 2010s. However, the Scottish National Party and its support for independence failed in the 2014 independence referendum and, more dramatically, in the Westminster Parliamentary elections of 2024.

These were instances of the co-ownership seen with empire in the British Isles and more generally. That, however, was never an easy process, and this was true of imperial acquisition, rule, departure and post-imperial relations, as well as such co-owned processes as enslavement (by

[25] Statement by Sir Keir Starmer and Pravind Jugnauth, Prime Minister of Mauritius, 3 October 2024.

African rulers) and the maritime slave trade (by British shippers). British attempts during decolonisation to establish systems, forms and practices of post-colonial cooperation that would ensure stability as well as the continuance of British influence, often proved fruitless or short-term. In part, this involved the rejection of British wishes, as with independent India and, later, the refusal of former colonies to provide the use of naval bases during and after the Suez Crisis. Yet, the failure to get federations to work as part of the departure from empire, notably in Central Africa and the West Indies, was more than a rejection of British wishes, but, also, reflected the strong tensions between interests and identities as British authority waned and ended.

Brexit in 2016 and thereafter provoked a discussion of empire that was more problematic than the consideration of particular territorial fragments. Critics of Brexit argued that departure from the European Union was a matter of imperial nostalgia, and used that to produce a grim account of the rationale and context of assumptions and policies[26]. This approach served to condemn both empire and Brexit, a process of joining and guilt by association, which was a standard rhetorical theme in the discussion of empire. In practice, Brexit was a projection more of a "little Englander" approach than a "Greater Britain" one, though the latter played a role. Moreover, in so far as empire was implicitly referred to in the discussion, it was as an anti-imperialist argument directed against the European Union, however implausible that description might appear. This argument indicated the malleability of understandings of imperialism, but also the degree to which anti-imperialism was strongly entrenched, which is a key aspect at, and of the close of, a history of British imperialisms.

In this context, it does not help that more Welshmen fought for Edward I than against him in 1277, the same with Scots and William, Duke of Cumberland at Culloden in 1746, with Irish for and against George V in 1916, that the enslaved from West Africa were provided and sold by local rulers and merchants and as part of a broader pattern of enslavement and the slave trade, and that much of the Indian Army did not rebel in 1857. The investment in a politics of grievance and a rhetoric of anti-imperialism is simply too strong to accept a more complex account of cooperation and resistance, achievement and cruelty, and a whole an-

[26] See, for example, R. Gildea, *Empires of the Mind. The Colonial Past and the Politics of the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019.

tiphonal range of other phrases and approaches. So, more generally for history as a whole[27], but imperial history appears to arouse particular anger, and not least when directed against the West. This acts as a salve for postcolonial failures and is a key constituent in "culture wars" within the West and more widely. As a result, it is particularly necessary to assess the issue and consider the arguments as attempted in this book.

[27] J.M. Black, *Contesting History. Narratives of Public History*, Bloomsbury, London 2014, and *Clio's Battles. Historiography in Practice*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN 2015.