

The ignorance that underpinned empire and slavery still has staunch defenders

It's not the 'woke' who want to erase the past, but those who are determined that it should never be examined



A statue of Cecil Rhodes outside Oriel College in Oxford.

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It seems that the government's war on woke is box office gold, infinite spite fired at an endlessly replenished stream of targets, none of them moving very fast, since they totally weren't expecting culture secretary Oliver Dowden to even be aware of their work.

But, ask anyone who uses it pejoratively to describe another person what "woke" actually means, and it turns out to have a specific usage. In an academic or museum trustee, it means anyone who talks about decolonising the curriculum, as in the case of the academic whose reappointment to the board of the Museum of Greenwich was reportedly vetoed by Dowden. In the context of youth, it's the ones on Black Lives Matter protests, unless it's the ones posing a threat to a slave owner's statue.

Its purpose is to reframe any anti-racist activism or intellectual inquiry as a threat to either public order or British heritage. It's tactically rather neat – if you're unwilling to say "racism is good, actually", then it's hard to lodge a heartfelt opposition to anti-racists. Yet if you can interpolate some other dearly held principle (history, public order and, oh go on then, freedom of speech), claim it is under attack and pledge to defend it with all your might, well, here's the emotional heft you were lacking.

That argument, where it relates to history, rests on a parallel idea, that anti-racist revisionism is seeking to erase the past. If we take down a statue of Cecil Rhodes, we begin an act of conscious forgetting, which corrodes the national identity.

The threat is actually coming from the opposite direction – by ignoring history we are unable to understand the shape of our nations. I'm thinking specifically of three recent works of popular history about colonialism and slavery; Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project for the New York Times, for which she won a Pulitzer last year (the podcast is incredible); Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland*; and Alex Renton's *Blood Legacy*, which details his own family's slave ownership in late 18th-century Tobago.

Each work is hauntingly original, and the perspectives different, but certain themes emerge. The first, forensically analysed by Hannah-Jones in the American context, is how slavery and exploitation as systems get into the fabric of all that is woven afterwards, whether that's modern-day healthcare or the economics of agriculture. "We're here because you were there", Sanghera writes, quoting the academic Ambalavaner Sivanandan, collapsing the walls between the past and the present.

Why, though, are those walls so important to a conservative worldview? It is not out of respect for history, or a sense that it's so fragile it must remain entombed in the shape it was first told. Rather, it is because the story they want to tell is one of discontinuity, which functions as both pardon and silencer. What happened, happened; it cannot unhappen; it could not happen now. So really, what would be the point evaluating its morality or legitimacy? It's history as video game: you clear a level. It wasn't pretty, but now you're on the next level, and there's no going back.

Nowhere is this clearer than on matters of character: statues shouldn't be destroyed, since those great men of the past cannot be judged by our standards. They wouldn't have been able to apply concepts of universal humanity, because they conceived of other races as sub-species.

This was implicitly argued by the German state in an ongoing case against it for the Namibian genocide of 1904-08. "The legal concept of genocide does not apply in this case," read its motion to dismiss, which left lawyers scratching their heads: it only doesn't apply if the Herero and Name people aren't, you know, *people*.

The problem is, it's not true: from Renton's book, which draws on archives of his family's letters, it is quite plain that slave owners did conceive of enslaved people as humans, and some of them did have a unified theory of what "humane" treatment looked like. What comes across much more strongly than a completely other, unrecognisable worldview is total cognitive dissonance; men who could quote you a scripture in the morning about love for all mankind, then put in an insurance claim for 76 slaves lost at sea in the afternoon, without any sense of that as a tragedy, still less of their own culpability. The denaturing agent, here, is money. How do you compartmentalise sentiment and torture? By maintaining a separation between the God-fearing human and the level-headed businessman.

Ignorance has always been a cornerstone of empire and the slave trade: Kerem Nisancioglu, co-author of *How the West Came to Rule*, points out that at the height of colonialism, the majority of Britons couldn't reliably name a British territory. The purpose of this ignorance, and the amnesia that is now so ardently protected, is not so much to hide past events as to distance them so much that they are infinitely dispersed.

That behaviour was typical of that age, therefore everybody of that period is responsible. The inconvenience of this fresh look at the era is not that it wants to vandalise it but understand it.

- *Zoe Williams is a Guardian columnist*