

MATERIAL CULTURE IN
THE IDENTITARIAN
EPISTEME: DEWEY AND
THE WAR ON WOKE

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In the UK, politicians are increasingly framing the threat to liberal democracy as a culture war between the general public and “woke” activists, defined as people with ‘an awareness of social justice issues’ and a desire for social reform (Casalicchio, 2021).¹ Against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the Common Sense Group of parliamentarians took up arms in the ‘battle of ideas’ (Hayes, 2021, p. 1) between the public and what they describe as ‘subversives fuelled by ignorance and an arrogant determination to erase the past and dictate the future’ (ibid). Striking a blow against the latter, UK Communities secretary, Robert Jenrick, used the term ‘baying mob’ (Jessel, 2021) to describe protestors who tore down the effigy of a slave trader and attacked other statues. In 2021, the UK government legislated to protect ‘20,000

¹ Originally, “stay woke” was a colloquial phrase used by the Black community in the USA to remind its members to be on guard against oppression and police brutality (Romano, 2020). Today, the term “woke” is used by right-wing politicians to ridicule all socially liberal ideologies (Morris, 2020), for example the views expressed by Extinction Rebellion and Stonewall, Europe’s largest LGBTQ+ rights organisation. This appropriation of the term “woke” serves to de-legitimise and silence Black voices (Brownlee, 2021).

statues and monuments throughout England for future generations' (GOV.UK, 2021), mandating a policy of 'retain and explain' (ibid) for memorials to contentious figures such as colonialists. In so doing, a significant faction of UK politicians sought to reduce debate over the economic and social forces unleashed by neoliberal globalisation into a simple binary of ordinary people/the "woke". This paper explores this binary by drawing on Dewey's art theory to challenge the assumption that "ordinary people" are experiencing culture in a different way than supporters of, for example, Black Lives Matter.

At first glance, the war on woke appears to be a manifestation of the divide, observed by William James in his 1909 lecture, between the 'tender-minded' rationalist ("artistic") temperament and 'tough-minded' empiricist ("scientific") temperament (James, 1981, p. 10). In support of this conjecture, we might note that the father of neoliberalism, Friedrich von Hayek, was strongly opposed to rationalist economic theory, describing the French rationalist tradition as 'simply and completely wrong' (Hayek, 2011, p.112). It is perhaps not surprising that some

Conservative politicians, well versed in the creed of Hayek-via-Thatcher, have dismissed “wokeness” as the tender-minded desire to engineer society to mollify individuals who believe themselves to be the victims of discrimination.

Arguably, the desire to resist social engineering through the preservation of memorials to slave traders confirms Harbour’s (1982, p. 90) hypothesis that the foundations of Conservative moral theory have ‘crumbled’, and that the ‘presumption of rough correlation between tradition and the universal rules of morality’ has given way. In England, nostalgia for a glorious past that trivializes current concerns has supplanted Conservative belief in a universal moral order. For example, the Common Sense Group does not attempt to argue that England’s historic slave trade conformed to universal rules of morality. Instead, it argues that the memory of the British Empire as a ‘modernising, civilising force that spread trade, wealth and the rule of law around the globe’ (Bacon, 2021, p.20) is being distorted by the “woke” fixation on slavery.

This perspective complements, and thus reinforces, the UK Government’s report from the Commission on Race

and Ethnic Disparities (2021). The authors of the report claim that ‘most of the disparities we examined, which some attribute to racial discrimination, often do not have their origins in racism’ (ibid, p. 11). They allege that ‘an increasingly strident form of anti-racism thinking’ (ibid) is diverting attention from ‘the other reasons for minority success and failure, including those embedded in the cultures and attitudes of those minority communities themselves’ (ibid). There is an obvious relationship between the belief that we distort our perception of the British Empire if we focus our gaze on slavery, and the belief that we distort our perception of modern Britain if we focus our gaze on racism. Presumably, permitting woke activists to destroy slave traders’ memorials risks exacerbating the latter problem.

How might Dewey's art theory help clarify the culture war in England and point to avenues for its resolution?

For Dewey,

The moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive. The critic's office is to further this work, performed by the object of art. (Dewey, 2005, p. 338)

Woke activists took on the office of critic during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, inviting audiences to view the statue of a Bristol slave trader without the scales of prejudice. Torn down and thrown into the river by Jenrick's "baying mob", the statue is now on display in the M-Shed, Bristol, prone and covered in graffiti (BBC, 2021). However, a Twitter group, Save Our Statues, is also taking on the role of critic, inviting audiences to regard this statue as part of 'our country's illustrious cultural heritage' (Cork, 2021) and urging its supporters to block-book time slots to kybosh the exhibition of the desecrated statue. It seems that the culture

war is likely to be a protracted stalemate between diametrically opposed parties.

Are supporters of Save Our Statues (SOS) experiencing material culture *differently* than supporters of Black Lives Matter (BLM)? Dewey's art theory implies that the answer is both yes and no. Dewey echoes James (1981), arguing that 'there are individuals and even classes of individuals who are dominantly executive or reflective; dreamers or "idealists" and doers' (Dewey, 2005, p. 258). The transfer of the individual's values (partially informed by disposition) to the perception of the object (described by Dewey as 'projection', *ibid*, p. 260) may prompt the spectator to admire or dislike a particular statue. However, Dewey claims that regardless of disposition, the individual *interacts* with the environment to produce an experience, and this *process* is the same for BLM and SOS supporters. Dewey refers to the 'rhythms in human history' (*ibid*, p. 262) to explain shifts in thinking about art, and it seems that BLM supporters are interacting with material culture from a *temporally* different place from SOS supporters, regardless of their individual dispositions.

To explain what is meant by this, it is helpful to consider the Foucauldian episteme, defined by Butler et al (2012, p. 268) as ‘a field of knowledge and set of practices that shape our conceptualization of and engagement with the world’ at a given time. Today, we are arguably entering what Jarzombek (2018, p. 95) has dubbed the ‘identitarian episteme’, in which the ‘national chauvinism’ (ibid, p. 99) of the nation-state is being supplanted by multiple interpretations of modernity. Although a shift in the episteme makes possible new discursive practices without rendering the past wholly unintelligible, Dewey (2005, p. 262) cautions that art critics are ‘likely to take as what is uppermost in the art tendencies of their own day as the normal psychological base of all art’. If the critic’s experience of art is grounded in the waning “nation-state episteme”, this phenomenon is likely to manifest itself as the assertion of the importance of heritage in the face of “abnormal” psychology, as in the case of SOS’s reaction to BLM. Arguably, the decision of the Walt Disney Company to address historical racism and sexism and add disclaimers to its back-catalogue of films (Rose, 2021) confirms that the

epistemic tide is turning towards an identitarian field of knowledge and set of practices. It is important to note that Disney's actions do not reflect executives' dispositions, but this changing tide: it is simply 'good business' (ibid) to align the corporation with audiences' evolving preferences. SOS and the Common Sense Group of politicians are taking on the role of Canute, endeavouring in vain to hold back the tide. This is not a "war" that can be won.

Instead of recognising "wokeness" as the most highly evolved expression of the identitarian episteme to date, some UK politicians appear to believe that supporters of groups such as BLM have a "tender-minded" disposition and are 'seeking offence everywhere' (Bacon, 2021, p. 22). This disposition, we are told, threatens the very future of 'democracy and freedom' (ibid, p. 24) and must be resisted through policies such as 'retain and explain' (GOV.UK, 2021). The use of the term "woke" by right-wing politicians is itself an assault of the legitimacy of complaints against racism, as it is 'an offensive cultural appropriation' of Black speech (Brownlee, 2021) that seeks to wrest control of the discourse of colonialism from those who feel its impact most

acutely. Dewey's theory implies, however, that the Government's chastisement of members of the British public who hold 'a quasi-religious view of the world' (Bacon, 2021, p. 23) as a place of unequal power relations is unlikely to alter the public's interaction with material culture. SOS may prevent us viewing a despoiled statue of a former hero, but the 'rhythms in human history' (Dewey, 2005, p. 262) carry us inexorably beyond our former ways of thinking about, and engaging with, the world. We have been transitioning into the age of identity politics since the 1950s (Ward, 2021), and it seems unlikely that UK politicians are unaware of this. The castigation of woke activism as the expression of abnormal psychology is at best naïve and, at worst, is an attempt to misdirect voters' attention from the social and economic fallout of decades of neoliberal globalisation. If UK politicians genuinely believe that the epistemic shift to identitarianism is a threat to liberal democracy, they are sounding the alarm 70 years too late.

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