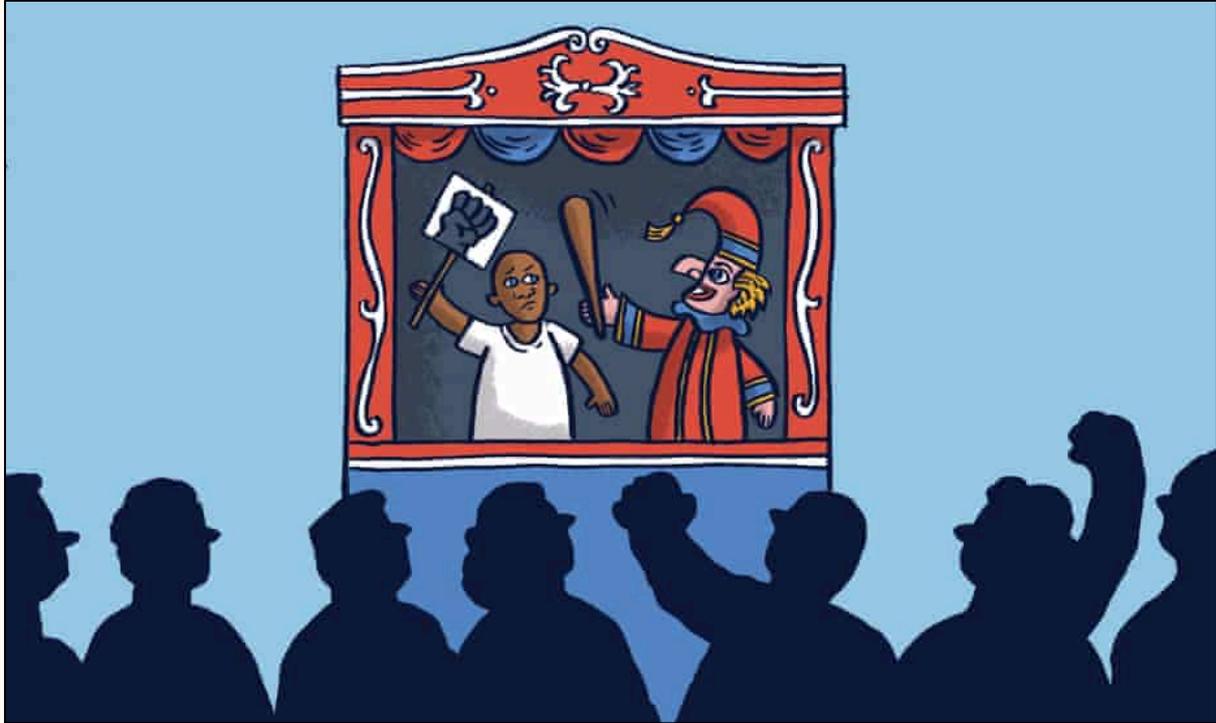


Cancel culture' is not the preserve of the left. Just ask our historians

Broadcasters, universities, museums, even the National Trust... the victims of political intolerance are many



By David Olusoga
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This will be a year of disillusionment. Even the rollout of new vaccines and the potential end of the pandemic will not prevent that. The first moment of disillusionment will come the moment we realise that we are still going to be talking about Brexit and still negotiating our future relationship with the EU, particularly around the service sector. As 2020 demonstrated, getting Brexit done doesn't mean it's actually done.

For those who believed in the more utopian of the many false promises contained within the original Brexit prospectus, the disillusionment will be deeper – although few will be willing to acknowledge it – as through the Brexit wardrobe lies our new age of difficult choices and cold realities, rather than some “enhanced sovereignty”, “Empire 2.0” Narnia.

For the government and its cheerleaders, growing disillusionment will bring with it another challenge, because among the many problems that follow the vanquishing of an imaginary enemy is that there is no one left to blame. What happens now that the finger of blame can no longer be pointed at Brussels bureaucrats? What will fill the papers now that stories of “bendy bananas” are off the agenda? Who can be vilified when immigration is not reduced to a trickle, lost industries do not return and

Britannia fails to re-emerge, “buccaneering” and “unchained”, on to the world stage? While many of the damaging effects of Brexit will be slow to emerge, and others will be blamed on the pandemic, eventually the day will dawn on which it is widely recognised that the buck stops at Westminster, not Brussels. Then what?

In the second half of 2020, one strategy for filling the post-Brexit blame vacuum was tried, tested and war gamed, all of it executed with levels of proactive forward-thinking and strategic planning that the government struggled to muster when dealing with the pandemic. New enemies were identified and the attack lines against them fine-tuned in the focus groups.

Firmly in the crosshairs are black and brown working-class people, who are to be stripped of their class identity so that their interests and their histories can be falsely presented as a dangerous threat to those of working-class white people. Hence the demonisation and deliberate mischaracterisation of the Black Lives Matter movement. But among the new enemies are academics and, in particular, historians, whose work focuses on the histories of empire and slavery. They and the institutions that have commissioned research from them have been subjected to a new order of hostility. Expect more of the same in 2021.

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Such strategies are a tactic by which, it is hoped, some of the anger and resentment that was carefully cultivated over decades and targeted at Brussels can now be redirected at enemies within. The name of the game is distraction, but also consolation for those disillusioned by the realities of Brexit Britain, but there is more to it. The government and its supporters also aim to set themselves up as the defenders of British institutions and the champions of British history and in order to stake claim to those titles they are willing to trash both.

To get a glimpse of 2021, take a look back at the second half of 2020. In August, the British Museum was denounced for adding information and gathering new artefacts around its bust of Hans Sloane in order to contextualise, rather than merely memorialise, a prolific collector who gained much of his wealth from slavery. Weeks later, the National Trust was condemned when it revealed that many of the properties under its care have historical links to slavery or imperialism. Research projects and findings that just a few years ago would have drawn little public attention have been presented as existential threats to the nation and one version of national identity, the academics involved in them denounced in newspapers as enemies within for merely doing their jobs.

Attacking historians who dare to examine the role of slavery or imperialism in the creation of Britain’s national wealth and our culture conveniently creates new enemies who can be paraded before “the people”. When the historians in question turn out to be women, as was the case with the National Trust’s Colonial Countryside project, the tone of the attacks becomes even more personal and hysterical. But what is under assault here are not just individuals but academic curiosity itself, the lifeblood of scholarship that is now being portrayed as a form of cultural treason or misrepresented as political posturing.

Unlike some on the left, I have never doubted that “cancel culture” exists, fuelled by political intolerance and the toxic anonymity of social media. The great myth about cancel culture, however, is that it exists only on the left. For the past 40 years, rightwing newspapers have ceaselessly fought to delegitimise and ultimately cancel our national broadcaster, motivated by financial as well as political ambitions.

Likewise, recent attacks on museums, universities and the National Trust were launched not to win arguments or influence the shape of historical debates but to intimidate other institutions and encourage them to cancel projects they might have been considering; to investigate their own historical links to parts of Britain’s past that our leaders and much of our press feel should be jettisoned or left unexamined. This is a war against facts, a flight from reason motivated by a cult of incuriosity. It is culturally corrosive but politically expedient.

In the weeks since his death last month, the words of John le Carré have been shared endlessly on social media. One quote in particular has gained traction. “Nationalism,” he once said, is “quite different from patriotism. For nationalism you need enemies.” The new enemies paraded before the gallows of these new culture wars are to be our fellow citizens, our cultural institutions and even aspects of our own history.

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