

Woke mobs wage war on the West

By Brendan O'Neill, The Australian, 13 June 2020

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The West is in the grip of a cultural revolution. Modern-day Red Guards have declared war on the past. The Black Lives Matter protests that erupted in response to the police killing of George Floyd have morphed with staggering speed into a frenzied assault on history, liberty and reason.

No statue, no monument, no bust is safe from the woke mob's frantic urge to purify the public square and erase all trace of people they disapprove of.

During the past week these right-on vandals toppled a statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in England. They cheered and jeered as Colston fell, then stomped on his head before throwing the statue in a river. It was a disturbing, almost medieval spectacle: a mob exacting some inexplicable vengeance against the likeness of a man who has been dead for 300 years.

Woke mobs also beheaded a statue of Christopher Columbus in Boston. Yes, they yanked off the head of one of the greatest explorers in history, the discoverer of the New World. It brought to mind the way in which wild-eyed Taliban and Islamic State members would hack with hammers at the heads of ancient statues they considered haram.

The new Red Guards also dragged down a likeness of Columbus outside the Minnesota state capitol. Anyone who watches the clip of this act of infantile philistine vandalism will surely be shocked by the hysteria of the crowd.

"I want everyone to come up and kick him in the head!" yells one of the fevered attendees. Thank god they're only attacking statues. For now, anyway.

If a statue can't be toppled, it is abused. The Winston Churchill monument in London had the word "racist" spray-painted on it during a Black Lives Matter protest last week. A statue of Queen Victoria in Leeds also was targeted. The mob spray-painted "murderer" on the base of the statue. They sprayed pink paint on the statue's breasts and genital area. What madness is this?

Even the statue of Abraham Lincoln in London was targeted. Lincoln fought an actual war to end slavery. But he's white, and American, and therefore bad — right?

Like good little Maoists, the PC vandals are now circulating lists of other statues to be dragged down. In the US they want to erase all trace of Columbus and sweep away Confederate monuments too.

In Britain they're targeting the colonialist Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University, a bust of Columbus in London, and even William Gladstone, the 19th-century Liberal prime minister.

Yes, this is how deranged the violent assault on history has become: they're now raging against one of Britain's most liberal PMs on the basis that his father was involved in the slave trade.

This week, under pressure from snowflake students, Liverpool University agreed to remove Gladstone's name from the students' halls of residence. Gladstone expanded democracy in the UK with the Third Reform Act in 1884. He was the first prime minister to propose Home Rule for Ireland. He was so popular he was referred to as "The People's William". And yet now he, too, must be erased, shoved down the memory hole, because a tiny gang of noisy historical illiterates has found him guilty in its kangaroo court of the things that his father did.

In these dark, intemperate times, the sins of the father shall be visited upon the son. Now that even Gladstone is being targeted, surely the politicians and media people who foolishly cheered the mob who dragged down Colston in Bristol will reflect on what they have helped to unleash. Because it's pretty clear now that this is not some righteous uprising against racism or the memorialisation of slave traders.

No, it has become a mad, undemocratic crusade against anything and anyone who offends the politically correct lobby.

These neo-Maoist efforts to cleanse the public square of people and ideas the woke elites disapprove of is a continuation of what has been happening in our universities and elsewhere in society for two decades now. This mad moment represents the bursting forth into public life of all the backward, illiberal, identitarian ideas that have been growing and festering in the academy.

That's why the events of the past week are so important.

This no longer has anything whatsoever to do with Floyd. Rather, we are witnessing nothing less than a power grab by the politically correct machine; an attempt by the new intolerant elites to export their eccentric ideologies into every street and square and corner of the public sphere.

It really does echo the Cultural Revolution. The original Red Guards likewise targeted "offensive" monuments. There was a "frenzy of smashing", as one historical account describes it. They especially hated statues of Buddha. They would tear them down and throw them on to bonfires.

Such destructive behaviour was repeated in Richmond, Virginia, this week when a woke mob pulled down a statue of Columbus, set fire to it, then threw it in a lake.

The Cultural Revolution was a war against the "Four Olds" — old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. Today's Woke Guards also rage against old ways of thinking that run counter to their own ideology.

They are remorseless. Culture that offends them must be banned. People who disagree with them must be cancelled. Re-education is their aim, as it was for the original Red Guards.

So during the past week it isn't only statues that have been torn down — so have "offensive" entertainment and dissenting thinkers. Netflix and the BBC have pulled comedy classics such

as Little Britain, The League of Gentlemen and all of Chris Lilley's shows on the basis that they feature white actors occasionally playing black characters.

A radio presenter on the Isle of Man was suspended for daring to question the idea of "white privilege". A Welsh journalist was ditched as a judge for a literary prize after he criticised Black Lives Matter.

In the US the new cultural revolution has exploded into newsrooms during the past week. Stan Wischnowski, executive editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, was forced out for the speechcrime of using the headline "Buildings Matter, Too" on a piece about why the riotous destruction of buildings is bad.

At The New York Times, opinion editor James Bennet resigned after publishing a piece by Republican senator Tom Cotton calling for troops to put down the rioting.

This scandal at The New York Times is probably one of the most important events of the new cultural revolution so far. For what has really taken place at this key liberal institution in American public life is a woke coup.

Younger staff members staged a "virtual walkout" over Bennet's publication of Cotton's piece. They denounced him, like jumped-up little Joe McCarthys, and accused him of wrongthink.

It was incredibly symbolic: the old liberal guard being swept aside by intolerant younger people, by the Woke Guards, who are utterly hostile to difference of opinion and open debate.

The New York Times essentially has been captured by the ascendant new elites. Given the role that newspaper traditionally has played in upholding the values of American liberalism, this could prove to be the most significant shift in the past week's march of the culture warriors from their campuses into politics, the media and the public square.

These unforgiving woke elites have been waiting for a moment like this. For years they have been honing their ideologies and their neo-Maoist tactics. And now they are exploiting the anger over Floyd's death to enforce their writ across society.

Their deadening and divisive world view is spreading fast. They spent decades developing "critical race theory" — the idea that racism is ingrained into modern societies such as the US, Britain and Australia. This theory, foisted on students at every opportunity, presents racism almost as an original sin, a stain Western societies will never wash away.

It reduces black people to permanent victims of the virus of racism and depicts white people as the "privileged" beneficiaries of slavery and other historical crimes. All blacks suffer, all whites are complicit: that's the nasty message of this eccentric ideology.

And now this nonsense, this world view that patronises blacks and demonises whites, is running riot. Literally.

It has spread through society. In recent days we have witnessed middle-class whites on their knees begging for forgiveness for historical events they had nothing to do with. We've had

the Archbishop of Canterbury telling white Christians to “repent” for their racial sins. We’ve seen Nigella Lawson saying “white people” are “complicit” in racism.

The deranged assaults on historical monuments is critical race theory in action. Well-educated youths are constantly told by their professors that Western society is a racist, rotten, patriarchal entity. So the fact these youths are now whooping wildly as they throw paint and insults at historical monuments is not really surprising. They are the footsoldiers of a new ideology that is profoundly anti-Western, which views Western history as little more than a litany of crimes.

Witness also the mainstreaming of the gender lunacy that has been rife in higher education circles for years. The cult of gender fluidity, which preaches that you can be any sex you like, is now rampant in political circles and popular culture. It is striking that during the past week we have witnessed not only the march of the cultural revolution against the history and monuments of Western society, but also a demented witch-hunt against JK Rowling for committing the thoughtcrime of believing that people with penises are not women.

Yes, courtesy of the transgender ideology, even expressing biological truths is a risky business these days. The religion of gender fluidity is now in classrooms, in change rooms and all over popular culture. There is no faster way to signal your decency, to advertise your virtue, than to utter the woke mantra: “Trans women are women.”

Many events from the past week echo the stifling culture that has been gaining ground in educational institutions. The “calling out” of anyone who fails to take the knee — that is, bow down — to everything BLM represents speaks to the cancel culture that has been a key feature of woke agitation for years.

The erasure of allegedly offensive comedy springs from the fervour for de-platforming that has defined campus life for a long time. Right-wing speakers, un-PC comics, people who question the gospel of climate change, anyone who believes there are only two sexes — they have all run the risk of being no-platformed by the self-elected moral guardians of the ivory towers, and now such PC censorship is taking hold in society at large.

And the desire to re-educate the masses about the West’s evil history and the reality of racism also comes from the PC elite’s longstanding desire to cleanse people’s heads of wrongthink and fill them with right-on blather.

Celebrated identitarian author Ibram Kendi has said we need a “radical reorientation of our consciousness”. This is fancy lingo for re-education, for forcing the dim throng to buy into the woke view on everything from race to sex, from history to comedy.

They have had plenty of practice in this authoritarian enterprise. For years many campuses have been holding diversity-training exercises, mandatory race-awareness courses and lessons in sexual etiquette. Now this Orwellian urge to wash away impure thoughts and replace them with the gospel truth of political correctness is a feature of everyday political life.

The new cultural revolution looks and feels like a war of the young against the old. Or rather, against the Four Olds. Against the ideas, culture, customs and habits of yesteryear that fail the purity test of today’s Woke Guards and the PC police.

There is unquestionably a generational dynamic at play. Millennials and Generation Z were brought up in safe spaces, overprotected by helicopter parents, and educated to believe their self-esteem should take precedence over everything else — even over the right of other people to say things that one might find challenging or offensive.

But it strikes me that the true problem today is not so much blue-haired youths and 20-something lefties with more PhDs than sense, even though such people seem increasingly shrill, censorious and sometimes ruthless. No, the problem is the failure of adult society and of key Western institutions to say “No” to the youths and chancers of the woke cult. From churches to the social media giants, from the BBC to the police, too many institutions are caving in to the 21st-century speech police.

During the past few days we’ve seen cops running away from BLM activists in London, church officials repeating the divisive mantras of the BLM movement, Netflix, the Beeb and others dutifully cancelling “problematic” TV shows, and a school in Sussex in England renegeing on its plans to name one of its houses after Rowling simply because she thinks men are men and women are women.

Every capitulation to the mob emboldens it. Who will stand up to the imperious ambitions of the PC brigade? Someone has to. Failure to do so will put liberty, free thought, reason and social solidarity itself at even greater risk than they already are.