

## Let's tear it all down at the dawn of Great Awokening

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HBO Max pulls *Gone With the Wind* from its streaming service. Cranks are burning and composting JK Rowling's Harry Potter books. Winston Churchill's statue is defaced. A staff hissy fit over an opinion article at The New York Times forces an editor to quit. The intolerable killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis has lit fires for all manner of intolerances, under the banners of racial equality and identity politics. While calling for compassion and tolerance, activists intimidate and destroy. In another week in the creep of the "woke" state, where social media police drop a knee on freedoms and thoughts are cancelled as easily as a swipe and delete, ordinary people could think the world is off kilter. Never mind that we are in a cook-off between great powers, economies are shrinking and the coronavirus is sweeping the globe; someone, somewhere is threatened by an opinion that's different, outraged by a historical relic, triggered by works of art, films, books and their creators. Control + alt + delete is a pathology.

A horrible death in Minneapolis has unleashed a scramble for moral supremacy. The fight is not waged in a robust contest of ideas but through the silencing, deplatforming, bullying and defaming of opponents. It's a brazen attempt to overthrow what we value in liberal democracy by those who slander it as a system of minority oppression and impoverishment. An ordinary person, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, may wonder: How did we get to this miserable place? Yet liberalism has been under assault for some time, from within universities and political parties, by oligopolist tech titans and those with control of the cultural ramparts.

It's acute in the US, as Paul Kelly detailed in *Inquirer* last week, with polarisation at the extremes and a hollowing out of the political centre, with its middle-class suburban stability, anchor of family life, aspiration and widely shared cultural norms. Beneath this is a crisis in liberalism. "The new age of rising anger and grievance is defined by excessive individualism and the relentless rise of subcultures, both trends advanced by technology," Kelly argued. "These are the killing agents stalking the liberal order." The killing of Floyd has exposed an America where trust has evaporated. As US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt observed, the battle between conservatives and progressives is a struggle between "different cultures", with a descent into tribal identities and inter-group conflicts a threat to democracy itself.

This degradation has its roots in the progressive takeover of universities in the West. The dominant fashions of postmodernism and critical theory junked any pretence of searching for the truth or objectivity, opening the space for rampant identity politics, purity tests and the shutdown of free speech. The arrival on campus at the turn of the century of millennials, followed soon after by younger, anxious snowflake siblings, supercharged the dynamic. Some have labelled it the "Great Awokening". These students were showing us what would happen when social media became the public square for democracy at a time of collapse of mainstream media, cyber trolling by China and Russia, and the rise of fake news. What started as a cult, if not quite a culture, of safe spaces, aversion to criticism, thought policing and primacy of identity in the social sciences has taken hold in all institutions, especially education, media, the public sector, corporations, even science, health and medicine.

Rather than being institutions of open debate, rigorous inquiry and academic freedom, universities have quickly succumbed to the tyranny of "diversity" and the perversion of

scientific method. We see it here in different guises and fields, and in the legal travails of Peter Ridd at James Cook University and Drew Pavlou at the University of Queensland. As well, universities have been at the forefront of the “diversity industrial complex”, pledging “gender equity” and other fads. Diversity, in this instance, is simply identity politics with critical theory and anti-capitalist overtones, rather than a multiplicity of viewpoints. Even in times of financial crisis, universities protect these bloated, feel-good bureaucracies, which are at odds with learning, inquiry and freedom.

But the mainstream is waking up to what is going on in these citadels, with the riots, cancellations and lily-livered responses by culture controllers signalling a tipping point. The lunacy has spilled into crusades to defund police departments, tear down statues of dead “oppressors” like Cecil Rhodes and James Cook, purge platforms of comedies such as Little Britain and Chris Lilley’s satires, and push wacky “critical race theories” that the West is “structurally racist”. Apart from being boring, corrosive and limiting, this is dangerous, dodgy terrain. On Friday art photographer Bill Henson called this out as “fascist revisionism”, seeing parallels with Pol Pot’s Year Zero and the Cultural Revolution in China. He argued Mao Zedong — who said, “We must abolish the Four Olds: old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas” — was a “precedent for these millennial tantrums”.

In the news business, the malaise is a symptom and cause of decline. In the Philadelphia Inquirer, a headline — Buildings Matter, Too — over a story by its architecture critic in the wake of damage to buildings from rioting, hastened the end for its top editor. Staff members saw it as an affront to the Black Lives Matter cause. The woke rebellion at The New York Times was over publication of a piece by Arkansas senator Tom Cotton, who called for troops to be sent in to restore order in US cities, an opinion shared by millions of Americans. The journalistic bastion, whose mission is “All the news that’s fit to print”, is in schism. As columnist Bari Weiss noted, it’s a split between mature libertarians, who put an emphasis on the “all” of its motto, and young progressives fixated on narrowing the meaning of “fit”. These baby merchants of truth and punishment were triggered by Senator Cotton’s opinions.

Imagine working for perhaps the most influential US media outlet and needing a safe space from ideas, history or reality? It’s OK because the new NYT opinion chief advised staff that anyone who finds “any piece of Opinion journalism — including headlines or social posts or photos or you name it — that gives you the slightest pause, please call or text me immediately”. Get me my blanky! As The Wall Street Journal duly noted, the resignations of two editors were another milestone in the march of identity politics and cancel culture through liberal institutions. “The agents of this politics now dominate nearly all of America’s leading cultural institutions — museums, philanthropy, Hollywood, book publishers, even late-night talk shows,” the Journal editorialised. At home, whether it’s in the coverage of US riots, local protests, trials of culture war enemies such as George Pell, or the meat, potatoes and organic greens of politics and policy, your ABC is similarly afflicted. This mulishness leads to blind spots and a lack of curiosity, with these activist-friendly news brands completely missing the forces behind, say, Brexit and the 2016 election of Donald Trump.

As we’re seeing in the rush to topple monuments, cancel culture shows a profound failure to understand history, where horror and glory are intertwined, often in the same person, and great civilisations have atrocious failings, including near universal slavery. The revival of unironic cheer squads for socialism among Gen Z, who drop “Nazi” as a weapon like grandparents dropped acid, is dispiriting. They clearly know nothing of communism and the bastard symbiosis between Nazis and Stalinists. There’s narcissism at play, for sure, but also

a wilful, luxuriant ignorance of history. Anyway, why over-think a slogan, hashtag or meme? As Geoffrey Blainey argues in *Inquirer* the essence of studying history is to try to see the obstacles and dilemmas people of the past struggled against or evaded. “We also hope that the future will try to understand why we made blunders, and learn from failures and achievements of our era,” he writes.

Amid the tumult, this time of the Great Awakening, there are signs people are pushing back against the tide of despair and rage, of dismal forgetting and fracturing. One is in the sheer ridiculousness of these excesses. Frankly, the mainstream, as opposed to vice-chancellors and chief executives, will never give a damn about activist pieties. On many measures, the world has never been a better or safer place, although COVID-19 has shocked us out of any complacency about risks to health and harmony. Our enduring values are from the Enlightenment, where science, technology and reason prevailed. That legacy is not completely lost, nor faith in democracy. But we need running repairs, emphasising open inquiry, civil debate, the virtues of liberalism in all its manifestations, and the power of individuals to promote that reform. The zealots of the *Zeitgeist* — mad, bad and dangerous to know, as Lord Byron’s lover once described him — are prone to overreach and hubris. Like other despots, they can still be toppled by evidence, reality, reason and informed democratic consent.