



ANDREW DOYLE

THE NEW PURITANS

How the Religion of
Social Justice Captured
the Western World



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How the Religion of Social Justice
Captured the Western World

Andrew Doyle



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*For Robin Robbins
1942–2010*

'To the untrue man, the whole universe is false, – it is impalpable, – it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist.'

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

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Prologue

‘**Y**ou’re a fucking Nazi cunt.’

This had been the third time he had shouted this at me, and I was still struggling to believe that it wasn’t some kind of misjudged joke.

‘You aren’t serious though, are you?’ I said.

‘Yes, I’m serious. You’re a fucking Nazi cunt.’

We had been drinking vodka martinis, so it was always possible that this sudden crazed outburst was an alcohol-induced fantasy. Perhaps from where he was sitting he could only discern the hazy outline of the reincarnated Joseph Goebbels. But even making allowances for his inebriated state, surely this man I had known for many years – a left-winger with a reputation for his intelligence and integrity – could not genuinely be entertaining the idea that I had any sympathy for fascists? If so, it’s odd that some years ago he had asked me to be godfather to his son; my role is to protect the boy from Satan, not indoctrinate him in the ways of the Third Reich.

I looked to his wife, one of my oldest friends, for any kind of support. She was silent, clearly embarrassed, reluctant to come to my aid. The strangers within earshot in this busy Soho bar were tactfully pretending not to hear in that very British manner.

The eruption had seemingly come from nowhere. The three of us had been chatting amiably for over an hour by this point, and there had been not the slightest intimation that an expletive-laden barrage of bile and slander was about to be hurled in my direction. Clearly this had been on his mind for a while. He was apparently convinced that my professional output over the past few years had been engineered to promote fascistic ideas, but when pressed to explain his reasoning he struggled to do so. The best he could muster was that I had written for a publication he didn’t much like, had voted in favour of leaving the European Union, and had written scripts that had satirised political positions that he supported. How any of this could qualify as ‘fascism’ remains unclear. As Carl Sagan was fond of saying: extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. No such evidence was forthcoming.

I have thought a good deal about the implications of this regrettable event. Like many people, I have grown accustomed to being smeared and misrepresented by strangers on social media to the extent that it barely registers any more. But there was something especially disturbing about being verbally abused by someone who knows me well enough to be sure that fascism represents everything I stand against.

The alcohol only explains so much. Few of us can claim never to have behaved badly when drunk, but in the sobriety of the morning we apologise for misspeaking, or for those pockets of lost memory during which we apparently let ourselves down. It has been over three years and I have received no apology. I can only assume that he feels justified in his tirade. I will almost certainly never speak to either of them, or my godson, ever again.

Quite apart from how upsetting it is to discover that someone you have known for so long is harbouring such unpleasant misconceptions, there is the more sinister aspect to consider. I am not alone in having lost friends for the crime of expressing my opinions honestly. Our era is characterised by the white heat of political tribalism and, as it has escalated, I have watched with a growing sense of incomprehension the curdling of rational minds. So many appear to have surrendered to a collective fantasy in which the slightest point of political disagreement is interpreted as evidence of neo-Nazism. A new censorial and identity-obsessed brand of social justice activism has given rise to a climate in which blind ideological affiliations are the norm. Whereas democracy is founded on the negotiation of diverging viewpoints, ideology is sustained through intolerance of dissent. You are, as the saying has it, either with us or against us. This is the essence of bigotry.

If my former friend truly believes I have developed a fondness for Adolf Hitler, his reaction, although unjustifiable, is at least intelligible. It is a testament to the toxicity of our times that he has surrendered to this delusion in spite of his awareness of my core beliefs: he knows that I have always been an outspoken opponent of racism; he knows that I value the sanctity of human life above all things; he knows that I hold the liberty of the individual to be essential for the preservation of a free society. Yet in the current climate neither his knowledge of my character nor his undoubted brain power count for anything. He has judged me a Nazi solely on the basis of what he perceives to be my impurity. It is a common characteristic of ideologues to assume that any challenge to their belief-system must be symptomatic of an evil nature.

The ongoing culture war, whose existence is often denied by its chief antagonists, is no longer something that any of us can afford to ignore. Culture warriors have always been small in number, but lately they have inveigled their way into positions of power and influence. As a result, the sphere of combat has extended into our homes, our schools, our places of work. Families, friendships and other relationships have been ruined. Many of us would prefer not to participate, but weapons have been forced into our hands. Culture warriors threaten to divide us even as they claim to be healing division. They couch their regressive ideas in progressive terminology, and those who attempt to slow their momentum are quickly subdued.

Often seen as ‘a sideshow to the serious business of governance’, the culture war of the moment is at the heart of all sorts of major political disputes. It wins and loses elections; Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 was seen by many as a cultural revolt against ‘political correctness’, and even the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom was largely a reaction against those culture

warriors who insisted on fostering the false narrative that the referendum was a racist coup.

Those of us who recognise that we are beneficiaries of the Enlightenment have been troubled by the rise of a movement – nebulous but somehow omnipresent – that is impervious to reason and regards the marketplace of ideas with suspicion. Many of us feel powerless to stem these illiberal trends that threaten to sabotage all the progress we have made since the civil rights movements of the 1960s. We have seen the evangelists of ‘social justice’ take control of our major cultural, political, educational and corporate institutions, thirsty for opportunities to be seen to vanquish devils, be they real or imagined.

These are the people who make grand claims of moral purity and brook no dissent, a mindset which has led to the development of today’s ‘cancel culture’. These are the powerful few who seek to control public discourse by deeming certain terms ‘problematic’ or supporting legislation against ‘hate speech’. These are the clerics who advance a modern-day equivalent of the Augustinian notion of original sin in the form of concepts such as ‘whiteness’, ‘toxic masculinity’ or ‘heteronormativity’. These are the chosen few, the elect, the discoverers of individual ‘truths’ and ‘new ways of knowing’ that bear little resemblance to reality. These are the arbiters of justice who require no evidence of sin in order to detect and denounce the sinners in our midst.

These are the new puritans.

Maleficia

The Afflicted

The first to be hanged was Bridget Bishop. She was a tavern-owner in her early sixties and had never met her accusers until she faced them in court. In many ways, she was an obvious target. Rumours of witchcraft had followed Bishop for a decade or more. Her manner of dress had always seemed ostentatious; her ‘red paragon bodice’ was even cited as evidence against her. She ran two taverns, or ‘ordinaries’, where late-night carousing was apparently encouraged. Whether the reputation was deserved or not, Bishop’s establishments were perceived as fleshpots of debauchery which marred the general sobriety of Salem and its environs.

The chief accusers were a group of young girls who would perform their histrionics in court to the horror of magistrates, ministers, families and friends. As Bishop took the stand, the girls writhed and screamed as though possessed, claiming that Bishop ‘did oftentimes very grievously Pinch them, Choak them, Bite them, and Afflict them’. One girl, Susanna Sheldon, insisted that she had witnessed Bishop suckling a snake. Other villagers testified that she had urged them to sign the Devil’s book. It was said that she had lately been ‘sending out her shape’ at night to haunt the bedchambers of local men. Sometimes they recognised her flashy attire through the shadows, but she had occasionally manifested in the guise of a black pig, or an unnatural hybrid of chicken, monkey and human. It was alleged that she took revenge on those men who rejected her advances; the premature deaths of some of their children was taken as proof of her malefic powers.

During these trials, the girls would often imitate the gestures of the accused, as though they were the merest marionettes to the witches’ diabolical wills. So as Bishop rolled her eyes in exasperation at the display before her, the girls simultaneously did the same, thereby proving that she had seized control of their bodies. Accustomed as she was to allegations of witchcraft, contemporary reports of Bishop’s trial suggest a woman who was not so much defiant as bewildered. ‘I am innocent to a witch,’ she said to the magistrates, ‘I know not what a witch is’. Eight days after her conviction, on 10 June 1692, she was taken to Gallows Hill and hanged from the great oak tree.

The witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts, lasted a little over a year, but hold a particular fascination to this day as a case study in communal hysteria. Partly, this is because accounts of the court sessions and the aftermath make for such compelling reading, from Cotton Mather’s *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693) to Daniel A. Gagnon’s *A Salem Witch* (2021). The claims of the girls were the stuff of phantasmagoria; ‘black men’ and ‘yellow birds’ would materialise in the courtroom, and while the witches in their corporeal forms protested their innocence, their ‘shapes’ would fly out and inflict injuries at will, safe in the knowledge that they were only visible to their victims. Then there was the ‘touch test’, whereby a suspected witch would be asked to lay hands on one of the children, who, invariably, would faint or fall into convulsions upon contact. It apparently didn’t occur to the magistrates to question why a witch on trial for her life would perform her acts of cruel sorcery before the very people she was attempting to hoodwink.

Then of course there is Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* (1953), a work that has consolidated the story in the popular mindset, for all the dramatic licence taken by its author. Through such sundry retellings, we feel acquainted with the victims of this tragedy. Globally speaking, the events at Salem were relatively minor, but the tens of thousands who perished in witchcraft hysteria across medieval Europe seem somehow depersonalised by dint of sheer scale. One is reminded of the remark by the satirist Kurt Tucholsky, often falsely attributed to Joseph Stalin, ‘The death of one man: that is a catastrophe. One hundred thousand deaths: that is a statistic!’

It is, of course, deeply unfair to characterise the puritans of New England as inveterate witch-hunters. As the novelist Marilynne Robinson has noted, by the standards of seventeenth-century Europeans, they ‘showed remarkably little tendency to hunt witches, yet one lapse, repented of by those who had a part in it, has stigmatized them as uniquely inclined to this practice’. For all that, the knowledge that Satan’s minions were eternally hungry for innocent souls doubtless created the conditions in which the wild testimonies of the children could be accepted. Through their tears and ravings, these girls offered the villagers powerful confirmation of an already settled belief.

The hysteria had begun in Salem Village – now known as Danvers – and had gradually spread to the towns of Salem, Andover and Topsfield. It had all started with the fevered imaginations of nine-year-old Betty Parris – the daughter of the village clergyman, the Reverend Samuel Parris – and her cousin Abigail Williams, two years her senior. These two were the first to be afflicted, falling alternately into trances and fits, or making incoherent, otherworldly sounds. Often such episodes would come about during prayer, as though the girls were reacting against the power of the holy spirit. A local physician, William Griggs, ruled out epilepsy and proclaimed that an ‘evil hand’ had fallen upon them. That Satan’s talons had extended into the home of the local minister was a horrifying prospect for the devout and God-fearing population of Salem.

In *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1949), Marion L. Starkey attributes the behaviour of Betty Parris to her fear of eternal damnation, one instilled from birth in the full fervour of Calvinism. Abigail Williams, on the other hand, was said to be a rebellious girl who was desperate for some kind of outlet from the restrictive nature of the puritan community. It is telling that when William Barker confessed to wizardry, he claimed that Satan had promised ‘an end to resurrection and judgement, to

punishment and shame'. The doctrine of predestination meant that no individual could ever be certain whether they were among the elect or the damned. Arguably, the religious tenets of the community contributed to a repressive climate in which collective mania was always likely to gestate.

The first to be accused of witchcraft was Tituba, one of the Reverend Parris's two household slaves. Betty and Abigail spent many hours in Tituba's company, and she would induct them in various magical rites and voodoo-like spellcasting she had picked up during her time in Barbados. No doubt little more than games, these harmless rituals took on a sinister quality after the girls began to show evidence of possession. Once Tituba had been accused, other obvious suspects presented themselves. Sarah Good was a local beggarwoman with no social standing, and Sarah Osburne, although not poor, had excised herself from polite society due to her poor attendance at church and having taken a lover out of wedlock. Before long the 'affliction' had spread to other local girls who had associated with Betty and Abigail, and more and more witches were identified in the subsequent frenzy.

By the time the trials came to an end, more than two hundred people had been accused, nineteen had been hanged, five others had perished in jail, and the farmer Giles Corey had been pressed to death with large boulders for refusing to enter a plea. In the throes of victimhood, these children had found the means to become the most powerful members of the community. They could see their fellow citizens executed on the basis of 'spectral evidence' alone, what we might today refer to as 'lived experience'. Those who attempted to apply reason and logic to the events as they unfolded were liable to find themselves accused, and so for the sake of self-preservation most left their doubts unuttered. The fantasies of the few were propagated by the elites: judges and ministers who had lost sight of reality, or had no inclination to see it restored.

One can barely fathom the impact these events must have had on local relationships. Starkey has noted how puritan communities were prone to squabbles and feuds, as 'living up to so severe a creed put a strain on anyone's good temper'. Petty rivalries were commonplace, not least because of territorial disputes. Under such circumstances, it is feasible that some would be willing to believe the very worst of their neighbours. The automatic forfeiture of land upon a conviction of witchcraft was surely an added incentive for those who wished to expand their property.

But perhaps there is no need for such cynicism. It doesn't take any great anthropological prowess to understand that human beings have a tendency toward groupthink. By all accounts, Salem was a hotbed of minor contentions, a kind of powder keg that needed very little agitation before it would ignite. The villagers lived in a state of perpetual fear; there had been outbreaks of smallpox, and raids from indigenous tribes were a continual possibility. Even the weather may have had an impact on the collective mindset. The hysteria in Salem coincided with a particularly cold period, and with failing crops came a deterioration of economic prosperity. The economist Emily Oster has shown how the witch hunts in history have tended to occur during periods of lower-than-average temperature, what climatologists refer to as 'little ice ages'. Witches, after all, were said to be able to control the weather. What better way for the devil to wheedle his way into an already vulnerable population?

With the recent rise of the new puritans and their religion of 'social justice', there are many good reasons to reflect on the lessons of Salem. The willingness of the villagers to believe the girls' visions serves as a reminder of the human susceptibility to false narratives, particularly if they are more readily comprehensible than complicated truths. When bad ideas are allowed to spread unchecked they take on an illusion of incontrovertibility, and when figures of authority are captured by dangerous ideologies, resistance becomes a feat of courage that few will dare to attempt. But perhaps the aspect of Salem most redolent to today's cultural skirmishes is the development of an intense climate of fear and mistrust. This episode in history offers a stark example of the conflicting loyalties and tribal instincts that can manifest in any society if the conditions are right.

For those of us who have found ourselves caught in the culture wars of the present day, these parallels will be obvious. Such patterns recur wherever reason is abandoned and fear prevails, be that during the 'Red Scare' of 1950s McCarthyism, or the ideological capture of today's major institutions and the trickle-down orthodoxies this has inspired. Starkey's book *The Devil in Massachusetts* was written in the years directly following the Second World War, and so it is not surprising that she could discern that the medieval urge to hunt witches had been revived through 'replacing the medieval idea of malefic witchcraft by pseudo-scientific concepts like "race," "nationality," and by substituting for theological dissension a whole complex of warring ideologies'. The screams of the children of Salem never really stopped; they simply found other ways to reverberate.

A Frenzy of Conformity

The association of our current culture wars with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) has become a predictable trope due to the way in which social justice activists so often redefine words to limit the possibility of debate. In addition to a reliance on a kind of 'Newspeak', we see revisionist tactics and continual denials of reality that were anticipated in Orwell's 'Ministry of Truth'. And when reading Orwell's account of the 'Ministry of Love' – a concentration camp in which the Thought Police torture and brainwash dissidents – one cannot help but be reminded of the ferocity and lack of human empathy so often embodied by online zealots who favour axioms such as 'Be Kind' and 'Love Wins'.

Yet for all the obvious comparisons that can be drawn between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the authoritarianism of the new puritans, teachers who are looking for a literary precedent to explain the current culture wars could do little better than *The Crucible*. Miller wrote the play as 'an act of desperation' at the height of the McCarthy era, and was especially troubled by the impact of powerful people who kept a strategic silence to ensure their survival. In an article for the *New Yorker*, Miller wrote that he was 'motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors' violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly'.

It's a familiar predicament. We are living through a frenzy of conformity, in which the opinions of a minority of activists are falsely presented by the media, political and corporate classes as though they reflect an established consensus. The impact is being felt in all walks of life. For instance, after the seismic events of the summer of 2020 following the killing of George

Floyd, an actor friend of mine was contacted by her agency because she had not posted anything on social media in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. She was told that she must do so immediately if she wanted casting directors to consider her for any future roles. I have heard many such anecdotes, but invariably they are communicated privately. There is a strong general feeling that to publicly object to the prevailing dogma is to jeopardise one's career and social standing. I have lost count of the number of emails from academics, artists and media figures who have contacted me to express sympathy for my criticism of the new puritans, but who admit that they could never endorse my sentiments in public for fear of 'cancellation'. It is a circular problem that can only possibly be resolved if sufficient numbers speak out.

This is the sad reality of most present-day working environments, where to utter a forbidden opinion, to misspeak, or even to fail to show due fealty to received wisdom can be an impediment to future job prospects. As a former teacher, I am still in contact with ex-colleagues who are troubled by the sudden revisions made to curricula and pastoral policies. Many are being forced to undergo 'unconscious bias' training, even though there is overwhelming evidence that such schemes are unreliable and ineffective. To raise a complaint is taken as proof of the kind of prejudice that the tests seek to expose. After all, only a witch would deny the existence of witchcraft.

Many teachers are concerned about how such modifications have been rushed through with little consultation with parents or staff. One teacher told me about a school assembly, conducted over the internet in the early days of the first coronavirus lockdown, in which pupils were berated for their 'white privilege'. The Reverend Dr Bernard Randall, a school chaplain at Trent College in Derbyshire, told me about training sessions in which staff were instructed to chant 'smash heteronormativity', and when he delivered a sermon about the importance of respectfully challenging such ideological viewpoints he was reported to Prevent, the government's anti-terrorism programme. Other private schools have pledged their fealty to Black Lives Matter, despite the fact that this explicitly anti-capitalist movement objects to their existence and would presumably be happy to see these institutions razed to the ground. In a noble effort to be seen to address injustice, these schools are implementing divisive and contentious theories as though they are irrefutable truths.

It hardly helps matters that the National Education Union, the largest teaching union in the United Kingdom, has said that there is an 'urgent' need to decolonise every subject and every stage of the school curricula. In a recent report, the union calls for 'activist training for teachers'. When it comes to bad advice, that takes some beating. With all the problems we currently face regarding the politicisation of the classroom and the influence of the new puritans in our schools, the very last thing we need is more activist teachers pushing their fashionable but ultimately regressive agendas.

Having drawn a number of parallels with the hysteria of Salem, it is worth emphasising that the new puritans, in truth, bear little resemblance to the puritans of old. Among the puritans of New England there existed a profound and pervasive consciousness of human fallibility and their unworthiness before God. This could not be further removed from today's social justice activists who, by and large, give the impression of never having questioned their own ideological certainties. While the puritans of the seventeenth century remained forever uncertain whether they were among God's elect, the new puritans seem to go about their business with a narcissistic lack of self-doubt. They have simplistically divided the world into sinners and saints and have presumed that they ought to be grouped among the latter.

Nor would the puritans of New England have had much patience for the notion of redressing 'privilege'. God had ordained the status and function of each of his creations, and it was not for them to challenge his reasons. If one was born in poverty it was the will of God, and so efforts to achieve what we now call 'social mobility' would have seemed potentially sacrilegious. Most importantly, the puritans believed in the importance of mercy, which is why the judges in Salem were inclined to leniency for those who confessed to malefic witchcraft. In Calvinistic terms, the fall of man had meant that all were born sinful, which is why repentance rather than innocence was the condition for salvation. The 'cancel culture' perpetuated by the new puritans not only suggests a general disdain for the concept of mercy, but it also reinforces their perception of themselves as some kind of infallible 'elect'.

When I discuss what I call 'the new puritans', therefore, I do not mean to imply a slur against puritanism *per se*, perhaps most memorably achieved by H. L. Mencken's definition as the 'haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy'. I am not concerned with religious groups that emerged in post-Reformation England and sought to purge church practice of all vestiges of Roman Catholicism such as clerical vestments or kneeling during the eucharist. I am not referring to those who, under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, came to power after the English Civil War, or those who established colonies in America in the early seventeenth century and preached the Bible as the revealed word of God. I am not referring to the belief that sports should be banned on the Sabbath, or that theatres are hives of corruption, or that drinking alcohol to excess is a sin, or that all sexual acts outside of wedlock are intrinsically disordered. Rather, I am using an analogy – one that has been commonly recognised for more than a century – to denote those of a prohibitionist and precisionist tendency who seek to refashion society in accordance with their own ideological fervour. Above all, the title of this book is my attempt to find an accessible shorthand for these cultural revolutionaries who make every effort to reject all labels that are assigned to them.

In the religion of 'social justice' we are facing a new kind of purity culture, one which is intolerant of any attempt to question its core tenets. To cavil at the convenient shorthand of 'puritan' in relation to such a movement makes about as much sense as complaining about how the ancient race of 'Philistines' has become a byword for one who is ignorant of the significance of great art. What must such literal-minded quibblers make of the Samaritans, a charity that provides support for the emotionally distressed? Do they consider this name misleading given that there is no reason to suppose that their namesakes in Bronze Age Palestine were similarly empathetic?

When reading this book, pedants can console themselves with the knowledge that the word 'puritan' as a synonym for intolerance and self-righteousness actually predates the rise of the puritan movement of early modern England. It was originally a pejorative term which was eventually adopted by its targets, much like 'Tory' and 'Whig'. Later historians helped to cement the popular understanding of puritans as killjoys. Thomas Babington Macaulay, for instance, claimed that the puritans 'hated bear baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators'. His account of their escalating intolerance after the accession of James I is starkly reminiscent of the new puritans of today. 'After the fashion of oppressed

sects,' Macaulay writes, 'they mistook their own vindictive feelings for emotions of piety' and 'when they had worked themselves up into hating their enemies, imagined that they were only hating the enemies of heaven'.

Yet the analogy of 'the new puritans' is useful mostly because of what the concept of puritanism has come to represent. Theirs is a belief in the perfectibility of humankind. The objective is not to critique society as it is, but to engineer an entirely fresh pseudo-reality through the imposition of limitations on language, thought and perception. They seek to publicly shame those they consider dissidents, and condemn all those who stray from the righteous path. Every day on social media there is a fresh Hester Prynne to force onto the pillory steps.

There are all sorts of ways in which lies gain currency. The hysteria of Salem is just one of the more evocative historical instances of people collectively fabricating a false reality and punishing those who fail to attest to its veracity. We are living through a period in which, much like the days when religious convictions were generally uncontested, articles of faith are peddled as truths by those in positions of power. The new puritans, then, are best understood as a clergy for a godless age, presiding over a dreamscape of their own making, rewriting our language, history and traditions as they go along. Yet, for all their clout, there are still some among us who steadfastly refuse to praise the elegance of the emperor's new clothes, who would rather point and laugh at the naked man in our midst. Not for the first time in human history, our way out of this madness will depend upon the heretics.

Creed

A Secular Religion?

In February 2020, I was invited on to the BBC's *The Big Questions* to debate the topic: 'Is wokeness the new religion?' I had already anticipated that mine would be the unfashionable view, and so I steeled myself in advance for the inevitable onslaught. This being a British daytime television show, the onslaught took the form of audible grumbles and a few raised eyebrows.

One of my fellow panellists expressed her dismay that we were discussing this topic at all, which is akin to accepting an invitation to a birthday party and then complaining about the bunting. Finding myself drawn into the whataboutery, I agreed that I would much rather be delving into other matters – economic inequality perhaps, or the life and work of Nana Mouskouri – but given that the subject matter had been set in advance, it seemed churlish to grumble now. Another panellist – some breed of activist whose whole body appeared to be stuttering with anger – spat out a few of the usual accusations. Didn't I understand how important it was to oppose racism? And wasn't I simply profiting from a culture war that I was deliberately helping to stoke?

Well yes and no, in that order. Apparently this twitching fellow had written a book on 'anti-racism' and had received threats following its publication. When I pointed out that I too had been threatened online, his immediate retort was 'Good!' As the audience collectively squirmed, evidently unprepared for what happens when the good guy turns bad, he attempted to back-pedal by suggesting that our common experience might facilitate further dialogue. It was too late; his instinct had betrayed him.

Not that he was entirely to blame. Those of us who have taken a critical stance on the culture war in the hope of hastening its demise have often been misinterpreted as attempting to prolong it. For a considerable period of time, most people were happy to dismiss such matters as the niche obsessions of trolls prowling the dark recesses of the internet, or over-zealous students hankering after a cause. In the green days before the coronavirus lockdowns, it was tempting for commentators to hold fast to the received wisdom that the culture war was merely a distraction advanced by unscrupulous politicians. My appearance on *The Big Questions* took place a month before the global chain reaction of coronavirus lockdowns, and three months before the death of George Floyd and the subsequent protests. Were the debate to be replayed today, it is unlikely that my perspective would be deemed marginal. Few would now deny that the culture war has exploded into the mainstream, and all of us are implicated, whether we like it or not.

The question of whether or not 'wokeness is the new religion' is unlikely to feature as a topic for debate these days. For all its flaws, the analogy is now commonplace and many pundits speak freely of 'the religion of social justice' without any need for further qualification. Culture warriors of all stripes have become increasingly doctrinaire and sectarian. Many of them favour slogans as a substitute for thought, almost as a form of holy writ. They have their own esoteric language, originating in largely outdated postmodernist jargon, and enshrined in foundational sacred texts by the likes of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, or the intersectional theories popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw. And although heretics are unlikely to be burned at the stake, their inquisitors are convinced that non-believers must convert for their own good.

All of this amounts to the legitimisation of bullying on a grand scale. American physicist Steven Weinberg famously remarked that 'with or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion'. When the puritans descended on churches across the United Kingdom in the mid-seventeenth century, destroying paintings, statues, stained glass, and any other images deemed offensive to their creed, they were not necessarily doing so out of a juvenile relish for vandalism. Many believed that they were undertaking God's work, and that their values should be imposed on the populace for its own sake. So too our latter-day puritans, who are happy to demolish the problematic monuments of the past, and scour social media for prey, like so many vultures circling their barely breathing lunch. They are the clergy for the digital age, an elite class that claims to know what is best for the unlettered plebeians. The trouble with all such righteous causes is that they attract the bullies who seek an approved outlet for their baser instincts. Some don the sacerdotal robes out of a sense of duty, others as a disguise.

Social media is the playground turned battlefield for these online crusaders. Here they pontificate to the masses, berate those who fall short of their moral expectations, and endlessly trawl through old tweets or Facebook posts in the hope of discovering a misjudged phrase or sentiment that could justify a campaign of public shaming. In their eyes, there is no possibility of redemption. The most vicious remarks you will find on social media come from the racist far right and intersectional activists. They are two faces of the same chimera. Identitarians on the right and left have an interdependent relationship; each one nourishes and sustains the other.

That is not to suggest some kind of moral equivalence. One of the most tragic aspects of this movement is that many of its acolytes are well-meaning. Yet unlike the culture warriors of the far right, who are universally despised in civilised society, the 'woke' religionists have positioned themselves as being 'on the right side of history' and therefore enjoy major institutional support. In spite of being capable of the most horrendous dehumanising behaviour, many of them believe themselves to be 'the good guys'. With this paradox in mind, the prospect of putting an end to the culture war seems Sisyphean. How does one tackle

a bully who bullies others in the name of love?

These cultural revolutionaries are engaged in an ongoing collective effort to destabilise and reorganise society around their ideological principles, underpinned by the conviction that the powerful – defined solely by group identity – are unaware of the structures that they unwittingly perpetuate. In this battle, however, the chief antagonists consider themselves to be under siege. In this perverse formulation, the defence of liberal principles is taken as an attack. This is why those who object to these radical and divisive societal upheavals are so often accused of ‘starting a culture war’, when they are simply responding to it. The new puritans are brawlers with a persecution complex, wildly throwing punches at strangers and then blaming them for the bloodstains on their hands.

We hardly even know what to call the movement, because this culture war is largely being waged through the subtle – and sometimes not-so-subtle – redefinition of language. The new puritans have become adept at the reapplication of existing terms that deviate from their widely accepted meanings. Phrases such as ‘social justice’, ‘anti-racism’, ‘liberalism’, ‘equity’, ‘whiteness’, ‘violence’, ‘safety’, and endless others, now bear connotations that are understood only by a minority of activists. They have apparently taken their cues from Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). ‘When I use a word’, he says to Alice, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’.

When most of us say ‘social justice’, we mean the concept of equality under the law, opposition to prejudice and discrimination, and equal opportunities for all. When social justice activists say ‘social justice’, they mean an emphasis on group identity over the rights of the individual, a rejection of social liberalism, and the assumption that unequal outcomes are always evidence of structural inequalities. When most of us say that we are ‘anti-racist’, we mean that we are opposed to racism. When ‘anti-racists’ say they are ‘anti-racist’, they mean they are in favour of a rehabilitated form of racial thinking that makes judgements first and foremost on the basis of skin colour, and on the unsubstantiated supposition that our entire society and all human interactions are undergirded by white supremacy. No wonder most of us are so confused.

For the logomachists of the new puritanism, the ambiguity is the point. Where there are no shared definitions there can be no possibility of discussion. This strategy of destabilising language and its meaning enables the well-versed to befuddle the layman with jargon, thereby giving vacuous theories the impression of substance. Moreover, the ambiguity can act as a get-out clause to make statements that are otherwise bound to be interpreted as hostile. This is why Cambridge academic Priyamvada Gopal can write phrases such as ‘Abolish whiteness’ and ‘White Lives Don’t Matter. As white lives’, and then blame those who are offended for being insufficiently schooled. That is not to suggest that she is insincere in her views, but one can appreciate from this example how such buzzwords can be readily exploited by those with an agenda.

So it has come to this. Liberalism is akin to Nazism. Words are violence. Debate is a fetish. We have somehow found ourselves in this mystifying scenario in which self-declared ‘liberals’ are advancing an illiberal agenda, ‘leftists’ are failing to stand up for left-wing ideals, ‘social justice’ means the opposite of what it says, and ‘anti-racists’ are creating a more racist society. The old definitions no longer apply. Culture warriors of all political affiliations play high-stakes word games, and truth and rationality are the casualties. We are dealing with a rapidly developing religion, albeit one of the secular kind, whose abstruse language and peculiar rituals are as incomprehensible to us as the miracle of transubstantiation must have been to a medieval congregation. This is a contemporary form of hocus pocus: we are tasting wine while the clergy assures us it is blood.

‘Repent, Motherfucker!’

Some of the more zealous activists of the cultural revolution have developed a liking for explicitly religious phraseology. After the comedian Dave Chappelle’s show *The Closer* was aired on Netflix in October 2021, there was a backlash among staff who staged a protest outside the company’s headquarters in Los Gatos, California. Counter-protesters gathered to champion Chappelle’s right to freedom of expression. In footage from the event, the comedian Vito Gesualdi can be seen holding a placard bearing the words ‘We like Dave’. One protester seizes the placard and tears it apart, leaving Gesualdi holding just a stick. Incredibly, Gesualdi’s assailant then accuses him of carrying a ‘weapon’. The most telling moment comes when a woman approaches Gesualdi and repeatedly screams in his face: ‘Repent, motherfucker!’ I can think of no more apposite phrase to encapsulate the combination of rage and religiosity that characterises this movement.

By making jokes about gender identity, Chappelle had committed the sin of heresy. Not only had he acknowledged the inescapable truth of biological sex differences and raised questions about the notion of gender self-identification, he had further exposed the priggishness and hypocrisy of those who claim to be on the side of the angels. But perhaps the most salient aspect of this affair was when Ted Sarandos, a co-CEO at Netflix, reneged on his defence of artistic freedom. He had inflamed tensions by initially standing by his decision to broadcast Chappelle’s show. ‘While some employees disagree,’ he said, ‘we have a strong belief that content on screen doesn’t directly translate to real-world harm’. This was in stark contrast to the claim of the protesters. To take a prominent example, the writer and producer Jaclyn Moore declared that she would no longer work with Netflix because of Chappelle’s ‘dangerous transphobic content’. While Sarandos had called into question the possibility that jokes could result in violence, Moore had asserted it to be the case.

Under pressure from activists, Sarandos apologised for his original statement. In an interview with *Variety* he said that he had ‘screwed up’, and claimed that ‘of course storytelling has real impact in the real world’. The power of these new puritans is such that even a top executive will intone the required liturgical cant at their behest. This necessitates a rejection of reality and evidence-based reasoning in favour of ‘lived experience’, a point to which we will later return. A key aspect of Sarandos’s *mea culpa* was his failure to sufficiently acknowledge the ‘pain and hurt’ of his employees. In an extraordinary reversal of corporate hierarchy, the boss had become the victim of a struggle session orchestrated by his subordinates.

One of my key concerns in this book is the relationship between language and power, and how supposedly progressive activists have accepted as an article of faith the notion that words can be forms of violence. There appears to be a particular emphasis on the way in which popular culture has the capacity to corrupt the masses, despite all evidence that this correlation is

unsound. After more than six decades of research into ‘media effects’ theories, the hypothesis of a malleable public who act on cue from the mass media they consume has been roundly discredited. So why is it that the view that jokes can be ‘dangerous’ is now so widely shared?

In so many of these cases we are seeing a paradoxical process by which victimhood is transformed into a source of power. This is why in his book *Dominion* (2019), Tom Holland is able to trace a direct link from the Christian theology of the past to the new ideology of ‘social justice’. Through his suffering and martyrdom, Jesus Christ became the supreme paragon of triumph through persecution. So while faith in Christ has receded, Holland argues, the values of Christianity have been retained in the culture wars of the present.

Christianity, it seemed, had no need of actual Christians for its assumptions still to flourish. Whether this was an illusion, or whether the power held by victims over their victimisers would survive the myth that had given it birth, only time would tell. As it was, the retreat of Christian belief did not seem to imply any necessary retreat of Christian values. Quite the contrary. Even in Europe – a continent with churches far emptier than those in the United States – the trace elements of Christianity continued to infuse people’s morals and presumptions so utterly that many failed even to detect their presence.

Even as the influence of Christianity declines, its tenets are subsumed into a new religion: secular, but equally dogmatic. As Holland puts it, ‘most of us in the West, even those opposed to Christianity, are but goldfish swimming in Christian waters’.

The author and cultural critic James Lindsay takes this a step further, making the case that the ‘woke’ ideology fulfils the definition of a ‘religion’ in the most literal sense, and should be safeguarded as such under the First Amendment. By extension, he argues, citizens need to be protected from the obligation to adhere to its guiding principles in both their private lives and in the workplace; in other words, he is making a case for the separation of ‘wokeness’ and the state. Lindsay opens his essay with a quotation from Ben Clements in the *Cornell Law Review*, defining ‘religion’ as ‘a comprehensive belief system that addresses the fundamental questions of human existence, such as the meaning of life and death, man’s role in the universe, and the nature of good and evil, and that gives rise to duties of conscience’. If a non-supernatural belief system such as Confucianism can be considered a religion, advancing as it does a humanistic philosophy that perceives ‘the secular as sacred’, then why not social justice? Recent books such as John McWhorter’s *Woke Racism* (2021) and Vivek Ramaswamy’s *Woke, Inc.* (2021) also argue that this ideology is a religion in an authentic, rather than merely analogous, sense.

But is ‘social justice’ the most accurate phrase? It is the term that the new puritans apply to themselves, but they have sound strategic motivations for doing so. One of the reasons why this ideology has been so successful in its infiltration of major institutions has been due to the appealing language it adopts. Few would claim to be *against* social justice, and so to oppose the movement feels counter-intuitive for the majority of decent people. It is a ‘Trojan Horse’ term, by which bad ideas are smuggled into popular discourse. As early as 1956, Charles Curran in the pages of the *Spectator* was dismissing the term as a ‘noble bromide’ and a ‘semantic fraud from the same stable as People’s Democracy’.

The economist and philosopher Friedrich von Hayek devoted a substantial proportion of the second volume of his *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1976) to what he called ‘the mirage of social justice’. In it, he argues that it is a ‘hollow incantation’ and that ‘the people who habitually employ the phrase simply do not know themselves what they mean by it and just use it as an assertion that a claim is justified without giving a reason for it’. He continues:

It is not pleasant to have to argue against a superstition which is held most strongly by men and women who are often regarded as the best in our society, and against a belief that has become almost the new religion of our time (and in which many of the ministers of old religion have found their refuge), and which has become the recognized mark of the good man. But the present universality of that belief proves no more the reality of its object than did the universal belief in witches or the philosopher’s stone.

The term ‘social justice’, Hayek maintains, is the prime example of how ‘fine sentiments’ risk becoming ‘the instruments for the destruction of all values of a free civilization’. It would seem that little has changed in the intervening five decades.

A present-day example of this kind of linguistic prestidigitation is evinced by activists who organise under the banner of ‘Antifa’ – a contraction of ‘Anti-Fascist’ – who are thereby able to engage in violence and intimidation against political opponents and simultaneously evade accusations of fascistic tactics. Like ‘Black Lives Matter’, these groups rely on the good nature of a public who are likely to interpret their name literally. After all, only a fascist would complain about anti-fascism. One prominent political correspondent fell for this basic rhetorical trick when she described the Normandy landing of more than 150,000 Allied troops as the ‘biggest Antifa rally in history’. Activist singer Billy Bragg posted an image of Winston Churchill captioned simply with ‘ANTIFA’. These are the kinds of simplistic misunderstandings that such word games are always apt to engender.

Likewise, even as we criticise adherents to the ‘social justice’ ideology, we inadvertently support their cause by adopting their preferred branding. To return to Curran’s point, the notion that self-styled ‘social justice activists’ are advancing social justice in any meaningful sense is akin to believing that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is an authentic democracy.

In their book *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (2020), Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay favour a capitalised form of ‘Social Justice’ to distinguish the ideology from the principle. Yet this only gets us so far. More recently, the authors have generally used the term ‘Critical Social Justice’, which adds a handy qualifier in order to make this key distinction, one that invokes the Critical Theory upon which the movement is based.

This is especially germane given that the term originates from the theorists themselves. In *Is Everyone Really Equal?* (2017), Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo emphasise that the mainstream understanding of ‘social justice’ as related to fairness and equality is not the aim of their movement. This, after all, would be a liberal humanist approach, one that the ‘woke’ ideology explicitly seeks to undermine. Rather, a ‘critical approach to social justice refers to specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability’. Critical Social Justice, therefore, ‘recognizes inequality as deeply

embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this’.

Given that there is a marked disparity between what most people understand by ‘social justice’ and what activists and academics mean when they use the term, we would do well to adopt Pluckrose’s distinction of ‘Critical Social Justice’ and ‘Liberal Social Justice’. The latter is the belief that inequalities and injustices in society are best addressed through civil discourse, the free exchange of views, and evidence-based analysis. The former is the belief that society is irredeemably unequal and unjust, that these structures are maintained by oppressive groups wielding power over the oppressed, that these groups are defined in terms of identity (i.e., race, gender, sexuality), and that the solution lies in the forcible reconfiguration of language, history and social norms.

Now that the culture war has reached the mainstream, it remains to be seen whether this distinction between Critical Social Justice and Liberal Social Justice will have any utility when it comes to communicating the problem to a general audience. Most people understand and have experienced the rise of this new movement, can see that it is authoritarian and regressive in nature, but are baffled because it describes itself in liberal and progressive terms. In recent years a solution has presented itself in the form of the concept of being ‘woke’, which has become a kind of shorthand for this sprawling and complex ideology. But, as we shall see, even this appellation has become compromised by endless reinterpretation.

The view that Critical Social Justice is tantamount to a religion is certainly persuasive. Consider the way in which its ideas have infected the private and public sector, with workers expected to pay lip service to a doctrine they are unlikely to share. The ‘religion of Critical Social Justice’ is probably the most accessible and immediate analogy to capture the nature of this ideology and how it operates. This is not to be taken as a slight against religion *in toto*, but rather an acknowledgement that the theories that underpin the Critical Social Justice movement are essentially faith-based.

There are all sorts of examples of how we have been urged to take on trust a variety of extraordinary claims. Practitioners of ‘Fat Studies’ maintain that there are no authentic health risks to obesity, and that the seemingly irrefutable evidence to the contrary is the product of the inherent bigotry of the scientific method. An image of an individual with a bloodstained crotch is shared online to prove that men can menstruate, when we can all quite clearly see that this is a biological female who identifies as male. According to the new puritans, the observable realities of existence are a mirage. Only they have access to the truth, and we are all invited to jettison verifiable facts and nod along. Is this really any different from a preacher who insists that his supernatural interpretation of the world must be uncritically accepted without any evidence to support it?

Unlike most religions, Critical Social Justice does not encourage the kind of self-reflection that allows us to acknowledge our own faults. Rather, it promotes an unshakable sense of certainty in one’s own convictions and a complete intolerance of non-believers. In truth, it more closely resembles a *fundamentalist* religion – insofar as it demands a belief in the unfalsifiable at pain of excommunication – but for the sake of concision the word ‘religion’ will suffice.

We might even be tempted to take the analogy a step further and see in the events of 2020 a transition to the status of religion from what was formerly a cult. When I made the case for the religiosity of ‘wokeness’ on *The Big Questions* back in February of that year, many were left unpersuaded, given that the cultural capital of its pre-eminent disciples was not at that time widely appreciated. As the year went on, however, we found ourselves reluctantly crossing the Rubicon with the martinetts of Critical Social Justice distributing the wading boots. There is little doubt that these cultural cattle-prodders now wield an undue degree of power and influence in all areas of public life.

Minority Rule

I have been thinking and writing about these issues for many years, but am doing so now in a changed world, one in which the evidence of my claims is everywhere and the imputation of an imaginary culture war is no longer entertained by serious people. It is my hope that, following the events of 2020, readers will be more receptive to a position that for so long was dismissed as needlessly alarmist. Ideas that once lurked at the penumbra of public consciousness have become the main attraction.

The bullying and infantile tactics of the new puritans can often lead people to dismiss them outright as crackpots and mountebanks. This is a mistake, because the ideology that they represent is now a dominant and destructive force in our society. While we may chuckle at their sheer irrationality and pearl-clutching moralism, we are at risk of overlooking the threat that they pose to the ideals of a liberal democracy. It hardly helps that many of those in positions of power have blindly accepted the tenets of this new religion, without understanding its grave implications.

Although culturally and politically powerful, the new puritans have always been in the minority; a recent report by the More in Common initiative estimates that they represent a mere 13 per cent of the population. They have been indulged largely because of their intimidatory tactics. Crucially, the narrative of straightforward generational differences are not reflected in the data. The new puritans are a minority in *all* generations, and so to reframe this as a matter of older people failing to adjust to changing norms is entirely misleading. Some of the most vehement pushback against this ideology is coming from Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012. Naturally, young people are more likely to endorse high-status opinions; with their career prospects yet to be determined, they have more to lose by challenging the status quo. The teenage years seem to engender the contradictory instincts of conformity and rebellion. The religion of Critical Social Justice offers a solution, enabling conformity under the *guise* of rebellion. Yet it is striking that so many young adults remain sceptical about this ideology, for all its fashionable cheerleaders.

I have written elsewhere about how the tendency to dismiss the younger generation as ‘snowflakes’ is both counter-productive and inaccurate. My various experiences of speaking on university campuses is that students are, by and large, eager to be challenged and open to hearing views that they have been assured – usually by academics of my generation – are beyond the pale. When I delivered a presentation to the International Politics Society at Aberystwyth University, it was the older members of staff who refused to publicise the event on the grounds that a talk likely to be ‘antagonistic to woke culture’ would violate their ‘departmental ethos of promoting diversity’. It would seem that diversity of *opinion* is not their priority.

The truest commitment to diversity, of course, involves a recognition of the primacy and sovereignty of the individual. To borrow a metaphor from C. S. Lewis, the symphony of the world would be insufferably bland if all the instruments in the orchestra played the same note. Such concerns are trifling to the breed of academic that prioritises activism over research. I find it endlessly surprising that some of the most truculent and juvenile online behaviour I have witnessed has come from teaching staff in higher education, but such is the constitution of the new puritans. As Helen Pluckrose pointed out to me, ‘It’s a worry when you can’t tell whether the person yelling at you is a twelve-year-old whose parents need to take their Twitter account away, or a professor of sociology’.

This is not to suggest that there is not a problem with resilience among students but, as broadcaster and free speech campaigner Claire Fox has outlined in her book *I Find That Offensive!* (2016), this is largely a product of over-protective teaching and parenting strategies by older generations, as well as an approach to anti-bullying that has encouraged young people to believe that trauma is inevitable and permanent. In a principled effort to shield children from harm, we have put them at greater risk by promoting the idea that to be challenged is a form of emotional abuse. That a culture of offence is taking hold in higher education is undeniable, but it is unhelpful to write off all young people simply because of the actions of an entitled minority who wish to go zorbing through life in their bubbles of hot air.

I make no secret of my hope that the high priests of the religion of Critical Social Justice will soon lose their collective stranglehold on our media, our arts, and our major educational, political and law-enforcement institutions. I yearn for the day when their more hysterical grievances will be treated with the insouciance they deserve, and that their seemingly interminable culture war will draw to a close. But in a time of such uncertainty, when so many are feeling browbeaten into silence, we have to find a way to reinstate the importance of dialogue. To stand up to these new puritans, we need to understand where they have come from, what it is they hope to achieve, and where we go from here.

Cataclysm

Culture Wars

In any given historical period, there is a culture war raging in the hinterlands. Usually the combatants have clearly defined and oppositional goals. Our present culture war is the result of many years of competing views at the extremes of public discourse, each informed by the politics of identity. On the one hand, this has taken the form of an idealised nationalism and a regressive racialised conception of society. On the other, there are those who seek to rectify oppressive power structures through a heightened focus on their holy trinity: race, gender and sexuality. Both of these movements are utopian and, like all ideologies, claim to have all the answers. The majority of ordinary people, however, still hold to the liberal, post-Enlightenment notion of striving towards knowledge, truth and justice in an imperfectible world.

Although there has always been a significant overlap between the cultural and the political, it is a curiosity of recent years that the religion of Critical Social Justice has been able to attain predominance within the political sphere and brought its concerns from the fringes to the fore. This process began somewhere around the early 2010s and culminated in the key events of 2020. There are all sorts of theories as to how this tectonic shift took place. Certainly the proliferation of new activist initiatives was a major contributory factor, most notably Black Lives Matter, gender self-identification, fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo movement. All of these campaigns had kernels of value, but like all remedies had the potential to cause harm if administered too crudely.

Political commentator Douglas Murray puts this down to a form of ‘overcorrection’ of past injustices, drawing the analogy of a train that suddenly accelerates as it nears its destination. The legitimate and important human rights campaigns for civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s had won out in the public consciousness. Just as we were reaching a consensus, as Murray puts it, we ‘all went through the crash barrier’. Inevitably, this new aggressive form of identity politics stimulated a responsive rise in what became known as ‘nationalist populism’. The cultural and the political were now inseparable.

By the turn of 2015, the ideologies of Critical Social Justice and intersectionality were ubiquitous. Suddenly, the public found itself routinely confronted with absurd headlines in the news media such as ‘Is “toxic masculinity” the reason for climate change?’, ‘Can my children be friends with white people?’ and ‘Transgender man gives birth to non-binary partner’s baby with female sperm donor’. Unreconstructed prejudices were promoted as a new form of tolerance, with writers making asinine claims such as white women are ‘evil’ or white DNA is an ‘abomination’. Barely a day went by without some frenzied denunciation of a movie or a television series for its lack of diversity and positive representation. Critics were reviewing artistic enterprises less on their quality and more on the basis of whether or not they were reinforcing the approved social message. Schools and universities grew less tolerant of dissenting voices, with students demanding that curricula were ‘decolonised’ of white male authors. At Yale University, it was suddenly possible to graduate in English Literature without having studied Chaucer or Shakespeare.

This new ‘woke’ movement seemed to extend to all forms of institutional power: the civil service and government quangos became obsessed with identity politics and began enforcing new speech codes, the police were investigating citizens on a daily basis for offensive remarks, and HR departments in all areas of the private sector were monitoring and disciplining employees for their choice of words or political opinions, both in the workplace and in their private lives on social media. Few people understood the jargon – ‘cisgender’, ‘mansplaining’, ‘whiteness’, *et al.* – but were assured nonetheless that the premises were indisputable.

There was a compulsive need to expose an ever-increasing set of ‘phobias’, many of which were detected even where they did not exist. Terms such as ‘homophobia’ and ‘xenophobia’ were well-established, but the ranks of potential phobias had been swelled with a whole range of neologisms which implicitly pathologised differences of opinion as forms of mental illness. Examples included: ‘biphobia’, ‘transphobia’, ‘Islamophobia’, ‘queerphobia’, ‘enbyphobia’, ‘whorephobia’, ‘fatphobia’ and even ‘vegaphobia’. In the absence of any kind of history of vegan persecution, this addition struck many as redundant.

Where evidence of racism was lacking, activists would concoct their own, through talk of ‘unconscious bias’, ‘white privilege’ or ‘institutional power structures’. Such ideas had been percolating over many years in academia – particularly in the sphere of Critical Theory – and had now escaped into society, like a virus from a poorly secured laboratory. Many have suggested that those responsible were the French postmodernists of the late 1960s – most notably Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard – whose approach to cultural analysis was arguably the wellspring of the current trend. The Critical Social Justice movement, in other words, was built on the speculations of once fashionable theorists.

One of the mainstays of postmodern thinking – that reality is constructed and conceptualised via systems of language – survived in the identitarian obsession with the capacity of words to ‘normalise’ and ‘legitimise’ hateful ideas, which is why freedom of speech was so mistrusted. It also explained the monomania over ‘power structures’, which followed on directly from the Foucauldian notion of the interconnectivity of power and knowledge. In other words, the rot was there from the outset. As C. S. Lewis observed, ‘if the first step in an argument is wrong, everything that follows will be wrong’.

Rather than confront bad ideas through discussion, debate, ridicule and protest, the culture warriors of the 2010s preferred to

intimidate their detractors into silence through what became known as ‘cancel culture’, a method of public humiliation and harassment which could often lead to the target losing his or her means of income. Often the response was massively disproportionate, and people found themselves shamed and denounced for simply expressing an opinion that did not align with the popular view. For these activists, the very notion of debate was anathema, because even to hear the opposing side would be to facilitate its dissemination in the public discourse.

More insidiously, they sought to empower the state and strengthen ‘hate speech’ laws to curb individual freedom. At one point the police in the United Kingdom were arresting more than 3,000 people per year for offensive remarks posted online, and investigating a further 120,000 over a five-year period for ‘non-crime hate incidents’. All of this was cheered on by activists in the belief that theirs was a saintly cause, but their illiberal actions ultimately bolstered the very ideas they purported to despise.

The overall effect of this movement was to cultivate a climate in which good people felt unable to speak their minds for fear of being misinterpreted and mischaracterised, wilfully or otherwise. By 2020, activists had managed to restrict the ‘Overton window’ to such an extent that much-needed discussions – such as how to deal with the challenges raised by gender self-identification and the possible impact on women’s sex-based rights – were often avoided entirely. Many were baffled by developments which, just ten years ago, would have seemed unimaginable. Yet to question or challenge the new creed of ‘wokeness’ was to risk being decried in the most stigmatising terms. Labels such as ‘racist’, ‘misogynist’, ‘homophobe’, ‘transphobe’ and ‘Nazi’ – extremely serious allegations that should only be used when there is incontrovertible evidence – were now so promiscuously applied that they had all but lost their impact. This not only provided cover for the far right, but also actively promoted the worst people in society by creating an illusion of widespread crypto-fascism.

At the outset of 2020, the institutional power of the Critical Social Justice movement was established to such a degree that it seemed as though it was here to stay. Genuinely liberal values – freedom of speech, freedom of the press, individual autonomy, open-mindedness and evidence-based epistemology – were now routinely accompanied by multiple caveats. It would take something out of the ordinary to stem the momentum.

With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, many suspected that this time had come. With country after country closing its borders, hospitals struggling to cope with the rate of infections, and the prospect of a global recession, the insistence of activists that certain words and opinions were tantamount to ‘erasure’, ‘violence’ and a threat to people’s ‘safety’ suddenly seemed more absurd than ever. Leftist identitarians who had spent the past five years having coniptions brought on by fantasies that we were living in a state of neo-Nazism, and insisting that some of the most privileged people who have ever existed were nonetheless oppressed, were now being confronted with a glimmer of actual hardship. In a post-coronavirus world, was it conceivable that English faculties at top universities would yield to activists’ demands to censure staff who challenged the new orthodoxy? Or that thousands of British citizens would be investigated by the police for ‘non-crime’? Or that art and literature would be judged primarily on how closely it mirrored vogueish preoccupations?

Those who were initially convinced that intersectional identity politics would be fatally undermined by the spread of Covid-19 were soon to be disabused. The agents of the culture war were already too well inoculated against the concerns of material reality. Even as governments around the world were imposing draconian restrictions on citizens’ liberty in order to curtail the spread of the virus, activists were busy claiming the impact would be most keenly felt by disenfranchised groups. An article in *Salon* declared that the pandemic had been accelerated by ‘white male privilege’ and the ‘racist white voters’ responsible for the Trump administration. A writer for *Vice* bewailed the postponement of trans surgery in favour of coronavirus victims. *Rolling Stone* ran a piece entitled ‘How social distancing could lead to a spike in white nationalism’. CNN criticised President Donald Trump’s coronavirus ‘task force’ for its lack of diversity. Australian senator Mehreen Faruqi called it ‘a gendered crisis’ that carried a ‘disproportionate risk’ to women, in spite of the fact that men were statistically more likely to die. American politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez claimed that deaths were spiking in ethnic-minority communities, and that ‘Covid relief should be drafted with a lens of reparations’.

In the United Kingdom, the Metropolitan Police were urging members of the public to be on the lookout for ‘hate crime related to the Covid-19 pandemic’, and academics at Queen Mary University in London were calling for ‘an intersectional view of the coronavirus pandemic’. Not to be outdone, the African-American Policy Forum hosted a webinar to explore ‘the intersectional failures that Covid lays bare’. One participant, Professor Dorothy Roberts, even went so far as to argue that the spread of the virus had been caused by ‘the current racial-capitalist system’ and that prisons – with their disproportionate number of black inmates – should therefore be abolished. It started to feel as though it would take an apocalyptic event of biblical proportions to put an end to the culture war, and even then there would always be commentators available to denounce the plague of locusts for its heteronormativity.

Of course, the new puritans weren’t the only ones who saw the pandemic as an opportunity to win ideological battles. Depending on who one listened to, the crisis was either going to vindicate socialism or advance the case for capitalism. It either proved that the European Union was a failed enterprise all along, or that Brexit was a mistake and must now be reversed. It would either bring us together and demonstrate the inherent benevolence of humanity, or drive us apart and expose us as the self-interested creatures we always were. Somehow, this disease conveniently ended up proving whichever political or philosophical point any given person preferred to make.

In a sense, I was just as guilty of this kind of prognostication. I wrote an article in early April 2020 entitled ‘Coronavirus won’t kill the culture wars’, in which I predicted that the ideologues of Critical Social Justice would simply ‘find a way to turn this crisis to their advantage and emerge more determined and vitriolic and authoritarian than ever before’. Yet it was always my hope that I would be proved wrong. As it transpired, the pressures of the lockdowns had heated the crucible to boiling point. Towards the end of May, the eruption finally occurred.

History is replete with famously catalytic moments. Every schoolchild knows that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria triggered the events leading to the First World War. In the Nika Revolt of 532, half of Constantinople was destroyed and more than 30,000 killed after Emperor Justinian refused to pardon two condemned prisoners. In 1738, the severing of Robert Jenkins's ear is said to have resulted in years of fighting between British and Spanish forces in the West Indies. And for the mythologically minded there is always Helen of Troy, whose elopement with Paris was said to be the *casus belli* for the Trojan War.

Fanciful historians have always portrayed such incidents as the sparks that ignited change. In truth, all political, military and cultural revolutions arise from a concatenation of circumstances that, when conveyed through the medium of historical analysis, give the impression of what the Greek tragedians called *peripeteia*: a sudden reversal of fortune which redirects the course of the action. If we were to write the drama of the twenty-first century culture war, the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020 would be the dramatic crux. So, while acknowledging that the cultural revolution that ensued was not necessarily dependent on this crime, with hindsight it is clear that this was the event horizon. We had reached the point of no return.

When Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes, leading to his asphyxiation and death, there was universal condemnation. Society was divided between those who saw the murder as symptomatic of 'systemic racism' and those who saw it as the abhorrent and aberrant behaviour of a bad cop. It was an ideological conflict between individual responsibility and collective guilt. As the peaceful protests became overshadowed by acts of looting, rioting and arson, it was clear that this was no longer simply about the death of one man. The tornado of anger that swept the Western world in the aftermath of this tragedy cleared the way for an illiberal movement to take control.

Murals of George Floyd soon began appearing internationally, some of which carried conspicuously religious overtones. A painting in Barcelona depicted Floyd with angel's wings. In Houston, another mural saw a winged Floyd with the addition of a halo. Artist Kelly Latimore painted a piece called 'Mama', a *pietà* with a figure resembling Floyd taking the place of Jesus in the arms of a black Virgin Mary. While some interpreted the painting as a form of artistic canonisation, it could as easily be seen as a comment on the consecration of a murdered man in the public imagination. Either way, the iconography was becoming obvious, and it was clear that Floyd had been enlisted as the first martyr of a new religion.

At times of heightened emotion, discussion is always difficult. It is impossible to see the footage of Floyd's murder without feeling a sense of horror at this utter disregard for human life. The police are uniquely licensed to use force against citizens in the interests of upholding law and order, and so it is essential that we are vigilant against abuses of this power. Any instances of police brutality or racism need to be opposed with vigour, and the protesters who did so in the wake of this senseless killing were perfectly entitled to do so. Peaceful protest is the hallmark of a healthy democracy.

This particular event, however, was so freighted with emotion that many commentators began making excuses when protests turned violent. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the *New York Times* reporter who won the Pulitzer Prize for creating the '1619 project' – an overview of American history so revisionist that even its own fact-checker raised concerns – declared that 'destroying property, which can be replaced, is not violence'. This statement was entirely in keeping with Critical Social Justice doctrine, according to which words may be redefined at will for the sake of political expediency.

Major media outlets, politicians and celebrities followed suit, defending and encouraging violent action. Some who condemned the looting, arson and physical attacks were accused of upholding white supremacy, a disingenuous charge almost certainly intended to quash dissent. Activist Vicky Osterweil even wrote a book entitled *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (2020). The very same people who would openly pronounce 'microaggressions' and controversial opinions to be forms of 'violence' saw no contradiction in redefining vandalism and physical assaults as non-violence.

Over months of public unrest which often veered into criminality, discussion was stifled out of fears that to condemn the violence would be perceived as endorsing racism. Isolated incidents of the maltreatment of suspects by police were taken as evidence of a 'systemic' problem, rather than the abuse of power by contemptible individuals. Others reacted in more unexpected ways. A viral video taken in Houston, Texas, showed a large group of white people kneeling to their black neighbours to beg forgiveness on behalf of all their race. Another video circulated on social media in which white crowds were seen sitting on the ground with their arms raised in supplication, repeating a chant: 'I will use my voice in the most uplifting way possible and do everything in my power to educate my community'. The religiosity was impossible to miss.

Many found it sinister to witness these spectacles of mass self-flagellation. Why were these people apologising for the racism of their ancestors? The gesture only made sense if one accepted the notion of collective guilt, precisely the same rationale behind the argument in favour of reparations for slavery. In the late 1960s, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt criticised the 'rather fashionable' tendency among white liberals to accept collective guilt, which she described as 'the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits'. In this, she was articulating something that we all instinctively know. 'Where all are guilty, no one is,' she wrote. 'The real rift between black and white is not healed by being translated into an even less reconcilable conflict between collective innocence and collective guilt'. Yet this was now precisely the kind of conflict that was being fostered.

Factions of the media were also taking sides. After the *New York Times* ran an article by a Republican senator calling for military intervention, an in-house dispute broke out between the old-school liberal journalists who believed in diversity of opinion, and the mostly younger staff members who saw the article as tantamount to violence. The opinion editor James Bennet was eventually fired and replaced with Katie Kingsbury. Her first act in her new role was to issue a directive to her staff: 'Anyone who sees any piece of Opinion journalism, headlines, social posts, photos – you name it – that gives you the slightest pause, please call or text me immediately'. With journalists being openly invited to spy on their colleagues and report them for wrongthink, it was safe to say that the *New York Times*'s 170-year-old reputation for liberalism had come to an abrupt end.

Before long, major corporations were posting messages of endorsement for Black Lives Matter, an organisation campaigning against what it called 'institutional racism', a term that dates to the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. Celebrities were sharing the Black Lives Matter hashtag on social media and providing funds for those who had been arrested in

the protests. A consensus was quickly established in the mainstream media that America was fundamentally and irredeemably racist. This was a narrative that quickly spread, with charges of ‘systemic racism’ soon being levelled against all nations in the Western world. Niche academic disciplines – such as Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies – were suddenly imported to the United Kingdom, even though they made little sense beyond the context of American history.

In this febrile climate, the media and political class endorsed the protesters uncritically, and in doing so circumvented the need for serious debate about their more dubious aims. Politicians were ‘taking the knee’ for photo opportunities, and London mayor Sadiq Kahn announced that he would be consulting ‘diversity experts’ to determine which historical landmarks ought to be removed. Activists supportive of Black Lives Matter began targeting public monuments and street names associated with Britain’s colonialist history. A campaign to ‘shut down academia’ and ‘shut down STEM’ was gaining momentum, with academics calling for more inclusive ‘new ways of knowing’ and asserting that higher education, like all major cultural institutions, was ‘systemically racist’. Corporations were likewise competing with each other to emphasise their solidarity. PG Tips and Yorkshire Tea were quick to rebuke customers via Twitter for any signs of non-conformity, as though their values extended any further than the mass distribution of tea for financial gain.

Meanwhile, television channels were frantically deleting content that might cause offence. Popular comedy shows were removed from streaming services such as BBC iPlayer and Netflix due to their supposedly insensitive jokes about race. *Gone with the Wind* (1939) lived up to its name when it was excised from HBO Max with the possibility that it would return at a later date with a ‘discussion of its historical context’. Such decisions were almost certainly well-intentioned, but were based on the patronising belief that viewers would be incapable of understanding how moral standards change over time.

In the months leading up to the 2020 American election, the culture war was freewheeling out of control. The essential work of standing up against police brutality, as evinced by the unforgivable treatment of Floyd, was obscured by activists – many of them white and middle-class – who had seized the opportunity to exploit a worthy cause. Those of us who had urged vigilance in respect to the rise of identity politics and the religion of Critical Social Justice had now been fully vindicated. For years we had warned about the ways in which the culture war had the potential to infect all public and political discourse. Now it had exploded onto the streets.

Saints and Sinners

The summer of 2020 brought with it a sense of events unhinging themselves from real life, a dizzying escapade into Topsyturkeydom. The sudden predominance of the Black Lives Matter movement was achieved through a limited understanding of its goals, one encouraged by the simple formulation of its name. To take an oppositional stance would be to invite the question ‘So you *don’t* believe that black lives matter?’, a highly effective act of rhetorical sidestepping.

Today, Black Lives Matter is just one of many organisations which thrive under the popular confluence of intersectionality and identity politics. Activists are fighting multiple battles on multiple fronts – white supremacy, the patriarchy, cisgender normativity – concepts that are now perceived as overlapping and interdependent. Such alliances were easy to anticipate; although organisationally disparate, these movements were always ideologically connected, which was why the Black Lives Matter manifesto included a commitment to ‘dismantle cisgender privilege’, foster a ‘queer-affirming network’ and ‘disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement’. It is why the Tavistock Centre in London, a paediatric gender clinic run by the National Health Service, urged its staff members to add a banner to their emails that displayed the raised fist emblem of Black Lives Matter against a backdrop of a rainbow pride flag.

The religion of Critical Social Justice, in other words, is a hydra with many heads. When one encounters someone who speaks in the familiar slogans of intersectionality, one can almost always predict their opinions on a whole range of other subjects. This is why the shorthand of ‘woke’ has become so useful to encapsulate a range of interconnected identity-obsessed movements. It is also why, as we shall see, its proponents have expended so much energy into delegitimising the term.

On the face of it, when an activist such as Emily Gorcenski states that ‘all TERFs [Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists] are white supremacists’ it makes little sense. Nor does the writer Roslyn Talusan’s assertion that gender-critical feminists are ‘white supremacists who’ve co-opted feminism to mask their bigotry’. The hectoring and dogmatic tone, the obscene generalisations, the unfalsifiable claims in lieu of evidence, the lack of self-awareness, the narcissistic conviction that they can read other people’s minds, the impulse to interpret critics in the most uncharitable possible way, the outright bigotry and intolerance of dissent: all of this is characteristic of the new puritans.

This is because the various branches of Critical Social Justice activism, from the extreme elements of the transgender movement to Black Lives Matter, are all underpinned by a form of identitarianism siphoned from the same source. In these circles, there is no distinction between the racist, the sexist, the homophobe, the transphobe; each designation implies the other. One may as well use the term ‘sinner’ and leave it there.

These various campaigns, therefore, are best understood as manifestations of a unifying belief-system. Just as the Eastern Orthodox Church has little in common with Opus Dei, they are nevertheless grounded in the tenets of Christianity. Those schooled in what became known as the ‘woke’ ideology share an infatuation with identity as being the source of their various forms of ‘truth’. Luke Easley, the Vice President of HR and Operations at the Center for Global Development, exemplifies this concept with his asseveration that ‘identity is reality – without identity there’s just a corpse’. Seen through the prism of Critical Social Justice, identity is elevated as the single most important aspect to human existence; in Easley’s terms, one’s identity is one’s soul. In addition, they have a united belief in what Pluckrose and Lindsay describe as the ‘postmodern knowledge principle’ (‘that objective knowledge cannot be obtained’) and the ‘postmodern political principle’ (‘that society is structured into systems of power and privilege’). This amounts to a form of standpoint epistemology, which rejects reason in favour of individual knowledge as determined by identity and ‘lived experience’, a point which we will explore further in Chapter 8.

Rooted largely in this anti-Enlightenment conviction that mutual understanding is an unstable precept, Critical Social

Justice is a religion of division rather than unity. The lure of collectivism is always strong, but for identitarians whose cultural and political clout resides in their ability to prove themselves victims it is indispensable. The perverse end point of identity politics – whether that be on the identitarian left or the racist far right – is segregation. LGBT-only dormitories have already appeared on many American university campuses. It has become common for activists to insist that ‘People of Color Need Spaces Without White People’ (to cite the title of a representative article by Kelsey Blackwell). At Goldsmiths University in London, student diversity officer Bahar Mustafa organised events which debarred white men from participating. When asked to defend her position, she could only resort to the standard intersectional shibboleths about structural oppression. More recently, at the same university, it was reported that Jews and white people were banned from attending a student meeting on ‘Palestinian liberation’.

This is what happens when group identity becomes an article of faith, and catchphrases are substituted for meaningful dialogue. It is the kind of arrogant certainty that originates in the conviction that one’s views are not to be challenged. As John Stuart Mill wrote, without the mental exercise of defending one’s point of view, one is left holding ‘a dead dogma, not a living truth’. Little wonder, then, that Mustafa dismissed Mill’s seminal work, *On Liberty*, as ‘just shit’, which is precisely the kind of critique one has come to expect from activists of an identitarian disposition.

For those of us who still believe in liberal values, the reduction of individuals to mere representatives of their particular demographic leaves us feeling somewhat unhorsed. The virtues of individualism, one of the many products of Enlightenment thinking, have been all but rejected by the commissars of Critical Social Justice and their acolytes. They would much rather see people defined predominately by their race, gender and sexual orientation, as opposed to their own distinct qualities. Racists, misogynists and homophobes tend to adopt a similar approach.

This pigeonholing of human experience is what social scientists call ‘insider epistemology’, more commonly known as ‘it takes one to know one’, and it lies at the heart of the identitarian faith. This is why a white student at San Francisco State University was accosted for sporting dreadlocks, why fashion outlet ASOS was forced to remove a hair clip from its website because of its resemblance to a traditional South Asian bridal accessory, and why a yoga course at the University of Ottawa was cancelled due to the ancient Indian origins of the discipline. Even language is now perceived as property to be guarded from would-be colonialists. When Dublin-based stand-up comedian Dean Scurry began his ‘Pow Wow’ podcast, he was reprimanded on Twitter for using a term that ‘belongs to First Nations culture and is not appropriate’. This reaction raises the question of to whom language belongs, and who should be the arbiter of ‘appropriate’ usage? Perhaps we should consider banning all English words of Greek etymology. We could start with ‘etymology’.

Given these circumstances, it isn’t all that surprising that students are calling for accommodation to be divided according to race and sexuality, or that activist sociologists are claiming that interracial marriage upholds white supremacy. Fear of miscegenation and interaction between racial groups has always been the backbone of racist orthodoxy. This has not changed simply because some of its advocates package their retrograde beliefs as ‘progressive’. If one were to deliberately construct an ideology intended to foster racial division and popularise the objectives of the far right, one could hardly do better than the new puritanism.

Many who oppose ‘wokeness’ do so precisely because it represents a direct threat to social liberalism. If we are serious about true social justice, we should take the Critical Social Justice movement to task for its ongoing trivialisation of important causes such as anti-racism, gender equality and rights for sexual minorities. It is the responsibility of genuine progressives to reassert the centrality of open debate as the cornerstone of any free society. In short, we need to robustly defend the liberal values that the new puritans have rejected as forms of institutional oppression.

Unlike the racist reactionaries in our midst, the new puritans have attained credibility and clout through a generalised misapprehension of their aims and core beliefs. The tenets of their religion are not engraved on any stone tablets and are open to endless reinterpretation. The success of the movement, then, lies in this wispish quality. It cannot be pinned down with ease and is therefore able to dance around the salvos of its critics.

We will consider later how such linguistic chicanery enables misguided ideas to spread without the kind of scrutiny that would see them fail. The blatant denial of reality, when combined with the subversion of the terms we use to describe it, has meant that good people have been duped into aligning themselves with causes that they would otherwise oppose. This is the key to comprehending how the Critical Social Justice ideology has so rapidly captured our major institutions. The culture war is best apprehended as word games writ large, and so to grapple with the key tenets of the new puritanism, we must first decide how best to describe them.

Denominations

The Trouble with ‘Woke’

Few words seem to generate more conversations at cross purposes than ‘woke’, whose definition varies depending on who is using it at any given time. Many who describe themselves as ‘woke’ believe that they are simply opposing racism and upholding the principles of social justice, but do not realise that for the activist *cognoscenti* these terms have very different meanings. The matter is complicated further by specious claims that ‘woke’ is merely a snarl word invented by the right, a tactical manoeuvre which undermines the ability of critics to effectively identify the phenomenon they are describing. An enemy without a name is impossible to defeat on the battleground of ideas. It would be like trying to fight with those ghostly twins in *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003); every time you strike, they dematerialise and your fist simply passes through.

The term ‘woke’ emerged in African-American vernacular during the early twentieth century to signify an alertness to injustice, particularly racism. The metaphor of ‘waking up’ to the reality of one’s subjugation saw it incorporated into the lexicon of black activism. The Jamaican political activist and black nationalist Marcus Garvey (1887– 1940) adopted this metaphor in his famous rallying cry: ‘Wake up, Ethiopia! Wake up, Africa!’ In Barry Beckham’s play *Garvey Lives!* (1971), the notion of ‘waking up’ to injustice is modified into the colloquialism of ‘staying woke’. As one character puts it: ‘I been sleeping all my life. And now that Mr Garvey done woke me up, I’m gon’ stay woke’. Some date the origins of this usage back to the ‘Wide Awakes’, an anti-slavery paramilitary movement formed by supporters of Abraham Lincoln’s Republican party in 1860.

The phrase ‘stay woke’ also appeared in a recording of Lead Belly’s ‘Scottsboro Boys’ (1938), a protest song that addressed the trial of nine young black men accused of raping a white woman in 1931, which was said to be an inspiration for the plot of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The term enjoyed a resurgence in 2008 due to Erykah Badu’s song ‘Master Teacher (Stay Woke)’, and was taken up by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. Activist publications such as the *Guardian* embraced the term with glee, but the connotations soon expanded from the issue of race to include all forms of identity politics. ‘Woke’ was rapidly being perceived as the latest incarnation of ‘political correctness’ although, as we shall see, this comparison is flawed. In any case, readers soon became accustomed to headlines such as ‘Can a woke makeover win Barbie and Monopoly new fans?’ and ‘My search for Mr Woke: a dating diary’. In the US, articles such as ‘Keeping your classroom woke’, ‘Becoming woke in the wake of “Me Too”’ and ‘The woke black person’s guide to talking about oppression with family’ became commonplace.

The popular understanding of the term found its way into mainstream dictionaries, with most defining it along the lines of ‘to be alert to injustice in society, especially racism’. This definition is still extant, although this has not prevented a general sense of bewilderment. A 2021 study by the Centre for Policy Studies found that only 37 per cent of respondents understood the meaning of the term. In a YouGov poll in the same year, 23 per cent of respondents said that they were not ‘woke’, while 12 per cent believed that they were. Of the 59 per cent who claimed to understand what it meant to be ‘woke’, only a third described themselves as such, with more than half rejecting the label. These findings explain why debates surrounding this word are rife with confusion and anger; everybody appears to be using different definitions and castigating others for not sharing their own. It is a game in which all the players are inventing their own rules as they go along.

How is it that a term with a clear dictionary definition should be the cause of such general perplexity? If all that ‘woke’ really means is ‘to be alert to injustice in society, especially racism’, then the vast majority of people would surely be happy to accept the label. That so many do not was the motivation behind composer Daniel Kidane’s piece ‘Woke’ for the 2019 *Last Night of the Proms*, which addressed his concern that the term had veered from its standard definition. In an article for the *Guardian* he refers to this process as ‘woke-washing’: ‘as the word grew in popularity,’ Kidane writes, ‘the licence to use it in any which way expanded and its meaning became diluted’.

This dilution occurred largely because many who self-identified as ‘woke’ in the mid-2010s were vocal advocates of the religion of Critical Social Justice. They had appropriated and sloganised the term so that it no longer simply implied one who was concerned about racism and other forms of injustice but became irrevocably connected to the authoritarian mindset of the new puritans. At the same time, those who identified as ‘woke’ could exploit the good natures of those who held fast to the traditional definition and claim that their activism was solely concerned with rectifying inequality.

To take one example of a liberal-minded writer being duped in this way, let us consider journalist Stuart Heritage’s ‘Woke Handbook’ for *The Times* which aims to explain this mysterious concept to an older generation. He begins by offering a definition:

In its truest form, ‘woke’ means educating yourself to be alert to issues of social justice that aren’t usually apparent in one’s day-to-day life. So, for example, a woke man will take time to learn about the issues that affect women, in order to create a more equal society. A woke feminist will educate herself on trans people, so that their feminism can become more inclusive. Woke white people will learn about the historical injustices faced by black communities. The list goes on.

If only it were that simple. The term has been through so many evolutions that there is no commonly accepted definition, which

of course explains why Heritage would feel the need to produce his guide in the first place. Yet the ideological connotations of the word cannot be wished away by adopting a definition that most people, according to the available data, simply do not recognise.

In effect we are dealing with the old ‘motte and bailey’ tactic. This relates to the medieval castle structure comprising a fortress on a raised mound (the motte) surrounded by a walled courtyard (the bailey). Given its location and fortifications, the motte is relatively easy to protect, as opposed to the bailey which is vulnerable to attack. As an informal fallacy in argumentation, the metaphor works as follows. Someone advances a tendentious viewpoint which we refer to as the ‘bailey’ because it is so difficult to defend. When challenged, our disputant retreats to the ‘motte’, which represents a far more modest proposal, and is able to claim that his or her ‘bailey’ argument has not been successfully refuted. When activists champion ‘woke’ causes, they are referring by and large to the kind of postmodern purity culture that is the subject of this book. When challenged in any way, they are able to cite the traditional definition of ‘woke’, which is ‘to be alert to injustice, especially racism’. This ‘motte’ represents the kind of position held by virtually everyone, which means that they are able to entice others into its walls and claim them for their ‘bailey’. This technique means that liberal-minded people are coaxed into advocating illiberal causes, or at the very least are counted as fellow travellers.

In order for any constructive dialogue to take place, therefore, we must recognise that the word ‘woke’ has come to mean entirely different things to different people. This leaves those of us who are interested in advancing the debate in something of a quandary. After all, there is no point in haggling over the price of a sofa if the customer thinks he is buying a goat.

If the phrase ‘woke’ is plagued by such ambiguities, perhaps ‘identitarian left’ would better suit our purposes. The Critical Social Justice movement is underpinned by a form of identity politics which represents an especially bellicose form of collectivism, but this is true of both the left and the right. On the left it takes the form of demands to ‘stay in your lane’, an insistence that only those within a particular ethnic, sexual or gender demographic are entitled to speak on certain issues. On the right, identity politics manifests itself through ugly claims to racial superiority and white nationalism. In either case we are dealing with a phenomenon best described as ‘identitarianism’, a term that originated in far-right movements, but is now similarly well-suited for their far-left antitheses.

Many activists on the identitarian left, in other words, share far more ideological common ground with the far right than they would care to admit. Both factions repudiate John Stuart Mill’s principle that ‘the individual is sovereign’ in favour of group identity; both are openly hostile to free speech and, irrespective of intentions, both are responsible for creating the conditions within which the far right can flourish. That said, to refer to the Critical Social Justice movement as the ‘identitarian left’ would be to accept their claim to be in any meaningful sense ‘left wing’. The new puritans have eschewed the traditional socialist goals of redressing economic inequality and redistributing wealth and replaced them with an obsessive focus on race, gender and sexuality. These are deemed to be the source of all disparities in power, in spite of the obvious truth that privilege is most commonly determined by money, class, heredity and nepotism.

Like their postmodernist forebears, the new puritans represent a predominately bourgeois movement whose mistrust of the masses is paralleled in its mistrust of democracy. I will explore this refocus from class consciousness to identity politics later in this chapter, and in particular how this has enabled activists to claim victimhood while freeing themselves of the obligation to dismantle an economic system that works for their benefit, all the while inadvertently perpetuating the racial divisions they claim to oppose. As the historian Touré Reed has observed, ‘the problem is that liberals have remained committed to viewing racial disparities through race-reductionist lenses that not only abstract race from class but they sometimes even reify race and racism’.

To return to ‘woke’, perhaps it would be helpful to outline the core beliefs of those who are so described. This is harder than it seems, because many who adhere to the ideology now shun the term on the grounds that some critics use it as a catch-all slur. The writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch, for instance, argued in the *Guardian* that anyone using the word is ‘likely to be a right-wing culture warrior angry at a phenomenon that lives mainly in their imagination’. Not all of her colleagues received the memo, which is why a *Guardian* writer recently described the *Saved by the Bell* movie reboot as ‘a woke reimaging’ and another asked ‘why are some Americans woke online but not in real life?’

The proposition that the term is the invention of the reactionary right is in many cases a revisionist strategy, one that is unlikely to succeed given that the most cursory of internet searches will uncover evidence of how readily public figures have wholeheartedly embraced the term in the recent past. When Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey wore a '#StayWoke' T-shirt on stage at the 2016 ReCode conference, he was not roundly lambasted for using a term that was merely ‘a right-wing slur’. When asked at an event in Iowa in September 2019 whether Donald Trump would be re-elected, Kamala Harris replied ‘2020 will not be 2016 . . . People are woke’. At no point was she accused of disseminating right-wing propaganda. These figures were woke, and proud of it.

For the sake of clarity, then, I will attempt to outline the key tenets of an ideology that has been variously described as ‘wokeness’, ‘wokism’, ‘wokery’, ‘wokedom’, ‘Social Justice’, ‘Critical Social Justice’, and ‘leftist identitarianism’, even though some of its followers may dispute any and all of these terms.

Censorship

First and foremost, ‘wokeness’ is a belief system underpinned by the postmodernist notion that our understanding of reality is constructed through language. Its adherents are convinced that words can be a form of violence and that censorship – either by the state or Silicon Valley tech giants or societal pressure (colloquially known as ‘cancel culture’) – is therefore necessary to guarantee social justice.

Power

The ‘woke’ maintain that society operates on the basis of invisible power structures that only those who are trained in Critical Theory are qualified to detect. This conceptualisation is derived from Foucault, who saw power as produced by discourses that

permeate all society in all directions, and not solely as a top-down phenomenon. ‘Power is everywhere’, he writes, ‘not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’. Denials of such structures are taken as further evidence of their existence, as anyone who would deny them is likely to be benefiting from the privileges they afford. Society must be reconstructed in order to guarantee equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity. In other words, we are talking here about ‘equity’ rather than equality.

Identity politics

The ‘woke’ see people in terms of their group identity rather than their individual qualities. Race, gender and sexuality – as opposed to class or economic disparities – are taken to be the determining factors when it comes to mapping the power structures that undergird society. This is why intersectionality plays such a significant role within the discourse of Critical Social Justice.

Lived experience

One of the key factors of Enlightenment thinking is the prioritisation of evidence-based epistemology rather than that which is grounded in faith, superstition or intuition. This is rejected by the ‘woke’ in favour of ‘lived experience’, which proposes that there are multiple ‘ways of knowing’ and prioritises individual ‘truths’.

All of which accounts for the tendency among the ‘woke’ to disregard data if they do not corroborate their existing views, and to interpret all forms of inequality of outcome as evidence of systemic oppression. Society is interpreted on the basis of group identity and equity achieved through the curtailing of individual freedoms, including freedom of speech. For all the wrangling over definitions, it might be simpler to think of ‘woke’ as a synonym for ‘anti-liberal’.

This is the key point that bears repeating: the new puritans are adept at glossing their illiberal ideas with progressive terminology. For those who have imbibed the postmodern hallucinogen, and have become convinced that our understanding of reality is wholly constructed through language, there is no harm in casually redefining terms – or outright lying about how such terms are generally used – if the ends justify the means. It’s the same reason governments refer to swingeing cuts to the welfare state as ‘efficiency savings’. It’s why the CIA has referred to torture as ‘enhanced interrogation’. It’s why the Ministry of State Security during the era of Soviet forced labour camps did not ‘sentence’ a person, but rather ‘imposed an administrative penalty’. In his book, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie recalls hearing a US military spokesman during the Vietnam War describe a deadly bombing raid as having ‘obtained a 100 per cent mortality response’. This is the kind of rhetorical sleight of hand that Orwell warned us about, and the ‘woke’ are masters of the art.

Most people who are concerned about ‘woke’ culture, and describe it as such, are referring to the very specific mindset outlined above. For them the term is merely descriptive, although we would be unwise to ignore the vocal few who have adopted ‘woke’ as a form of insult and who genuinely oppose the noble goal of confronting prejudice. Debates which have been framed as ‘anti-woke versus woke’ smack of tabloid sensationalism, which has led to a general misapprehension of what is really at stake. It is also arguably why such terms ought to be avoided, as the word games are a distraction from the issues at hand. At heart, however, this distinction is best approximated as a conflict between liberalism (‘anti-woke’) and authoritarianism (‘woke’). In spite of those who wear the mantle of ‘anti-woke’ as a means to advance illiberal and regressive ideas, the overwhelming majority of those who take an ‘anti-woke’ stance are trying to resist bigotry rather than uphold it.

Intersectionality

I have suggested that the religion of Critical Social Justice is a many-headed hydra, with all the various offshoots connected by the body of postmodernism. With this in mind, it is useful to think of intersectionality as the beast’s beating heart. Intersectionality is a formerly obscure branch of feminism that underpins today’s culture wars, influencing the policies of employers, educators and politicians, in spite of the fact that few have taken the trouble to understand its implications. Like the key aspects of the ‘woke’ movement already discussed, intersectionality is now taken as an article of faith and implemented without question. For the new puritans, debate is a form of heresy.

The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in an article published in 1989 which focused on three discrimination cases. The first of these was a 1976 lawsuit, *Degraffenreid v. General Motors*, in which five black women alleged that they had not been hired because of their race and gender. The court found that the company’s record of employing black men and white women was evidence that it was neither racist nor sexist. Black women, in other words, were left in limbo. As Crenshaw put it in a recent TED talk: ‘Without frames that allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, many will fall through the cracks of our movement’.

Crenshaw has a point. No civilised person would contest the principle that applicants should not be discriminated against in this way, or support the idea that such discrimination should be enabled by legal loopholes. Today such views are uncontested, but the same could not be said in the mid-seventies. To illustrate the concept, Crenshaw imagined the intersection of a crossroads, demarcated according to sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. If you are a victim at the intersection, you will feel the impact from multiple directions. As a metaphor this is helpful, but that is where its utility ends.

Intersectionality has now transformed into a fully fledged theoretical practice, one that predominates in contemporary feminism, and has become a crucial doctrine of the religion of Critical Social Justice. Thankfully, the kind of discrimination cases addressed by Crenshaw in her original article have become rare in the intervening four decades, but the unremitting focus on victimhood has seemingly escalated as social attitudes have progressed. Just as fear of crime has risen as actual crime has dropped, the illusion that we live in a country plagued by social injustice is more common than ever before. How else might one explain a report in the *Pink News* about a group of ‘queer hikers’ who seek to prove that ‘the great outdoors isn’t just for cis,

straight, middle class folk' – as though anyone ever assumed it was – and have reached the extraordinary conclusion that there exists 'a lack of equality around access to the outdoors'. Most gay people are perfectly capable of walking in the countryside, and only a pampered few with a grotesque yearning to self-identify as 'oppressed' would ever pretend otherwise.

We see this also in the perpetration of hoax 'hate crimes' and what political commentator Brendan O'Neill has described as 'contemporary society's sanctification of victimhood'. The phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified by the actor Jussie Smollett who, in January 2019, hired two associates to don masks and physically assault him while shouting racist and homophobic slurs. Although the most widely reported, the Smollett case is by no means an isolated incident. Political scientist Wilfred Reilly has documented what he describes as 'an epidemic of hoaxes' which 'provide support for the meta-narrative of majority group bigotry'. In addition to outlining numerous examples, he presents a compelling thesis that fabricated 'hate crimes' not only 'exaggerate racial animosities', but 'may very well fuel real hate crimes in the future'. The goal of intersectionality was never to turn victimhood into cultural capital, but its influence has nonetheless facilitated this development. This would at least make sense of some activists' claims of 'ancestral trauma' or 'post-traumatic slave syndrome'. If oppression can be inherited, one can still be a victim while maintaining a life of relative privilege.

As an analytical framework, intersectionality seeks to apply a formula to interrelated concepts – oppression, prejudice, power – that are too sprawling and nebulous to be successfully quantified. The tendency to present easy solutions to difficult problems is a common characteristic of ideologues. There are communists who tell us that if we follow their rules, everyone will be equal. There are capitalists who insist that their system always rewards merit and hard work. Most religious groups claim that salvation can only be achieved if we follow their particular deity. The intersectional belief that hierarchies can be eliminated through tackling the power structures that underpin society is similarly idealistic.

This is not to suggest that tackling injustice and prejudice should not be a priority, but the application of this kind of framework only creates a new kind of hierarchy, one in which various factions compete to be the most victimised. Moreover, there are infinite possible variables when it comes to gauging levels of oppression. We need not look beyond our own experience to know that individuals who are conventionally more attractive tend to enjoy undeserved advantages. Indeed, there are countless ways in which one person can be privileged over another. Many are accidents of birth – such as health, temperament, height, or intelligence – and the list could go on indefinitely. The solution for the intersectionalists is to restrict their framework to a few key factors: race, gender and sexuality. As already noted, it is remarkable that class, the most direct source of social privilege, is usually overlooked.

The idea that underpins intersectionality is not new; Crenshaw simply found a more evocative way of describing it. Second-wave feminists in particular had addressed the importance of recognising that individuals can face discrimination on multiple fronts. In 1969, for instance, political activist Frances M. Beal wrote a treatise called 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female'. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), the philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler considered how 'gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities' and how it is therefore 'impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained'. To an extent, these authors shared common ground with Crenshaw in her attempt to identify interlocking forms of oppression in the hope that ways to compensate might be found in the process. It was a sound principle based on admirable intentions.

The form of intersectionality that predominates today is not what Crenshaw originally envisaged. One sympathises with her frustration when asked to define the concept: 'These days, I start with what it's not, because there has been distortion. It's not identity politics on steroids'. Just as Foucault's ideas have been misapplied and twisted into forms he would not recognise, many of Crenshaw's votaries have pummelled the nuance out of her brainchild. In its contemporary manifestation, intersectionality seems to be operating on a range of assumptions which are helming the Critical Social Justice movement on a course to self-destruction. We saw this in January 2019, when a women's march in California was cancelled because the organisers feared that too many white women would attend. Then there were the pink 'pussy hats' worn at the women's marches after the election of Donald Trump. Intersectional activists deemed these to be insufficiently inclusive, on the grounds that some people who identify as women do not have vaginas. Katherine Nolan, the designer of the pussy hat, apologised and deleted the knitting pattern from her website.

With its emphasis on group identity, present-day intersectionality is rooted in a collectivist worldview. An article in the *Huffington Post* by Lyz Lenz entitled 'Women Are Evil' exemplifies this approach, assuming that white women are inherently privileged and a 'menace' that has 'yet to be reckoned with'. Likewise, the author and diversity consultant Robin DiAngelo insists that treating people equally irrespective of the colour of their skin is 'dangerous', because it fails to account for oppressive power structures which are embedded in society. So we are in the bizarre situation where a well-intentioned anti-racist academic is urging us to be racist in order to combat racism.

To define individuals principally through their group identity is a degrading approach that has devastating and retrograde consequences for humanity. As biologically hierarchical creatures who are subject to an infinite number of external social forces, human beings cannot be reduced to abstractions based on 'matrices of oppression', and the idea that to do so could deliver equality of outcome seems hopelessly quixotic. The best that we can do is to attempt to redress all forms of injustice as and when we encounter them, and we don't need intersectionality to show us how to do that.

The religion of Critical Social Justice operates as a virus, attaching, penetrating and replicating its way throughout society. Under mounting pressure to conform, infection seems the only option. The analogy might seem ungracious, were it not for the fact that it has been proposed by intersectionalists themselves. In their paper 'Women's Studies as Virus: Institutional Feminism and the Projection of Danger', Breanne Fahs and Michael Karger argue that 'one future pedagogical priority of women's studies is to train students not only to master a body of knowledge but also to serve as symbolic "viruses" that infect, unsettle, and disrupt traditional and entrenched fields'.

Yet even with this in mind, it is worth considering why so many institutions have been susceptible to infection in the first place. As I have already argued, the issue of class is a major contributory factor. Although many intersectionalists have addressed class as a form of oppression, many of their disciples have neglected to do so. Critical Social Justice in its current

form is an overwhelmingly middle-class concern, and its failure to address issues of economic inequality is not so much a glitch as the key to its success.

A Bourgeois Virus

There is a curious moment in Norman Douglas's *Fountains in the Sand* (1912) – an account of the author's travels in Tunisia in the decades after French rule had been established – where he meets a Polish count wandering the streets of Gafsa in a haze of melancholia. He has fallen on hard times, his friends have abandoned him and, unaccustomed to work, he can think of no route back to the life he once knew. As ever with Douglas's encounters with strangers, the conversation turns philosophical. 'Tell me,' says the count, 'is not poverty a kind of madness, an obsession that haunts you night and day? To puzzle, at every hour, how to meet this demand and how to shun that one; to deny yourself the necessities of life, and your friends those poor little pleasures that you are yearning to bestow upon them – is it not a mental malady, a fever; is it not damnation itself?'

This is a specifically aristocratic conceptualisation of despair, made all the more ironic by the count's claim that one cannot judge the poor until one has lived a pauper's life. His situation cannot be too perilous, given that he apparently has the time to roam the city at ease, bewailing his condition to anyone who will listen like some kind of doleful *flâneur*. Yet there is something that rings true in the count's appeal to 'never judge an impoverished man by your own standards of right and wrong'. While some socialists are inclined to excuse criminality among those in desperate circumstances (a patronising assumption that belittles the moral agency of the working class), some conservatives can be dogged in their refusal to accept that one's prospects are severely limited when financial resources are meagre.

In truth, the reality of poverty is often unfathomable to those who have not experienced it. As a boy I often felt jealous of the children at the local private school whose families took holidays abroad, and who seemed to me wealthier than Croesus. But when I heard my mother talk about her upbringing in a working-class area of Derry in the 1950s, living in a small house with no indoor plumbing, having to share a bed with two sisters, and using bicarbonate of soda as an affordable substitute for toothpaste, it quickly put an end to any self-pitying thoughts. In his memoir *Self-Portrait in Black and White* (2019), the American cultural critic Thomas Chatterton Williams recalls his mother telling him that 'poverty, real poverty, was nothing so much as it was the permanent sense that nothing ever works'. The nineteenth-century essayist William Hazlitt compared the want of money to 'travelling in a foreign country without a passport – you are stopped, suspected, and made ridiculous at every turn'. This is a world away from the experience of those accustomed to wealth who, although not exempt from the inevitable tragedies of human existence, are at least able to evade the daily aggravations that only money can make disappear.

Class distinctions may be closely tied to levels of income, but more pertinent is the outlook that such conditions foster. Consider former prime minister David Cameron, who once said in an interview: 'The papers keep writing that [my wife] comes from a very blue-blooded background. She's actually very unconventional. She went to a day school'. This is the kind of innocent myopia that comes about when one's entire worldview has evolved in a state of relative affluence. There is a good reason why leftists whose predominant obsession is identity politics are often reluctant to consider issues of economic hardship. The attempt to perceive class as an identity like any other falls short; we are not dealing in abstractions here, rather the tangible impact of poverty.

This is why some have struggled with George Orwell's tendency to put himself through difficulties in order to write about them. In the first half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), for instance, he describes his time among the working-class mining communities of the industrial north. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) he recounts his experiences of purposefully living for a time as homeless. Many of his essays have a similarly immersive quality. In 'The Spike' (1931), he stays for a night in a squalid workhouse in London. In 'Clink' (1932) he deliberately drinks to excess so that he will be arrested and be forced to spend a night in prison. Orwell didn't write at a distance, and his work is all the more evocative for it. Yet in all these scenarios, his insight is contingent on the knowledge that at any time he could return to his relatively comfortable lifestyle.

When left-wing politics took a turn from economic inequality to identity politics, it correspondingly shifted its emphasis from the material to the abstract. Poverty is not an identity, but a reality of those for whom the machinery of living has broken down. In its eschewal of class politics, leftist identitarianism cannot help but be a pursuit for the relatively affluent. Even to point out that the most significant advantages come from economic prosperity is treated with mistrust. According to Robin DiAngelo, the claim that the 'real oppression is class' is an example of 'white fragility' in action. While no one would dispute the existence of other forms of oppression, for activists to prioritise anything other than class and still refer to themselves as 'left wing' is incoherent.

This turn from class to group identity is no more clearly instantiated than by the concept of 'white privilege'. When activists speak of 'white privilege', they are making the valid point that white people are unlikely to experience racial discrimination in white-majority countries. It still happens, perhaps more than activists would care to admit, but it is rare. Proponents of 'white privilege' are not, therefore, suggesting that white people do not face barriers in life, but that these will generally not be due to racial factors, which is why David Wellman – author of *Portraits of White Racism* (1977) – contends that the 'essential feature of racism is not hostility or misperception, but rather the defense of a system from which advantage is derived on the basis of race'.

Although the term 'white privilege' makes sense on a conceptual level, therefore, the phrasing is clumsy and bound to cause confusion and resentment. There is little point in advancing a theory if one cannot communicate it in a lucid manner. The phrase 'white privilege' has a definitive quality, the kind of broad-stroke certainty that fails to convey that which its defenders intend. It is a rhetorical failure because it invariably rings hollow to underprivileged white people. For academics to concoct a phrase which is likely to offend, and then justify themselves by claiming that those who are offended have misunderstood their meaning, only compounds the offence caused in the first place. Those who know anything about rhetoric understand that clarity of expression is key to meaningful dialogue.

Consider the term ‘pussy-whipped’. It is meant to describe the phenomenon of heterosexual men who are obsequious to their female partners. Of course it is undeniable that uxorious males exist, but ‘pussy-whipped’ is an unhelpful form of description because the phrase is so clearly an affront. The same applies to ‘toxic masculinity’. While no one would deny that cultural expectations of men can sometimes lead to toxic behaviour, the phrase itself has a rebarbative effect.

One suspects that this is precisely the point; activists are able to argue that ‘white privilege’ and ‘toxic masculinity’ merely refer to observable sociocultural norms, while revelling in a form of passive-aggressive linguistic gameplay. When activist Munroe Bergdorf claims that ‘you can be homeless and still have white privilege’, can she really be surprised when she fails to persuade others of her point of view? Similarly, when Oprah Winfrey – a woman whose estimated net worth is 2.6 billion dollars – asserts that white people are always privileged irrespective of ‘where they are on the rung or ladder of success’, provocation is guaranteed.

The concept was popularised by feminist writer and activist Peggy McIntosh in her 1988 essay ‘White privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack’. As a piece of writing it lacks substance in every way imaginable. Comprising mostly of unsupported assertions, McIntosh lists twenty-six conditions of the privilege that being white affords. Examples include ‘I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed’, and ‘I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race’. Needless to say, such generalisations are no sound basis for an analytical framework.

Yet for all its flimsy and anecdotal qualities, McIntosh’s conceptualisation of ‘white privilege’ has become a mainstay of Critical Race Theory, and more recently has found its way into public discourse. For instance, the University of Kent has created a mandatory ‘Expect Respect’ module for students, which claims that one example of white privilege is the ability to ‘dress in second-hand clothes, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race’. Quite how the authors of this module reached this extraordinary conclusion is anyone’s guess.

Like ‘whiteness’, the term ‘white privilege’ has a religious quality about it. Its closest counterpart in Christianity would be the notion of original sin; something you are born with and for which you need to atone. Yet to live a life free from prejudice and racism is not a privilege at all; it is a basic human right. To speak of ‘white privilege’ is to shift the emphasis *away* from victims of discrimination. The problem is not that white people are not experiencing racism, but that other people are. Moreover, the term encourages an overly simplistic view of complicated matters. As I have already pointed out, there are innumerable factors by which one individual can be at an advantage over another.

The downsides of these discourses surrounding ‘white privilege’ are not restricted to widespread definitional misapprehensions. There is evidence to suggest that the popularisation of the term has had deleterious real-world effects on some of the poorest in society. A report by the Educational Select Committee in the United Kingdom has revealed that white working-class pupils, who are consistently among the lowest performing demographic in the educational system, have been let down because use of the term ‘white privilege’ has ‘muddled’ policy thinking. According to the report’s authors, the focus on the concept of privilege ‘may be alienating to disadvantaged white communities’ and ‘may reduce sympathy for white people who are struggling with poverty’.

Let us consider how class has a direct impact on one’s opportunities in life. A 2019 report by the Social Mobility Commission confirmed that although only 7 per cent of the population are educated in private schools, they are overwhelmingly dominant in politics, business, and the creative industries. When it comes to the media, those who are privately educated represent 43 per cent of the most influential news editors and broadcasters and 44 per cent of all newspaper columnists. Yet when it comes to the implementation of diversity quotas, class is rarely considered. If we must have quotas – and I am not persuaded that we should – it would seem a more sensible approach to initiate a system which required 93 per cent of all employees to be state-educated, in line with the national statistics. This would not only ensure greater opportunities for the working class, but would also satisfy identitarian concerns, given that ethnic minority groups are far more prevalent in the lower income bracket.

The rise of the new puritans, and the success of their culture war, has effectively sabotaged the class struggle of the traditional left. Identity politics is not progressive; it is a bourgeois fig leaf that often conceals the realities of economic inequality. As editor of *spiked* magazine Tom Slater has observed, it is much cheaper for corporations to hire diversity experts ‘to lecture staff about their alleged racism than it is to offer them better pay and working conditions’. The ideology of Critical Social Justice has never caught on in poorer communities, because those who are facing authentic hardship have little patience for the exaggerated, manufactured or imagined grievances of the privileged.

It is no coincidence, then, that the most vocal proponents of Critical Social Justice have emerged from the universities with a higher proportion of wealthy students. Of the five most censorial institutions that were identified by *spiked’s* ‘Free Speech University Rankings’, four – Oxford, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Cardiff – are part of the prestigious Russell Group. According to one government study, ‘almost half of the new places created at Russell Group institutions over the past decade have gone to privately educated individuals’. Are we really so surprised to see rich teenagers demonstrating an undue sense of entitlement?

Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson has called this development in left-wing thought the ‘cultural turn’. The predominance of neo-Marxism in contemporary academe is further evidence of the influence of the French postmodernists of the 1960s, the unwitting progenitors of the new puritanism, who did not so much reinterpret Marxist critique as redefine it. In this new schema, identity replaces money as the determinant factor in power relations. For the left, this approach has been a form of electoral hemlock. We all remember what happened when Hillary Clinton pursued a campaign that continually and explicitly targeted voters on the basis of their gender, ethnicity and sexuality. The reality of life for working-class people in the United States exposes the shallowness of this approach. How can anyone square supposed ‘white male privilege’ with the sharp decline in steady, meaningful and solidly paid employment that has affected so many working-class voters? Similarly, just as a black president failed to make life any better for the average black American, a mother working two jobs would be unlikely to have found consolation in the idea of one female multimillionaire being elected to the White House. Despite what many of her admirers argued, Clinton was not a progressive presidential candidate simply because of her XX chromosomes. Elevating one specific woman to a position of power may send out a positive message, but it does nothing in and of itself to lift working-class

women out of poverty. It does, however, allow middle-class voters to feel better about themselves while they continue to reap the benefits of the economic status quo.

In the United Kingdom, the Labour party's identitarian drift has coincided with plummeting support from its traditional working-class base. The so-called 'red wall', comprising those industrial heartlands of the north of England, was demolished in the general election of 2019. Largely this was due to the Labour party's disastrous policy of advocating a second referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union; given that a significant majority of Labour constituencies had voted to leave, it was inevitable that this would be interpreted as an effort to encourage voters to try again and produce the acceptable result. The democratic process is an equalising force; in the ballot box, the hedge-fund manager has the same power as the shopkeeper, and to jeopardise this principle was never going to convert into electoral success.

The selection of socialist stalwart Jeremy Corbyn as party leader might have had a galvanising effect on the traditional Labour strongholds, were it not for his apparent submission to identitarianism. It might seem relatively innocuous that Corbyn announced his pronouns at an award ceremony organised by *Pink News*, or that those buying tickets to hear him speak at a public event in Loughborough in early 2018 were charged different rates according to their skin colour, but such instances had a cumulative impact on his credibility.

A Labour party that fails to connect with its traditional working-class base is unlikely to find itself in power again. Nor has the problem been limited to occupants of Labour's front bench. In February 2018, it was reported that the Young Labour equalities conference would exclude anyone who did not identify as either BAME [black, Asian and minority ethnic], disabled, LGBT or female. The organisers explained their reasoning in an article for the *Guardian*: 'In theory, the only people "excluded" are the most over-represented in politics; anyone who is straight, white, male and able-bodied. Luckily for them, they are not oppressed in politics. They do not need to attend a conference about liberation and under-representation. We do not believe this to be a controversial statement'. Once again, activists were busy undertaking their opponents' work for them. Various right-wing commentators were quick to seize on this needlessly divisive exercise and exploit it for political capital. Of course the organisers were entitled to exclude whomever they wished, and few would have felt genuinely aggrieved that they were unable to attend. But Young Labour's pointless gesture only served to demonstrate that it was in desperate need of a competent strategist.

As political scientist Mark Lilla has argued, an overemphasis on diversity has created 'a generation of liberals and progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups'. No enlightened individual would suggest that racism, homophobia and sexism should not be tackled, but more often than not the disciples of intersectionality are blind to everything but their own grievances. The solution to an economic system that has been failing the poor for decades is not going to be discovered through progressive posturing, or tokenistic appointments that benefit only a few – usually middle-class and often privately educated – individuals from minority groups. The new puritans have singularly failed to understand that, when it comes to inequality, money is what matters most of all.

Genesis

Parasites and Pygmies

Robin Robbins was one of the most impressive people I ever knew. One of my doctoral supervisors at Oxford, Robin was a literary scholar in the truly vocational sense, whose writing was remarkable for its insight, interdisciplinary breadth and painstaking attention to detail. When I met him he had already been working on his edition of John Donne's complete poetry for more than fifteen years, and was not content to proceed to publication until every last allusion had been thoroughly pursued. When the two-volume edition appeared in 2008, it was even more exhaustive than I had anticipated. For all that, one of our most memorable conversations ended with Robin fixing me with a stare and uttering what turned out to be life-changing advice. 'Don't become an academic,' he said. 'You'll end up deranged, running around the quad screaming "Why did I waste my life?"'

By this point I was already a stipendiary lecturer at Wadham College and was in the process of applying for post-doctoral fellowships and, although I didn't take Robin's words too seriously at the time, the seeds of doubt had most assuredly been sown. It was my habit to work in the Duke Humphrey's Library at the Bodleian, the oldest of the reading rooms, where the manuscripts and special collections could be consulted. I preferred to locate myself in the bays, where rows of readers' desks are overlooked by high shelves of ancient tomes, many of which are still chained down to prevent theft. It was at these desks that I learned how to read sixteenth-century handwriting, turning crumbling pages with care for hours at a time, feeling a little like Hippolyte – the library assistant in Anatole France's *The Revolt of the Angels* (1914) – 'slowly poisoned by the dust of accumulated knowledge'. If I didn't arrive early enough to secure a window seat, there was no chance of direct sunlight, and I would be forced to work in the shadows. Occasionally I would catch the eye of one of the academics at a nearby desk, invariably much older than myself, and I could see in each demeanour that sense of resignation to a fate left too late to avoid. After months of this, Robin's words started to ring true.

The other catalyst to my flight from academia was the several conferences I attended, either in the role of speaker or delegate. I suppose even a Masonic ritual makes sense in the moment of its enactment, with all the robes, runes and incantations that I imagine it involves. The same can be said for the academic conference. Once accustomed to the conventions and the recherché language it no longer feels bizarre. Where else could gauche and bespectacled bookworms be elevated to the position of rock stars, with groupies gravitating towards them during every coffee break to express admiration for their latest incomprehensible tract? These gatherings are less about the sharing of knowledge and more about networking and career advancement. The sexual element is not entirely absent either; a weekend conference presents an excellent opportunity for infidelity. No spouse in his or her right mind would wish to ask too many questions about such a carnival of tedium.

My academic experience was short-lived, but in those few years I became sufficiently absorbed to qualify as one of the hive. This was during the early 2000s, when the study of English Literature was still knee-deep in the quagmire of postmodernism. Only unfashionable academics like Robin had evaded the swamp, mostly because a mind such as his could never be satisfied with wordplay as a substitute for rigorous research. The philosopher A. C. Grayling hits the target when he describes the postmodernist literary theory of this period as 'a sort of ersatz, easy, do-it-yourself philosophy' in which 'various playful because inconsequential forms of jargon-rich lubrication take the place of substantive commentary'. Or, as philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum puts it in her analysis of Judith Butler's turgid prose, 'obscurity creates an aura of importance'.

I remember attending a lecture by Butler at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford, half expecting it to be every bit as convoluted as her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) which I had read in the weeks before. To my surprise, Butler was articulate, cogent, even occasionally funny. It was as though she were speaking with a different voice. As a result, her lecture was far more impactful than her books could ever be. While it is fair to say that difficult ideas sometimes require complicated terms to describe them, it is always possible to do so with elegance. If we cannot explain our point of view with clarity to a moderately intelligent person, the result is alienation rather than persuasion. We invite distrust by compelling a reader to wade through layers of meaning before they might grasp the point; it makes us look as though we have something to hide. Moreover, we refine our ideas through the very act of articulating them in an original way. This is why the tendency towards cliché is to be avoided, because the capacity for individual thought is enervated if we are imitating a pre-existing script.

This taste for obscurantism among the intelligentsia is a recurrent bugbear in the essays of George Orwell, who complained that when reading their jargon 'one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy'. His reflections are just as applicable to the sloganeering of the academic culture warriors of today:

A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church.

One immediately thinks of the now common intonation that 'trans women are women' or 'trans men are men'. As journalist Helen Joyce has noted, such expressions fall into the category best encapsulated by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton as 'thought-

terminating clichés’, those ‘brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases’ that ‘become the start and finish of any ideological analysis’. How often have we heard commentators intuiting the motives of their opponents through accusations of ‘dog-whistling’, the practice of sending out secret signals that only one’s followers can hear? Or the kind of amateur clairvoyance that denounces people for being ‘on the wrong side of history’? Or dismissals of legitimate opinions as ‘right-wing talking points’? The implication of all such clichés is that there is no further discussion to be had, but those who utter them tend to give the impression that they are determined to evade serious argument. They act as hermeneutic shortcuts which disoblige the speaker from considering carefully whether or not his or her ideas have merit.

My research at Oxford focused on Renaissance discourses of gender and sexuality. I immersed myself in the writings of the French poststructuralists of the 1960s and the schools of thought they inspired. It was then in vogue to reject biological essentialism in favour of the tenuous proposition that human experience and understanding is wholly ‘constructed’ through language. Of particular relevance to my doctoral thesis was the first volume of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976), in which he argues that modern sexual identities emerged from late nineteenth-century medical discourses, entailing the ‘incorporation of perversions’ into ‘a new specification of individuals’. This concept is a key aspect of the field of study known as Queer Theory, through which Foucault’s premises were misappropriated into the principle of the ‘new invention’ of homosexuality. As constructionists would have it, this coincided with Charles Gilbert Chaddock’s translation of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892), in which the Latin/Greek compound ‘homosexual’ was first used. The sheer absurdity of claiming that homosexuals did not exist before 1892 is rightly mocked by cultural critic Camille Paglia, who points out that ‘it’s like Antarctic explorers coming upon penguins for the first time and informing them, “I’m sorry, you did not exist before we named you.”’

The kind of literary theory that dominated the study of English Literature during my time at university was that of the American ‘New Historicists’ and the British ‘Cultural Materialists’, two tines of the same bloody pitchfork, skewering the achievements of the liberal humanist scholarship of the past. The poststructuralists had been virtually canonised by this point; queer theorist David M. Halperin even went so far as to write a book entitled *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995). By the time I began my university career, these ideas were generally accepted as gospel. The vapid wordplay of Foucault’s brood had become second nature to most of us. If you wanted a decent grade, it was prudent to pepper your essays with buzzwords such as ‘phallogocentric’, ‘discursive’ or ‘hegemony’. We were taught a code, an abstruse way of writing seemingly engineered to alienate ordinary readers and enable academic careerists to sound authoritative while saying very little. I remember Robin pointing out to me that books written in this style would always make it to publication, irrespective of quality, because the publishers simply could not penetrate the jargon.

The most scathing assessment of this particular brand of academic culture is to be found in Paglia’s essay ‘Junk bonds and corporate raiders: academe in the hour of the wolf’, ostensibly a review of Halperin’s book *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990), but really an onslaught against the insular and self-satisfied nature of this parasitic branch of the humanities. In Paglia’s judgement, Halperin’s ‘strategy of obliterating distinguished past scholarship and flooding us with minor works by callow nonentities allows him to emerge in the post-Foucault landscape as king of the pygmies’. This Year Zero approach to scholarship and culture is one that remains popular among the new puritans, both in and outside higher education.

The origins of the current culture war can be traced back to these academic ‘pygmies’ and their collective chokehold on the arts, humanities and social sciences. Some of the influences are direct – intersectionality, for instance, is a form of Critical Theory that has made the leap from academia to the mainstream – but more often than not the activists of today are drawing on the ideological sources of postmodernism indirectly. The French theorists of the 1960s are only part of the story. The band of thinkers who comprised the Frankfurt School – Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, *et al.* – and their subsequent influence on the ‘New Left’ are also significant. Taken together, these overlapping schools of thought provided the foundational texts of the Critical Social Justice movement and, as with all holy books, many of the faithful are only superficially familiar with the contents.

The Long March

There are few academics working today who would honestly deny that universities are overwhelmingly left-leaning. A 2017 study by the Adam Smith Institute confirmed that less than 12 per cent of teaching staff support right-wing political parties, as compared to approximately 50 per cent of the national population. A 2020 report by Policy Exchange found that one in three right-leaning scholars claim to self-censor ‘for fear of consequences to [their] career’. This trend was corroborated in a study by the Legatum Institute released in early 2022, which found that three in four conservative academics occasionally self-censored while at work. The report warned of a rapidly developing ‘monoculture’ in higher education. With this kind of ingrained bias, it is hardly surprising that a decidedly postmodern form of left-wing politics has become the norm in the kind of middle-class, university-educated circles from which the high priests of Critical Social Justice typically emerge. Little wonder, then, that traditional leftists often struggle to see their values reflected in either the words and deeds of supposedly progressive activists, or their intellectual cheerleaders on campus.

Are we seeing the culmination of the so-called ‘long march through the institutions’? The phrase was coined by the German revolutionary Rudi Dutschke, based on Antonio Gramsci’s conception of institutional and cultural ‘hegemony’. Put simply, as an alternative to violent revolution, influential thinkers, teachers and artists would gradually infiltrate the major cultural institutions – churches, universities, the media, the arts – and help to formulate a new power base of the left. The strategy isn’t quite as conspiratorial as it appears, not least because its architects were open about their intentions. Much like the avowed tactic of the Fabian Society, a slow ‘permeation’ of culture, as represented by their symbol of a tortoise with a raised fist, the long march was to be an inchmeal affair in plain sight. Gramsci’s idea was to create the conditions within which revolution might become possible, what he described as a ‘war of position’ which would precede the ultimate ‘war of manoeuvre’. For

Dutschke, a successful slow-motion cultural revolution could obviate the need for a violent uprising.

The conspiratorial element of all this is open to mockery, and the reality is far less exciting. There is no doubt that the ‘long march’ had its prime movers, and in the early years was actuated by those who were persuaded by Dutschke’s vision, but most of those who have contributed to the climate of intellectual conformity in higher education have done so unwittingly. Part of the appeal of the religion of Critical Social Justice is that it reframes differences of opinion as moral questions. For instance, Policy Exchange’s research shows that only a minority of academics who voted to leave the European Union would feel comfortable admitting this to colleagues. It is unlikely that this is down to a reluctance to debate the issues, but rather springs from a fear of moral judgement. Like one’s position on the national lockdowns during the coronavirus pandemic, how one voted on Brexit became reduced in many people’s eyes to a simple binary of Good versus Evil. The new puritans are adept at reaching a consensus almost immediately on any given issue, largely because the tenets of Critical Social Justice are already rigidly established. They are following a script, not thinking for themselves. As for the rest of us, they are convinced that we must be possessed by a nameless malignity, and that it would be better if we threw ourselves off some convenient precipice like a herd of Gadarene swine.

‘How do I define history?’ says Rudge in Alan Bennett’s play *The History Boys* (2004). ‘It’s just one fucking thing after another.’ While the lack of viewpoint diversity in higher education points to the success of the ‘long march’ strategy, in truth it has probably come about more by accident than collusion. In either case, the echoes of postmodernist and neo-Marxist thought in the ideology of the new puritans is striking. These traditions have offered a blueprint for how the arts are broadly understood as wielding undue cultural and behavioural influence. Take, for example, the deconstructive approach to literature, by which students are encouraged to tease out the contradictions and covert prejudices in any given text. This technique renders the act of reading not so much an exercise in literary judgement, but an inquisition by which authors are reprimanded for their moral failings. One of the earliest and most famous examples of this school of analysis was the late Kate Millett’s book *Sexual Politics* (1971), in which she denounced the likes of D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer for their supposedly sexist and patriarchal tropes. This is activism masquerading as criticism, a significant feature of what the philosopher Roger Scruton called a ‘culture of repudiation’. There’s a good reason why Paglia once described Millett as the woman who ‘made vandalism chic’.

Much contemporary criticism of popular culture follows a similarly remonstrative methodology. It is peculiar that the very same post-structuralist approach that produced Roland Barthes’s concept of ‘the death of the author’ should now have spawned a generation of moral detectives who are seemingly obsessed with the behaviour of writers and other artists. Much has been made of Roald Dahl’s anti-Semitism, for instance, but his works remain essential reading for children. As Christopher Hitchens once observed, Dahl’s inherent unpleasantness was probably the very characteristic that enabled him to produce such twisted classics as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Twits* (1980) and *The Witches* (1983). If we were to consign all works by morally dubious writers to the memory hole, the Western canon would be so flimsy it would hardly be worth reading at all.

In other words, when it comes to their activism, the new puritans have clearly imbibed from the fountainhead of poststructuralism and neo-Marxism. Just as Critical Theory seeks to expose the hidden sins embedded within texts, the religion of Critical Social Justice casts judgement on what it perceives to be ‘unconscious biases’, often based on feeble evidence. The promiscuous and unjustifiable accusations of ‘racism’, ‘homophobia’, ‘misogyny’ and even ‘fascism’ now so ubiquitous in the mainstream media and online discussion forums are not solely tactical manoeuvres. They are based on activists’ tendency to arrogate to themselves the superpower of detecting wrongthink. They are the bastard offspring of Kate Millett and Tomás de Torquemada.

Progressive Reactionaries

As we have seen, the way in which postmodern theories were incubated in the institutions of higher education, and eventually formed the architecture of present-day Critical Social Justice activism, has been complicated and tortuous. A thorough and accessible account of this process has been provided by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay in their book *Cynical Theories* (2020). They note that postmodernism is a repudiation of modernity, with all its attendant emphasis on truth, universalism and scientific progress. They explain how, for these theorists, ‘reality is ultimately the product of our socialization and lived experiences, as constructed by systems of language’. To illustrate the point, the authors quote the ‘four pillars of postmodernism’ as outlined by political scientist Walter Truett Anderson in 1996: the social construction of the concept of the self, relativism of moral and ethical discourse, deconstruction in art and culture, and globalisation. This does not quite amount to a denial of reality – not even Foucault went that far – but rather a belief that we cannot hope to comprehend objective truth due to our inherent biases. We are, in other words, products of our cultural circumstances, our perspectives and ideas having been forged within the limitations of linguistic expression.

One of the most common complaints aimed at those who blame postmodernism for the excesses of the Critical Social Justice movement is that these activists are not ‘postmodernist’ in any genuine sense. They have a strong case. The same people who cite the Foucauldian precedent of power structures in society are, more often than not, guilty of asserting their own power through such mechanisms. With its exploitation of victimhood as a means to dominate others, the religion of Critical Social Justice could just as easily be said to exemplify precisely the kind of ‘power-knowledge’ that Foucault sees running through all strata of society. The postmodernists sought to deconstruct the meta-narratives that have been historically significant for humankind, such as religion, science and rationality. But the overlapping schools of Critical Social Justice, intersectionality and identitarianism, have merely created a new meta-narrative, one in which their advocates position themselves as being ‘on the right side of history’. In other words, although these movements are postmodernist in origin, their grasp of postmodernism is insecure. They represent, rather, a *perversion* of postmodernism. Foucault is not so much the deity of Critical Social Justice as its dancing bear.

Confusions often arise because the term ‘postmodernism’ has been used by so many in wildly different ways. In the 1950s, the term generally denoted the work of artists who parted company from the modernist conventions of the time. By the 1970s, it had been broadened from the arts and literature to incorporate architecture. For the Spanish writer and critic Federico de Onis, ‘postmodernism’ was a literary genre of poetry that sought to curb the excesses of modernism. For Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, ‘postmodernism’ was a specific historical period of late capitalism. For historian Arnold Toynbee, the postmodern era heralded the decline of Western civilisation, beginning with the advent of the twentieth century and its global conflicts. The term has been implemented in so many different ways that many postmodernists do not even describe themselves as such.

The postmodernists have long been mistrusted, often unfairly. When Jacques Derrida received his honorary doctorate from Cambridge University in 1992, an open letter from numerous academics appeared in *The Times* casting doubt on his status as a philosopher. They criticised his incoherent and paronomastic prose style, claiming that on the rare occasions when his assertions were clearly expressed, they were ‘either false or trivial’. They concluded that ‘academic status based on what seems to us to be little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship is not, we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university’.

However one feels about the merits and demerits of postmodernist thought, it is too simplistic to blame these theorists entirely for the rise of the new puritans. When Jean-François Lyotard wrote *The Post-Modern Condition* in 1979, he was not agitating for direct societal change on the basis of his ideas. Rather, he was attempting to discredit the possibility of an authentic form of epistemological authority. Although I find his reasoning more cynical than sceptical, it can hardly be said to be harmful. The civilisational threat we now face is partly a consequence of these theories being taken as authoritative and enacted in the realm of public policy.

Pluckrose and Lindsay make this clear through their distinction between postmodernism and ‘applied postmodernism’. The postmodernists had taken a hacksaw to modernity, but once the activists of the early 2000s had successfully penetrated the major cultural institutions, this destruction was no longer merely theoretical. Pluckrose and Lindsay note that the perceived demise of postmodernism in the late 1980s served to disguise its mutation into various new branches, such as Postcolonialism, Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory, all of which followed naturally from the applied postmodern turn of 1989. More recently, its manifestations have become readily identifiable from the use of the word ‘Studies’, with Whiteness Studies, Fat Studies and Disability Studies being the most obvious examples. In all these cases, the activist element is front and centre; the goal is to reconstruct society in order to combat the oppression of minority groups. This is an undeniably laudable aim, but when a theory advances the idea that power structures infuse society at every level, oppression will be perceived everywhere. And if you can’t see it, this is taken as evidence of your collaboration with the system.

One of the more depressing aspects of applied postmodernism is that it emerged just as a consensus had been reached on issues relating to equality and fairness. It had been a long and arduous process but, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the heroes of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s had won out. This is not to suggest that racism and sexism had been eradicated – an absurd proposition which no serious person has ever made – but to express such views would now at least mean exclusion from polite society. Anti-gay sentiment had taken a little longer to redress, but by the time same-sex marriage was legalised in the United States in 2015, most Western countries were well on the way to full equality under the law.

Free speech had been the keystone of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and beyond. Benjamin N. Cardozo, Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court from 1932 to 1938, put it this way: ‘Freedom of expression is the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every other form of freedom’. Individual autonomy and the right to free expression were the means by which oppression could be confronted. This is why the free speech movement at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in 1964 is still perceived as a decisive phenomenon in the history of the struggle for civil rights and the triumph of social liberalism.

Not so for the intersectionalists who, like the *réactionnaires* of the French Revolution, are troubled by the transformations they have seen in their lifetimes and yearn for a return to the old ways. Today, the term ‘reactionary’ is typically reserved for nationalists who fear that without the lynchpins of custom and tradition we risk the irreparable fragmentation of society. Conservatism, however, need not necessarily be reactionary. In the words of Edmund Burke, its champions seek to ‘reform in order to conserve’. That is to say, we draw from the wisdom of the past in order to adapt to the changing circumstances of the present.

By contrast, in its ongoing efforts to unravel the achievements of the civil rights campaigns, the religion of Critical Social Justice is reactionary in the truest sense of the word. Drawing from the implications of postmodernism, it seeks to abjure the very notion of objective truth. It believes that there is no reality beyond the constructions of language by which we make sense of our lives. According to this mindset, the lessons we have learned from our ancestors are just camouflage for tyrannous power structures. This is now the predominant orthodoxy in higher education throughout the Western world. It is the reason why the writer and philosopher Peter Boghossian resigned from his post at Portland State University. ‘Students at Portland State are not being taught to think,’ he wrote to his former employers. ‘Rather, they are being trained to mimic the moral certainty of ideologues.’

Worse still, the new puritans have repeatedly associated free speech with the political right, encouraging many on the left to abandon the principle altogether. One columnist for the *Guardian* goes so far as to argue that free speech is ‘not a value’ but ‘a loophole exploited with impunity by trolls, racists and ethnic-cleansing advocates’. To defend the right of unpleasant people to speak their minds is frequently, often wilfully, misinterpreted as a defence of the sentiments expressed.

Intersectional activists who claim to be the heirs to the legacy of Martin Luther King are both self-aggrandising and misguided. Their hostility to free speech situates them unambiguously in opposing camps to the great civil rights luminaries. Their infatuation with group identity is incompatible with King’s famous dream of a future in which people ‘will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character’. This is because the religion of Critical Social Justice is fundamentally identitarian in nature and sees people less for their individual qualities and more for the demographic they happen to represent. Where the New Left promoted the politics of unity, today’s intersectional reactionaries promote the politics

of division.

PC's Ugly Offspring

None of this is to be taken as a denial of continuing inequalities in society. One of the cruel ironies of the new puritanism is that it relies on strategies and conceptualisations that are almost guaranteed to perpetuate and even exacerbate the very injustices they seek to counteract. The claim that the power structures embedded in society can not only be detected, but quantified and regulated, is bound to exasperate those who remain unconvinced that they exist at all. It is as though the argument stage has been entirely bypassed; activists assert what they *know* to be true, without even the most cursory attempt to persuade others of the validity of their point of view. This is the behaviour of theocrats.

Such dogmatism is the inevitable option for those who know that their ideas are unlikely to withstand interrogation. One of the main problems for many of the younger activists is that they are not old enough to remember a time when open declarations of prejudice were relatively common. Anyone born before 1985 will have experienced for themselves the rapid progression of social liberalism and will hardly be convinced that we are living through the most oppressive time in our nation's history. When I was at school in the 1990s, we were so accustomed to homophobic slurs that they were wholly unremarkable. The very idea of an openly gay pupil seemed preposterous, and when, during my sixth form studies, two boys were discovered to be having a sexual relationship, they were treated with derision. One of my good friends even suggested, in all sincerity, that the headmaster ought to expel them from the school.

One of the more curious aspects of the religion of Critical Social Justice is the way in which it encourages its followers to deny the progress that our commitment to liberal values has achieved. That racism still exists is taken as evidence of the failure of the liberal project, but of course nobody has made the case that it has been eradicated. If a disease is cured but a few symptoms linger, one does not claim that the treatment was ineffective. Social liberalism is an ongoing process because it recognises the imperfectability of human nature.

In 2018, *British Vogue* published a feature on 'the new suffragettes', a group of contemporary feminists from the realms of journalism, politics, the arts and social media. One of those profiled – the artist Gillian Wearing – was quoted as saying that their struggle was even 'harder than fighting for the vote'. Implicit in this comparison is the notion that the progress that has been made is largely illusory. Discrimination on the basis of sex has been illegal for a long time, but according to activists this simply means that sexism has been absorbed into our culture in less obvious ways and, as a consequence, is all the more difficult to root out. The disenfranchisement of women at the time of suffragettes may have been unjust, but at least it was overt. The 'new suffragettes', by contrast, have the far more arduous task of first convincing others of their oppression before it can be rectified. Critical Race Theory endorses a similar outlook in the claim that societal and legal proscriptions against racism have simply driven it further to the core of our culture. This is why Robin DiAngelo is able to assert that 'racism's adaptations over time are more sinister than concrete rules such as Jim Crow'.

In truth, the speed at which attitudes to minority groups has shifted has been staggering. When I once suggested to a work colleague that gay marriage ought to be legalised, she laughed out loud and quickly scurried across the office floor to share the joke. This was in 2003. In under fifteen years, few would find anything to laugh at in my remarks. Now, those who oppose gay marriage are the subject of ridicule, and many of us are happy to pretend that the certainties of yesterday were nothing more than a momentary glitch.

This is one of the undeniably positive effects of the wave of political correctness which reached its peak during the 1990s. In spite of the civil rights victories of earlier decades, unconcealed prejudice and institutional bias against certain minority groups still survived. Although often maligned, the impulse to redraw the social contract in the spirit of fairness – to reach an agreed consensus on polite forms of address in the workplace, in schools and other public spaces – has always struck me as fundamentally sound. As Edward Stourton shows in his book *It's a PC World* (2008), the movement achieved some genuinely progressive outcomes in terms of social consciousness without having recourse to the kind of censorial police intervention or the mob-driven retributive 'cancel culture' that we see today.

This is not to suggest that there were not instances of overreach, or that the more zealous practitioners of political correctness did not act unjustly, but on the whole it seems undeniable that the eventual outcome was more positive than negative. In 1964, Peter Griffiths had been elected as a Conservative Member of Parliament on the slogan, 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour'. This was a man who had openly endorsed apartheid, arguing that 'if it could be separated from racialism' it 'could well be an alternative to integration'. Shocking and controversial at the time, it is still astonishing that he was able to be elected through such racist and divisive means. That this kind of campaign would be unimaginable thirty years later is surely testimony to the success of political correctness. This was not achieved by the heavy-handed and counter-productive instigation of 'hate speech' laws – the favoured tactic of our illiberal times – but through persuasion, discussion, criticism and protest. This is a genuinely progressive development; few of us would wish to return to a time when racist slurs would pass without comment or rebuke.

The religion of Critical Social Justice is not 'political correctness' as once understood, and the confusion arises because so many insist on using the same term. This enables the new puritans to elide important criticism of their authoritarian speech-policing with the kind of fusty tabloid columnists who carp on about 'PC gone mad' and 'snowflakes'. A recent example is Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's book, *In Defence of Political Correctness* (2018), in which the author argues that 'political correctness' is nothing more than a synonym for 'politeness'. She laments the passing of 'a civilised consensus about sensible, flexible limits' to what is 'acceptable in public discourse', even though such a consensus still exists. As individuals in a free society, we should all be at liberty to breach the etiquette of social norms without the threat of criminal prosecution, but that does not mean that we should expect such incivility to be widely approved. Alibhai-Brown considers the PC debate to be a 'confrontation between advocates of uninhibited communication and those who believe in self-restraint and fairness', but the

two positions are by no means mutually exclusive. Most of us who champion free speech also believe in the idea of etiquette and the social contract. We simply do not believe that such parameters should be legally enforced by censorship or compelled speech diktats.

This merging of the concept of a social contract with institutionally policed speech codes is the fatal weakness at the heart of Alibhai-Brown's defence of political correctness. The word 'correctness' connotes nicety, in the sense of both precision and politeness. But there is nothing remotely 'nice' about imposing criminal penalties for making offensive jokes, or destroying careers on the basis of a misjudged utterance. As usual, good intentions have paved a road to Pandemonium. The age of political correctness is over, and we are left struggling with its ugly offspring.

Alibhai-Brown is right to point out that the PC movement of the 1990s succeeded in ensuring that 'truly obnoxious statements and behaviours have become unacceptable', which is precisely why we need to draw a clear distinction between the PC era of the 1990s and the opposition to free speech that has since been enshrined in 'hate speech' laws, often now abused by the state to clamp down on controversial opinions. The mark of a healthy liberal democracy is that it is able to reach a consensus regarding civility without having recourse to criminalisation or mob pressure to enforce such terms. The belief of the apparatchiks of Critical Social Justice – that all our problems will magically disappear once we outlaw certain points of view or words that cause 'harm' – is a utopian delusion.

The early civil rights victories did not solve all our problems, but it did catalyse a general shift in attitudes. When the momentum seemed to be slowing, it was reenergised by the political correctness initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s. As we moved into the new millennium, we had every reason to feel optimistic. Although the dream of a world without prejudice was never going to become a reality, civilised society had finally reached its consensus, and laws were in place to at least attempt to ensure equality of opportunity. To return to Douglas Murray's train analogy, at long last it seemed as though the destination was in sight. However, at the final moment, the lumbering freighthoppers of the Critical Social Justice movement leapt on board in sufficient numbers to cause a derailment.

The tragedy of this cannot be overstated. It is also proving difficult to resolve because the illiberal elements of the left erroneously believe themselves to be continuing the legacy of the struggle for civil rights while at the same time reacting against it. Gradually, the ideological assertions that were once the exclusive domain of the shriller factions on university campuses have mutated into the articles of faith for the political, media and managerial classes. They have insinuated themselves into all our major institutions: the media, the arts, the law, the judiciary, education, academia, and government. Collective guilt, the damaging impact of cultural appropriation, our servility to amorphous power structures, the primacy of identity politics; all of these concepts and more are now uncritically accepted by many of those in positions of authority. When politicians use phrases such as 'white privilege' and 'systemic racism', for instance, they are deploying the language of Critical Race Theory without necessarily understanding the full implications of the ideas behind the buzzwords. They are the unsuspecting agents of applied postmodernism. Far from being a student phase out of which young people would mature, they have taken this ideology into adult life and the institutions they now occupy. Those who warned against the complacency of writing off these developments as the excesses of youth have now been fully vindicated.

Repressive Tolerance

Many of the new puritans routinely cite Foucault as an influence, but it is peculiar that they do not more often mention Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School. His 1965 essay on 'repressive tolerance' reads to a great extent like a blueprint for 'woke' activism, calling as it does for militant disobedience and an intolerance of the intolerant. The indoctrination of the masses, in Marcuse's view, has led to a 'semi-democracy' and a generalised 'false consciousness' by which the dominance of oppressive forces is secured. Moreover, failure to resist is tantamount to complicity in the system.

For Marcuse, the very notion of tolerance has been perverted to the point at which it effectively bolsters systems of oppression. He advances a new, and specifically partisan, form of tolerance which may necessitate 'the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion'. He justifies the 'extreme suspension of the right of free speech and free assembly' as a pre-emptive measure against the resurgence of totalitarianism. We are, he believes, living in a period of 'clear and present danger' which 'requires the withdrawal of tolerance before the deed, at the stage of communication in word, print, and picture'. Such ideas anticipate the wide range of 'hate speech' laws that are currently in place throughout Europe, but manifest most dangerously in the existence of various groups within the disparate 'Antifa' movement.

Just as proponents of 'anti-racism' mean something very different from how the term is typically interpreted, 'anti-fascism' does not simply signify an opposition to fascism in the sense that most people believe. As Mark Bray explains in *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* (2017), anti-fascism is an explicitly anti-liberal movement which opposes freedom of speech for the intolerable. Bray offers a cogent and fascinating overview of the history of anti-fascist movements, but his central thesis rests on the notion of a 'historical continuity' that is clearly tenuous. Whereas the justification for taking a stand against violent fascist extremists in the 1930s was self-evident, today's 'Antifa' agitators have expanded the definition of 'fascism' to such an extent that they can excuse violence against anyone they happen to disagree with. This is why feminists who were protesting against California's gender self-identification laws – which had been exploited by a known sexual predator to expose himself to women and children at the Wi Spa in Los Angeles – were mobbed by groups calling themselves 'Antifa'.

Here we can see clearly how the slippery word games of postmodernists can serve as a justification for needless violence. Whereas what Bray describes as 'the construction of societal taboos against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression that constitute the bedrocks of fascism' was undoubtedly once necessary, this cannot possibly apply in today's society where such taboos already exist. In other words, the core of Bray's defence of anti-fascist violence rests upon the belief that the progress of civil rights and social liberalism has been negligible – or, at the very least, that fascism continues to operate

as a mainstream force – which is perhaps why he misreads the Brexit vote of 2016 as being ‘largely fueled by the far-right’. He continually emphasises the horrors of the past, whereas a truly effective anti-fascist movement would have to reckon with the realities of the present.

We will return to this notion of the culture war as a struggle between competing realities in later chapters, but for now it is worth noting that Bray’s key arguments and Marcuse’s notion of ‘repressive tolerance’ were foreshadowed in the philosopher Karl Popper’s ‘paradox of tolerance’:

Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. But we should claim the right even to suppress them, for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to anything as deceptive as rational argument, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant.

Popper’s formulation is often cited by activists, but his insistence that we ought not to suppress intolerance so long as it can be restrained by the force of public opinion is often overlooked. The triumph of social liberalism in today’s society is evident in that open declarations of racism and other forms of intolerance are treated with near-universal disdain. Faced with this reality, the new puritans have resorted to detecting intolerance where it may not exist, sometimes as a means to justify acts of violence as a form of self-defence. A survey of undergraduates in the United States in 2017 found that 30 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement: ‘If someone is using hate speech or making racially charged comments, physical violence can be justified to prevent this person from espousing their hateful views’.

Popper was writing in the context of a global conflict and the atrocities of the Third Reich. It is unlikely that he would ever have envisaged his words being used as a validation for authoritarian strictures against free speech. His definition of intolerance explicitly relates to those who are impervious to rational argument and who cannot be constrained by public opinion. The new puritans ought to take care when invoking Popper’s paradox, given that they are the ones who most clearly resemble the model of ‘intolerance’ that he describes.

Although the new puritans prefer to trace their lineage to the postmodernists, the cultural emphasis of the Frankfurt School is of great significance when considering the development of these ideas. Their legacy is often described as ‘Cultural Marxism’, although this phrase has been widely interpreted as an anti-Semitic trope deployed by conspiracy theorists who believe that the émigrés of the Frankfurt School had infiltrated American society during the 1930s as part of a Jewish plot to dissolve Western society from within. More recently, the term has come to be associated with the ‘alt-right’, a white nationalist movement birthed in the age of the internet. This association has been furthered by the fact that the phrase ‘Cultural Marxism’ occurred repeatedly in the ‘manifesto’ of the ethno-nationalist psychopath Anders Breivik. When the Conservative MP Suella Braverman claimed that the country was ‘engaged in a war against cultural Marxism’, writers in the left-leaning press giddily leapt on the phrase, as though she were invoking the spirit of Breivik. Owen Jones at the *Guardian* was quick to break out the search engine and trawl for any other right-wing commentators who had used the term. ‘It’s not clear whether these people were aware of the phrase’s loaded nature’, he conceded, ‘but many readers would certainly have heard a dog whistle’.

Without an understanding of the historical connotations, ‘Cultural Marxism’ is always liable to be adopted as a shorthand for the point at which Marxism was adapted to focus more on culture than class. When this happens, it is ungenerous in the extreme to assume any kind of deliberate ‘dog-whistling’. This is particularly the case when one considers that the phrasing makes so much sense intuitively. Anyone with the slightest familiarity with the Frankfurt School will understand that it advanced a reworked form of Marxism that sought to explain its failure to instigate a socialist revolution through the anaesthetising effects of culture. As the author and commentator Marc Sidwell puts it, they aimed ‘to seize the means of cultural production’. This is why many academics have used the term ‘Cultural Marxism’ to describe this shift in focus. Still, words and phrases have a tendency to become irrevocably tainted in the wrong hands, and so I would recommend ‘neo-Marxism’ as a sensible alternative. It has the advantage of implying a development away from Marxism in its purest sense, but also will frustrate those ideological dogs who have their ears permanently pricked for imaginary whistling.

The neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School redirected their analysis from class to the concurrent influence of sex and culture. Drawing on Freud, they deemed the nuclear family and traditional gender roles to be as stultifying as economic inequality. They had in common with the later French postmodern theorists a deep mistrust of popular culture which, according to this view, turned the masses into little more than lotus-eaters, numb to their own subjugation. We see this most clearly in Marcuse’s conception of the ‘one-dimensional man’.

This kind of paternalism lingers in the religion of Critical Social Justice, which has little faith in what Burke called ‘the wisdom of unlettered men’, and sees consumers of the popular arts as susceptible to moral corruption. However, it is too simplistic to draw a direct line from one belief system to the other. A better way to understand the relationship between the Frankfurt School, the French postmodernists and the Critical Social Justice ideology, is to see them as consisting of interconnected strands. For instance, the discipline of Critical Theory, as advanced by the likes of Adorno and Horkheimer, offers a means to expose how the powerful operate through cultural discourses. We might see this as anticipating the new puritans and their obsession with identifying and redressing oppressive ‘power structures’, but we might just as easily draw a connection with the French postmodernists, for whom power and knowledge were interfused.

A comprehensive overview of the way in which these ideas have evolved is far beyond the scope of this book, but it is worth noting how these neo-Marxist ideas tend to survive in successive movements. That said, is it really feasible to consider the religion of Critical Social Justice the new ‘hegemony’ as evinced by Gramsci, the final step in Dutschke’s long march through the institutions? There is something altogether too neat about such a proposition and, as has already been noted, the

new puritans deviate from their predecessors in significant ways. Certainly, Critical Social Justice bears the DNA of Marxism, most notably the utopian belief that equality of outcome is both desirable and possible, even though its realisation would take the implementation of totalitarian measures. Moreover, Marx was able to inspire a similar kind of quasi-religious devotion, which is why the political economist Joseph Schumpeter devoted an entire chapter to ‘Marx the Prophet’ in his seminal work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1943). Schumpeter understood that once a series of tenets are accepted as articles of faith, debate is no longer feasible. In such instances, he says, ‘the opponent is not merely in error but in sin. Dissent is disapproved of not only intellectually but also morally. There cannot be any excuse for it once the Message has been revealed’.

The incoherence of much of ‘woke’ discourse places it far beyond the scope of any serious conceptualisation of Marxism. Rather, Critical Social Justice is a *Marxian* phenomenon, laden with the internal contradictions and distortions of a political philosophy only half-apprehended. It has retained the conflict theory of Marx as understood after the ‘cultural turn’ of the Frankfurt School and the postmodernists, but has processed this through the meat-grinder of a new fundamentalist fervour. For the new puritans, nothing need be explained or rationalised, because objective truth has become subordinated to ‘lived experience’. Where Marx saw society as an ongoing competition for resources and power between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (a development from Hegel’s Master–Slave dialectic), the high priests of Critical Social Justice see society as stratified according to identity politics.

To see a straightforward chronological and philosophical continuity from Marxism to neo-Marxism to political correctness to Critical Social Justice is to do a great disservice to the formidable left-wing thinkers of the past. What we are seeing is not so much a coordinated march through the institutions as evidence of the appeal of authoritarianism. As the online mobs marshal in ever-expanding numbers with their entitled demands and infantile tantrums, and viral videos of pink-haired loons screaming at their detractors become increasingly common, one thing is for certain: these are not the foot soldiers that Dutschke had in mind.

Blasphemy

An Extraordinary Encounter

Our scene begins on a lake of fire. Satan has been cast into Hell after a failed rebellion against God and is fixed in chains along with his cohort of fallen angels. He assures his second-in-command, Beelzebub, that their defeat is only temporary, and that he intends to recover and continue the struggle against the ‘tyranny of heaven’. He breaks free and flies to dry land where he calls on his army to reassemble.

This is the dramatic opening of *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton’s epic poem about the fall of man. Amid Satan’s company of demons and counterfeit pagan gods there is an unexpected cameo which takes the form of a topical allusion. As Satan strides across the fiery landscape, Milton focuses our attention on his mighty stature by comparing his spear to ‘the tallest pine / Hewn on Norwegian hills’, and his shield to ‘the moon, whose orb / Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views’. This is Galileo, the only one of Milton’s contemporaries to be immortalised in *Paradise Lost*, here depicted with the recently invented telescope that he had adapted for the purposes of astronomical observation. Like Satan, he was cast out of favour for challenging the prevailing orthodoxies of his time – he had openly endorsed Copernicus’s theory that the Earth moved around the Sun – but, unlike Satan, Galileo was right.

Yet this flattering allusion was not the extent of their association. If Milton is to be believed, he met the ageing astronomer while on a trip to Italy in 1638. The reference appears in *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton’s rebuttal to the Licensing Order of June 1643 which required all printed texts to be approved by a censor before publication. Contrary to Voltaire’s writing on the subject, Galileo was not groaning away ‘in the dungeons of the Inquisition’, but was in fact living out his final days under house arrest in his villa among the picturesque hills of Arcetri. It was here that he and Milton most likely met.

The villa still exists, just a twenty-minute walk from the Arcetri Observatory. Fanciful visitors are likely to be drawn into vivid reveries of this meeting of two great minds; the young poet traversing the continent to expand his artistic and intellectual capacity, and the elderly astronomer confined to his home for his far-sighted labours. From the perspective of the religious dogmatists of the time, Galileo’s words would not only have been considered offensive, but hateful, too. How might he have fared in today’s climate, where feelings are prioritised over uncomfortable truths? If the phrase ‘hate speech’ had existed when Milton was writing his *Areopagitica*, it could well have been applied to the case of Galileo.

The Inquisition of today is not so savage. The new puritans are an altogether more civilised lot, or at least have the good sense to appear so. Gone are the iron maidens and the breaking wheels, and instead we see the vindictive forms of harassment and public shaming known as ‘cancel culture’. The pious zeal is the same even if the methods are not. As I have noted in previous chapters, anyone who has spent any time on social media will have witnessed the utter delight with which the new puritans bully and demonise those who have stepped beyond their locus of received wisdom. To take a notable example, gender-critical feminists who are concerned about women-only spaces for victims of domestic abuse often have their views misrepresented as a form of heresy. For the crime of asking for an honest and civil discussion about sensitive issues, they are monstered as ‘hateful’ and ‘transphobic’ by a vocal and self-righteous minority of activists, some of whom feel no compunction in openly endorsing violence against them. Had these zealots been alive during the time of the Inquisition, they would have been strapping these women to the rack.

We will return to cancel culture in Chapter 10, but it is worth noting here that this is not simply a problem of a few hot-headed fanatics. The notion that speech must be restricted for the sake of social cohesion is now a standard feature of contemporary policing. In particular, there is the curious phenomenon of ‘non-crime hate incidents’, which are recorded by police even in cases where there is no evidence of hostility, and which are defined according to the perception of the ‘victim’. This is ratified in official guidance from both the College of Policing and the Crown Prosecution Service. How a victim can be said to exist when no crime has been committed is not clarified.

In April 2021, the Home Secretary Priti Patel instructed the College of Policing to modify their guidance so that police no longer record ‘non-crime hate incidents’, but as yet there is no evidence that her instructions are being followed. And after a lengthy case initiated by Harry Miller of campaign group Fair Cop, in association with the Free Speech Union, the Court of Appeal ruled in December 2021 that ‘the recording of non-crime hate incidents is plainly an interference with freedom of expression and knowledge that such matters are being recorded and stored in a police database is likely to have a serious “chilling effect” on public debate’. In its response, the College of Policing seemed to imply that the practice ought to continue but with some modifications to the guidelines. This is the kind of fudge which bears all the hallmarks of ideological capture. Ultimately, it seems unlikely that ‘non-crime hate incidents’ will last for much longer, but there is clearly still much work to do to rectify the illiberalism that has become ingrained in contemporary law enforcement.

This mentality was perhaps best encapsulated in a photograph that went viral in February 2021, in which four officers from the Merseyside police were seen standing next to a digital-advertisement van, which bore the legend ‘Being offensive is an offence’. In this context, the depersonalising impact of their face masks seemed all the more menacing; less like a public-service announcement and more like a threat. The image went viral because it encapsulated the way in which our police forces

are now seemingly obsessed with monitoring our speech and punishing those who stray from the accepted rubric. ‘Being offensive is an offence’ is a mantra that would not have been out of place in the mouths of Galileo’s prosecutors.

Critics of the police were quick to point out that offence is entirely subjective, and so it would be impossible to legislate against this reality of everyday life. Following these complaints, the police issued a statement to clarify that being offensive ‘is not in itself an offence’. But this sign had not been produced on a whim by a rogue officer with a Pharisee’s disposition. This was a professionally designed digital billboard which must have been approved in advance by numerous members of staff. There will have been meetings and discussions and a consensus would have been reached on the most appropriate wording. Even if the slogan was later retracted, the fact that it materialised at all suggests something very sinister about the general mindset of those who are trained to enforce the law.

The more troubling aspect of this story is that, in a sense, the original phrase was correct. Every year in the United Kingdom, thousands of people are arrested for falling foul of the 2003 Communications Act by posting something online which causes offence. The legislation is explicit on this score; a prosecution will be secured if the material is deemed by a court to be ‘grossly offensive’. When the Merseyside police declared that ‘being offensive is an offence’, they had inadvertently let slip a terrible truth.

The principle of free speech has become difficult to defend because so many have accepted the false premise that defending the speech rights of unpleasant people amounts to an endorsement of their words. This is why there is little appetite among politicians to repeal existing ‘hate speech’ legislation included in the Public Order Act 1986 and the Communications Act 2003. In addition, we have seen how the discredited theory that public behaviour is dictated by mass-media consumption is now taken as an unquestionable truth.

In many cases, of course, police investigations into ‘hate speech’ are directed at vile individuals who revel in causing distress. But there is no contradiction in defending the right of people to express their bigoted views and disapproving of what they choose to say. I have consistently argued for a combination of social liberalism and civil discourse, but the enforcement of civility by threat of criminal prosecution is the first step on a very dark path. Given that there can be no objective standard of ‘offence’, any legislation that seeks to create one will inevitably be exploited by the powerful to silence dissent. Moreover, the defence of freedom of speech is our most effective guarantee of equal rights for marginalised groups, and is the only way to see bad ideas successfully refuted. Not every heretic is a Galileo, speaking truths to a society not ready to hear them, but once we compromise on the principle of free speech the Galileos of this world will suffer as much as the trolls.

This is why, in all of these difficult but necessary debates, my thoughts invariably return to that image of Milton and Galileo deep in conversation in a villa on the hills of Arcetri. Galileo had lost his sight by this point, and was worn down by his experiences of interrogation under continual threat of torture and his rejection by society. Is it too far-fetched to see in Galileo’s condition a premonition of Milton’s eventual fate? He too was to end his life blind and disgraced after barely escaping execution, in his case for siding with the republicans during the civil war. Denied the privilege of a place in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, Milton was instead buried in the chancel of St Giles’ Cripplegate in 1674, only to be mutilated in 1790 by souvenir hunters, who exhumed his body and sold his teeth, bones and locks of hair. The fate of heretics is rarely pleasant.

It certainly seems fitting that Milton and Galileo, both of whom famously lost so much for their honesty, might have enjoyed this fleeting encounter. The substance of their *tête-à-tête* will forever remain in the realms of fanciful speculation, but we can be certain that Galileo would have approved of Milton’s remark in *Areopagitica* that the freedom ‘to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience’ is the ultimate liberty.

Unlawful Speech

The culture war is often portrayed as a matter of ‘left versus right’, but this is to misapprehend the way in which the new puritanism insinuates itself into political discourse. As I have argued, self-identified ‘leftists’ who prioritise the politics of group identity are not authentically left wing at all. In fact, there is a convincing case to be made that the ‘woke’ are more closely akin to the right than the left, given that their causes tend to resonate predominately with the middle-classes. A reductive and misleading conflation of intersectionality with leftism has encouraged many voters to support policies that are in opposition to their interests. The landscape of the culture war has been redrawn in stark chiaroscuro, with left and right refigured as a simple binary of ‘woke’ and ‘anti-woke’. This perception is reinforced whenever Conservative politicians claim to be fighting a ‘war on woke’, one that all evidence suggests they do not understand. Yet in its capture of major corporate, academic and civic institutions, the orthodoxy of Critical Social Justice is able to occupy all positions on the political spectrum.

Consider the civil service. Nick Busvine, a former diplomat at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has written about how this purportedly non-partisan administrative branch of the state has fallen under the influence of the new puritans. He relates how civil servants have confided in him about how identity politics have been ‘imposed on them’, and how the atmosphere has become ‘positively Orwellian’, with junior and middle-ranking officials claiming to feel ‘afraid that being seen to say or do the wrong thing would have an immediate and lasting impact on their careers’. The ‘woke’ ideology, he notes, has become ‘a wonderful vehicle for the highly ambitious and manipulative to manoeuvre themselves up the greasy pole without necessarily delivering the departmental outcomes expected by taxpayers and voters’. Busvine makes clear that a civil service in the grip of identitarianism inevitably surrenders the very impartiality it requires to undertake its duties. It is worth contemplating how effective the Conservative party’s so-called ‘war on woke’ can possibly be when the machinery of government is grinding in the other direction.

Moreover, many recent Conservative policies could be said to borrow directly from the paternalistic Critical Social Justice script, by which words can be forms of violence and authoritarian measures are to be advanced. At time of writing, the Conservative government is in the process of implementing two new bills that represent a grave threat to freedom of expression. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill was published on 9 March 2021 in response to the changing tactics of protesters

who have taken to criminal damage and obstructing roads and access to buildings. The climate activists of Insulate Britain, for instance, have been widely condemned for roadblocks, which have even prevented patients from reaching hospital. In March 2021, three members of Extinction Rebellion were prosecuted for vandalising buildings at Cambridge University. In September of the same year, activists from the group smashed windows at the headquarters of J.P. Morgan with hammers decorated with the words ‘live’, ‘laugh’ and ‘love’.

Critics of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill have pointed out that such tactics are already illegal. This new legislation would put the onus on police to determine whether or not a protest should be allowed to go ahead and could even see protests banned for being too loud or causing ‘serious annoyance’. It goes without saying that protests by their nature must be annoying to someone, otherwise they would be redundant. Furthermore, the language of the bill is hopelessly vague and open to exploitation. If the noise from a peaceful protest is deemed to have ‘relevant impact’ on other citizens that ‘may be significant’, it could be shut down under this new law. The benchmark for these subjective notions will be determined by the Home Secretary, which would be particularly tendentious if the subject of the protest is the government itself.

The Online Safety Bill, formerly known as the Online Harms Bill, is perhaps even more draconian. It includes a requirement for social media companies to censor ‘legal but harmful’ speech. Such terms are lifted directly from the lexicon of Critical Social Justice activism, now tripping from the tongues of those who claim to oppose it. To ensure the ‘safety’ of online users, the bill seeks to pressure big tech to curb ‘offensive material’ on its platforms. This is reminiscent of the prohibition of ‘grossly offensive’ material in the 2003 Communications Act, and is similarly impossible to define. As we shall see in Chapter 10, the word ‘safety’ has been weaponised as a means to censor or to restrict the liberties of others, and so it is especially disturbing to see it find its way into legislation.

The Scottish National Party’s Hate Crime and Public Order Bill is a particularly egregious example of how the conviction that speech can be a form of violence has been imbibed by those at the highest level of authority. In accordance with the standard *modus operandi* of Critical Social Justice, the terminology masks the regressive nature of the policy. In this case, state censorship has been enacted under the guise of protecting the freedom of citizens. Given its significance, it is worth considering the SNP’s legislation in some detail. That the party should be susceptible to the influence of the new puritans is unsurprising, given its history of intrusive policies that imply, if not prove, a deep-rooted mistrust of the public. This is the party that wanted to assign a state guardian to every child born in Scotland through its ‘named person’ scheme, only to be thwarted by the Supreme Court. Under Nicola Sturgeon’s leadership, there have been repeated attempts to regulate eating and drinking habits, including proposed bans on two-for-one pizza deals and minimum pricing on cheaper alcoholic drinks. For the SNP, the phrase ‘nanny state’ is not so much a criticism as an aspiration.

It makes sense, then, that the party’s paternalism should extend to the question of free speech. Scotland’s Hate Crime and Public Order Bill was ostensibly proposed to repeal outdated proscriptions against blasphemy but has instead ushered in a range of new blasphemy laws by stealth. Most controversially, part two of the bill pertains to the offence of ‘stirring up hatred’, which criminalises anyone who ‘behaves in a threatening, abusive or insulting manner’ or ‘communicates threatening, abusive or insulting material to another person’.

During the consultation period, the Scottish Police Federation warned that the effects of the bill would be tantamount to the ‘policing of what people think or feel’, and the Law Society of Scotland called it a ‘significant threat to freedom of expression’. It was only due to such complaints that the SNP modified the bill to remove its most flagrantly authoritarian aspect; in its original form, the bill empowered the state to prosecute a citizen for ‘stirring up hatred’ even if the accused had done so unintentionally. If behaviour or material was deemed ‘likely’ to stir up hatred against any protected groups (defined by age, disability, racial or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, transgender identity or variations in sex characteristics), then whether or not the perpetrator intended to do so was considered immaterial. It does not take a comprehensive understanding of the judicial system to know that intention is a key factor not only in sentencing but also in the classification of a crime. Intention, after all, is what distinguishes murder from manslaughter.

For those who understand the core tenets of the religion of Critical Social Justice, how we reached this state of affairs is no great mystery. The postmodern conceptualisation of society as interlocking systems of power means that oppression is understood as being perpetuated inadvertently by those caught in its net. According to this view, our complicity does not depend upon our consciousness; our words, ideas, thoughts and actions are products of an unjust system, one that we cannot therefore help but unwittingly reproduce. In this schema, intention is irrelevant and, having embraced this ideology, the SNP is apparently unable to think in any other way. It seems inconceivable to many of us that those with the power to make laws would have so readily dismissed intention as a factor in determining a potential crime, but an ideological framework has its own logic, and its success often depends on disabling the critical faculties of its adherents.

The excesses of the bill do not stop there. Even an actor playing a bigoted character on stage could be prosecuted under the new laws. An entire section of the bill is devoted to the ‘public performance of a play’, which specifies that actors and directors can be found culpable if members of protected groups find the material offensive. So if you are troubled by the anti-Semitism of Shylock’s detractors, or the Islamophobia of Tamburlaine’s decision to burn the Quran, you can complain to the Scottish police. It will be interesting to see whether this has any ramifications for the annual Edinburgh Festival, which features over 55,000 performances of more than 3,500 shows every year.

The implications for stand-up comedy are similarly dire. As practitioners of an art form that often burrows into controversial terrain, comedians frequently find themselves at the front line of free speech battles. The SNP’s bill defines a ‘play’ in the same terms as the Theatres Act 1968, the legislation that finally abolished the censorship of theatres enacted by the Lord Chamberlain, and from which the current bill derives much of its language (particularly the prohibition against ‘stirring up hatred’). Whether or not a stand-up performance will qualify remains to be seen; comedians often describe themselves as ‘playing a role’, which would be sufficient to justify investigation should their material be deemed insulting or abusive. The vice dean of the Faculty of Advocates, Roddy Dunlop QC, has already warned that stand-up would not be exempt, and that even an old-fashioned ‘Scotsman, Irishman and Englishman’ joke might be perceived as discriminatory.

The bill even goes so far as to criminalise the possession of ‘inflammatory’ material, which is why senior Catholic bishops have raised concerns that owning a copy of the Bible could become a criminal offence. Let us not forget that Leviticus 20:13 calls for the execution of gay men – a protected minority under current laws – and God’s chosen punishment for the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah is ‘inflammatory’ in both the literal and metaphorical senses of the word.

During the debates that led up to the passing of the bill, the SNP’s Justice Secretary Humza Yousaf asserted that it ‘does not undermine free speech’, but rather ‘protects it’. This outright denial of the facts is of course entirely consistent with the authoritarian impulses of the SNP and the religion of Critical Social Justice to which they subscribe. Given that this bill could see those found guilty of ‘insulting’ behaviour imprisoned for seven years, and that it would see people criminalised for statements uttered in the privacy of their own homes, Yousaf’s claim that the legislation actually ‘supports and protects our shared freedoms’ is at once hilarious and disturbing.

‘The Bill does not seek to stifle criticism or rigorous debate in any way,’ writes Yousaf, ‘people will still be able to express controversial, challenging or even offensive views as long as this is not done in a threatening or abusive way that is intended to stir up hatred or likely to stir up hatred’. None of which addresses the problem of how such vague legislation is apt to be interpreted. In accordance with all official law enforcement guidance in the United Kingdom, the website for Police Scotland defines an incident or crime as ‘hateful’ based on the perception of the ‘victim’ (Newspeak for ‘complainant’). If hatred is a matter of perception and not intent, and even the context of dramatic representation is considered irrelevant, how can we possibly safeguard against the abuse of state power?

Many advocates of the SNP’s bill have emphasised that the judiciary can be trusted to be guided by common sense, but a certain degree of vigilance is surely necessary when it comes to the introduction of legislation when formulated in such vague terms. Yousaf’s stated belief that ‘free speech itself is never an unfettered right’ strongly suggests that the bill’s ambiguity is no accident. This should be a matter of utmost concern for those of us who still believe in the preservation of liberal values, the erosion of which is a clear sign of a society that has begun to take them for granted.

Warnings from History

In *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tells a story of six peasant farmers who returned to a field they had mowed in order to collect some hay for their cows. For this crime they were arrested, confined to Leningrad’s Kresty Prison for a short while, and eventually executed. Solzhenitsyn’s anger at this barbarity is palpable. ‘Even if Stalin had killed no others,’ he writes, ‘I believe he deserved to be drawn and quartered just for the lives of those six Tsarskoye Selo peasants!'

How is it that any government could descend to acts of such cruelty and injustice? Why did the All-Russian Central Executive Committee refuse to pardon these obviously innocent men? The answer, as Solzhenitsyn’s book so persuasively shows, can be encapsulated in one word:

Ideology – that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors.

Solzhenitsyn was a mathematics teacher turned novelist who had been sentenced to eight years in forced-labour camps for a letter he wrote that was critical of Joseph Stalin. In writing *The Gulag Archipelago*, his goal was to create a record of life inside the camps, to lay bare the full horrors of the gulags and the experience of oppression under Soviet totalitarianism which, until this point, had found ‘almost no expression whatever in the printed word’. In spite of attempts by the KGB to suppress the manuscript, the first edition of Solzhenitsyn’s book was published in Paris in late 1973. It rapidly became an international sensation.

Stalin’s regime was responsible for the deaths of in excess of twenty million people. The sheer scale of these numbers creates a barrier to empathy because it reduces human suffering to a set of unfathomable statistics. The power of *The Gulag Archipelago* stems from its emphasis on individual experiences under the most harrowing of circumstances. At one point Solzhenitsyn imagines volumes of photographs containing images of all the dead, and suggests that if we were able to leaf through such books, ‘looking into the extinguished eyes’, it ‘would leave a deep mark on our hearts for all eternity’.

One is reticent to draw comparisons between the Soviet penal system and the mindset of the new puritans. Just as the high priests of Critical Social Justice invoke the spectre of Hitler and the Third Reich at any opportunity, it is inaccurate and unhelpful to suggest that we are drifting inexorably towards a future in which the equivalent of the gulags might be reinstated. Even when activists make attempts to minimise the catastrophe of Stalin’s regime, this does not amount to an endorsement of incarceration and murder for the crime of wrongthink. To give a notable example, the LGBTQ+ Society at Goldsmiths University in London claimed that the gulags offered ‘compassionate’ and ‘non-violent’ opportunities for bigots to be re-educated, with ‘regular classes, book clubs, newspaper editorial teams, sports, theatre & performance groups’. These frolicsome holiday camps amounted to a system that was ‘a rehabillitary [sic] one and self supporting, a far cry from the Western, capitalist notion of prison’. And as for all those myths about torture and murder, death sentences were only ever ‘reserved for the most heinous, serious crimes’.

Had members of the Goldsmith LGBTQ+ Society read *The Gulag Archipelago*, they would have been quickly disabused of such fantasies. Yet, as we have seen, reality is a protean commodity for the new puritans; what is convenient to believe becomes the accepted narrative, and if the facts do not tally with this constructed version of events they are swiftly dismissed. This tendency to persist with false convictions even when evidence is produced to contradict them is known as ‘belief perseverance’, and is a recurring trait among ideologues. This applies as much to the student activist who has convinced himself that his university is a hothouse of white supremacy as it does to the soldier in the gulag committing acts of torture on those innocent

prisoners who refuse to recite the approved creed.

So while we must exercise a degree of caution when it comes to drawing comparisons between the antics of ‘woke’ activists and the horrors that Solzhenitsyn describes, we would be remiss not to note that their instincts are nonetheless authoritarian in nature. They may not support the violent suppression of their opponents, but they do generally countenance the removal of ‘problematic’ monuments, or the censorship of outdated books, or campaigns to expand ‘hate speech’ laws. Additionally, they display the tendency to reduce moral and political questions to the simplistic binary of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. In other words, they see the world as an expanded Disney cartoon, divided into readily identifiable sets of heroes and villains. Solzhenitsyn reminds us of the folly of this approach. ‘If only it were all so simple!’ he writes. ‘If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?’

The kind of revisionism it takes to confidently declare that the gulags were the Soviet equivalent of a Butlin’s holiday resort can, of course, be largely explained by straightforward historical illiteracy, but it also represents a simple failure to learn the lessons of the past. *The Gulag Archipelago* works as a cautionary tale against the inchmeal drift into authoritarianism. For instance, we have seen how ‘hate speech’ laws and police guidance often disregard the significance of intention in favour of a perception-led assessment. Solzhenitsyn warns against precisely this development. Chapter 10 of Part 3 of *The Gulag Archipelago* relates a number of examples of Soviet citizens who were incarcerated for many years simply because their intentions were deemed inconsequential to the perceived transgression. A villager who used his belt to carry a heavy bust of Stalin was sentenced to ten years for ‘terrorism’ because it resembled a noose around the leader’s neck. Two farm children were imprisoned after getting into a fight and accidentally knocking a political poster off the wall. For good measure, their parents were also convicted.

Most relevant of all is the way in which Solzhenitsyn repeatedly laments the failure of ordinary people to speak out before the smaller acts of authoritarianism escalated into full-blown tyranny.

You aren’t gagged. You really can and you really ought to cry out – to cry out that you are being arrested! That villains in disguise are trapping people! That arrests are being made on the strength of false denunciations! That millions are being subjected to silent reprisals! If many such outcries had been heard all over the city in the course of a day, would not our fellow citizens perhaps have begun to bristle? And would arrests perhaps no longer have been so easy?

The road to tyranny, then, is circuitous and often navigated at a glacial pace. We might today sanction the occasional act of censorship on the assumption that it is for the greater good, but in doing so we accelerate a process that we may not always be able to control. Our lawmakers may insist that intention is irrelevant to the commission of a crime, but once that precedent is established, we cannot be certain how it could be abused by later governments. We may divide the world into the binary of good and evil, but we have no way of controlling how the leaders of the future will choose to apply these designations. The new puritans now routinely denounce behaviour that at one time would not only have been tolerated, but seen as a virtue. If we yoke ourselves to moral certainties, how will we survive once the sands shift in their inevitable and unpredictable ways?

Digital Plutocracy

‘The simple act of an ordinary brave man is not to participate in lies.’ This is a line from Solzhenitsyn’s acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy upon winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. Throughout *The Gulag Archipelago* we are reminded of what a society might come to resemble once it has dispensed with the primacy of truth. In a world where falsehoods are the only acceptable currency, anyone can be branded a criminal. If one person’s ‘lived experience’ is sufficient to condemn another as a racist, homophobe, sexist or transphobe, there can be no adequate defence for the accused. ‘For several decades’, Solzenitsyn writes, ‘political arrests were distinguished in our country precisely by the fact that people were arrested who were guilty of nothing and were therefore unprepared to put up any resistance whatsoever’. While we might find the strength of mind to fend off false allegations and smears, it is quite another matter to find oneself ‘arrested for nothing and interrogated about nothing’.

Social media platforms frequently borrow from this playbook, punishing users who are not aware of having broken any rules. These companies operate with a sinister lack of transparency, deleting accounts or content at will. Their ‘Terms of Service’ tend to be purposefully nebulous so that anyone can be said to have violated them at any time. It’s a grim admission to make, but those of us who are repeatedly booted off these platforms often find ourselves accepting the seemingly arbitrary decisions of our overlords simply because it feels as though there is nothing we can do about it. Occasionally, we might lodge an appeal, asking for more details on how precisely we broke the rules, only to receive an automated response referring us back to the very set of rules we were questioning in the first place. It’s rather reminiscent of Josef K. in Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), punished for an unspecified crime that he is not aware he has committed.

It is worth re-emphasising the obvious: there is no moral equivalence in the censorial behaviour of the new puritans and the atrocities of the Soviet regime. My point is that there are echoes of a similar mindset that, if left unchecked, has the potential to escalate into something far more troubling. For instance, the way in which Silicon Valley moderators are able to arbitrarily pronounce on what constitutes ‘disinformation’ can have deleterious consequences. For a long while, any suggestions that the coronavirus pandemic originated from a laboratory leak in Wuhan was considered a racist conspiracy theory, and big tech was quick to delete content that advanced it. Now, it is generally accepted as a credible possibility. The lesson of this ought to be clear. Disinformation is best addressed through more accurate information, and there can never be any guarantees that the censors themselves are not misinformed.

At the height of the pandemic, a ‘Lockdown TV’ episode by the website *UnHerd* featuring Professor Karol Sikora was

removed from YouTube, probably as a result of his claim that the virus was likely to ‘burn out’ and that levels of public immunity had been underestimated. One would be forgiven for assuming that Sikora, a distinguished oncologist and former advisor to the World Health Organisation, would have something to add to the debate, irrespective of whether or not one agreed with his analysis. Fortunately, the video was re-uploaded after YouTube claimed that the deletion had been an error. Even so, the pandemic seemed to accelerate big tech censorship in a way that few had anticipated. By the time of the 2020 United States election, Twitter was sufficiently emboldened to suspend the *New York Post*'s Twitter account after it published an unflattering article about Joe Biden's son, Hunter. Other users were even prevented from sharing the story. In January 2021, President Donald Trump was banned from Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

I have argued in my book *Free Speech and Why It Matters* (2021) that in recent years we have seen a growing misapprehension that censorship can only be enacted by the state. In reality, social media platforms are the *de facto* public square, and the companies that run them are effectively the arbiters of a substantial proportion of global political discourse. This has generated uncertainty among libertarians whose devotion to the free market sits at odds with the fact that those of their persuasion are far more likely to be censored under these conditions. Meanwhile, the dominance of the new puritans in Silicon Valley has led to a self-contradictory phenomenon: an avaricious corporate oligopoly comprising those who nonetheless believe themselves to be ‘left wing’. It is hardly surprising that, as Douglas Murray notes in *The Madness of Crowds*, the people employed to monitor content on Twitter’s ‘Trust and Safety Council’ – a branding so dystopian in tone that it almost feels deliberate – are first tested in order ‘to weed out anyone with the wrong ideological inclinations.’

These kinds of corporate oligopolies are the reason why antitrust legislation exists in an open-market economy; there is broad recognition that private companies are likely to exploit consumers when there are no competitive alternatives. The way in which the tech giants coordinated to prevent users from accessing Parler, a rival social media platform established in 2018, demonstrates that they are willing to go to any lengths to ensure that their dominance of the market is absolute. This was justified by the fact that certain accounts on Parler had openly called for violence, and that the company had failed to remove such content, although the same could be said for Twitter itself. For instance, in spite of numerous complaints by human-rights campaigners, Twitter has still to this date not removed a post by Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, calling for the wholesale eradication of Israel. The site’s ‘terms of service’, in other words, are so inconsistently administered as to be virtually meaningless.

It is simply not sustainable to argue that users who are unhappy with such arbitrary censorship policies can go elsewhere, particularly when tech giants are able to shut down any nascent competition. A dissatisfied customer at a restaurant, furious at discovering a live weevil in his risotto, might seek out an alternative place to dine. The same cannot be said for social media, where the concentration of power is such that the laws of the free market do not apply. The reality of the digital age is that the principal channels of public discourse are superintended by unaccountable and unelected billionaires who enjoy greater political clout and influence than any major nation state.

The possibility of an internet Bill of Rights was never likely to be explored by Joe Biden’s administration, because the plutocrats of Silicon Valley are politically aligned with the Democratic party. This is myopic, because online censorship will ultimately impact on everybody, irrespective of political affiliation. The complacency of the Trump administration meant that he left office in 2021 with big tech still enjoying the protections afforded by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which was introduced in 1996 so that companies could moderate user posts without being legally defined as publishers. This was especially important when it came to online comment sections, where it would be unjust to hold news outlets culpable for illegal or libellous content uploaded by users.

While this provision was therefore necessary, the act could easily have been amended so that its protections only pertained to illegal content. This would have meant that platforms such as Twitter and Facebook could not simply remove posts because they disagree with the opinions expressed or because they find them offensive. The common practice of banning gender-critical feminists, for instance, shows how social media platforms are happy to engage in partisan editorialising even where no law has been broken. If this is how these companies wish to behave, then they should be legally defined as publishers and held accountable for all content on their site, just like any other media outlet.

The greatest trick of authoritarians is to convince their subjects to rejoice in their own subjugation. The rise of the new puritanism has meant that it is not uncommon to see self-proclaimed ‘leftists’ cheering on multi-billion-dollar corporations as they ratchet up their policies on censorship and their determination to control the parameters of acceptable thought and speech. The strength of feeling against Donald Trump has meant that his permanent ban from all major social media platforms was treated as a victory for progressive values. The instinctive sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing one’s enemy silenced prevented many from apprehending the broader ramifications. These are the imbeciles who stare at the finger as the wise man points at the moon.

The Nazi Pug

Culture warriors on all sides tend to favour analogies that invoke the distinction between those who are alert and those who are oblivious. For the new puritans, there is the notion of being ‘woke’; that is to say, awake to the ways in which minority groups are routinely oppressed. For the critics of this movement there is the concept of being ‘redpilled’, an allusion to *The Matrix* (1999), a movie set in a dystopian future in which human beings are wired into a mass computer simulation and are brought out by the symbolic means of swallowing a red pill.

Then there is what James Lindsay describes as the ‘woke tipping point’, by which he means that every individual has a threshold at which the true nature of Critical Social Justice becomes apparent and his or her enthusiasm dissolves. For liberal-minded people, this is an inevitability, given that ‘wokeness’ is the antithesis of liberalism. Although, as I have argued, it is often couched in terms that mislead liberals into offering their support, such as ‘equity’, ‘justice’ and ‘anti-fascism’, the illiberal

substructure of the ideology does not take long to manifest itself. Increasingly, I am seeing evidence that more and more people who were once sympathetic to the ideals of the new puritans are recognising their toxic impact on society, and often this revelation occurs due to a single event.

If I were to identify my own specific ‘woke tipping point’, one likely contender would be the case of Markus Meechan, a Scottish YouTube comedian known by his online moniker ‘Count Dankula’, who was arrested in May 2016 for posting ‘grossly offensive’ material online. His case was to be one of the earliest instances of what we now call cancel culture, and was all the more insidious in that it involved a collaboration between online activists and the state. Meechan’s crime was to upload a video in which he is seen teaching his girlfriend’s pug to lift its paw in mimicry of a Nazi salute whenever its master says ‘Sieg Heil’, and to react excitedly to the phrase ‘gas the Jews’. At one point in the offending video the pug, Buddha, is seen at a computer screen, apparently enjoying a filmed excerpt from one of Hitler’s speeches. After this arrest, it took two years and thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money before Meechan was convicted at Airdrie Sheriff Court and fined £800 for breaching Section 127 of the 2003 Communications Act.

It is not difficult to see why so many would find such a provocative video offensive – the phrase ‘gas the Jews’ is repeated twenty-three times – but it takes quite a leap of the imagination not to see that Meechan’s intention was to be funny. He even explains the joke in the video itself. ‘My girlfriend is always ranting and raving about how cute and adorable her wee dog is’, he says, ‘so I thought I would turn him into the least cute thing that I could think of, which is a Nazi’. Even without this caveat, there can be few who would fail to comprehend that the joke is predicated on the notion that the Nazis were uniquely evil.

Does the concept of a Nazi pug really have to be explained? Have we reached the point where such a self-evidently ludicrous premise is interpreted as anything other than comedic? It is a peculiarity of our time that policymakers and law enforcers apparently lack the basic nous to identify an attempt at humour when they see it, or, more worryingly, have such a degraded view of humanity that they believe that many will be drawn to fascism and criminality on the basis of a misinterpreted prank.

The joke itself has a historical precedent. In 1941, a dog in Finland sparked a three-month investigation by Germany’s Nazi government. Tor and Josephine Borg had allegedly trained their Dalmatian to raise its paw in response to the word ‘Hitler’, which eventually became the dog’s nickname. The German embassy dismissed Tor Borg’s claim that he had not intended to insult the *Führer* but, in the absence of witnesses, the charges were eventually dropped. When Meechan’s case was reported, few imagined the case would reach a court of law. The story seemed too absurd, and it was surely unfeasible that the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service would not intervene and prevent the Scottish legal system from becoming an international laughing stock. As it turns out, the present-day Scottish judiciary can be more tenacious than the Third Reich.

The prosecution of Meechan is largely down to how the nature of comedy has come to be misunderstood in the current culture war. While it has become fashionable to castigate comics of the past for ‘punching down’, there is a new generation of young internet ‘shitposters’ whose humour is based almost entirely on shock and provocation. For ‘normies’ (those who rely predominately on the mainstream media for their entertainment and information), this internet subculture is inexplicable. It is this cultural divide, rather than any far-right sympathies on Meechan’s behalf, that might account for why the Nazi pug video was so widely misconstrued.

In 2019 I produced a television documentary for the BBC under the insipid title of *Nazi Pug: Joke or Hate?*, having already presented an online documentary called *The Curious Case of the Nazi Pug* for *spiked* magazine the year before. As such, I was able to meet Meechan and his friends and be temporarily immersed in their internet subculture. On my first visit, I was invited to see Meechan’s ‘Discord server’, an online chat forum in which he spends most of his evenings. By way of demonstration, he posted the following bulletin to the eight thousand or so members who were logged on at the time: ‘Documentary guys are filming my Discord right now. You know what to do.’ Within sixty seconds I had seen pornographic imagery on themes ranging from Lego to frogs, multiple drawings of 1990s television favourite Mr Blobby with an erection, and some scatological imagery that I have since done my utmost to forget. ‘It’s about getting a reaction’, Meechan told me. ‘There’s a whole community here from every background, race, sexuality, gender, age. We play pranks, we post memes, and we try to be as offensive as possible. I’m an adult in every other area of my life – my house is clean, I pay my bills – but when it comes to my free time I’m an immature arsehole.’

This kind of tendency for troublemaking was always likely to be misread. To the uninitiated, it can even seem sinister. As Meechan told me:

A lot of normies don’t understand. Most of the people who are involved in our culture are the sort who weren’t very popular at school, who were bullied, who felt rejected by society. They had this magical place to fall back on called the internet, where it didn’t matter who they were or what they looked like. Now there are people coming in and seeking to control that. They didn’t want us in mainstream society in the first place, and now they’re trying to kick us out of the world we created for ourselves.

This accounts for the fact that those who interpreted the pug video as a front for fascism invariably came from those entirely unfamiliar with the conventions of this internet subculture. According to Meechan, the judge in his case ‘was deadpan throughout the trial’, putting his inability to comprehend internet culture down to a ‘generational difference’. Of the roughly three million people who watched the video online, not one complained to the police; the investigation was only able to proceed because the authorities actively trawled for witnesses who would find the material offensive.

At the time that the Nazi pug story broke, I was co-writing the scripts for Jonathan Pie, a fictional online news reporter who would often be caught indulging in off-air political rants. During early 2018, Pie was touring the country in the second live show that I had co-written for the character and for which I was also the stand-up support act. On the day that Meechan was found guilty at Airdrie Sheriff Court, we were due to appear at the nearby Pavilion Theatre in Glasgow, but the venue had caught fire during the night and the show had been cancelled. Given that we now had a day off, I was keen for us to address this miscarriage of justice in a new video. Having quickly written the script, we took a taxi to the court and filmed Pie’s response to the verdict, which saw him goose-stepping on the court steps to demonstrate the absurdity of criminalising jokes about Nazis.

This turned out to be our most widely shared video since our response to Donald Trump's election in 2016, but its popularity among Pie's fans was offset somewhat by criticisms from numerous other comedians who felt that the court had made the right decision. 'Let the moron stew', tweeted one, claiming that Meechan's joke wasn't of sufficient quality to make defending him worthwhile. Another casually referred to him as a 'Nazi'. Inexplicably, one comedian managed to imply that standing up for Meechan could make you an apologist for sexual assault, because such energy would be better channelled into cases of harassment. Some even went so far as to accuse me of defending far-right values, an interpretation so far off the mark that I began to feel like the subject of some immense practical joke.

Whether or not this qualifies as a 'woke tipping point' is difficult to say, but I was certainly taken aback by the angry messages I received from comics who felt that Meechan deserved to be prosecuted. To put this into context, it is worth considering what had happened in 2006 when Tony Blair's government attempted to oppose amendments passed by the House of Lords that limited the scope of the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. Had the government not been defeated, any complaint against a comedy show that mocked religious belief would have been a matter for police investigation. Unsurprisingly, the bill had been the subject of an oppositional campaign by comedians and other performers. It was spearheaded by the actor Rowan Atkinson, who argued that 'the right to offend is far more important than any right not to be offended'.

This was an important campaign, but it was hardly controversial. In 2006, it would have been quite some feat to find a single comedian who would have approved of government legislation which imposed boundaries on artistic expression. By 2018 this had all changed, and the consensus had seemingly evaporated. I wrote an open letter to *The Times* calling for the repeal of Section 127 of the Communications Act – under which Meechan's 'Nazi pug' video was being prosecuted – but for all my efforts was only able to find thirty signatories from the comedy industry, due to a general reluctance to be seen to enable 'hate speech'. In the end the letter came to nothing because *The Times* was not interested in publishing it, but I was struck by how much of a struggle it had been and how such stark divisions had seemingly emerged overnight. Where once there had been unanimity among comedians regarding the sanctity of free expression, there was now doubt and fear.

So what had happened in the intervening twelve years? Why was it that comedians seemed so relaxed about the prospect of the British state criminalising certain kinds of jokes? The fallacy of guilt by association was inevitably a factor; Meechan had been falsely smeared as 'alt-right' or 'fascist' by prominent figures in the media, and so anyone who defended his right to freedom of speech was likewise stigmatised. This was partly due to the fact that he had been supported by a number of prominent figures who are perceived by many to be sympathetic to the 'alt-right', including co-founder of the English Defence League Tommy Robinson and broadcaster Katie Hopkins.

It should surprise nobody that controversial figures have an interest in defending freedom of speech given that uncontroversial speech is never under threat. The principle cannot be said to be invalidated simply because those we dislike endorse it. In surrendering our ideals out of fear of guilt by association, we subordinate our own moral agency to those we fundamentally oppose. A former friend of mine once told me that defending Meechan's right to free speech was out of the question because Tommy Robinson got there first. I asked him why, if he so despised Robinson, would he grant him the power to dictate which principles he should or should not uphold? He was unable, or unwilling, to answer.

In any case, the accusations against Meechan do not stand up, given that in the two years following his arrest the police and specialists in cybercrime intelligence thoroughly scrutinised his online history and found no evidence whatsoever of any far-right or racist tendencies. As Meechan later pointed out, '*Guardian* columnists like to think they know a hell of a lot more than any intelligence division'. As we have seen, it is a common characteristic of the new puritans that facts are routinely subordinated to private intuition. Even so, one would have thought that they might have considered Occam's Razor in their deductions. Which scenario is more likely? That Meechan was playing a joke on his girlfriend which some found offensive, or that he was attempting to radicalise people to the far right through the medium of pugs?

Many critics took an alternative approach, complaining that Meechan's video was simply not funny enough to justify its controversial subject matter. Of course, such wholly subjective objections can be dismissed outright. Whether one finds the Nazi pug funny or not is beside the point, and there is something oddly elitist about comedians denying Meechan the right to make jokes on the grounds that he was not a professional. These critics are perfectly entitled to find fault with his attempts at humour, but this hardly justifies a criminal prosecution. Without wishing to resort to stereotypes, I can think of none less qualified to assess the merits of comedy than the Scottish judiciary.

Class prejudice is the most likely explanation for why so many were quick to assume the worst about Meechan. Having spent some time in Meechan's community during the course of filming *The Curious Case of the Nazi Pug*, I soon found that the rash assumptions made about his character and background in the mainstream media bore little relationship to reality. He took me on a tour of Coatbridge, the town in North Lanarkshire where he grew up, and it immediately struck me as the kind of place which would be alien to most *Guardian* subscribers. The supportive attitude of locals was evident: one man with a prominent scar across his neck and face approached him for an amiable chat outside a chip shop; another stopped to shake his hand but was mistrustful when he heard my outsider's accent. Meechan explained to me that violent incidents are not uncommon here simply because, as he put it, 'this is Coatbridge'. When the police handcuffed him and bundled him into the transport van, he found himself sitting next to an old friend who had been apprehended for cutting someone's face with a machete. Another friend, he told me, once literally stabbed him in the back, yet they have remained on good terms. It's hardly surprising that middle-class, privately educated media types found it so difficult to relate to his circumstances.

Although ostensibly so preposterous, Meechan's case was important because it alerted many people to troubling legislation on the statute books of which they had been previously unaware. Others had served jail time for jokes before, but this was the first case that had pricked the interest of the national press. It is strange to think that a 'woke tipping point' could be reached by means of a pug, but it was a valuable reminder that the right to freedom of speech ought never to be taken for granted. The distinction between 'offensive' and 'grossly offensive' is not a standard that can be measured objectively, yet the conviction was secured on this very basis. It was accepted that there was no evidence that Meechan had far-right sympathies, and that the only evidence of his intention to cause offence was the existence of the video itself. By its own reasoning, then, the court had taken

faith and intuition as a form of proof. The implications are sinister; a fair and impartial legal system does not criminalise what it assumes to be the private thoughts of citizens. To say that this is the behaviour of a police state may be hyperbole, but only just.

Exegesis

Language and Control

It is a truism that people are often educated out of extreme religious beliefs. With good education comes the ability to think critically, which is the death knell for ideologies that are built on tenuous foundations. The religion of Critical Social Justice has spread at an unprecedented rate, partly because it makes claims to authority in the kind of impenetrable language that discourages the sort of criticism and scrutiny that would see it collapse upon itself. Some would argue that this is one of the reasons why the Catholic Church resisted translating the Bible into the vernacular for so long; those in power are always threatened when the plebeians start thinking for themselves and asking inconvenient questions.

This tactic of deliberately restricting knowledge produces *epistemic closure*, and is a hallmark of all cults. The elitist lexicon of Critical Social Justice not only provides an effective barrier against criticism and a means to sound informed while saying very little, but also signals membership and discourages engagement from those outside the bubble.

It is inevitable that the principle of freedom of speech should become a casualty when powerful people are obsessed with language and its capacity to shape the world. Revolutionaries of the postmodernist mindset would have us believe that societal change can be actuated through modifications to the language that describes it, which is why Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School maintained that it was not possible to conceive of the liberated world in the language of the existing world. As for the new puritans, they have embraced the belief that language is either a tool of oppression or a means to resist it. This not only accounts for their approval of censorship and ‘hate speech’ legislation, but their inability to grasp how the artistic representation of morally objectionable ideas is not the same as an endorsement.

It further accounts for their hostility to debate. According to this view, the airing of toxic ideas enables their promulgation, and so there is a moral duty to ensure that they are silenced. This is the logic behind the practice of ‘no platforming’ or ‘deplatforming’ which sees visiting speakers disinherited from appearing on university campuses due to their contentious opinions. The new puritans’ longed-for utopia, in which all forms of prejudice are eradicated from the human instinct, will apparently be brought about through the control of how we speak and, by extension, how we think.

In addition to calls for censorship, language can be manipulated through what is known as ‘concept creep’, by which words lose any meaning through endless misapplication. The most disturbing example has been the expanded meaning of terms such as ‘far right’, ‘fascist’ and ‘Nazi’, which has needlessly raised the temperature of current political debates. A new make-believe domain has emerged, in which many are gripped by an irrational conviction that we live in a country dominated by fascists, poised to rise and seize control like a rerun of Mussolini’s march on Rome. So one left-leaning commentator informs us that ‘fascist extremism and terrorism is being legitimised and fuelled by “mainstream” newspapers and politicians alike’. Another insists that ‘all white people’ are implicated ‘in white supremacy’. The rhetoric has become so ubiquitous that these terms have begun to lose their potency.

So why is it that so many journalists and activists are persuaded that neo-Nazism has gone mainstream? Why do so many on social media feel the need to identify themselves as ‘anti-fascist’? Like most people, I have never met an actual fascist. I have encountered some racists, a few far-right advocates, and one white nationalist during the filming of a programme for the BBC – but no fascists, so far as I am aware. My default expectation of my fellow creatures is that they would instinctively oppose such pernicious ideas. Claiming to be an ‘antifascist’ is rather like wearing a badge saying ‘I am not a paedophile’; it makes others wonder what you’re hiding.

The illusion of a crypto-fascist epidemic is buoyed by the misapprehension that white supremacists and neo-Nazis tend to keep their views to themselves. This is untrue; one of the problems we face in combating these ideologies is that fealty to the cause is considered a source of pride. By failing to use terms accurately and with care, commentators and journalists have created the impression that such groups are pervasive and have thereby inadvertently promoted them. It is no great leap to suppose that this goes some way to explaining why the far right has lately been recruiting members with greater ease. Although still extremely marginal, there is evidence to suggest that the far right is growing, and while we ought to take this very seriously, we should not allow the truth to be distorted through lazy hyperbole.

Then there is the slippery term ‘alt-right’, a catch-all that rivals ‘fascist’ and ‘Nazi’ for the way in which it is deployed so thoughtlessly. Even Jordan Peterson, the famous clinical psychologist whose opposition to tyranny in all its forms could not be more well documented, has been branded as ‘alt-right’ by numerous media outlets. In common parlance, the term has become irrevocably associated with white nationalism and movements helmed by the likes of Richard Spencer. So when Peter Walker, political correspondent for the *Guardian*, claims that the meaning of ‘alt-right’ is ‘subjective’, he is either being disingenuous or naïve. According to Walker, it ‘can be associated with a sort of highly robust, fairly confrontational libertarian right-leaning politics with a dash of support for Trump’, but his use of the modal verb is telling. That a phrase with such potentially libellous connotations can be defined in multiple ways should surely give journalists pause for thought. Unless, of course, their intention is to imply a correlation with white supremacy, safe in the knowledge that the get-out clause of ambiguity will excuse the smear.

We see the same problem with the notion of ‘Islamophobia’, which has been weaponised to great effect. As a consequence,

people with legitimate criticisms of Islam are gratuitously pigeonholed alongside the sort of reactionaries who shout abuse at women in hijabs or throw bacon at mosques. Even Muslim critics are dismissed as suffering from ‘internalised Islamophobia’ if their ideas are not deemed sufficiently deferential. In a free society, no religious belief should be ringfenced from analysis or mockery, and the accusation of ‘Islamophobia’ has become the primary tool by which to discourage potential critics.

We need to restore some clarity. We are right to call groups such as the British National Party ‘far right’, because they have always been dominated by those who believe in the concept of racial superiority, but once the meaning of the term spreads to incorporate civic nationalists, readers of right-leaning tabloids, those who voted for Brexit, or gender-critical feminists, the words become denuded of their power. Hysteria is no sound basis for political analysis, and nor is it advisable to allow genuine fascists the opportunity to claim greater support than they actually command. For all the alarmism of the new puritans, we do not live in a country in which racism, homophobia, misogyny or anti-trans hatred are considered in any way acceptable. Even the mildest suspicion of such tendencies can result in a form of social excommunication. That is not to say that such prejudices have been eliminated – human nature is far too flawed for that – but it is reassuring that we appear to have reached a civilised consensus.

There was a time when the right-wing press seemed to be dominated by fantasists. Reports abounded of asylum seekers being showered with benefits, ethnic minorities forcing local councils to ban the word ‘Christmas’ in favour of ‘Winterval’, or nurseries teaching children to sing ‘Baa, Baa, Rainbow Sheep’ so as not to offend black people. Such histrionic ‘PC gone mad’ stories were typically propagated by reactionary tabloid polemicists. They were describing a fantasy Britain, one distorted by fear, ignorance, and possibly a few too many boozy press lunches. Not to be outdone, the new puritans have seemingly conjured a different kind of imaginary Britain, in which the behaviour of a few extremists is magnified to an absurd extent. These are the reactionaries of our present culture war, occupying a nightmare land of their own making. Some sympathy is warranted here; it must be exhausting to harbour such convictions, untethered as they are from reality. But the fact remains that it is our security services and intelligence agencies who are taking on the handful of fascists in our midst. The rest are just scrapping with ghosts.

Archivists or Activists?

That the new puritans have consolidated their power through the manipulation of language might explain why they have secured so much influence over public libraries. During the past few years, we have seen a bizarre militancy from librarians who are keen to ‘decolonise’ their collections or berate people for their reading habits. I am not suggesting here that there has been some kind of conspiracy among ideologues to infiltrate libraries by stealth, but rather that the role seems to attract activists who are convinced that society can be re-engineered through censorship of the words we say and the books we read.

I am aware of how ludicrous the concept of ‘woke librarians’ might sound, but the evidence is compelling. Even the British Library has a ‘Decolonising Working Group’, which has successfully persuaded its management to review its collections, ‘powerfully reinterpret’ statues of its founders, and put more than three hundred authors on a watchlist if they have even the flimsiest of connections to the slave trade. One of the group’s more risible findings is that the library’s main building is a monument to imperialism because it resembles a battleship.

When archivists at Homerton College, Cambridge, were engaged in a project to upload their collection of children’s literature to the internet, they decided to apply ‘trigger warnings’ to texts that might cause offence due to outdated racial stereotypes. These included *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) by Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Water Babies* (1863) by Charles Kingsley and various books by Dr Seuss. Typically, such gestures are a reliable indication that those responsible are ideologically captured, and this was confirmed by a statement issued on behalf of the college. The archivists apparently sought to make their digital collection ‘less harmful in the context of a canonical literary heritage that is shaped by, and continues, a history of oppression’. Note the familiar invocation of ‘harm’ unfittingly applied to the written word, and the underlying assumption that art and literature is a means by which the oppressor class perpetuates its power over marginalised groups.

Most revealingly, the archivists stated that it would be ‘a dereliction of our duty as gatekeepers to allow such casual racism to go unchecked’. This is what has become known colloquially as ‘saying the quiet part out loud’. The role of the archivist is that of the custodian, not the gatekeeper. Yet it is clear from this statement that those in charge of this digital project consider it their duty to shield the public from potentially corrupting texts rather than to facilitate access. Any competent teacher will confirm that even young children are capable of appreciating the concept of historical context and how values shift over time, particularly with the proper guidance. These self-appointed ‘gatekeepers’ evidently believe otherwise.

The application of ‘trigger warnings’ has been common practice in universities since at least 2013. These can range from literary works on English Literature courses to the study of rape cases in law schools. One professor at Harvard University writes how a colleague was ‘asked by a student not to use the word “violate” in class – as in “Does this conduct violate the law?” – because the word was triggering’. It is hardly crass to point out that if undergraduates cannot bear to hear about unpleasant crimes, they should avoid the study of law. It would be like someone who cannot stand the sight of blood specialising in heart surgery.

Those who defend the practice of trigger warnings argue that they are simply protecting certain students from the reignition of a preexisting trauma. If someone has been the victim of a violent attack, the reasoning goes, they should be made aware in advance if a text contains distressing imagery. The intention is clearly compassionate, and few would deny that it is upsetting to be reminded of past experiences we would rather forget. Early in my short-lived teaching career, I was blindsided by an incident in an English Literature class that might have been prevented had warnings been issued. I was teaching a poem in which an execution by hanging was vividly described. As I was reading the text aloud, a pupil ran from the classroom in tears. It was only later that I discovered that one of her relatives had recently hanged himself. After this unfortunate incident, I reflected on whether a warning at the beginning of the lesson might have prevented this outcome, or if this was simply the consequence of a failure of communication among teaching staff.

As it turns out, there is a consensus among cognitive behavioural therapists that trigger warnings are counter-productive when it comes to trauma recovery. As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt explain in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018), ‘avoiding triggers is a symptom of PTSD, not a treatment for it’. They quote Richard McNally, the director of clinical training at the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, who writes: ‘Trigger warnings are counter-therapeutic because they encourage avoidance of reminders of trauma, and avoidance maintains PTSD’.

There is a distinction to be drawn here between trigger warnings at universities and the kind of notifications we find before films aimed at helping parents to determine whether the content is suitable for their children. When the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) alerts viewers to potentially upsetting material, they do not make the claim that it is ‘harmful’, only that it may be inappropriate for certain age groups. Trigger warnings, on the other hand, are justified on the basis of this putative nexus of words and violence, one that is informed by the ideology of the new puritanism.

Worse still, this flawed notion can be weaponised by activist students who wish to exert some degree of control over their teachers. A letter from seven anonymous academics to *Inside Higher Ed* drew attention to the potential risk:

We are currently watching our colleagues receive phone calls from deans and other administrators investigating student complaints that they have included ‘triggering’ material in their courses, with or without warnings. We feel that this movement is already having a chilling effect on our teaching and pedagogy.

Trigger warnings have also been deployed as a form of appeasement to activists, a signal that their concerns are being heeded even if they are groundless. For instance, after students and staff demanded that the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge acknowledge the ‘systemic racism’ of this entire field of study, trigger warnings were added to ancient Greek and Roman literary works. Given the litany of sexual violence in these texts, one would have assumed that squeamish students would have avoided the subject altogether. Consider Ovid’s account in the *Metamorphoses* of how Adonis was conceived; his mother Myrrha tricked her own father into copulation and, while heavily pregnant, was transformed into a tree. This is surely the very definition of a dysfunctional family.

A further aspect of the faculty’s ‘action plan’ was to add signs to the display of plaster casts of Roman and Greek sculptures explaining that their ‘whiteness’ was not to be taken as a sign that the ancient world lacked diversity. Of course, this sort of performative handwringing is hardly necessary. The whiteness of the plaster casts can be readily accounted for by the fact that plaster is white.

Such needless and patronising explanations are entirely in keeping with the trigger warning mentality, which perceives adults as being locked in a permanent state of infancy. In the summer of 2021, Brandeis University in Massachusetts published an ‘oppressive language list’ of phrases best avoided by students and staff. Examples included ‘female-bodied’, ‘lame’ and ‘spirit animal’. The phrase ‘person experiencing housing insecurity’ was recommended as an inoffensive alternative to ‘homeless person’. A category headed ‘violent language’ featured phrases such as ‘rule of thumb’ and ‘you’re killing it’; the latter apparently could be misconstrued as an allegation of homicidal intent. This is evidently a university for the congenitally literal-minded.

Of course when it comes to the culture wars, the United Kingdom is never far behind the United States. Soon after the publication of the ‘oppressive language list’ at Brandeis, it was reported that the University of Glasgow had instructed staff to apply trigger warnings to course content to prevent distress. As an added twist, it was decreed that the phrase ‘trigger warning’ might itself be triggering as it invokes guns and violent imagery, and so ‘content advice’ was to be preferred. Other universities have competed to see who can invent the most asinine warnings: Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599) has a plot that ‘centres on a murder’; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* (1886) ‘contains depictions of murder, death, family betrayal and kidnapping’; Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) includes scenes of ‘graphic fishing’. Even George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been slapped with a warning that students might find the contents ‘offensive and upsetting’. Of course, those who would assume that a famous dystopian novel would be inoffensive and uplifting probably shouldn’t be studying literature in the first place.

Political commentator Brendan O’Neill has described trigger warnings as ‘a slippery form of censorship’, insofar as they ‘don’t outright ban books but they do shroud them in suspicion; they treat them as dangerous objects; they tell readers, “Watch out – this book might hurt you”’. And once we countenance the premise that words can be ‘harmful’, the next logical step is the withdrawal or destruction of books. Following a review of its collections, the Waterloo Region District School Board in Canada identified and removed books that were considered ‘harmful to staff and students’. Other school libraries did away with copies of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), following complaints about ‘racist, homophobic, or misogynistic language and themes’.

Those involved in these decisions evidently lack the most basic interpretative abilities. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is, of course, explicitly anti-racist, but for those who have invested words with the power to wound, the inclusion of racial slurs is sufficient to see it condemned. Never mind that the novel is set in the Deep South during the era of the Great Depression when such terms were commonplace, nor that Lee invites us to sympathise with the characters who believe, as does Atticus Finch, that ‘you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it’, and how justice is the right of every man ‘be he any colour of the rainbow’.

When NewSouth Books published an edition of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) in which the racial epithets were eliminated, they were demonstrating a similarly myopic approach. Like Atticus Finch, Huckleberry is a rare figure who can see beyond the ingrained prejudices of his time. Through its first-person narrative, we are invited to share the vantage point of a boy who instinctively rejects the prevailing conventions. The target of Twain’s satire is a community who believe themselves to be moral and godly but are happy to enslave and degrade their fellow creatures. In this we can detect Rousseau’s conception of the child uncorrupted by ‘civilisation’; it takes the innocence of a boy to see through the sanctimony and hypocrisy of a society built on exploitation.

The impulse to censor, or remove entirely, such explicitly anti-racist texts in the name of ‘anti-racism’ is a reminder of how

the new puritanism can only be sustained where critical thinking is absent. Language is reduced to a series of cyphers intended only to bolster oppression or resist it. The prioritisation of the ‘lived experience’ of the reader – or, more often, the non-reader – means that even the most egregious misinterpretation may be taken as evidence of a text’s capacity to ‘stir up hatred’. How else might we explain the removal of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a mainstay of contemporary feminist literature? The novel depicts a dystopian future in which women are reduced to broodmares for the ruling class. It is no accident that it is set in New England; Atwood draws a direct connection between the theocracy of this era and the totalitarianism of Gilead, her fictional dystopia, particularly in the treatment of women and the assumption of their inherent servility. Like the women of New England, who dressed plainly and were prohibited from using combs or mirrors, Atwood’s handmaids are attired in a manner that denies them an individual identity: ankle-length red skirts, a flat yoke with full sleeves, and white wings around the face that prevent them ‘from seeing, but also from being seen’.

Atwood has described her ‘take on American Puritanism’ as ‘not that far behind’ Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne’s novel tells the story of Hester Prynne, a woman convicted of adultery and forced to wear an embroidered letter ‘A’ as a mark of shame and expiation for her sins. Both Atwood and Hawthorne share an ancestral connection to the puritans of New England. Hawthorne was the great-great-grandson of John Hathorne, one of the leading judges in the Salem witch trials, and found little pleasure in revisiting these ghosts of his family’s repressive past. Perhaps more than any other author, Hawthorne is most responsible for the view of the puritans as repressive, bigoted and hypocritical. He considered *The Scarlet Letter* to be a ‘positively hell-fired story’, into which he ‘found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light’. Atwood’s family connection is through Mary Webster, one of the dedicatees of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, who was hanged for being a witch in 1683 but survived the execution process.

Those responsible for the removal of *The Handmaid’s Tale* from libraries might not be executing women who fail to conform, but they are certainly embodying the kind of ideological fervour that the novel explores. A similar philistinism was betrayed when the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board removed copies of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) on the grounds that the themes of the book ‘were outdated and too focused on white, male power structures’. As ever, the new puritans are unable to read literature through anything other than an identitarian lens. Golding’s novel is concerned with what happens when civilisation is stripped away, and the perennial risk of human beings reverting to their animal and tribal instincts if they are not adequately socialised or constrained by ethical norms. These factors are not specific to any race and gender. In any case, even if one were to interpret *Lord of the Flies* as a comment on ‘white, male power structures’, it could hardly be said to be an advertisement.

I am reminded of the comedian Victoria Wood’s short television play ‘The Library’ (1989), which depicts a tyrannical librarian called Madge who likes to bowdlerise Jackie Collins novels with a felt-tip pen and draw bras on the women in breastfeeding manuals. ‘She thinks book-burning is a sensible alternative to oil-fired central heating’, Wood tells her audience in the show’s opening monologue. Little could she have known that, thirty years on, the absurdist notion of a librarian who approves of censorship would become a habitual figure in the industry.

Wood’s jibe was somewhat prescient, given that the body in charge of elementary and secondary schools in southwestern Ontario recently authorised the ritualistic burning of books for ‘educational purposes’. In what they described as a ‘flame purification’ ceremony, almost five thousand books were removed from shelves and were destroyed or recycled if they were judged to contain outdated racial stereotypes. Some of those that were burned had their ashes used as fertiliser to plant a tree. An uplifting, progressive and environmentally conscious gesture, if one ignores the overtones of *Fahrenheit 451*.

The new puritans are similarly attracted to positions in which they are able to participate in the revision of dictionaries. Although the conventional role of the dictionary is to record common usage, the rise of the Critical Social Justice movement has meant that definitions are often modified to better reflect the ideological beliefs of staff members. Take America’s oldest dictionary, Merriam-Webster, whose contributors have deemed it necessary to change the definition of the word ‘racism’ to ‘reflect systemic oppression’. Likewise, the Anti-Defamation League has changed the definition of ‘racism’ on its website from ‘the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another’ to ‘the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people’. In this, they are following the diktats of critical race theorists who believe that ‘racism’ is an equation – prejudice plus power – rather than prejudice or hatred towards individuals on the basis of their race, which is how the vast majority of people understand the term.

In *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018), Robin DiAngelo rejects as ‘simplistic’ the notion that racism is best understood as ‘intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals’. Rather, racism is ‘a system’ or ‘a structure, not an event’. Furthermore, the ‘prejudice plus power’ formulation explains why the new puritans believe that only white people can be racist. So when two Indian teenagers were arrested at a football game in New Jersey having verbally abused and urinated on a group of black schoolgirls, the *New York Times* claimed that the perpetrators were ‘enacting whiteness’. What we might perceive as racism between ethnic minority groups is known instead as ‘colourism’. Furthermore, it is supposed that a white person cannot experience racism. DiAngelo even offers the theoretical scenario of a white person being ‘mercilessly’ bullied due to the colour of their skin, but resorts to a definitional fudge to explain this away as an example of someone ‘experiencing race prejudice and discrimination, *not racism*’. As a linguistic gymnast, DiAngelo often ends up face-down on the mat.

Merriam-Webster has a track record of this kind of paternalistic behaviour. In 2019, ‘they’ was added to the dictionary as a non-binary pronoun and was even judged to be ‘Word of the Year’. For all these efforts, the use of ‘they’ as singular has not caught on with the general public; further evidence that most people are not the kind of malleable drones that the new puritans believe them to be. According to Oxford University Press, publisher of the Oxford English Dictionary, recent words of the year include ‘post-truth’, ‘climate emergency’ and ‘youthquake’. Note how these choices are conspicuously political. Apart from media circles, the term ‘youthquake’ was hardly ever used in 2017 – the year it was honoured – and has since all but disappeared.

In August 2020, *Dictionary.com* published a new entry for the acronym ‘TERF’ (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), often

used as a slur against gender-critical feminists or anyone who believes that there are biological differences between men and women. That *Dictionary.com* tweeted out a link to its definition, along with the phrase ‘Beware the TERF’, leaves us in no doubt as to where the company stands on this issue. Many feminists have expressed concerns that the more extreme trans activists are seeking what is tantamount to the erasure of womanhood, denying women’s rights to single-sex spaces and even attempting to shoehorn the neologism ‘womxn’ into mainstream vocabulary, in spite of the fact that no one knows how to pronounce it. These feminists’ suspicions are certainly validated by *Dictionary.com*’s original choice of illustration for the TERF entry: the female symbol (a circle with a cross underneath) struck through with a red line. Nor was it particularly reassuring to see that one of *Dictionary.com*’s original example phrases, now deleted, was ‘punch a TERF’.

As the power and influence of the new puritans accelerates, we can expect to see more capitulation to these efforts at social engineering through the manipulation of language. Take the *Encyclopedia Britannica*’s transcript of Martin Luther King’s most famous speech: ‘I have a dream that . . . one day right there in Alabama, little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers’. The attentive reader will note that the word ‘black’ has been capitalised, but the word ‘white’ has been left in lower case. This follows the patently ideological decision by the Associated Press to amend its style guide to reflect the view that ‘white people in general have much less shared history and culture, and don’t have the experience of being discriminated against because of skin colour’.

It sounds like the stuff of fantasy. Yet the proliferation of activists in libraries, dictionaries, schools, advertising, the arts and the media makes complete sense when one considers that the devotees of the religion of Critical Social Justice have a vested interest in seizing control of outlets that influence how language is used. One thinks immediately of the science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick, who said that ‘the basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words’.

The Pronoun Game

Spinoza warned that an individual’s ‘indefeasible natural right’ to be ‘the master of his own thoughts’ was threatened wherever he might ‘be compelled to speak only according to the dictates of the supreme power’. Just as language can be manipulated, it can also be compelled, which is a similarly coercive method of control. Clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson first became widely known due to his opposition to the compelled use of gender-neutral pronouns. Contrary to popular belief, he had never objected to addressing his students according to their preferences, but he drew the line at legal proscriptions against refusing to do so. ‘Tyranny grows slowly,’ he reminds us, ‘and asks us to retreat in comparatively tiny steps. But each retreat increases the possibility of the next retreat’. Once we permit speech to be compelled under certain circumstances, we create a precedent whose limitations will be impossible to predict.

In the United Kingdom, there have been several police investigations into ‘misgendering’ and calls for this to be classified as a ‘hate crime’. In February 2020, Kate Scottow was convicted under the Communications Act for referring to a transgender individual who identified as a woman as ‘he’ on social media, although this was later overturned on appeal. Journalist Caroline Farrow was subjected to a six-month-long investigation by police following an appearance on ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*, where during an off-air moment she had allegedly referred to another contributor’s transgender daughter with a male pronoun. While relatively rare, such unwarranted interventions from the state over the matter of individual speech choices are certainly cause for concern.

For some reason, gendered and genderless pronouns have become the most visible means by which the new puritans have attempted to dictate the language choices of others. The strategy has had some degree of success because it has been portrayed as an expression of courtesy, a way to be inclusive to those whose gender may not be immediately apparent. At the same time, it establishes a precedent for a socially acceptable form of compelled speech, the future consequences of which could well represent a serious threat to individual liberties.

Throughout the United Kingdom, corporations and public institutions are gently nudging staff into the habit of declaring pronouns, either in emails or at the beginning of meetings. For instance, in February 2022 it was reported that members of staff at the British Library were being encouraged to wear pronoun badges with ‘he/him’, ‘she/her’ or ‘they/them’. In July 2021, Scottish civil service staff were being asked to sign off emails with their preferred pronouns in order to ‘foster an open culture that is supportive of the LGBTI+ community’. In July 2020, the BBC issued new guidelines to encourage its staff to make similar gestures, claiming that adding pronouns to emails is a ‘small, proactive step that we can all take to help create a more inclusive workplace’. Advance publicity for the Netflix series *The Sandman* included pronouns for cast members. The popular networking site LinkedIn now prompts users to add their pronouns to their profiles. In October 2021, students and staff at Leeds University called on their vice chancellor to make it policy for staff to state their preferred pronouns in formal communications. The trend is growing so rapidly that few have taken the time to reflect on the implications.

The new puritanism has even spread to the armed forces and intelligence agencies. On the day that Vladimir Putin initiated his invasion of Ukraine, the front page of the *Daily Mail* was leading with a story about a leaked document from MI5 and MI6 which was urging spies to acknowledge their ‘white privilege’ and declare their pronouns. Almost simultaneously, a tweet from the Ministry of Defence, since deleted, announced that its LGBT coffee morning that day had been a great success, and that it had included discussions about pansexuality and asexuality. It will surprise few people to learn that major political figures such as Nicola Sturgeon, Jeremy Corbyn and Kamala Harris have all performed the ritual of pronoun declaration, but who would have anticipated that Richard Moore, the head of MI6, would suddenly decide to include ‘he/him’ in his Twitter bio?

Many mainstream media outlets have also adopted the practice of using pronouns relating to gender identity rather than sex, which often makes for shambolic reportage. A striking example was published on the BBC’s news website in March 2022. The article outlined the vicious crimes of an eighty-three-year-old woman in New York who had dismembered another elderly woman she had met online, having already spent fifty years in prison for murdering two female friends. Those new to the story

would be forgiven for feeling that something was amiss in this account. After all, there are very few female serial killers, and even fewer who target other women. It is only towards the end of the article that the writer acknowledged that the killer had ‘recently identified as a woman’. This detail was presented as an aside, as though it was an inconsequential aspect of the case.

As with so many debates in the culture wars, the issue of pronouns has been misrepresented as a simple question of whether one is on the right or wrong side of history. Activists insist that it is just a way to be inclusive and polite, and in many instances that is clearly the intention. Yet the case against these measures is essentially liberal, and is worth outlining in full, given that most of us, at some point in the near future, will be faced with the choice between explaining our reasons for refusing, or capitulating in order to avoid conflict.

When you ask someone to declare pronouns you are doing one of two things. You are either saying that you are having trouble identifying this person’s sex, or you are saying that you believe in the notion of gender identity and expect others to do the same. As a species we are very well attuned to recognising the sex of other people, so for the most part to ask for pronouns is an expression of fealty to a fashionable ideology, and to set a test for others to do likewise. This is akin to a religious conviction, and we would be rightly appalled if employers were to demand that their staff proclaim their faith in Christ the Saviour or Baal the Canaanite god of fertility before each meeting.

In a recent article in the *Metro*, a young person who identifies as non-binary complained about being misgendered by doctors when seeking treatment for endometriosis, a condition of the womb. But for a medical practitioner, biological sex is an important consideration that cannot simply be wished away. In the article, the writer notes that one young doctor – who had just completed a trans inclusivity training course – ‘seamlessly switched to using “they/them” pronouns’ in their conversation, although why he would make the curious decision to start addressing his patient in the third person is not clarified.

This point is often overlooked. Announcing one’s pronouns has no practical purpose in most scenarios, given that we do not refer to individuals by their pronouns unless we are talking *about* them, rather than *to* them. In other words, there appears to be little utility in announcing pronouns other than to endorse the notion of gender identity. But this is a specifically ideological stance, one that people should not be pressurised into making against their will. Moreover, even raising the question can be offensive. Feminist campaigner Julie Bindel has pointed out that women who reject traditional notions of femininity are frequently told that they ‘look like men’. To ask such an individual for her pronouns can be construed as a kind of attack, given that she will have struggled to achieve acceptance as a woman who simply does not conform to sex stereotypes.

Then there is the added complication of neo-pronouns. On university campuses, it is not uncommon for badges to be distributed during freshers’ week in order to limit the potential for *faux pas*. ‘My pronouns are he/him/his’ the badge might say, but it could just as easily be ‘they/ them/their’, ‘xe/xem/xyr’, ‘ne/nym/nis’, ‘ve/ver/vis’, ‘fae/faer/faers’ or ‘zie/ zim/zir’. This kind of cryptic puzzle makes for quite the initiation.

Although no employers are as yet mandating pronoun declaration, there is something coercive about the request. An actor friend of mine recently told me that it is now common practice for members of a new cast to announce their pronouns at the beginning of the rehearsal process. In such circumstances, he says, to refuse would be unfeasible. For one thing, objections to the practice are not very well understood, and you would be instigating a tense and lengthy debate just at the moment when the cast ought to be bonding. More seriously, a refusal would doubtless result in accusations of transphobia, and the actor in question would be unlikely to be cast in future productions. Who is going to scupper their own career over a couple of words?

It is often forgotten that many transgender people are opposed to pronoun declaration for a number of reasons. It draws needless attention to them when they just want to get on with their lives. It can have the effect of ‘outing’ people against their will, particularly if they are in the early stages of their transition. It creates a false impression that gender identity ideology is the norm, even though it is a belief system shared by relatively few. Most importantly – to return to my key point – compelled speech is a fundamentally illiberal prospect, one that should always be resisted.

Debates around pronouns illustrate the clear disparity between the world as it is and the world as activists pretend it to be. Let us consider the insistence that ‘they’ and ‘them’ are widely accepted as singular pronouns. In September 2019 there was an almost instantaneous sea change in media policy when the pop singer Sam Smith announced that he would henceforth identify as non-binary and would prefer those writing about him to adopt ‘they’ and ‘them’. Editors who would have previously baulked at the use of ‘they’ as singular suddenly insisted on doing so, which generated a number of articles that were jarring to those readers with an eye for syntax and style. Of course Smith was free to make his request – just as we are free to decide whether or not to accede – but any attempt to impose speech rather than allow it to evolve in its own way should not be taken lightly.

The expectation that ‘they’ and ‘them’ should be adopted as singular pronouns in formal speech and writing presents its own set of challenges. We are all aware of the common colloquial usage of ‘they’ as singular in the case of one whose gender is unknown. For instance, to say ‘Someone has left their suitcase here’ is far more natural to us than ‘Someone has left his or her suitcase here’, which would seem unwieldy even in the written form. Those who claim never to use ‘they’ in the singular have not paid close attention to their own speech patterns. That said, in the vast majority of cases for the vast majority of people, ‘they’ operates as a plural. The sentence ‘They are furious with you’ tells me to expect complaints from multiple individuals. Without further clarification, this sentence does not let me know that I have upset a specific person who identifies as gender-neutral.

This issue will doubtless become a major headache for educators in the near future. One of the most common reasons why pupils fail their English examinations is their tendency to write as they speak, for failing to distinguish between the formal and the colloquial. The singular ‘they’ falls into this latter category and can often make one’s meaning unclear. At present there is no specific regulation from examination boards on the matter of gender-neutral pronouns, but most teachers seem to take the view that they are not compatible with standard English. This is not the news that activists will be keen to hear, especially those who routinely cite Shakespeare’s use of the singular ‘they’ as a defence of current fashions. I cannot be the only person who considers it odd to claim that the best way to ensure progress is to mimic a writer from the sixteenth century. Shakespeare also observed the distinction between the familiar ‘thou’ and formal ‘you’, but our language has evolved since then. Few of us are likely to start addressing others as ‘my liege’ in emulation of his characters.

It would seem that the pronoun game is one that the new puritans cannot lose. Those who fail to comply are branded as reactionary and opposed to progress. The alternative is to accept and thereby legitimise the notion of compelled speech, a precedent that lays the groundwork for future exploitation. Those of us who are conflict-averse will be tempted to acquiesce, but the cost may be substantial in the long run. If you feel uncomfortable with stating pronouns at work, my advice would be to make your feelings clear. A refusal need not be antagonistic, and most employers will be happy to hear your reasons. There is always the possibility that you could be accused of transphobia or hate, but this is simply part of the coercive strategy.

It is perfectly possible that our language will adapt so that ‘they’ is commonly understood as both singular and plural, but it will not come quickly and will be impossible to enforce. The evolution of language is inevitable and unpredictable; the imposition of language is authoritarian and should be opposed on principle. For the overwhelming majority of people, pronouns are used in correlation with biological sex, not gender identity, and it is unlikely that this convention will change any time soon. As for the issue of gender-neutral pronouns in English classes, the consensus among teachers seems to be ‘we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it’. Perhaps this will suffice for now, but the far-sighted among us can spy a turbulent river on the horizon and, as yet, no obvious sign of a bridge.

Revelation

The Counter-Enlightenment

In Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991), there is a scene in which conservative lawyer Roy Kohn – a closeted gay character with close links to Ronald Reagan's administration – is told by his doctor that he has AIDS. In response, Roy points out that homosexuals have 'zero clout', so the diagnosis simply cannot apply to him. Unless he revises his definitions, Roy tells the doctor, he will systematically destroy his practice and reputation. 'Roy Cohn is not a homosexual' he explains. 'Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man . . . who fucks around with guys'.

There is power in preventing others from speaking what they know to be true, and this is not something that has escaped the clerics of Critical Social Justice. All authoritarian movements claim dominion over the truth, and define which elements of reality may or may not be acknowledged. When Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* looks at the portrait of Big Brother on the frontispiece of a children's history book, he is struck by the deranging sensation of being unmoored from the real world. 'It was as though some huge force were pressing down upon you – something that penetrated inside your skull, battering against your brain, frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you, almost, to deny the evidence of your senses.' The famous dogma of 'two plus two equals five' is something that the Party could at any time impose on its citizens. This is how submission is guaranteed.

In the case of the Critical Social Justice ideology, the mendacity of the equation isn't even what matters. As James Lindsay puts it, the real question is 'whose specific identity group interests are served by accepting that two plus two equals four?' According to this view, 'if saying two plus two equals four predominately serves white, Western male interests, that statement itself is political and politically problematic and should therefore be treated with suspicion, maybe dismantled, decolonized, or banned'. Reality is not, and has never been, the point.

Postmodernism's rejection of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and objective truth means that it is fundamentally opposed to liberalism. This is why so many self-proclaimed 'liberals' – particularly in the USA, where the word has come to be synonymous with 'left wing' – espouse ideas and activity that are so palpably illiberal. We might even borrow from the social and political theorist Isaiah Berlin and call this the 'Counter-Enlightenment'. Although Berlin's 1973 essay of that name referred specifically to what he perceived to be a pushback against Enlightenment thinking in Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the term has since been applied more broadly to those who are antagonistic to empiricist and rationalist principles. For the new puritans and their postmodernist forerunners, the Enlightenment is just another grand narrative to reject, a 'conspiracy of dead white men in periwigs'.

Like all religions, Critical Social Justice requires that the faithful adopt a specific perspective. We are not dealing with two competing narratives of the same reality, but a whole other kind of reality which is supernatural at heart. The map of the Critical Social Justice world is not composed of the coordinate systems of latitude and longitude, but the invisible power structures derived from a Foucauldian understanding of human relations. Inconvenient truths are to be erased from this new globe. Behavioural trends that emerge due to biological sex differences, for instance, are simply to be ignored because they defy the rules of the new terrain. Instead, there will be conspicuous lacunae bearing the inscription 'here be dragons'.

Writing in 1693, the puritan minister Cotton Mather defended his role in Bridget Bishop's trial in Salem by claiming that there was 'little occasion to prove the *Witchcraft*, it being evident and notorious to all beholders'. This common logical fallacy is known as the 'appeal to self-evident truth', and is similarly characteristic of the new puritans. Rather than initiate a discussion about difficult issues, they exhibit the infuriating tendency to simply make assertions, and treat with hostility anyone who challenges them. Without the standard of objective truth, the demons of unreason will flourish.

'Is the accuser always holy now?' says John Proctor in *The Crucible*. The new puritans share with the magistrates of Salem the view that accusers must automatically be believed, and in doing so obviate the fundamental principles of due process. It is now standard practice among police officers in the United Kingdom to prioritise 'lived experience' over other evidential thresholds. The government's website on 'hate crime' defines it as 'any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim, or anybody else, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice' towards one of the five 'protected characteristics' (race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender identity and disability).

We often hear of how hate crimes are on the rise, but this is largely due to this relatively recent policy of 'perception' as the defining factor. Even the Home Office concedes that rising hate crime statistics have been caused by this broadening of definitions and changes in how such incidents are recorded. This is also why politicians so often reiterate the view that the transgender community are one of the most abused and marginalised groups in society, in spite of overwhelming evidence that this is not the case. The narrative of a widely demonised trans community is sustained not by facts, but by testimonies of 'lived experience', and the conflation of words and violence which reconceptualises 'misgendering' as a form of hateful assault.

This linguistic sleight of hand may seem relatively inconsequential, but when a complainant is rebranded a 'victim' it amounts to a dismissal of the presumption of innocence. The justification for the change is well meaning, a response in large part to the activists in the #MeToo movement who sought to raise awareness of the long history of victims of sexual assault

being disbelieved by the authorities. Yet belief and disbelief are simply two forms of the same flippant attitude to the task of criminal investigation. One erroneous approach is not redeemed by the implementation of another.

In truth, every police officer knows that ‘perception’ is one of the least reliable means of understanding the circumstances of a crime. Eyewitness testimony is frequently flawed or outright mistaken, often with disastrous consequences for the falsely accused. Experts in memory have long understood that the way in which we recall events can bear little resemblance to how they actually unfolded. The Satanic Ritual Abuse hysteria of the 1980s saw countless miscarriages of justice on the basis of sincerely held memories that nonetheless turned out to be false. Anyone who is any doubt about the dangers of false memories should read Richard Webster’s *The Secret of Bryn Estyn* (2005), which offers a meticulous and sobering account of the North Wales care workers sex abuse scandals of the 1990s and the fantasists that fuelled them.

The presumption of guilt was also the reasoning behind the disastrous Operation Midland, which wasted millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money pursuing fabricated stories of child murder and sexual abuse at the heart of Westminster. Investigators judged the fantasies of the accuser, Carl Beech, to be ‘credible and true’ without a scrap or tittle of evidence. To look back on these grim episodes in human history – from Salem to Operation Midland – is to remind ourselves of how empathy and compassion, although essential for meaningful existence, may beguile us in unexpected and regrettable ways. For the puritans of the late seventeenth century, the world was a palimpsest of visible and invisible forces. In this context, it would make little sense to deny the ‘lived experience’ of the girls, given that evil spirits who seek to sow chaos are unlikely to leave physical evidence of their existence. The confusion is the entire point.

The new puritans see evil spirits too. For those of us who baulk at their bullying and authoritarian tactics, the tendency to assume disingenuousness and malevolence is understandable, but in order to reinstate the possibility of discourse we must proceed on the understanding that intentions on all sides are sincere. There will, of course, be some who cynically exploit the current culture wars to legitimise nefarious behaviour; there can be few more socially acceptable outlets to inflict cruelty and exert power over others than the Critical Social Justice movement in its current form. Having said that, for the majority of activists who are well meaning, such suppositions only serve to reinforce their intransigence and reluctance to examine their own certainties. In other words, the incoherence of the identitarian religion will be exposed far more effectively through the presumption of good faith.

This is no easy feat. The common factor that unites culture warriors of all political persuasions is a tendency to see the truth as an inconvenience that can be brushed aside. The denial of observable reality has become known colloquially as ‘gaslighting’, because the impact is to undermine someone else’s security in their point of view. The word comes from the movie *Gaslight* (1940), in which a husband convinces his wife that she is going insane by, among other things, dimming the lights and then denying that the house is getting darker when she complains. Media outlets with a particular ideological bent often engage in ‘gaslighting’. When CNN’s Omar Jimenez covered the protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the chyron that ran under the report described them as ‘mostly peaceful’, in spite of the clearly visible backdrop of burning cars and buildings. Similarly, the BBC was roundly mocked for its description of ‘largely peaceful’ protests in which twenty-seven police officers were injured. In this Trumpian era of ‘alternative facts’, it is apparent that prominent elements of the media are just as willing to contradict the reality before our eyes.

Instinctively, it feels as though these reporters must be peddling these untruths knowingly, perhaps out of a misguided sense of paternalistic responsibility. But even more sinister is the possibility that they have bought into their own fictions. If one accepts the postmodernist belief that our experiences are solely constructed through the language with which they are expressed, then to describe an event as ‘largely peaceful’ makes it so. In all of this, we should not lose sight of the possibility that prominent members of the media class are so ideologically captured that they cannot see beyond their own fabricated dreamscape.

Lived Experience

The outright denial of what we can plainly see has become so common that we barely notice it. Consider a recent argument between broadcasters Piers Morgan and Alex Beresford on the current affairs television show *Good Morning Britain*, in which the latter took issue with the former’s scepticism over the truth of some of the claims made by Meghan Markle in an interview with Oprah Winfrey. Midway through the discussion, Morgan pointed out that one of Markle’s most incendiary claims – that her son Archie had been denied the title of ‘Prince’ because he is mixed race – was demonstrably false. ‘Do you know what?’ said Beresford. ‘It’s their lived experience’. Morgan countered by repeating that it simply wasn’t true. ‘It’s their lived experience’, Beresford intoned once more, as though the recital of a cliché was any kind of adequate surrogate for the facts.

‘Lived experience’ is one of those phrases that function as a kind of countersign for membership of the fashionable club. Like its close cousin ‘dog-whistle’, it is typically deployed to make an accusation in the absence of evidence. If, for instance, you are determined to accuse someone of homophobia even though they have not said or done anything homophobic, you can always say that their words are an ‘anti-gay dog-whistle’ or that your ‘lived experience’ has revealed their malignant intent. To ask for evidence can even be taken as further evidence of the charge, such as when television presenter Phillip Schofield on *This Morning* asked whether the press coverage of Markle had been racist, only to have activist Shola Mos-Shogbamimu claim that to even raise the question was an example of ‘white privilege’.

Nor is ‘lived experience’ politically neutral. The intention is to validate personal perspective, but only if it corresponds with the expectations of the new puritans. For instance, Markle’s ‘lived experience’ apparently confirms that the royal family is inherently racist, but Prince William’s ‘lived experience’ that his family is ‘very much not’ racist can be readily dismissed. As usual for the practitioners of Critical Social Justice, propositions are framed as conclusions and all evidence to the contrary is ignored or denied. ‘Lived experience’, in other words, only carries weight if it is of the sanctioned type.

The concept was arguably popularised by the feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir, who used the phrase ‘*L’Expérience*

Vécue – often translated as ‘lived experience’ – as the title of Volume II of *The Second Sex* (1949). By rooting feminist analysis in the experiential reality of women’s lives, she was drawing an implicit distinction between that which is merely experienced and the political consciousness that might be actuated by such experiences. Therefore, although ‘lived experience’ seems tautological – what other kind of experience could there possibly be? – the phrase is an attempt to emphasise this notion of heightened social awareness that comes from everyday life.

There is much to be said for the potential to learn from those whose lives have been directly impacted by a particular issue. Yet although anecdotal evidence can be very revealing, most people understand that it cannot form the basis for overarching conclusions. I have on numerous occasions been the target of homophobic abuse, but that does not mean that I can extrapolate my experiences as a reliable measure of the general population’s attitude towards gay people. Anecdotes, by their nature, limit the scope of inquiry to the individual, one necessarily unreliable and clouded by personal bias, which makes them a tenuous basis from which to draw broader conclusions. So when Alex Beresford expects us to support an already discredited claim on the grounds of one person’s ‘lived experience’, we should not be taking him seriously.

For those who wish to claim that ours is an inherently oppressive and fascistic society, it is hugely inconvenient that the evidence so clearly tells us otherwise. As such, ‘lived experience’ has become an essential tool when it comes to denying those facts that threaten the newly dominant intersectional narrative. It is related to the concept of ‘positionality’, by which knowledge is understood to have been constructed according to one’s position on the matrices of oppression or privilege. That is to say, there are multiple epistemologies – or ‘ways of knowing’ – which is why the very notion of objective truth is mistrusted.

Let us take the hypothetical example of a white male historian who attempts to refute the claim that Winston Churchill was guilty of racial genocide, an increasingly common accusation. Our historian might acknowledge that Churchill’s Cabinet made disastrous policy decisions which contributed to the Bengal famine of 1943, but at the same time point to evidence that shows that Churchill was led to believe that this was simply a case of local mismanagement of food distribution. One might assume that this is a matter of weighing up the evidence and drawing our conclusions, but positionality would have us consider first the race and sex of the historian, and how his relative privilege in terms of group identity has distorted his reading of historical data.

One would have thought that disciplines related to science, medicine or engineering might be ringfenced from the pernicious influence of positionality, but even these are now seen as constructions of an oppressive white, male and heteronormative culture. This is to engage in a soft form of racism, because the history of scientific discovery is by no means the singular domain of white people. With the origins of science in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the development of mathematics and physics in medieval Islam, claims that such areas of study are inherently ‘Eurocentric’ are untenable.

Science is about deepening our knowledge of what is true, not what is less likely to cause offence or promote diversity and inclusion. This hasn’t stopped the *New England Journal of Medicine* from arguing that ‘sex designations on birth certificates offer no clinical utility, and they can be harmful for intersex and transgender people’. The *Journal of the Royal Society of Chemistry* has even produced new guidelines to ‘minimise the risk of publishing inappropriate or otherwise offensive content’. Predictably, the very notion of offence is framed specifically according to the now compulsory emphasis on ‘lived experience’. As the guidelines make clear, ‘it is the perception of the recipient that we should consider, regardless of the author’s intention’.

This is not to suggest that scientists are not subject to their own biases, but the scientific method works against human error by attempting to falsify its own claims. For those who believe in embedded structural racism, even a rigorous system of peer review is suspect because it has emerged within the context of a fundamentally oppressive discipline. This is why Professor Rochelle Gutierrez from the University of Illinois can make the claim that ‘on many levels, mathematics itself operates as whiteness’. It is difficult to know what to do with such a bizarre declaration, other than pray for her recovery.

In New Zealand, the government has attempted to include Maori origin stories into school science curricula in deference to alternative ‘ways of knowing’. This belief system, known as *Mātauranga*, takes the view that the human race was created by the god of the forest, and that raindrops are the tears of the goddess Papatuanuku. Garth Cooper, a professor at the Royal Society of New Zealand, was one of a number of signatories of an open letter in the *Listener* which advised against this approach. The writers, all professors at the University of Auckland, acknowledged the cultural significance of indigenous traditions and beliefs, but noted that ‘in the discovery of empirical, universal truths, it falls far short of what we can define as science itself’. As the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins pointed out, it would be like teaching ‘Druid “ways of knowing” in British science classes’.

The shrewd reader will have guessed what happened next. The signatories were all denounced not only by their own vice chancellor, but by the Royal Society, the New Zealand Association of Scientists and the Tertiary Education Union. Two of Cooper’s colleagues issued their own open letter in response, in which they complained about the ‘untold harm and hurt’ he had caused, and an official investigation ensued. When the journalist and free speech campaigner Toby Young reported on this incredible story, he asked a simple but pertinent question: ‘Why punish a scientist for defending science?’

It seems counter-intuitive, but positionality is now a dominant framework in higher education. This is why the Urban Institute, a think tank in Washington DC, recently included ‘objectivity’ on a short list of ‘harmful research practices’. Objectivity, it is claimed, is based on ‘the belief that neutrality on a subject is the best way to determine its facts’, allowing researchers ‘to define themselves as experts without learning from people with lived experience’. Even ‘rigor’ is considered harmful because it involves ‘following an established research protocol meticulously instead of ensuring data are contextualized and grounded in community experience’. This attack on traditional standards in academia is derived from what is known as ‘standpoint epistemology’ which goes beyond questioning the motivations and methodology of researchers according to group identity but confers an advantage on those who have ‘lived experience’ of marginalisation. As philosophy professor José Medina writes, ‘there is a cognitive asymmetry between the standpoint of the oppressed and the standpoint of the privileged that gives an advantage to the former over the latter’.

In other words, one’s insight into society, history and human relations is enhanced by one’s oppression as determined by intersectional identity politics. The rise of the religion of Critical Social Justice has been termed the ‘Great Awakening’ because

it maintains that a more authentic understanding of reality is attainable from the perception of the marginalised rather than the myopia of the privileged. Worse still, this view has spread to the realm of journalism, an industry in which a commitment to the truth is surely paramount. Bari Weiss powerfully expressed this point in her resignation letter from the *New York Times*, writing that ‘a new consensus has emerged in the press, but perhaps especially at this paper: that truth isn’t a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else’.

Yet this assault on objective truth does little to improve the lives of the powerless. Rather, it substitutes a flattering claim of superior insight which can only ever be based on faith. It is only through reckoning with the truth that we might seek to ameliorate the many inequalities of our world. For all the emphasis on ‘lived experience’, objective truth still matters. We should be wary of those who tell us otherwise in order to preserve the delicate scaffolding of their pseudo-reality.

Internecine Struggles

A few years ago a teacher friend of mine suddenly found himself confronted with the kind of anti-gay language he had not heard in a long time. For whatever reason, pupils at this boys’ school had rediscovered terms such as ‘faggot’ and ‘queer’ as insults and were apparently bullying those who they perceived to be gay. He sought advice from Stonewall, the country’s leading gay rights charity, in the hope that they might be able to send some resources to help tackle the problem.

I saw these ‘resources’ for myself. They took the form of a series of posters and pamphlets, none of which addressed the issue of homophobic language but instead focused on the importance of respecting those who identify as alternative genders and prefer to be known by ‘they/ them’ pronouns. Needless to say, this material was useless. It did not address the actual issue that my friend was facing and, as an English teacher, it would be sending mixed messages if he were to suddenly advertise the use of ‘they’ as a singular pronoun when he was trying to uphold grammatical standards.

On further investigation, we soon realised that Stonewall had quite recently pivoted into new ideological terrain. No longer was this an organisation committed to the rights of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, but it had instead developed a singular fixation with transgenderism. There are many organisations that campaign specifically on behalf of trans people, and they have good reason for doing so. Those who are affected by anti-trans discrimination deserve support, and it makes sense for these groups to focus their efforts on one particular cause. However, Stonewall’s unexpected shift in direction has taken many by surprise.

The development from the LGB initialism to LGBT has led to much general confusion. It has hardly helped matters that myriad variations have since materialised, such as LGBTQIA+, LGBTQ2SIA and LGBTQIP2SAA. One is reminded of the resentment between the dissident factions in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979): the ‘People’s Front of Judea’ and the ‘Judean People’s Front’. The excesses of identity politics are so often self-satirising.

The rainbow flag for Pride has been through a similarly confounding metamorphosis. It was designed in the late 1970s to supersede the pink triangle, which had been appropriated from Nazi concentration camps as a gesture of empowerment and defiance. The new rainbow symbol was a conscious attempt to distance itself from such dark connotations and express a more joyful and optimistic outlook. Originally featuring eight stripes, it was soon whittled down to a more striking six-stripe version, which was the standard for many decades. With the ungovernable escalation of identity politics and intersectionality over the past few years, various interest groups have competed for ‘representation’ on the flag. The ‘progress flag’, for instance, adds a five-stripe chevron: the pink, light blue and white stripes signify trans rights, while the black and brown stripes represent people of colour; as though the original rainbow was some kind of literal depiction of the skin colours that are acceptable in the gay community.

There are now flags for every conceivable sexual or gender identity. These are not necessarily representative of groups that have been historically persecuted, but rather a hotchpotch of neologisms that can be seemingly selected at will like so many fashion accessories. Flags have been designed for those who identify as pangender, aporagender, agender, bigender, trigender, genderqueer, genderfluid, demigender, demigirl, demiboy, neutrois, polyamorous, non-binary, asexual, omnosexual, poly-sexual, abrosexual, androsexual, gynosexual, skoliosexual, aromantic, gender questioning, gender non-conforming, and many more. Surely it would be far easier to create one giant flag for narcissists and be done with it.

Is this progress? Or it is simply that some of us remain sober while the world gets drunk? The proliferation of what we might call ‘neosexualities’ risks demeaning the struggles of sexual minorities in the past. The persecution of homosexuals over the centuries is well documented, but if there has been any equivalent campaigns against asexuals it has certainly escaped the attention of historians. It is difficult to conceive of a militant evangelist at his pulpit condemning anyone for having a low libido.

Moreover, this obsession with niche identities advances the idea that at the heart of gender and sexuality is the notion of choice. This works directly against the ‘born this way’ mantra of the various gay liberation movements of the twentieth century. This is largely a development from the social constructionist dogma of Queer Theory, which rejected the notion of biological essentialism as oppressive. Many trans activists, on the other hand, are following the lead of the early gay rights movements, advancing the biological essentialist argument that they are born with male or female brains in bodies of the opposing sex. Some activists even try to maintain both positions at once, claiming that sex is a social construct but that trans people are born in the wrong body.

As the regalia and lexicon of the LGBTQIA+ movement grows ever more farcical, one cannot escape the feeling that many of its proponents are nostalgic for the oppression of the past. As we have seen, identity politics as practised by the new puritans is rooted in narratives of victimhood. This makes sense in countries where being gay is illegal or even punishable by death, but no sense at all in a country like the United Kingdom where equal rights have been long established. This is not to suggest that homophobia has ceased to exist, or that we shouldn’t be vigorously opposing it wherever it lingers, but to be gay in the United Kingdom no longer carries the risk of arrest or social ostracism. It is an insult to the achievements of civil rights heroes of the

past to pretend that gay people are more oppressed than ever. Compared to Harvey Milk and Stormé DeLarverie, the LGBTQIA+ activists of today seem like intoxicated brawlers still swinging their arms at imaginary foes even after the pub is shut.

The struggle for gay rights was about equal treatment before the law, and making visible those whose persecution by the state had driven them into the shadows of society. Now that equality has been achieved, Pride has descended into a corporate orgy of identitarianism. The rainbow flag and all its tawdry spin-offs are a marker of virtue for companies that wish to sell products to the gullible and declare their commitment to ‘diversity and inclusion’. As psychiatrist Norman Doidge observes, ‘Telling people you’re virtuous isn’t a virtue, it’s self-promotion’. Last year I had the misfortune of dining at a restaurant in Soho awash with rainbow flags, with signs that openly stated that the company was proud to uphold equal rights for LGBT people. Why would they suppose anyone would assume otherwise? If anything, a business that feels the need to shout about how it doesn’t discriminate against gay people makes me suspect that it might be secretly homophobic.

There is a meme on social media about Pride month that depicts a slavering creature straight out of Dante’s *Inferno*, enticing a long queue of gays into its open mouth with a strategically placed rainbow flag. The cynicism seems justified. Most corporations were certainly not celebrating Pride quite so openly before Section 28 was repealed in 2003, or before the age of consent was equalised in 2001, or before the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Scotland in 1980. Their commitment to LGBT rights apparently only manifests itself when it is likely to make them a profit. They are like Falstaff standing over the body of Hotspur, claiming victory in a battle they never fought.

Little wonder, then, that more and more gay people are feeling uncomfortable about the Pride flag and the various LGBT initialisms. We are all in favour of unity, equal rights and taking a stand against prejudice and discrimination, which is why flags and convoluted strings of letters that generate alienation and division seem well past the point of any utility. The allure of qualifying for victim status has made it voguish to ‘identify’ oneself into an oppressed class, with almost a third of American millennials now claiming membership of the LGBTQIA+ community. Just as the symbol of Christ’s crucifix encapsulates the triumph of the victim and has been exploited historically as a means to exert power over others, the rainbow Pride flag now serves a similar function.

Given that gender identity is at best tangentially related to sexual orientation, the extension of the initialism beyond LGB seems futile. Advocates maintain that marginalised groups have a responsibility to support each other, and so the addition of the ‘T’ to the LGB was an inevitability. But by gathering these disparate causes under the same aegis, campaigners have inadvertently stirred a brew of conflicting interests. This was no more clearly demonstrated by the reaction to the establishment of LGB Alliance, a registered charity that campaigns solely for the rights of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Even before it had issued an initial statement, the hostility towards the group was frenetic. Matters have hardly improved, with numerous public figures rushing to cast judgement on a matter about which they clearly know very little. For instance, commentator Owen Jones has repeatedly smeared LGB Alliance as a ‘hate group’, and comedian Matt Lucas has branded it ‘anti-trans’. As usual, assertions have taken the place of evidence.

The misapprehension is a simplistic one. Much of the rancour appears to be driven by the supposition that LGB Alliance has ‘dropped the T’ and thereby ‘excluded’ trans people, but of course gender identity was never part of the charity’s remit in the first place. Accustomed to initiatives that seek to represent both gender identity and sexual orientation, many are now reacting negatively to a group that focuses solely on the latter. It is striking that organisations exclusively concerned with issues of transgenderism are not faced with accusations of homophobia for failing to represent gay people, and so why LGB Alliance should automatically be considered transphobic is not entirely clear.

We are dealing here with a kind of hysteria. In the absence of evidence of ‘anti-trans hate’, the assumption is sustained on the basis that LGB Alliance does not address issues that pertain to transgender people. In other words, a pernicious motive is presumed rather than proven, often in the most histrionic terms. This approach was encapsulated by the television dramatist Russell T Davies, who railed against LGB Alliance at the 2021 *Attitude* awards ceremony by stating that ‘to cut out the T is to kill’. Yet this bears no relation to the charity’s explicitly stated aims, which are easily accessible on its website. In particular, the group has addressed the myths that have circulated ever since their inauguration.

We fully support trans people in their struggle, for dignity, respect and a life lived free from bigotry and fear. We don’t hate trans people and we don’t wish to see them erased. The issues and priorities for people who are attracted to the same sex (homosexual/bisexual) are different from those of transgender people, and so, with a number of organisations focused on trans people and trans issues, our focus is on lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people and their issues.

The only way such a clear statement of intent could be so widely misinterpreted is if dissemblance is assumed. But the argument is circular. It has been decided that LGB Alliance are behaving disingenuously, and so the statement can be taken as proof of their mendacity.

Much of this animosity can be traced to Stonewall’s insistence that the ‘LGB’ is inseparable from the ‘T’, a view that the organisation did not hold prior to 2015. For those of us who grew up at a time when to be openly gay at school was to pin a target to one’s back, Stonewall was considered to be a much-needed force for change. The resurgence of anti-gay sentiment in the wake of the AIDS crisis led to the implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, with its prohibition in schools against the ‘promotion’ or ‘acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. As a teenager, I knew of no peers who were openly gay, and when political commentator Andrew Sullivan made the case for gay marriage in his book *Virtually Normal* in 1995, it was considered an outlandish proposition.

Stonewall has been a leading presence in the success story of gay equality. But having won all its major battles, Stonewall has faced a crisis of purpose. Critics have claimed that its subsequent turn to gender identity ideology was necessitated by this success in order to keep the organisation relevant and to justify the continuation of government funding. Yet the charity’s emphasis on trans issues has come at a cost. In 2021 there was a sudden exodus of government bodies and private companies from Stonewall’s ‘Diversity Champions Scheme’, including Channel 4, Ofsted and the Equality and Human Rights

Commission. In May, the equalities minister Liz Truss advised the 250 or so government departments and public bodies who were part of Stonewall's scheme to sever all ties. Ostensibly this was a funding issue; why pay money for consultation with Stonewall when discrimination law in the United Kingdom is already clear? The charity's guidelines on gender-neutral pronouns and gender-neutral spaces are ideological in nature, and do not accurately reflect authentic legal obligations.

Truss's advice came soon after a review by the University of Essex, which determined that it was wrong to rescind the invitations of two visiting speakers – Professors Rosa Freedman and Jo Phoenix – after they had been falsely accused of transphobia. Furthermore, the review found that the decision had been influenced by Stonewall's misrepresentation of the Equality Act to imply that 'gender identity' was classified as a 'protected characteristic'. The report's author, barrister Akua Reindorf, reached the conclusion that the charity's policy 'states the law as Stonewall would prefer it to be, rather than the law as it is'.

Stonewall's biggest mistake has been to consistently interpret criticisms of its activities as expressions of transphobia. I have spoken to many gender-critical feminists over the years, and have yet to meet one who does not believe in equal rights for the transgender community. That is not to say that there are no individuals who hate or feel prejudice towards trans people, only that they cannot be particularly common. The attempt to frame this debate as those who support transgender people versus those who hate them is, for the most part, a disingenuous tactic.

As I have repeatedly noted, the tendency to assume the worst motives of one's critics is a common feature of the new puritans, and this is particularly the case among those who believe in 'gender identity'. Most people do not consider themselves to have a gender identity at all, but rather use the terms 'male' and 'female' to denote a biological reality beyond their choosing. The same goes for sexuality. For many of us, 'gay' is not an identity but a descriptive term; to say 'I identify as gay' feels about as worthwhile as saying 'I identify as left-handed'. This is why a conflict has developed between trans activists and some gay rights groups. A recognition of the anatomical differences between the sexes is the foundation of same-sex orientation. The vast majority of gay women are sexually attracted to female bodies, not to those who identify as female. Yet this has not stopped Stonewall from redefining 'homosexual' as 'someone who has a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards someone of the same gender'. This definition excludes most gay people, for whom gender identity is simply not relevant to their sexuality.

Few could have anticipated that the mainstreaming of gender ideology would have rejuvenated many old homophobic tropes. In October 2021, an investigative study by Caroline Lowbridge was published on the *BBC News* website, featuring testimonies from lesbians who had been lambasted for asserting that they were not attracted to female-identifying individuals with penises. In addition, the article cited a poll of eighty lesbians, which found that more than half had been pressurised into accepting a transgender woman as a sexual partner. Stonewall's chief executive Nancy Kelley went so far as to claim that Lowbridge's study was itself 'transphobic', and that women who excluded trans people from their dating pool were analogous to 'sexual racists'. She claimed that 'if you are writing off entire groups of people, like people of colour, fat people, disabled people or trans people, then it's worth considering how societal prejudices may have shaped your attractions'.

We have heard this before. In the 1980s, the idea that gay men 'hadn't found the right girl yet' or that lesbians 'just need a good shag' were common homophobic tropes. By redefining 'homosexuality' in order to root the concept in gender rather than sex, Stonewall and other activist groups have inadvertently helped to reignite anti-gay sentiments. Social media is now awash with the kind of rhetoric that most of us assumed was consigned to the past. A cursory internet search will reveal innumerable examples of gender ideologues casually branding gay men 'fags' or 'faggots', calling for the murder of gays and lesbians, suggested we 'normalise homophobia' and claiming that the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s was a positive thing. The common refrain that 'genital preferences are transphobic' shows how homophobic ideas can be rebranded as progressive. Other trans activists have argued that sexual orientation based on biological sex is a form of 'trauma'. Somebody ought to inform these activists that homosexuality was removed from the World Health Organisation's list of psychiatric disorders in 1993.

While most transgender people would surely reject such abusive behaviour, and none of this would be tolerated anywhere outside the grubby realm of cyberspace, it is extraordinary to see the resurrection of reactionary tropes that society had long rejected. Just as the new puritanism has enabled rehabilitated racial thinking to flourish, it has laid the groundwork for the demonisation of same-sex-attracted people. Whatever conclusions we might wish to draw from this development, it is clear that the existence of a supposed 'LGBTQIA+ community' is fatally undermined by the ongoing escalation of these internece struggles.

Hocus Pocus

In the Catholic faith, the miracle of transubstantiation sees the bread and wine of the Eucharist become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. The word 'transubstantiation' – officially approved by the Council of Trent in 1551 – refers to the Aristotelian philosophy upon which it is based. The 'accidents' or physical properties of bread and wine are retained, while the 'substance' is altered. The communion wafer may look and taste like unleavened flour and water that has been heated and shaped into a small disc, but it is the *actual* body of Christ. Hence the priest's words as he elevates the host, an echo of Christ's words to his disciples at the Last Supper: 'This is my body'. Or, in the Latin mass, '*Hoc est corpus meum*'. It's quite the magic trick, which is why a corrupted form of the Latin phrase became 'hocus pocus'.

Transubstantiation may be a dogma of faith, but research suggests that a majority of Catholics believe it to be a merely symbolic ritual. There are parallels to be drawn here with the debate over gender identity ideology. For believers, a man can become a woman – or, in some cases, has *always* been a woman – by simply declaring it to be so, even without undertaking any cosmetic changes. The individual retains the 'accidents' of maleness – the anatomy, the XY chromosomes, the ability to produce spermatozoa – but the 'substance' is female.

I am not here talking about gender dysphoria – those people who feel at odds with their sex and seek to adapt either through medical procedures or the way in which they present themselves – but rather the notion that we each have an innate gender

identity that transcends physiological considerations; trans activist Julia Serano describes it as a ‘subconscious sex’, opinion columnist Sarah Ditum as ‘an immaterial sense of self’, journalist Helen Joyce as ‘something like a sexed soul’. The definition of ‘woman’ is thereby as fluid as can be imagined, because a ‘woman’ is simply one who identifies as a woman. The obvious next question – ‘what is a woman?’ – is often dismissed as transphobic, presumably because the answer inexorably directs us towards the reality of sexual dimorphism.

So fraught has this area become that leading politicians are now routinely blindsided by this simple question, or variations on the theme. When Labour’s shadow minister for women and equalities, Anneliese Dodds, was asked to define the word ‘woman’ on Radio 4’s *Woman’s Hour*, she resorted to meandering obfuscation. Her colleague Dawn Butler had previously claimed during a televised interview that babies are born without a sex. After MP Rosie Duffield faced threats for pointing out that only women have cervixes and was compelled to withdraw from the 2021 annual Labour conference, the party leader Keir Starmer was seemingly unable to defend her. When asked by BBC journalist Andrew Marr whether Duffield’s words amounted to transphobia, Starmer replied: ‘It is something that shouldn’t be said. It’s not right’. And when asked whether a woman could have a penis during a radio interview by Nick Ferrari on LBC, Starmer’s response was revealing: ‘Uh, Nick, I’m not, er, I, I don’t think we can conduct this debate with, you know, I get this, uh.’

Is it really too much to ask those who struggle to define the word ‘woman’ to refrain from running for public office? Ketanji Brown Jackson, Joe’s Biden’s nominee for the Supreme Court, was asked to provide the dreaded definition during her confirmation hearing in March 2022. ‘No I can’t,’ she replied. ‘I’m not a biologist.’ Jackson hadn’t been asked to explain how blood is deoxygenated, or to offer an intricate overview of the molecular mechanisms by which protein function is regulated in cells. How can we possibly trust politicians if they cannot acknowledge the most basic realities of human biology? While most voters have a limited understanding of various key political issues, we can all see that a failure to define ‘woman’ is either delusional or dishonest, neither of which are qualities we seek in our elected representatives.

The question ‘what is a woman?’ is hardly the riddle of the sphinx; a reasonably intelligent six-year-old would be able to give an adequate answer. So when *USA Today* publishes an article claiming that ‘a competent biologist would not be able to offer a definitive answer’, we can be sure that the publication has been ideologically captured and has little merit as a source of reliable information. Increasingly, the question has been seen as a ‘gotcha’, but it might be better understood as a means by which we can assess the honesty of the ruling class.

This kind of generalised confusion has particularly grave implications for gender-nonconforming children who, with the growing influence of gender ideology, are often invited to consider that their ‘sexed soul’ might not match their body. More often than not, such conclusions are reached on the basis of acutely conservative views of what it means to be male and female. There is a fascinating moment in the BBC documentary *Transgender Kids: Who Knows Best* (2017), in which a father discusses his experience of raising a transgender child. ‘I saw her run off to camp after she transitioned’, he says. ‘And ah! That’s just like a girl running, instead of looking at my son who runs like a girl.’ He finishes the anecdote by rolling his eyes theatrically, as though the very prospect of a boy running in a feminine manner represents the height of embarrassment for any self-respecting father.

Very few would deny that gender dysphoria is real and causes genuine distress to those who suffer from it, but the potential for children to be misdiagnosed and encouraged to stave off puberty with hormone blockers because they do not fulfil old-fashioned gender stereotypes is far from trivial. At the Tavistock Centre in London, a gender clinic that has been accused of ‘fast-tracking’ children into life-altering treatments without proper assessments of their psychological and social circumstances, there was a running joke among the staff that soon ‘there would be no gay people left’.

The perception that some of these treatments are tantamount to ‘fixing’ gay children to better align with heteronormative expectations is controversial, but understandable. There is overwhelming evidence that gender nonconformity in childhood is a reliable predictor of homosexuality in later life. A preponderance of ‘detransitioners’ – those who have undergone sex reassignment surgery and later wish to revert – are gay men and lesbians. Although the notion that a child can be ‘born in the wrong body’ has gone out of fashion, it was for many years a common mantra among trans activists. Gender-critical feminists are not the only ones to have exposed the flaw in this premise. One thinks of Christopher Hitchens’s words: ‘I don’t have a body, I am a body’.

Public consciousness of the rise of gender ideology can be measured to some degree by the number of referrals to the Tavistock clinic, which was 2 in 1989 and 2,378 in 2020. Gender dysphoria is only one explanation for the sudden leap in diagnoses. Social contagion, particularly common among teenage girls, must also be taken into account, a point made forcefully in Abigail Shrier’s book *Irreversible Damage: Teenage Girls and the Transgender Craze* (2020). In addition, a disproportionate number of those who transition are on the autistic spectrum. As Helen Joyce notes in *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* (2021), the traits associated with this condition can result in misdiagnosis: dissociative feelings ‘can be misinterpreted as gender dysphoria’, and rigid thinking ‘can lead someone to conclude that deviating from sex stereotypes makes a person trans’. According to Joyce, research shows that around 80 per cent of children eventually become reconciled with their biological sex, either before or in the early stages of puberty, if they ‘are permitted to express themselves how they wish but not encouraged to believe that they are members of the opposite sex’. Puberty blockers, in other words, in most cases simply postpone the very process that would resolve the problems that these young people face.

While the trans debate is continually misrepresented it will be difficult to make any progress. For the most part, trans activists and gender-critical feminists share a belief in bodily autonomy and the right to identify however one pleases. The contention has arisen because many trans activists take the view that self-identification renders biology irrelevant, whereas for feminists the preservation of single-sex spaces – such as prisons, changing facilities and domestic violence refuge centres – means that biology cannot be so easily dismissed. In spite of what some activists believe, feminists do not wish to preserve single-sex spaces in order to exclude certain people, or to bolster a certain kind of ‘privilege’, but rather to protect women from the reality of a world in which violence against them is overwhelmingly caused by male perpetrators. This is the key argument of philosopher Kathleen Stock’s book *Material Girls* (2021), which offers a robust overview of the ways in which women’s

rights depend upon a recognition of biological truth.

The same goes for sports, which are segregated by sex because of the indisputable physical advantage enjoyed by male athletes. The case of transgender swimmer Lia Thomas alerted many to the problem because it was so widely reported. Thomas had ranked 554th in the college league tables when competing among men, but soared to the top of the rankings after transitioning and competing in the women's category in early 2022. The biological advantages of being a man in a woman's competition became obvious when a photograph was widely circulated of the winners in the 500-yard freestyle in Atlanta. Even those who have been determined to hold fast to the view that 'trans women are women' found it difficult to look at the image of Thomas towering over the other competitors on the victor's podium without sensing a collision with the brick wall of reality. As William Hazlitt put it: 'Facts, concrete existences, are stubborn things, and are not so soon tampered with or turned about to any point we please, as mere names and abstractions'.

The prioritisation of gender over sex has become established practice in many of our major public institutions. In March 2022, Baroness Emma Nicholson spoke in the House of Lords about a woman who had allegedly been raped on a hospital ward. Apparently, when police contacted the hospital they were told that there were no men on the single-sex ward, and 'therefore the rape could not have happened'. This form of 'gaslighting' is part of a policy known as 'Annex B'. The NHS accommodates patients by gender identity, not biological sex, and if a female patient complains that there is a man on her ward, she is to be told that this is not true; there are no men present. As the official NHS guidelines make clear: 'Views of family members may not accord with the trans person's wishes, in which case, the trans person's view takes priority'. One cannot help but be reminded of Orwell's words in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command'.

In the same NHS document, it is asserted that sex is 'assigned' at birth. Everyone knows that sex is observed and recorded, often before birth, and so it is surprising to see the holy writ of the new puritanism find its way into an official report. For medical practitioners it is particularly important that there are records of our sex, which is why all patients are given a unique NHS number in which this information is encoded. Yet patients are currently able to change this number on request so that it reflects personal identity rather than biological reality. Even more worryingly, a 2010 document from the NHS Information Standards Board for Health and Social Care explicitly states that the public must be misled on these matters in order to avoid general confusion: 'The policy commitment relates to gender, not sex, but to ensure a better public understanding it is referred to as Mixed-Sex Accommodation (MSA)'. In other words, although the then Health Secretary Andrew Lansley had announced that NHS wards must be segregated by sex, and that hospitals would face fines if they failed to comply, behind the scenes it was understood that gender was to be the determining factor. It seems that the plebeians cannot be trusted with the truth.

In addition to the unfounded accusations of 'transphobia' against anyone who questions gender ideology, there has been an attempt to conflate gender-critical feminism with the far right. In June 2021, the Institute of Race Relations published an article describing a 'symbolic glue' which has supposedly been forged between feminists and right-wing populist groups in Europe. The attempt to smear by association was beyond tenuous, suggesting that these unrelated movements 'share the goal of preserving the traditional nuclear heteronormative family'. During an interview with the *Guardian*, queer theorist Judith Butler claimed that the 'anti-gender ideology is one of the dominant strains of fascism in our time'. So while most people understand fascism as an authoritarian political movement of the twentieth century that pushed an extreme nationalism combined with claims of racial purity and a militaristic repression of dissent, gender ideologues have other ideas.

Of course, it is utterly nonsensical to suggest that a predominately left-wing feminist movement is somehow upholding the heteropatriarchal norms and conservative sex stereotypes that it so clearly rejects. This is either a grave misunderstanding or a deliberate effort at misconstruction for ideological purposes. The article by the Institute of Race Relations is replete with slippery rhetoric: for instance, a recognition of innate sex differences and their significance for human rights is rebranded as 'biological fundamentalism'. The tactic is reminiscent of Stonewall's Nancy Kelley who, in an interview with the BBC, compared gender-critical feminism to anti-Semitism. It goes without saying that the notion of gender as a social construct has been a staple of feminist thought for decades, so Kelley's comparison is not only unfair, but deeply reactionary.

Inevitably, many are losing patience with Stonewall's failure to take its critics' concerns seriously. When a number of articles appeared in the national press which questioned the charity's recent ideological shift, including one by Matthew Parris, one of its co-founders, the official Stonewall Twitter account retorted with 'U ok hun?'. This kind of snarky contempt in the face of legitimate criticisms has not been well received; after all, those who refuse to engage in debate often do so because they know they will lose. Rather than attempting to understand people's misgivings, Stonewall is apparently content to pretend that gays and lesbians who have always upheld equal rights for trans people have suddenly and simultaneously metamorphosed into evil bigots. This is political discourse at its most infantile.

We have already seen how disciples of all denominations of the religion of Critical Social Justice have a tendency to redefine terms to better suit their purposes, often while denying that they are doing so. In the absence of shared definitions, all possibility of serious discussion is stymied from the outset. This scenario, compounded by the continual smears and mischaracterisations, leaves us in a hopeless state. By way of explanation, let us return to the 'thought-terminating clichés' of 'trans women are women' and 'trans men are men'. A thoughtful approach to the question of whether or not 'trans women are women' would involve first acknowledging that the assertion rests upon a conviction that 'woman' is an identity category rather than a biological designation. For trans activists, to be 'male' or 'female' is a matter of personal identity. For feminists, to be 'male' and 'female' is determined by the production of either small or large gametes (there are no intermediate varieties, even among intersex individuals). This is why the former believe that sex is 'assigned' at birth, while the latter understand that it is observed and recorded.

Of course, the phrase 'trans women are women' has no semantic basis, because it only makes any kind of sense if one dispenses with definitions. Those who are familiar with the daily back-and-forth between feminists and trans activists on social media will have come across variations on the following exchange:

'Trans women are women.'

'What is a woman?'

'Anyone who identifies as a woman.'

'But how do you know how to identify as a woman if you can't define a woman?'

'The definition of a woman is anyone who identifies as a woman.'

All of which brings to mind the headmaster Andrew Ingraham (1841– 1905), who coined the phrase ‘the gostak distims the doshes’. The sentence is syntactically sound; there is a subject and an object and an identifiable verb. As such, we understand that the doshes are able to be distimmed, and that such distimming is carried out by the gostak. Or, to see this rendered in dialogue form:

'What is the gostak?'

'The gostak is what distims the doshes.'

'What's distimming?'

'Distimming is what the gostak does to the doshes.'

'Okay, but what are the doshes?'

'The doshes are what the gostak distims.'

To engage in the kind of semantic swordplay favoured by gender ideologues is as maddening as trying to ascend a staircase designed by M. C. Escher.

In any case, simply to demand that the public subscribes to the view that ‘trans women are women’, without even attempting to persuade them, is always likely to cause bemusement, because unless one sees the world through an identitarian lens the statement is incoherent. Until each side of the debate can accept that they are working with incompatible definitions of the same terms, the stalemate is likely to continue indefinitely. The liberal approach offers the most straightforward solution. Everyone has the right to identify as they wish, use whatever name and pronouns they prefer to describe themselves, and ask others to do the same. They do not, however, have the right to foist such decisions onto anyone else. Similarly, I could marry a male partner and refer to him as my ‘husband’, but under a liberal system I cannot expect the law to intervene should someone else refuse to use the term. The minority who believe that we each have an innate ‘gender identity’ are entitled to express this view, but cannot expect others to accept it. To impose one’s beliefs on others by force is the very definition of illiberalism.

But why is it that gender has become such a national obsession? More than forty secondary schools in the United Kingdom prohibit girls from wearing skirts, and many more are considering the move to gender-neutral uniforms. The authorities at Priory School in Lewes, for instance, have ‘stressed the importance of ensuring transgender students feel comfortable’. But this betrays a patronising attitude that assumes that transgender individuals are so fragile and solipsistic that they are incapable of existing in a world in which the majority of people are happy to identify with their biological sex. This trend reveals that gender is increasingly perceived as a problem to be fixed. Yet there can be no utopian end point at which gender will be considered irrelevant. Notions of femininity and masculinity have been celebrated and subverted throughout human history. The blurring of gender boundaries is evident in great works of art and popular culture alike. A society which successfully neutralised the concept of gender could not possibly have produced the comedies of Shakespeare, or the gender-bending performances of Madonna and David Bowie.

In part, the desire of feminists to decouple sex and gender, and insist that the latter is entirely culturally produced, has laid the groundwork for the ideological conflicts that currently ensue. In truth, gender is a product of a complex relationship between biological and cultural factors. Few would argue, for instance, that the dressing of boys in blue and girls in pink is anything other than convention, but this does not mean that such practices are inherently harmful, or that differences between the sexes can be entirely explained away by social conditioning. The trend towards gender-neutral uniforms in schools represents a fashionable but ultimately hollow form of identity politics, underpinned by this resurgence of constructionist dogma. Challenges to traditional and proscriptive gender roles are all very well, but this does not mean that gender in or of itself should be treated with such outright suspicion.

Current debates about gender identity reveal the extent to which such post-Foucauldian concepts have infiltrated the mainstream, but also how they have been misunderstood. Once faddish queer theorists such as David M. Halperin held a staunchly gender-critical position, seeing gender as ‘an irreducible fiction’, but many self-declared ‘queer’ activists of today have taken this further and judged sex itself to be a social construct. The influence of such ideas has even reached women’s rights groups such as Action Aid, which recently issued a statement claiming that ‘there is no such thing as a “biologically female/male body”’. Of course, to assert that sex is entirely socially determined is very easy if you have no understanding of anatomy or genetics. The evolutionary biologist Colin Wright has described this tendency to apply social constructionism to biology as an ‘attempt to jump the epistemological shark’.

A useful way of classifying this division within the constructionist camp is outlined by Celia Kitzinger in her essay, ‘Social Constructionism: Implications for Lesbian and Gay Psychology’. She describes the two predominant groups as ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ social constructionism, aligning herself with the latter. ‘Weak’ social constructionism is summarised as ‘the familiar argument that socialization, conditioning, media, advertising, and social arrangements, which encourage heterosexuality and prohibit homosexuality make it impossible to begin to understand lesbian or gay existence without reference to its social, historical, and political context’. ‘Strong’ social constructionism is characterised by an insistence that even basic anatomical dimorphism is culturally produced, that the notion of ‘woman’ is ‘not a natural given, but a political category’, functioning ‘only as a marker of otherness and subordination’, and that to ‘describe woman as a natural category is to biologize the historical situation of domination’.

The form of gender identity ideology espoused by the new puritans is an adapted form of ‘strong’ social constructionism that not only bypasses biological reality and considers sex a ‘spectrum’, but insists upon the quasi-religious belief that gender is

somehow innate. Such anti-scientific ideas have even infiltrated peer-reviewed medical literature. For all the new puritans' deification of Judith Butler, these notions seem incompatible with her view that gender is performative, an illusion that grants ontological status to masculine and feminine traits. As Butler puts it, 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality'. Yet for today's activists, gender can be both fluid or fixed, depending on how one feels about it at any given time. Ideological consistency is no prerequisite for the new puritans.

There is surely some neutral territory to be located between the traditional feminist view that gender is a dangerous fiction and the transgender activist view that it is integral to one's existence. Unfortunately, the toxicity of these current debates mean that common ground is unlikely to be occupied any time soon.

Dogma

Racism of the Gaps

There is a moment in *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), a BBC documentary series by Adam Curtis, in which the CIA's investigations into Soviet armaments during the Cold War comes under scrutiny. Dr Anne Cahn, former senior staff member at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, is interviewed about a government inquiry which concluded that the Soviets had developed advanced submarine technology. She says:

They couldn't say that the Soviets had acoustic means of picking up American submarines, because they couldn't find it. So they said, well maybe they have a non-acoustic means of making our submarine fleet vulnerable. But there was no evidence that they had a non-acoustic system. They're saying, 'we can't find evidence that they're doing it the way that everyone thinks they're doing it, so they must be doing it a different way. We don't know what that different way is, but they must be doing it'.

In other words, the inquiry decided that the very absence of any evidence that the Soviets had an acoustic defence system was itself evidence that they must have developed a system so sophisticated that it could not be detected.

This is the military equivalent of the 'God of the gaps' phenomenon, by which an absence of scientific knowledge in any given area is taken as evidence of God's existence. The premise of 'systemic racism' works in much the same way. Where there is inequality of outcome – for instance, a firm in which ethnic minority employees are underrepresented in top jobs – this is taken as proof that racism is the explanation for the disparity. In calling for an 'anti-racist amendment' to the United States Constitution to 'fix the original sin of racism', activist Ibram X. Kendi asserts that 'racial inequity is evidence of racist policy'. This approach has given rise to the concept of 'racism of the gaps', which encapsulates this tendency to assume racism from the outset and take all analysis from there. As an article for the *New York Times Magazine* puts it, theorists 'speak of race not as a physical fact but as a ghostly system of power relations that produces certain gestures, moods, emotions and states of being'. In his response to this piece, Andrew Sullivan was quick to identify the religiosity of the language. 'It permeates everything everywhere,' he writes. 'Like the Holy Ghost?'

We see this view most clearly expressed in the work of practitioners of Critical Race Theory, one of the key academic disciplines that has become associated with the new puritans. This is not to be confused with a theory in the scientific sense. Rather, Critical Race Theory offers a framework through which society is interpreted. Its ostensible aims are both valid and important, given that it seeks to understand how it is that the phenomenon of racial inequality can still persist in a society with legal protections against it. However, the answers it offers are not only unsatisfactory but have already fostered further racial division. As with many of the offshoots of postmodernism that we have encountered, Critical Race Theory has infiltrated popular discourse to such an extent that politicians and commentators now parrot its jargon without necessarily comprehending the full implications. For example, when the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan claims that black Londoners face 'systemic racism', he is invoking the principles of Critical Race Theory, whether he knows it or not.

In the way it has been applied, Critical Race Theory has served to provide further philosophical justification for a destabilisation of objective truth. Consider the thousands who were willing to break the lockdown restrictions enacted by the government to control the spread of coronavirus in order to attend the Black Lives Matter protests in London in June 2020. At the time, many health professionals were suddenly claiming that the virus was not such a grave concern so long as the protesters' cause aligned with their views. Over 1,200 medical experts signed a letter arguing that existing restrictions ought not to apply to demonstrations against 'the pervasive force of white supremacy'. The epidemiologist Jennifer Nuzzo exemplified this attitude when she wrote: 'We should always evaluate the risks and benefits of efforts to control the virus. In this moment the public health risks of not protesting to demand an end to systemic racism greatly exceed the harms of the virus'.

Understandably, many questioned the utility of protests organised in the United Kingdom when the original grievance had been against American police brutality. However, for most of those who took part the real target of their ire was the will-o'-the-wisp of 'structural racism'. Few were prepared to challenge the validity of so bold a claim, because to do so could prompt the accusation of complicity in white supremacist discourses of power. It had long been a consensus that racism was not to be tolerated, and yet here there were mass protests claiming that the country was deeply racist. Few specific details were forthcoming, because even to ask for evidence would be taken as a further expression of white privilege. Most of those who spoke of 'structural racism' had accepted the idea uncritically and did not realise that they were repeating the dogma of applied postmodernism. The ideological battle was being won because the opponents were excluded from the field.

The objective reality of a deadly pandemic, in other words, was subordinated to the advancement of the identitarian project. Similarly, the reality of the Britain we all knew – one in which to be openly racist is to make oneself a pariah – was to be disregarded. Ironically, it is the anti-racist nature of our society that enabled this to happen. The cost of being accused of racism is too great, precisely because it is so opposed by the general population. In such precarious circumstances, most people will opt for an easy life and keep their misgivings to themselves.

Those who oppose Critical Race Theory are so often charged with simply failing to understand it. As with any academic

field, there are nuances and details that will escape a layman, but this does not debar him from objecting to some of the central premises. It would be akin to a clergyman claiming that atheists are unqualified to declare their disbelief in God until they have developed a sufficient level of expertise in Thomas Aquinas's writings on the compatibility of faith and reason. A comprehensive overview of Critical Race Theory is clearly not within the purview of this book. For those who are interested in an accessible primer, I would recommend *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2017) by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. However, the key tenets are readily graspable and summarised and so merit an overview here. This will be particularly helpful for those who are interested in grappling with the implications of what happens when Critical Race Theory is applied in society, but who are nervous about engaging with garrulous activists who deploy jargon as a means to deter would-be critics.

Richard Delgado has emphasised how critical race theorists differ in their various approaches, but has helpfully identified four common traits. Firstly, Critical Race Theory 'takes as a given that racism is not a series of isolated acts, but is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically'. Secondly, that it 'reinterprets civil-rights law in the light of its ineffectuality, showing that laws to remedy racial injustices are often undermined before they can fulfill their promise'. Thirdly, that it 'portrays the traditional claims of the legal system to neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self-interest of dominant groups in American society'. Finally, 'it insists on subjectivity and advocates that legal doctrines be reformulated to reflect the perspectives and experiences of the "outsider groups" that experience racism first hand'.

Critical Race Theory, then, is underpinned by the conviction that the organising principle of Western society is racism, perpetuated by white people for their own advantage. With its origins in applied postmodernism, Critical Race Theory by definition necessitates 'praxis', which is to say it is not limited to the theoretical realm but must be directly implemented if it is to have any meaning. The assumption that Critical Race Theory is merely concerned with the exploration and interrogation of ideas misses the key factor of its practical application. It's the difference between asserting one's belief in the resurrection of Christ and forcing others to celebrate Easter. Praxis is a religious obligation.

This explains why confessions of 'systemic', 'structural' and 'institutional' racism have become a matter of routine, irrespective of whether or not they can be substantiated by the evidence. This is not to deny the possibility that forms of institutionalised discrimination exist. History is awash with examples of systemic racism that would never be condoned today, so we should always take seriously any possibility that it still lurks in our society. But when activists make the claim that universities in 2021 are hotbeds of white supremacy, we are right to ask for clear and irrefutable proof. These are among the most tolerant places to live and work, and so in this case the proposition of systemic racism needs to be discussed and investigated, not assumed.

In truth, most such declarations are purely performative. When Princeton University claimed that it was 'systemically racist', there was an understandable sense of *schadenfreude* after the United States Department of Education suggested an investigation ought to be launched. After all, racism is a violation of civil-rights law and, if Princeton was serious, then it amounted to the admission of criminal activity on a mass scale. If any given institution claims to be 'systemically racist', our first questions must surely be: what are the institution's racist practices, who put them in place, and why? In other words, any claim of systemic racism should be the beginning of a conversation, not the end.

Critical Race Theory originated in the work of American legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and Mari Matsuda, but has now expanded further afield. Its online disciples – those who are perhaps not so well read in the subject they seek to defend – often attempt to 'gaslight' critics by claiming that any concerns about the impact of Critical Race Theory on society are futile given that, as a field of study, it is restricted to law schools. Yet the practice has been rolled out throughout American universities, corporate training schemes, public services and government policies.

It is astonishing that the lie of Critical Race Theory as a specifically legal discipline should have been so widely accepted, given that there have been hundreds of articles, books and podcast discussions on the importance of applying it to one's pedagogical approach at all levels of the educational system. Perhaps its defenders hold their critics in such low esteem that they assume they struggle with the concept of an internet search engine. As early as 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV were arguing for 'a critical race theoretical perspective in education analogous to that of critical race theory in legal scholarship'. For those who sincerely believe that Critical Race Theory is unrelated to the field of education, I would recommend the following books: *Critical Race Theory in Education* (2006), edited by Adrienne D. Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau Anderson; *Critical Race Theory in Education* (2020), edited by Laurence Parker and David Gillborn; and *Critical Race Theory in Education* (2021) by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Those who remain unconvinced might consider contacting the authors to suggest alternative titles.

Critical Race Theory makes a number of suppositions. The first is that race is the defining principle of the structure of Western societies, and that 'whiteness' is the dominant system of power. As Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay note in *Cynical Theories*, the question is not 'Did racism take place?' but 'How did racism manifest in that situation?' In other words, failure to observe racism does not mean that it is absent, but rather that it has not been successfully uncovered. Those trained in Critical Race Theory are uniquely qualified to make such determinations; the rest of us have to take them on faith. The author and film director Omowale Akintunde exemplifies this view of racism as 'omnipresent', even going so far as to say that it 'pervades every vestige of our reality'. Ibram X. Kendi – who describes Critical Race Theory and intersectionality as 'foundational' to his work – argues that 'every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups'. For Kendi, terms such as 'institutional racism', 'structural racism' and 'systemic racism' are redundant because 'racism itself is institutional, structural, and systemic'.

When racial inequality is considered to be present in all conceivable situations, literally anything can be problematised by activists as racist; recent examples include breakfast cereals, the countryside, cycling, tipping, traffic lights, classical music, Western philosophy, interior design, orcs, punctuality and botany. Even the American sitcom *The Golden Girls* could not evade this kind of reinterpretation, with the television network Hulu removing an episode in which a black guest is startled to see

Blanche and Rose wearing dark brown mud-masks.

When data explicitly show that racism is virtually non-existent in certain institutions, the notion of ‘lived experience’ is often invoked to prove the opposite. This is why the *Guardian* was able to run an alarmist front-page headline – ‘Revealed: the scale of racism at universities’ – even though the statistics cited in the article itself revealed that racism in higher education is remarkably uncommon. Statistics from 131 universities found that from 2014 to 2019 there were 996 formal complaints of racism, of which 367 were upheld. On average, therefore, there were only 1.5 formal complaints each year in any given institution. The *Guardian* nonetheless, through a series of incredible contortions of logic, cited these figures in order to prove that racism in higher education is ‘endemic’. When journalists, academics and politicians advance a worldview in direct opposition to the observable truth, they risk creating what the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas once described as a ‘legitimation crisis’, by which trust in figures of authority is irreparably depleted. As ever in such cases, the intentions might well be good. Even one incident of racial discrimination is one too many. But citing statistics in order to prove the opposite of what they suggest only sows mistrust and demeans genuine victims.

This is what happens when activism is prioritised over journalistic standards. The *Guardian*’s conclusions seem to rely on personal accounts of what is perceived to be ‘institutional’ prejudice. This means that horrifically racist incidents are conflated with the sort of identitarian grievances that are causing so much division in society. To take one example cited in the article: ‘The faculty is all white British and mostly mediocre. The curriculum is white, and hardly decolonised. And most of the students are, of course, white.’ It is an insult to those who have been racially abused to suggest that their ordeals are in any way comparable to being required to read too many works by white authors.

There is a profound difference between ‘assaults’ and ‘microaggressions’, which the *Guardian*’s report entirely fails to take into account. The term ‘microaggressions’ was coined in 1970 by the psychiatrist Chester Pierce, and are defined by the psychologist Derald Wing Sue as ‘brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership’. In its report, the *Guardian* assumes that anecdotal instances of microaggressions bolster the case that racism is far more commonplace than the new data suggest. In other words, the fact that so few instances of racism are reported is taken as proof of a general failure of university authorities to understand how racism should be defined. Priyamvada Gopal, an academic at Cambridge University, believes that ‘complainants get exhausted and give up simply because there is no comprehension of what racism is. There is either outright denial, “gaslighting” or minimising.’ It goes without saying that accusations of racism should be taken seriously, and that it is certainly possible that there have been some failings in this regard which ought to be addressed. But does this mean that no objective evidential threshold should be applied, other than the perception of the complainant?

Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, any challenges to claims of institutional racism may be taken as proof of the structural problems they describe. In turn, unfounded accusations of racism tend to generate resentment among those falsely accused. Such resentment can then be interpreted as additional proof of the initial charge of racism. By means of this self-perpetuating cycle, the preconceptions of the new puritans are nourished and the outcomes that they fear the most are doomed to recur. This is the ouroboros that cannibalises itself and complains about the taste.

As an interpretative framework, Critical Race Theory thereby offers us an alternative vision of society, one that is pessimistic, regressive and opposed to material reality. It asks us to believe that racism is normalised and predominant, even though studies show that the vast majority of people in Britain are opposed to any form of racial prejudice. It suggests that the progress made since the civil rights movements of the 1960s is a mirage, that racism has been subsumed into all strata of society and that only through critical methods can it be revealed. It advances a hyper-racialised approach to human interaction, one that discards the achievements of Western culture as white supremacist and essentially oppressive. This is why it is explicitly opposed to the values of liberalism and meritocracy, because people of colour are forced to operate within a social system constructed and maintained in the interests of white hegemony. As Derrick Bell observes in his essay, ‘Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory?’, its adherents are ‘highly suspicious of the liberal agenda, distrust its method, and want to retain what they see as a valuable strain of egalitarianism which may exist despite, and not because of, liberalism’. Any progress towards racial equality that has been made is not understood as evidence of the triumph of the liberal approach, but rather is explained away as ‘interest convergence’. Critical race theorists concede that black people have enjoyed remarkable success – the election of a black president of the United States being the most obvious example – but maintain that any such achievements have only taken place because they have been in the interests of whites.

Those of us who value evidence-led epistemology are left in a bind. Black people in poverty can be taken as proof of racial inequality, but black millionaires can be taken as proof of white supremacist ‘interest convergence’. This is how Robin DiAngelo is able to dismiss the institutional and political power of the likes of Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, Marco Rubio and Barack Obama: ‘They support the status quo and do not challenge racism in any way significant enough to be threatening’. When perceived in this way, no outcome can conceivably exist that would cause the proponents of Critical Race Theory to doubt their own precepts. The rules of the game have been rigged so that its critics will always lose.

White Fragility

This is the Kafka trap set by Robin DiAngelo in *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018), a book that has become a mainstay of ‘anti-racism’ training. DiAngelo contends that when white people are confronted with their inherent racism they react defensively, and by doing so exhibit ‘white fragility’, which can be taken as evidence of their racism. It’s an ancient trope. Either the witch confesses to her guilt or proves her guilt by failing to confess.

DiAngelo does not entertain the obvious flaw in her logic – that a non-racist would be just as likely to react defensively as a racist – because, for DiAngelo, ‘all white people are racist’. In this, she is echoing the view of critical race theorist Barbara Applebaum, who asserts that ‘all white people are racist or complicit by virtue of benefiting from privileges that are not

something they can voluntarily renounce'. How could they be otherwise, the theory goes, given that they have been socialised in a world that is undergirded by racism at all levels? White fragility, then, is not simply a defensive reaction to unjust accusations, but is to be 'conceptualized as the *sociology of dominance*: an outcome of white people's socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy'.

These are assertions piled upon assertions, with little or no evidence to corroborate them. Having accepted the 'prejudice plus power' formulation of the critical race theorists, DiAngelo is able to justify her broad generalisations as a virtue because 'social life is patterned and predictable in measurable ways'. There is barely a page of *White Fragility* in which DiAngelo does not assert that which ought to be proven. By the closing chapter she is able to claim that she has 'tried to show throughout this book [that] white people raised in Western society are conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions'. But unsupported proclamations do not 'show' us anything, however often they are repeated.

The book is not without merit. Any attempt to tackle racism in society surely must originate in the very best of intentions, and the question of how such attitudes still persist among a minority even when those attitudes are considered socially unacceptable is certainly worthy of consideration. It is indisputable, for instance, that ethnic minorities are overrepresented in lower-income groups, and critical race theorists are right to address why this might be. Are such disparities evidence of a structural problem? Are they due largely to the fact that income is accrued within families over many generations, and this obviously puts descendants of immigrants at a disadvantage? Perhaps a combination of both?

DiAngelo is also right to highlight evidence of differential treatment in the law enforcement and justice system, specifically that 'blacks and Latinos are stopped by police more often than whites are for the same activities and that they receive harsher sentences than whites do for the same crimes'. One might also cite reports that show that job applicants with 'white-sounding names' are more likely to reach the interview stage than those whose names are African or Asian. These are the kinds of tangible, evidence-based disparities that merit our attention.

For DiAngelo, race is a monomaniacal obsession. She writes of 'the rolling racial waters of daily life', how 'we are all swimming in the same racial water', and how 'our prejudices tend to be shared because we swim in the same cultural water and absorb the same messages'. The aqueous leitmotif is apt, given that DiAngelo is never able to fix on anything that resembles a solid line of reasoning. She insists that 'a positive white identity is an impossible goal', yet her work urges people to identify racially above all else. She strives to be 'less white', a notion she advanced in a much-ridiculed training session at Coca-Cola in February 2021. Screenshots of her presentation which urged staff members to 'try to be less white' were shared widely on social media. The activist and comedian Heydon Prowse put it best when he observed that 'anyone who has had the misfortune of passing a group of Eton boys at Notting Hill Carnival will know that trying to be less white is literally the whitest thing anyone can do'.

The problem with DiAngelo's approach is that it reduces these complicated questions to straightforward articles of faith. She correctly points out that identity politics has historically been at the forefront of societal progress but fails to differentiate the civil rights movements that had liberalism at their core from the essentially anti-liberal identitarianism of today. This is similar to the error perpetrated by those who conflate the political correctness movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s with the present-day Critical Social Justice ideology. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic emphasise, 'Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order'.

DiAngelo's book is frustrating because it continually invites the reader to indulge in the same kind of cod-psychological flights of fancy that fatally undermine her own work. She admits her own racism in stark terms, such as in the following anecdote:

I was invited to the retirement party of a white friend. The party was a pot-luck picnic held in a public park. As I walked down the slope toward the picnic shelters, I noticed two parties going on side by side. One gathering was primarily composed of white people, and the other appeared to be all black people. I experienced a sense of disequilibrium as I approached and I had to choose which party was my friend's. I felt a mild sense of anxiety as I considered that I might have to enter the all-black group, then mild relief as I realized that my friend was in the other group. This relief was amplified as I thought that I might have mistakenly walked over to the black party! All these thoughts and feelings happened in just a few seconds, but they were a rare moment of racial self-awareness. The mere possibility that I might have to experience not belonging racially was enough to raise racial discomfort.

The account is admirably honest, but DiAngelo takes her own reaction as evidence of generalised white behaviour. It does not appear to cross her mind that many white people would have felt no discomfort whatsoever under similar circumstances. In other words, she is projecting her own racism onto the racial demographic to which she belongs. 'Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves,' she writes, 'we become highly fragile in conversations about race'. This sentence makes more sense if we assume she is using the royal 'we', which would be suitably high-handed for one so dogged in her own convictions. DiAngelo takes it upon herself to speak on behalf of all whites, or what she calls 'the collective white consciousness', as though such a thing existed. In truth, DiAngelo can speak only for herself.

It is tempting to assume that this strategy works as a form of moral absolution. According to the theory of psychological projection, those who are guilty of negative impulses can find consolation through the unconscious attribution of their own faults to others. If racism is embedded in 'the white mind', as DiAngelo puts it, then she cannot be held responsible for her own racist thoughts. She admits as much in the book, stating that she does not 'feel guilty about racism' or her 'deep racial bias' because, as a white person, she could not have been socialised in any other way. However, any speculation on our part about DiAngelo's thought process is self-defeating because it reduces the debate to competitive intuition. She has already thrown herself headlong into that pitfall; it would be unwise to follow her lead.

An identitarian perspective is only sustainable through collectivism, which is why it is a common quality among the new puritans to make unevidenced generalisations which bolster their thesis. Reni Eddo-Lodge, for instance, opens her book, *Why*

I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race (2017), with the assertion that white people have ‘never known what it means to embrace a person of colour as a true equal, with thoughts and feelings as valid as their own’. This kind of wild conjecture, based as it is on the presumption that anyone of the same skin colour must share an identical experiential outlook, has become remarkably common. It takes an astonishing degree of self-certainty to believe that one has an insight into the minds of a whole swathe of the population. This is the kind of prejudice that identitarianism so often instils, irrespective of whether it comes from the left or the right.

Given that DiAngelo is inventing the rules as she goes along, she has little compunction in making similarly blundering generalisations about men and women who, it transpires, are as intrinsically differentiated in her mind as black people are from whites. She writes of the weaponisation of ‘white women’s tears’ and provides a separate list of the ways in which men exhibit their white fragility, including ‘silence and withdrawal’, ‘hostile body language’ and what she calls ‘channel switching’. An example of channel switching is to suggest that class is, in many cases, the most prominent source of oppression in Western society. I refer the reader to Chapter 4 of the present volume in which I make this case and thus expose my own white fragility.

DiAngelo further claims that ‘correcting’ the ‘racial analysis of people of color and white women’ is a common trait among fragile white men. This is simply a continuation of her strategy of reframing disagreement as evidence of her thesis. Debate is not a form of ‘correction’, but a collaborative means by which ideas may be scrutinised, tested and occasionally proven wrong.

We have seen how the new puritans derive their authority from the ability to detect ‘power structures’ in society that reinforce and perpetuate systems of oppression. For DiAngelo – and the critical race theorists who have informed her thinking – the most omnipresent of these is ‘whiteness’. This is how she defines the term:

Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm. Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone. White people find it very difficult to think about whiteness as a specific state of being that could have an impact on one’s life and perceptions.

DiAngelo considers ‘whiteness’ to be synonymous with ‘white supremacy’, which she elsewhere defines in precisely the same way (‘the definition of whites as the norm of standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm’).

Having established these preliminaries, concept creep becomes inevitable. In the popular imagination ‘white supremacy’ is associated with the ugly and irrational conviction that white people are inherently superior to all other races. One immediately thinks of the Ku Klux Klan or the various branches of neo-Nazism. DiAngelo is not claiming that all white people are tolerant of such groups, but by reframing ‘white supremacy’ as synonymous with ‘whiteness’ (a discourse from which it is impossible for white people to extricate themselves), she is making all white people, or ‘people who identify as white’, as complicit in extremism.

‘Whiteness’ is an evasive category. Although the likes of DiAngelo insist that it refers to a system of shared behaviour, too often it is used as an alternative term for ‘white people’. This allows theorists the luxury of plausible deniability when they make racialised generalisations. No doubt the student activists who organised the ‘Resisting Whiteness’ conference at Edinburgh University in September 2019 were sincere in their belief that the ‘whiteness’ of the title referred to societal power structures rather than race. But by creating a racially segregated ‘safe space’ and prohibiting white attendees from asking questions during the question-and-answer session, it is clear that skin colour was one of their major considerations.

Ultimately, this form of discourse cannot be anything other than divisive. It invites mistrust of even the best of intentions. In her book, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* (2021), DiAngelo cautions against smiling during encounters with ethnic minority people as this can be interpreted as ‘a way for white people to maintain moral integrity in the face of racial anxiety’. ‘Over-smiling’, she writes, ‘allows white people to mask an anti-Blackness that is foundational to our very existence as white’. It may be foundational to DiAngelo’s existence – it would be churlish not to take her at her word – but her PhD in Multicultural Education hardly qualifies her to make such forays into mass telepathy.

Worse still, in *White Fragility* DiAngelo openly besmirches individualism and colour blindness as ‘ideologies of racism’. The original sin of ‘whiteness’, as produced by an irredeemably white supremacist culture, condemns us to a kind of racial stasis in which divisions can never be healed. This is why she continually speaks of ‘interrupting’ racism, implying that it is continuous and inevitable. In this, DiAngelo is attempting to sabotage the goal of colour blindness so powerfully expressed in Martin Luther King’s most famous speech. Such a concept is anathema to a race determinist like DiAngelo, who considers judging people not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character a manifestation of ‘aversive racism’.

Colour blindness represents a singular threat to those whose belief system depends upon the inevitability and omnipresence of structural racism. This is why Ibram X. Kendi assumes that the promotion of colour blindness is ‘a mask to hide racism’, and Reni Eddo-Lodge dismisses it as ‘a childish, stunted analysis of racism’, which ‘starts and ends at “discriminating against a person because of the colour of their skin is bad”, without any accounting for the ways in which structural power manifests in these exchanges’. Yet this view can only be sustained if one assumes that such power dynamics are at play in the first place, a position that is essentially faith-based.

‘Because no one can actually be color blind in a racist society,’ DiAngelo writes, ‘the claim that you are color blind is not a truth; it is a false belief’. She assails those who believe that ‘if we pretend not to notice race, then there can be no racism’, but only the most literal-minded would claim that those who propound ‘colour blindness’ are suggesting that we engage in any such pretence. To be colour blind is not to fail to notice race, rather it is a metaphor for treating everyone in precisely the same way irrespective of the superficial differences that are there for all to see.

DiAngelo accepts that racial distinctions are largely socially constructed, emphasising that ‘under the skin, there is no true biological race’. It is well known that the origins of racial taxonomies can be traced back to the eighteenth century and, in particular, the Swedish physician Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) which divided humanity into racial ‘varieties’ on the basis of the four known continents of the time: *Europaeus albus*, *Americanus rubescens*, *Asiaticus fuscus* and *Africanus niger*. As Christopher Hitchens often emphasised, the decoding of the human genome has entirely discredited any possibility of the

concept of ‘racial superiority’. When asked to declare his race on a press credential form, he would only accede if he were permitted to write ‘human’.

This is the tragedy of the identitarian approach; it rehabilitates the very divisions that we had striven for so long to overcome. As Hitchens puts it, ‘the essential and unarguable core of King’s campaign was the insistence that pigmentation was a false measure’. For those of us who are serious about tackling the cancer of racism, we would do well to challenge the Robin DiAngelos of this world who seek to deprive us of this beautiful ideal.

Anti-Racism

Up until relatively recently, the phrase ‘anti-racist’ was universally understood as straightforwardly signalling an opposition to racist attitudes and behaviour. However, the literal meaning has been rejected by the new puritans. According to Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019), ‘the claim of “not racist” neutrality is a mask for racism’ and that ‘we are all either racists or antiracists’. The dichotomy of ‘racist’ and ‘not racist’, therefore, is reconceptualised as two different forms of racism: active and passive. Alana Lentin, author of *Why Race Still Matters* (2020), takes it a step further, arguing that to be ‘not racist’ is ‘a form of discursive racist violence’. If you declare yourself not to be racist, in other words, you are aligning yourself with a white supremacist outlook.

To be truly committed to racial equality, these theorists argue, one must be ‘anti-racist’ rather than ‘not racist’. That is to say, one must accept the creed of Critical Race Theory that racism is present in all situations, even when evidence for it is lacking, and that we must actively resist its effects. This can only be achieved through a heightened ‘critical consciousness’, which allows one to perceive the racism that may not be apparent to others, much like a spiritualist who can see the auras that are invisible to the uninitiated. The discourse of ‘anti-racism’, in other words, invites us to be proactive in this process of discovery. This explains why institutions and businesses have lately been falling over themselves to assert their credentials in line with this belief. Sadiq Khan has declared City Hall to be ‘a committedly anti-racist organisation’. Channel 4 refers to itself as ‘an anti-racist organisation’ and created a number of adverts in collaboration with major supermarkets to promote an ‘anti-racism message’. Even the Girl Guides’ website claims that ‘it isn’t enough to not be racist, we must be actively anti-racist’.

Let us consider a recent statement by Professor David Richardson, chair of the advisory group for Universities UK. Given that his words embody so much of the circular reasoning of Critical Race Theory, it is worth quoting in full:

A lot of people think it’s OK to say: ‘I’m not a racist, I don’t believe in racism.’ We need to go further than that. We need to be actively anti-racist, and to be actively anti-racist people need to understand better the issues that those suffering from systemic racism in our institutions are facing and where they are facing them. And unless you are really educated in that, unless you’re trained in that, you won’t have that full understanding. What you might call overt racism is the tiny tip of the pyramid under which sits covert racism, and unless you have the lived experience I don’t think you fully understand the extent of that covert racism that pervades across our institutions.

When Richardson appeals to ‘lived experience’ in lieu of data, he is making the case that anecdotal evidence somehow provides a secure basis for analysis. Worse still, he is disregarding the experiences of those who do not share his worldview. Once again, we see that ‘lived experience’ seems to matter only if it conforms to certain preconceptions.

Given the claims of Richardson and his ilk, it is worth emphasising again that the charge of systemic racism should be taken seriously, because it is clearly possible for institutions to maintain discriminatory policies. It is also feasible that racist policies from the past can have an impact on the perpetuation of racism in the present. For instance, although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 in the United States sought to address the problem of racial segregation in housing, the lasting impact of ‘redlining’ in the first half of the twentieth century – the denial of services to those living in certain areas, often designated by race – has meant that descendants of those families who were disadvantaged under this system have significantly less accumulated wealth in the present. When theorists make claims of ‘systemic racism’, they do not necessarily mean that the racist structures put in place are still extant, but rather that their impact is ongoing.

But more often than not the charge of ‘systemic racism’ is applied where no such systems have ever existed, or, if they ever had, their effects are no longer felt. Take, for instance, the ‘anti-racism action plan’ devised by the student council of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in July 2020. It calls on the institution to undertake a process of ‘rebranding as anti-racist’ by acknowledging its ‘colonial history’ and adopting ‘anti-racist ideology and practices that form the core of its foundation’. It is claimed that RADA continues to ‘reinforce systematic discrimination’ and ‘uphold the false ideology of white supremacy’ by its glorification of ‘problematic historical figures and systems of oppression’. As ever, there appears to be an inverse relationship between the gravity of the claims and the extent of the evidence. This did not stop the student authors from insisting that the George Bernard Shaw Theatre be renamed due to the playwright’s views on eugenics, that ‘master and servant’ improvisation exercises be discontinued, and that Restoration comedies should no longer be performed due to their connections with the British Empire. This is a series of demands so entitled that it would make Veruca Salt blush.

The concept of ‘anti-racism’ is an illiberal notion cloaked in liberal terms. It sounds bold, virtuous and active. No wonder so many well-intentioned people are declaring themselves to be ‘anti-racist’ with little understanding of its divisive implications. The worst possible way to tackle prejudice is to reanimate the racial divisions of yesteryear through a heightened emphasis on group identity. The wordplay of the anti-racist movement is sufficiently slippery to make rebuttals seem counter-intuitive. Anti-racism proponents have it backward. In order to oppose racism one must be opposed to anti-racism.

Equity Versus Equality

Victoria Wood once performed a stand-up routine about the pressure of organising her son's birthday party in an age when children are so pampered. A game of 'Pass the Parcel' had become economically unviable, because every layer required a little prize to ensure that no one's feelings were hurt. She explained that life was very different when she was growing up. You would open the last layer, find it empty, and when you complained you'd be told: 'That's life that is – think on!'

Much has changed since then. Gone is the hard-boiled, unsentimental approach to child-rearing, and in its place we find something more compassionate but arguably less effective. Until I started working at a secondary school, I had not fully appreciated the extent to which teachers are now expected to be amateur therapists as well as educators. We were continually reminded that criticism of a pupil's work needed to be leavened with a few complimentary remarks, even when the child in question had all the redeeming qualities of the Anti-Christ. One headmaster I worked under insisted that our guiding principle must be 'praise, praise, praise', which isn't all that easy when a pupil has copied and pasted an essay from the internet and submitted it as his own.

If you thought that by the time young people made it to university they would be less coddled, you would be wrong. Some institutions are now beginning to adopt what is known as 'inclusive assessment', a policy originally intended to support students with learning difficulties. According to guidelines from Hull University, the expectation that students ought to be able to write fluently is 'homogenous, North European, white, male, and elite'. Academic staff at the University of the Arts London have been instructed to 'actively accept spelling, grammar or other language mistakes that do not significantly impede communication unless the brief states that formally accurate language is a requirement'.

However well-intentioned, the suggestion that rigorous standards of spelling, punctuation and grammar are inherently 'elitist' overlooks one of the chief benefits of standardised English: that it guards against the development of a multi-tiered system of communication which bars certain individuals from the top echelons of society. Throughout history and across cultures, low levels of literacy have been the key factor in sustaining class divisions. It is in the interests of the powerful to keep the lower orders in a state of ignorance. Education brings with it equality of opportunity and the possibility of social mobility. Standards in written English do not perpetuate elitism, they act as a guarantee against it.

If it is true that pupils from particular demographics are failing to achieve their goals, the solution is not to dispense with standards altogether but to improve the education system itself. There is a perverse determinism, not to mention a mild form of racism, in the suggestion that certain ethnic groups are destined for academic failure. As headmistress Katharine Birbalsingh has argued, the proposition that accurate written English is 'white, male and elite' does nothing to close the attainment gap, but rather 'masks the fact that our schools are not delivering and ensures only rich white guys will ever succeed'.

Besides, the association of academic success with 'whiteness' has already been debunked. The UK government's recent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities found no evidence that the legal and educational systems of this country are rigged against minorities and noted that pupils from ethnic minority groups consistently outperformed their white peers, with the exception of those from black Caribbean backgrounds. And even though class is a more accurate predictor of academic underachievement, this does not mean that we should treat poorer pupils as a lost cause. The conflation of material success with 'whiteness' is reminiscent of the guidelines issued by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, which claimed that 'white culture' is defined by qualities such as independence, rational thought, hard work, respect for authority and politeness. According to the Smithsonian's guide, even the tradition of the 'King's English' is a Trojan horse for white supremacy. Many black people were naturally outraged at the implication that such positive traits were alien to them, yet this sort of bigotry of low expectations now carries the approval of President Joe Biden, his government, and an American media in thrall to the agenda of the new puritans. It is, in other words, a rebranded form of racism, which some are now calling 'neo-racism'.

The racialisation of 'inclusive assessment' is not the first time that educational authorities have advanced such patronising and divisive initiatives. A 2019 *Guardian* article by Steven Spier, vice-chancellor of Kingston University, proposed that 'universities should be punished for giving black students lower grades'. In 2006, the Scottish Qualifications Authority was ridiculed for allowing 'text speak' in English examinations so long as the meaning was clear. Under this criterion, a pupil would not be marked down for quoting Hamlet as saying '2b r nt 2b', even though we can be fairly certain that smartphones were in short supply in medieval Denmark.

Some of these modifications exemplify the gradual influence of Critical Race Theory in our schools, and in particular the obsession with 'equity' over 'equality'. The distinction is an important one, often misunderstood. Whereas liberals have always been determined to promote equality of opportunity for all, irrespective of race, gender, sexuality or class, the new puritans believe in equality of outcome. They interpret all disparities as evidence of institutional discrimination, which means that the system must be reconfigured in accordance with their assumptions. As Ibram X. Kendi insists, the 'only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination'.

This is to tackle the symptom of a problem rather than its cause. I have taught at a number of private schools and am fully aware of the clear advantages that such an education brings. Yet the proponents of 'inclusive assessment' would rather see standards lowered across the board, instead of addressing the problems inherent in a system that makes it easier for a select few to realise their potential. In doing so, they are making matters worse, and disincentivising poorer pupils from striving for success. They are the crabs in the bucket, pulling everyone back down if they dare to reach for the top.

In any case, how does the policy of 'inclusive assessment' benefit disadvantaged pupils in the world beyond higher education? Even if universities were to reach a consensus that the ability to write well is optional, is it really likely that employers in a competitive job market are going to feel the same? It is all very well pretending that effective written communication is not an essential aspect of career advancement, but if I were in the process of hiring, I would probably start by discounting all those applicants who couldn't spell 'curriculum vitae'.

Education, like the job market, is not a children's party game where everyone gets the same prize. Yet many are labouring under the misapprehension that the goal of 'equity' can be successfully reached by setting the bar so low that anybody can step over it with ease. What could be more elitist than assuming that pupils from certain ethnic or social groups are incapable of

mastering written English? This is not only offensive to the children in question, but is indicative of a growing malaise in our education system.

The Chartered College of Teaching, the professional body for teachers, has offered its imprimatur to such ideas through the distribution of resources to schools that focus on identity as seen through the lens of Critical Race Theory. These help them teach about ‘whiteness, including white racism, white identity, privilege, power and intersectionality’. With teaching staff caught in a maelstrom of half-baked academic theories, and the increasingly shrill demands of activists, it is hardly surprising that so many are left disillusioned or, worse, are quitting the profession.

The report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities provided an important corrective to the prevailing narrative of systemic racism in the United Kingdom. It repudiated the view that any differentiation in outcome by race is evidence of racial discrimination. It pointed out that if it were the case that racism was built into the system, we would not have a situation where black Caribbean pupils perform badly, but black African pupils outperform their white peers. It would have to be a very targeted form of racism that kept black Caribbean pupils down, but actually elevated those from an African background. Crucially, the report showed that crude racial aggregates are misleading, and that other factors ought to be taken into consideration. These might include different cultural norms, trends in family structures, geographical inequalities, and the lower economic resources that are typical of first-generation migrants. The report was not denying the problem, but rather making the case for a multivariate analysis in order to successfully address it.

The response to this compassionate and eminently reasonable approach was remarkable, with many political and cultural commentators simply refusing to accept the findings. Some critics claimed that the report was denying the existence of racism, even though it explicitly stated that ‘racism still exists in the UK’ and ‘has no place in any civilised society’. The report’s authors had committed the cardinal sin of advancing an evidence-led approach to tackling racism and inequality, as opposed to relying on ‘lived experience’. The heresy was unmistakable.

The Runnymede Trust, a think-tank which campaigns for racial equality, produced its own report as a direct rebuttal, in which it was claimed that our society is ‘deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities’ and that ‘racism is systemic in England’. The rhetoric was forceful but, inevitably, the proof was lacking. Drawing on the standard reasoning of critical race theorists, the Runnymede Trust had assumed that unequal outcomes in terms of race are confirmation of systemic discrimination. In other words, the Runnymede Trust’s report had simply repeated the very fallacy that the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities had exposed.

Some have speculated that these insubstantial claims are the natural consequence of an organisation that has been ideologically captured. In 2000, the Runnymede Trust produced a report – *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* – led by Professor Bhikhu Parekh, following a two-year investigation into racism in the United Kingdom. It concluded that race relations in the country were the best in Europe, and described as ‘skewed and partisan’ the idea that there were severe racial problems. The Runnymede Trust now claims that in the intervening twenty years there has been a sea change, with the current CEO going so far as to accuse the government of pursuing a ‘white nationalist agenda’.

If the Runnymede Trust’s present suppositions were accurate, it would need to explain why one of the most comprehensive surveys ever conducted on public attitude to race – the EU’s 2019 report on *Discrimination in the European Union* – found that citizens of the United Kingdom are among the least racist in the world. This followed a report in 2018 by the journal *Frontiers in Sociology*, which found that ‘prejudice against immigrant workers or minority ethnic and religious groups is rare in the UK, perhaps even slightly rarer than in equivalently developed EU countries’. A study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights reached similar conclusions that, in spite of ‘widespread and entrenched prejudice and exclusion’ throughout the EU, ‘the UK had one of the lowest reported levels of race-related harassment and violence in the 12-country study’.

Of course, there are many legitimate criticisms to be made of the report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, and these are to be welcomed. But that so many have based their attacks on points that the report never made, or objected to the very notion of an evidence-led approach, reveals something profoundly disturbing about the state of contemporary debates around these important issues.

Indoctrination

The emergence of Critical Race Theory was rooted in the specific context of the troubled history of race relations in the United States, with its history of slavery, government-mandated racial division in the Jim Crow era, and the later civil rights and black emancipation movements. When imported to the United Kingdom, this framework for interpreting society is rendered unintelligible. Yet since the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020, schools throughout the United Kingdom have been encouraged to assess their own connections to colonialism, to acknowledge their ‘systemic racism’ and to re-evaluate curricula through an identitarian lens, with many teachers forced to undertake ‘unconscious bias’ training. This has particularly been the case in the more affluent institutions such as Eton College. As we have seen, many of the new puritans are drawn from a privileged elite.

In the United States, this hyper-racialised interpretation of society has already led to multiple lawsuits from parents who are concerned about teachers treating pupils differently according to the colour of their skin. The writer and filmmaker Christopher F. Rufo has documented numerous cases of school districts explicitly promoting Critical Race Theory. Examples include: the campaign against ‘whiteness in educational spaces’ launched by the Wake County Public School System in North Carolina; the Buffalo school district that teaches students to believe that ‘all white people play a part in perpetuating systemic racism’; the letter sent by the principal of New York’s East Side Community School, which encouraged parents to become ‘white traitors’ and support ‘white abolition’; the elementary school in California that told third-grade pupils to analyse their own racial identities by ranking themselves according to ‘power and privilege’; and the claims made by a speaker hired by the San Diego

Unified School District that white teachers are ‘spirit murdering’ black pupils and require ‘antiracist therapy’.

The prestigious Brentwood School in California even went so far as to arrange racially segregated ‘dialogue sessions’ with parents and teachers, and the American School in London – the most expensive day school in the United Kingdom – organised after-school activities in which children were separated by race. Segregation is not necessarily the intended goal of theorists but, as I previously argued, it is the logical end point.

In June 2021, Brighton Council – which had proudly declared itself as presiding over an ‘anti-racist city’ – introduced an ‘anti-racist schools strategy’. Ostensibly, this seemed like a tremendously positive step forward, given that we can all surely agree that there is no place for racism in our education system. Although the new school strategy document issued by Brighton Council did not use the phrase ‘Critical Race Theory’, it bore all of its hallmarks. Just as the new puritans sought to disown the label of ‘woke’ once its opponents began to grasp its connotations, as the public became more aware of the consequences of Critical Race Theory it became necessary to find ways to adopt its principles without using the term itself.

Former Governor of Virginia Ralph Northam’s claim that Critical Race Theory is merely ‘a dog whistle that the Republicans are using to frighten people’ needs to be understood in this context. As writer and activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali has pointed out, Critical Race Theory is a shapeshifter, a methodology that requires continual rebranding in order to survive. Favoured alternatives to CRT include DEI (‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’) and JEDI (‘Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion’). As Hirsi Ali notes, irrespective of which acronym is adopted, the goal is the same: ‘to shift away from meritocracy in favour of an equality of outcome system’.

The new puritans are cannibals; they devour each other soon enough. So we should not be surprised to learn that writers at the *Scientific American* have turned on their fellow activists for their use of the JEDI acronym and complained that ‘the Jedi are inappropriate symbols for justice work’. In an article that verges on the deranged, the authors explain how this ‘religious order of intergalactic police-monks’ from the *Star Wars* franchise are ‘prone to (white) saviorism and toxically masculine approaches to conflict resolution’, with their ‘phallic lightsabers’ and ‘gaslighting by means of “Jedi mind tricks”’. And this from the magazine that once published pieces by Albert Einstein, Linus Pauling and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

So it is entirely predictable that Brighton Council would implement Critical Race Theory without using the term. For those in any doubt, the chair of the committee responsible for the ‘anti-racist schools strategy’, Green councillor Hannah Clare, stated that ‘Critical Race Theory is our lens for developing our understanding of the complexities of racism’. She denied that this approach was in any way ideological, although many took a different view. An online petition by Don’t Divide Us – an initiative that promotes racial equality – called on the council to ‘stop teaching our kids that they are racists or victims of their classmates’.

But might such practices be illegal? In October 2020 the equalities minister Kemi Badenoch addressed Parliament to clarify the government’s position. ‘We do not want to see teachers teaching their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt’, she said. ‘And let me be clear, any school which teaches these elements of Critical Race Theory as fact, or which promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law’. Badenoch’s statement was confirmation that Section 406 of the Education Act 1996, which prohibits ‘the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject’, applies to Critical Race Theory. Her statement should not be in any way controversial; anyone with even a cursory familiarity with Critical Race Theory understands that it is fundamentally political, something that its proponents would never deny. Even so, Badenoch has predictably come under fire from identity-obsessed academics and journalists. Some even berated the minister for opposing free speech, which simply shows that their grasp of the concept is severely limited. Like any other profession, teachers are obliged to fulfil the requirements of the job. It would be like a biology teacher refusing to cover the school curriculum, instead devoting all his lesson time to the reproductive anatomy of hens, and then declaring himself a free speech martyr when fired for gross incompetence.

All Badenoch is saying is that political theories should not be taught as though they are incontestable, which happens to be a legal obligation. Teaching *about* Critical Race Theory may have some utility, given that pupils should be able to understand how this divisive and destructive orthodoxy has managed to infiltrate all our major cultural, political and educational institutions. What better way to explore the concept of groupthink, the corruption of academia, and the bizarre phenomenon of activists who promote racial division in the name of anti-racism, than by studying a deeply flawed and yet commercially successful text such as *White Fragility*?

We so often hear that Critical Race Theory is ‘just learning about our past’. If this were the case, it would be difficult to object, given that marginalised groups have indubitably been neglected in the annals of history. This is why the early pages of Reni Eddo-Lodge’s book, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, are its most effective, in which the author provides an overview of some of the key historical events relating to black Britons that are often overlooked. Calls to review curricula in order to redress such omissions are clearly valid, and there would be few who would have concerns about initiating these discussions.

The practice of ‘decolonisation’ of curricula, however, too often veers into heavy-handed and reductive interpretations of history, reducing whole disciplines to racial power dynamics. A video released by Sheffield University in early 2020, for instance, claimed that writers such as William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Blake, Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf were not necessarily ‘producing the best work’, but were studied because they have historically been a ‘better fit’ in an academic culture of whiteness. There is even a growing movement to abolish the field of Classics altogether on the grounds that it is too white and ‘Eurocentric’. Andrew Sullivan is one of many commentators who have exposed the absurdity of the logic behind such endeavours. The very concept of ‘whiteness’ would ‘have been all but meaningless to all the ancient writers’, Sullivan writes. ‘It’s beyond even an anachronism. How on earth do you reduce the astonishing variety and depth and breadth of texts from an ancient Mediterranean world to a skin color? How do you read Aristotle and conclude that the most salient quality of his genius was that he was “white”?’

As I have said, Critical Race Theory is an active discipline; it is not simply to be taught but rather calls for its own praxis,

which is why its influence in schools has been so easy to detect, in spite of the tactical denials of its acolytes. Take, for example, Channel 4's recent documentary *The School That Tried to End Racism* (2020), in which eleven-year-old pupils are separated by race and asked to reflect on their ethnicity. The distress of the subjects soon becomes palpable; one boy is seen breaking down in tears and fleeing from the classroom. If this had remained an isolated televisual experiment we need not be concerned but, in keeping with most religious groups, the clerics of Critical Social Justice have made the indoctrination of the young a priority. Children who had once been taught that treating people differently on the basis of skin colour was morally wrong are now being encouraged to see everything through the prism of race. The skewed rationale of Critical Race Theory has left us in a position whereby a mixed-race child could be encouraged to perceive one parent as the oppressor and the other as the oppressed.

'O that I could steal all the daughters from their mothers and lock them in a monastery', wrote Sister Serafina of Capri (1621–99) to her confessor. From a strategic point of view, it makes complete sense to indoctrinate children at an early age. As I have argued, the very notion of critical thinking and reasoned debate is anathema to the new puritans, because, once examined, their ideas quickly deteriorate. But Arthur Schopenhauer was almost certainly right when he wrote that 'there is no absurdity so palpable but that it may be firmly planted in the human head if you only begin to inculcate it before the age of five'.

This accounts for the sudden proliferation of 'woke' children's books, presumably intended to produce a whole new generation of activists. *Who Are You? The Kid's Guide To Gender Identity* (2016) by Brook Pessin-Whedbee, aimed at three year olds and over, takes readers through the multiplicity of fashionable new identities such as 'genderqueer, non-binary, bigender, neutrois and two-spirit'. *It Feels Good To Be Yourself* (2019) by Theresa Thorn teaches children that when they were born, doctors 'made a guess' as to whether they were male or female. Other recent examples include *Woke Baby* (2019) by Mahogany L. Browne, *Feminist Baby* (2017) by Loryn Brantz, *Antiracist Baby* (2020) by Ibram X. Kendi, and *The Little Girl Who Gave Zero Fucks* (2018) by Amy Charlotte Kean. Such books are the dragon's teeth of Cadmus, sown to grow new armies from the earth.

Inquisition

Lex Talionis

Lately I have been contemplating revenge. Not that I am hoping to enact it, of course, but I have found myself mulling over this most profound and visceral of instincts. A friend of mine recently told me how he had been sold a second-hand car with faulty fuel injectors. A mechanic told him that it was impossible that its previous owner could not have been aware of the problem, yet when he sought a refund he was denied. Sitting by a log fire in a local pub, my friend outlined his evil scheme. He would take a rowing boat after sunset down the river that flows past the back garden of this salesman's house. He would creep onto the premises and push an incendiary device through the cat-flap. Then he would flee into the night, presumably cackling with malevolent glee.

I have always taken the view that revenge is an entirely natural instinct, out of which we are generally socialised. Every parent knows that young children value fairness above all things, and commonly will seek out retribution if they sense injustice. But, as my friend's plan shows, it's an instinct that never quite goes away. Not that he seriously intended to go through with it, of course, but there was something about the level of detail that made it clear that he been indulging in this fantasy for some time.

Private fantasies, even of the most diabolical kind, can have a cathartic effect. The Ancient Greek tragedians understood this in their grisly portrayal of violent reckonings, usually described in the most lurid of terms by a messenger. We may not approve of Medea when she sends a poisoned dress to her husband's new lover, but when we are told of how the victim's flesh was torn from her bones as she attempted to disrobe, we understand Medea's satisfaction. The literal meaning of catharsis is a purging; we wash away our worst impulses by seeing them enacted on the stage. Our immersion in this theatrical fantasy is only ever temporary, and, after the curtain falls and our rationality is restored, we are able to consider the possibility that Medea may have slightly overreacted.

This is why revenge stories can be so successful. The plot of Quentin Tarantino's two *Kill Bill* films (2003 and 2004) can be summarised in a few sentences. A man attempts to murder his former lover with the help of some accomplices. He fails. She recovers and then kills each perpetrator one by one, saving him for last. The films work brilliantly because, in addition to Tarantino's flamboyant set pieces, he does not seek to overcomplicate the motives. The same can be said for Meir Zarchi's *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) or Neil Jordan's *The Brave One* (2007). It is why *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) is the best of the series. The unending stream of violence in *John Wick* (2014) is so enjoyable because we want our hero to avenge those who murdered his dog. Wick's actions are utterly unjustifiable from start to finish, and all the better for it. This is cinema as pure cathartic gratification.

Revenge stories remind us why we don't act on impulse, and it helps that they are often inherently absurd. *Titus Andronicus*, if produced well, is one of the funniest of Shakespeare's plays. Our hero takes his revenge on the men who raped his daughter by slitting their throats, mincing up their flesh, and feeding them to their mother in the form of a pie while dressed up in a chef's outfit. There is a moment when Titus asks his daughter to carry his dismembered hand between the teeth of her tongueless mouth, while he in turn takes hold of his son's decapitated head in his one remaining hand. I refuse to believe that Elizabethan audiences did not laugh out loud at the audacity of this image. To seek revenge is to surrender to our basest passions, and that's why it makes us so ridiculous.

That said, C. S. Lewis is right to remind us that revenge is a perversion of something good. Revenge, he writes, 'wants the evil of the bad man to be to him what it is to everyone else'. This is why the avenger not only wants the guilty party to suffer, but 'to suffer at his hands, and to know it, and to know why'. The *lex talionis* of the Old Testament, which seeks an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, is superseded in the gospels by Jesus Christ and his turning of cheeks. An intuition for justice is not inherently shameful; it's just that in baking our enemies into pies, we run the risk of losing the moral high ground.

'I suddenly realised today,' wrote the actor Kenneth Williams in his diary, 'that most times when someone is nasty to me my immediate reaction is "When and how can I be revenged?" It's incredibly primitive'. There's no harm in recognising the more vindictive side of human nature, so long as we do not allow our reason to be dominated by our passion. This, it seems to me, is the greatest failing of the new puritans. As I have noted, its high priests have perfected what has become known as 'cancel culture', a metaphor to describe the systematic public shaming and retribution against those who transgress their code. We have seen how a key aspect of their ideology is a rejection of reason, evidence-led analysis and critical thinking. Little wonder, then, that the impulse to seek revenge comes naturally to those who have embraced this state of infantilism.

Cancel culture typically takes the form of humiliation through online censure, and direct contact with the targets' employers in order to deprive them of their livelihoods. Through social media, irreparable reputational damage can be inflicted, even when there is no secure evidence for the accusations. Not only can this result in dismissal, but it can also impede future employment prospects. Often, the reactions are immensely disproportionate to the supposed slight, and the intentions of the transgressor are disregarded as irrelevant, much like Solzhenitsyn's account of the deaf and dumb carpenter who received a ten-year prison sentence for 'counter-revolutionary activity' after hanging his jacket and cap on a bust of Lenin.

Inevitably, practitioners of cancel culture often deny that it exists, or attempt to sidestep their culpability by redefining the terms. The denial is an extension of the strategy because it enables them to continue with impunity. So acts of public shaming are reframed as ‘holding the powerful to account’, even though the vast majority of those affected are neither wealthy nor famous. When a supermarket employee loses his job for a joke he posted on Facebook, it doesn’t feel much like a valiant blow against plutocracy and the ruling class. Criticism of powerful figures is not only acceptable, it is necessary, but retributive and performative mass denunciations in order to destroy lives and enforce conformity are quite another matter.

A common tactic of denialism is to highlight the ongoing success of J.K. Rowling, in spite of attempts to see her ‘cancelled’. As an author whose novels have sold at least five hundred million copies worldwide and grossed £6 billion, Rowling cannot be cancelled, and so the smear campaigns against her have had limited efficacy. Those who are too famous, wealthy or powerful to be cancelled can fall prey to what the novelist and lawyer Helen Dale has called the ‘silo effect’. With continual smearing, public figures come to be associated with certain political or ideological tribes, irrespective of their actual views. This is largely caused by the escalating partisanship of news media, and the online ‘echo chamber’ effect. As Dale explains: ‘Both social media (by dint of algorithms) and now conventional media (by dint of deliberate hiring and firing) are herding their viewers and readers into ideological silos. Once there, they’re unlikely to encounter anything other than intellectual comfort food with which they already agree’.

Those denialists who cite the example of Rowling to support their view that cancel culture is a myth neglect to mention the many women of lesser means who have suffered the loss of their livelihoods or had their reputations trashed for expressing similar views. Unlike Rowling, they have neither the finances nor the influence to shield themselves from the depredations of the online mob. A notable example is the children’s author Gillian Philip, whose support of Rowling resulted in her being dropped by her publisher. She has since re-trained as a trucker and has written that ‘the haulage industry is far more supportive and inclusive – and a lot less misogynistic – than the world of children’s writing’.

The experience of German textile artist Jess de Wahls offers another case in point. For many years she subsidised her creative endeavours by working as a hairdresser in a salon based in the Soho Theatre in London. In 2019, she wrote a blog in which she explained why she did not countenance gender identity ideology. That is to say, although she affirms anyone’s right to identify however they choose, she believes that the reality of biological sex cannot be gainsaid and is crucial when it comes to upholding the rights of women. She was subsequently driven out of the Soho Theatre and, after just eight complaints, had her embroidery work removed from sale at the gift shop of the Royal Academy of Arts. Although this decision was later reversed and an apology issued, by that point de Wahls had been bombarded on social media with vitriolic messages and calls for her to commit suicide. ‘It’s horrible,’ she said in an interview. ‘It’s really difficult for people to understand what this feels like who hasn’t had it. There’s nothing comparable in “real life”’. According to the *New Statesman*, the charge was led by fellow artists who launched ‘petitions that resulted in cancelled exhibitions and collaborations’. Often the most venomous campaigns are directed not at political opponents, but at those within the group who have deviated from the tribal covenant.

This was certainly the case with Vanity Von Glow, a drag queen played by Thom Glow, who was banned from multiple cabaret venues in London for appearing at the ‘Day for Freedom’ in May 2018. This free speech rally had been co-organised by Tommy Robinson, former head of the English Defence League, and because of this connection was inaccurately branded a ‘far-right rally’ by many in the mainstream media. The article covering the event on the *Guardian* website originally bore the headline: ‘Thousands of far-right protesters march in London in support of “free speech”’. This was later amended to ‘Thousands march in “free speech” protest led by rightwing figures’, but this instinct to smear an entire crowd on the basis of a minority contingent is telling.

As a lifelong Labour voter, Von Glow’s appearance offered a welcome counterweight to the right-leaning tendencies of the majority of the speakers. The crowd represented a diverse range of views, which would have been better served by a more eclectic line-up. As it was, Von Glow was stigmatised for sharing a stage with those of an opposing political outlook. ‘People couldn’t conceive that there could be a reason for attending, unless I agreed with everyone’, Von Glow later explained to me. ‘Does shaking someone’s hand mean you are now polluted with the toxins of their ideology?’ Yet this fallacy of guilt by association was precisely the justification offered by those venues who sought to deprive Von Glow of an income. One cabaret venue known as ‘Her Upstairs’ claimed that ‘her alignment with such an event calls into question her motives’, and duly cancelled all future performances.

For a supposedly mythological phenomenon, cancel culture has nonetheless managed to build up an impressive list of casualties. An early example was the Nobel Prize winning biochemist Tim Hunt who, in June 2015, was ousted from his honorary position at University College London after jokes he made at a conference in Seoul were misrepresented by a journalist. In August 2019, the school teacher Christian Webb was fired after it was discovered that he had produced a number of comedy rap videos over a decade earlier as his alter-ego ‘MC Devvo’. In spite of the overtly comedic nature of these performances, their supposedly offensive nature made this a ‘serious safeguarding issue’, according to one parent at the school.

In June 2020, Nick Buckley was ousted from the Mancunian Way – a charity he had set up to help the homeless and disaffected young people – after he criticised some of the more controversial aims of the Black Lives Matter organisation. In June 2021, the cricketer Ollie Robinson was banned from playing for eight months due to offensive tweets he posted as a teenager. In addition to the ban from the Cricket Discipline Commission, he was fined £3,200 and was compelled to participate in ‘anti-discrimination’ training. In June 2021, it was reported that law student Lisa Keogh had been investigated by authorities at Abertay University in Scotland for saying that women have vaginas. Although she was cleared, she described the two-month investigation as ‘needlessly cruel’, given that it coincided with her final examination period. When it comes to cancel culture, the process *is* the punishment.

Such examples of cancel culture in action are endless, making the widespread denialism all the more exasperating. Such stories, however, are just the barest glimpse of a much wider problem. Cancel culture works pre-emptively by fostering a climate in which most people are wary of speaking their minds for fear of misinterpretation, wilful or otherwise. In the past, when someone misspoke at work or unintentionally caused offence, a colleague might have spoken privately to the individual

concerned to resolve the issue. Nowadays, there is a tendency to shame the transgressor on social media – perhaps with a screenshot of an offending email – in order to initiate a pile-on. This is precisely what happened to William Sitwell, who resigned from his post as editor of *Waitrose Food* magazine after a joke he made in a private email was posted online.

This kind of incident is now sadly familiar. There can be few of us who do not know people who have lost work, been disciplined, or have been passed over for promotion on the grounds of relatively innocuous remarks they have made in a private capacity. Even towards the end of my former career as a teacher, many of my colleagues had given up on making jokes in the classroom because they understood that deliberate misconstructions of their words could be used against them by pupils or parents with a personal grudge. The result was an enervated and less stimulating learning environment, and all it took was a few unscrupulous pupils to make disingenuous complaints to ruin it for the rest of them.

The problem is not so much those activists who make their demands, but the tendency of employers to capitulate. Of course, this testifies to the degree of power that the new puritans now wield as a consequence of their intimidatory gambits, but it is dispiriting to see so many in authority truckle to their bidding. Self-censorship is now an accepted feature of most modern workplaces. A national survey by the Cato Institute in 2020 found that 62 per cent of Americans ‘say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive’. When people are expected to behave like automata, who will never misspeak or inadvertently cause offence, the business of living is reduced to drudgery.

Cancel culture, then, is often a form of vengeance against those who have dared to stray from the permitted ideological pathway. It depends upon the dehumanisation of the victim, because – in most of these cases – basic empathy would give its practitioners pause for thought. In other words, a person selected for ‘cancellation’ must first be monstered to justify the slaying. It is a malicious and inhumane trend that perversely elevates the instinct for vengeance above the virtues of forgiveness and compassion. As Solzhenitsyn reminds us, ideology blinds good people to the evil that they commit.

Those examples that make the headlines are often widely discussed, precisely because so many people recognise that cancellation could happen to any of us at any time. We need to challenge this atmosphere of conformity by reasserting the values of empathy and resisting unreasonable demands for moral infallibility. There is nothing healthy about a society that no longer believes in redemption, in which a substantial proportion of the population choose to silence themselves rather than risk facing reprisals for the crime of thinking freely.

Perhaps more troublingly, those who fail to conform can be entirely misrepresented in order to justify their ‘cancellation’. The example of J.K. Rowling is particularly germane. How is it that a much-loved public figure could be demonised by activists to such an extent that even those who stand apart from the culture wars have been tricked into accepting the mischaracterisation? During an appearance on *Sky News* in August 2020, I defended Rowling against accusations of transphobia. ‘To be fair,’ the presenter responded, ‘she has really upset a lot of transgender people in this country who feel absolutely undermined by what she’s said’. But is this accurate, or has the furore on social media from a minority of activists generated a false impression of widespread outrage? There is a clear disconnect between what Rowling has actually said, and what she is deemed to have said in the alternative reality seen through the lens of Critical Social Justice. In other words, the truth is immaterial. What matters is the illusion to which we are expected to accede. While online activists were busy behaving like Abigail Williams and her fellow fantasists from *The Crucible*, embellishing each other’s imagined grievances in ever more sensational ways, it was remarkable that the mainstream media had assumed there was any substance behind the group hallucination. The more extreme culture warriors are harmless enough if ignored, but when their chicanery is taken as gospel, we are on treacherous ground.

This proposed alternative reality, in which we are expected to say things we know not to be true, and to condemn systems of oppression that are supposedly invisible to anyone with privilege, is a form of chaos. We have already seen how these ideas developed over many decades, from the theorising of postmodernists, into a dominant religion that proselytises by force. Those of us who are concerned about the impact of the culture wars understand that the ongoing assault on our cognitive liberties will create the conditions within which authoritarianism may thrive. Do we really want to live in a society in which truth no longer has any meaning, in which our words and ideas are provided for us by those who seek to regulate the limits of intellectual enquiry?

The Witch Hunt

The Rowling case merits further scrutiny, as it seems to exemplify so many of the problems I have been describing. It all started a few years ago, when Rowling accidentally ‘liked’ a contentious tweet. Soon after, she followed on Twitter the gender-critical feminist Magdalen Berns, then in the last stages of the brain cancer that took her life. This online activity was taken as evidence of Rowling’s ‘transphobia’, and she was subject to attacks from activists and in the LGBT press. The major catalyst came in December 2019, after tax expert Maya Forstater lost a tribunal against her employers for wrongful dismissal. She had been fired after voicing her opposition to the government’s proposed amendments to the Gender Recognition Act, which would have allowed transgender people to self-identify as the opposite sex without medical consultation. Rowling tweeted her support using the hashtag *#IStandWithMaya*, writing: ‘Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who’ll have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?’

The backlash was seismic. Extreme trans activists blitzed Rowling with misogynistic abuse. She has stated that the volume of death threats has been such that she could ‘paper the house with them’. It goes without saying that this behaviour can hardly be said to be representative of the transgender community as a whole, and many decent trans people expressed dismay at the damage this was causing to public perception. The situation escalated even further when Rowling criticised an online article for its use of the phrase ‘people who menstruate’ rather than the more obvious, and certainly less cumbersome, ‘women’. The invective reached fever pitch; some former Harry Potter fans even went so far as to burn their copies of Rowling’s books. If only they had read their history, they might have thought twice about the optics of such a move.

One journalist somehow reached the incredible conclusion that Rowling had been ‘radicalised online’. This alarmist phrase brings to mind all manner of transgressions. It’s not as though she joined a fanatical death-cult, or endorsed a national policy of eugenics, or embedded subliminal Nazi propaganda into her latest book for children. Rather, her ‘radicalisation’ amounts to a belief that there are biological differences between men and women. ‘If sex isn’t real,’ she tweeted, ‘there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth’. That anyone could possibly consider this a form of ‘radicalisation’ speaks to the loss of critical faculties when one becomes immersed in an ideological thought process that can never yield to reason or compromise.

This kind of mass moralistic outbreak is usually described as a ‘witch hunt’, a term which most obviously brings the Salem trials to mind. Although many are quick to dismiss the analogy as clichéd, it does share many of the core features of cancel culture. In the case of the campaign against Rowling, it is likely that even many of those who have actively participated will eventually agree that their responses were bewilderingly disproportionate. No rational person could honestly regard rape and death threats to be legitimate forms of criticism, but this has not prevented some from acting as apologists for inhumane behaviour. One online activist repudiated the notion that Rowling had been ‘bludgeoned by the mob’, claiming that she had merely ‘faced swift and abundant critique’. There are thumbscrews and daggers in these words.

In *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018), Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt draw on the work of the sociologist Émile Durkheim to explore how group identity can escalate into these kind of mass surges of moral condemnation and demands for moral purity. In particular, they cite an essay by the sociologist Albert Bergesen which identifies three key features common to these outbreaks. Firstly, they emerge quickly and with a sudden intensity. Secondly, the crimes of the supposed perpetrators are seen to threaten the collective: ‘The Nation, The People, The Revolution, or The State’. Finally, the charges are often based on minor or seemingly insignificant acts. All of these features apply to the Rowling case.

Having spoken to a number of people who consider Rowling to be transphobic, I have been struck by the lack of substance upon which they have based their conclusions. Either they attribute opinions to her that she does not believe, quote phrases out of context in order to skew their meaning, or attempt a form of guilt by association. For example, her ‘liking’ of a tweet posted by an individual who elsewhere might have expressed hostility towards trans people is taken as evidence that Rowling herself shares such hostility, as though agreeing with an individual on any given point suggests an endorsement of everything he or she has ever said.

One apparently damning moment was when Rowling posted an image of a T-shirt that she had bought from ‘Wild Womyn Workshop’, along with a link to the shop’s website. *Pink News* described the online store as ‘a hotbed of anti-trans messaging and merchandise’, citing badges and stickers bearing phrases such as ‘F*ck your pronouns’, ‘Lesbians don’t have penises’ and ‘Trans-ideology erases women’. Leaving aside the dubious claim that such sentiments are actually ‘transphobic’, these were not the items that Rowling had promoted. Under the circumstances, it is to be expected that she would feel a certain affinity for the slogan on this particular T-shirt: ‘This witch doesn’t burn’.

This is what Bergesen meant when he wrote of ‘crimes and deviations’ in witch hunts that ‘seem to involve the most petty and insignificant behavioural acts’. For those of us not caught up in the anti-Rowling hysteria, it seems incomprehensible that ‘liking’ certain tweets or wearing a T-shirt could warrant such an aggressive reaction. Perhaps most egregious of all was the slew of negative press following Rowling’s detective novel *Troubled Blood* (2020), written under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. In his review for the *Telegraph*, Jake Kerridge made reference to the likelihood that Rowling’s decision to include a killer who, at one point, disguises himself in a ‘woman’s coat’, was likely to stir ire in some quarters. ‘One wonders what critics of Rowling’s stance on trans issues will make of a book whose moral seems to be: never trust a man in a dress.’

Kerridge’s view that this is the book’s ‘moral’ is far-fetched, and in predicting the outcry in this manner he inadvertently provoked it. Again, it was the *Pink News* whose coverage was the most fearmongering. ‘JK Rowling’s latest book is about a murderous cis man who dresses as a woman to kill his victims’ bawled the headline. Most of us were left bemused as to how a line taken out of context from a review could be used to justify the escalation of a campaign to demonise an author on increasingly spurious grounds. Again, we see that reality was being subordinated to the ‘lived experience’ of activists who had simply *decided* that a book they had not read was a transphobic call to arms.

In order to placate her critics, Rowling issued a measured and compassionate statement on her website to outline her thought process surrounding this apparently most controversial of topics. She explained that her experiences as a victim of domestic abuse had led to her interest in trans issues and the concerns that feminists have raised about the threat to single-sex spaces that may result from gender self-identification. Those who read Rowling’s statement with an open mind could not possibly infer that she felt any hatred or prejudice towards trans people, and yet this is the astonishing conclusion that many subsequently reached.

The Weald Community School in West Sussex imbibed this moonshine when its governors decided to drop Rowling’s name from one of their houses. A year later, the Holy Trinity Church of England Primary School in Richmond followed suit. One would have thought that a woman who reigned children’s literature for a generation would be worthy of a house name, but these school authorities have clearly strayed into the alternative domain of the Counter-Enlightenment, or – at the very least – understood that to protect themselves they should don the necessary disguise. It has hardly helped that the stars of the Harry Potter films – Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson and Rupert Grint – have all explicitly opposed Rowling’s views in the midst of the controversy. Leaving aside the ingratitude of three actors whose fame rests largely on their incredibly good fortune to have been cast in Rowling’s films as children, there is also the problem of the unexamined mantra they all felt duty-bound to intone: ‘trans women are women; trans men are men’.

Rowling’s courage in the face of such an onslaught has been remarkable. Anyone who has ever been the subject of a social media frenzy will appreciate how psychologically damaging it can be, and for a figure as famous as Rowling, the extent of it is unfathomable. The intensity of the rage can be partly explained by the fact that the new puritans have grown accustomed to getting their own way. They appear not to comprehend the idea that one of their victims might refuse to apologise, to yield to

their superior authority, or retreat entirely from public life. Rowling made this point in a tweet highlighting the kind of threat she regularly receives online, this time an activist wishing her ‘a very nice pipebomb in [the] mailbox’. ‘To be fair,’ she replied, ‘when you can’t get a woman sacked, arrested or dropped by her publisher, and cancelling her only made her book sales go up, there’s really only one place to go’.

Many other celebrities are in lockstep over this issue. The actor George Takei offered a representative example when he tweeted: ‘When you defend so-called “biological sex,” you sound scientifically ignorant and you elevate transphobia’. But biology is not something that can be simply abandoned at will, and Takei’s claims would see him fail the most rudimentary of courses in human anatomy. As the trans writer and YouTuber Blaire White has pointed out, most of those who have supported Rowling are themselves trans, while many of the more vociferous attacks have come from self-declared ‘trans allies’, such as Takei, who are speaking on behalf of others. She notes that the vast majority of trans individuals accept that sex differences are innate and immutable. ‘Biological sex exists,’ she writes. ‘Without it, there is no such thing as being trans’. Too often, activists are advancing an absolutist worldview which is unsustainable when set against the experiential reality of the vast majority of people. They are, as Kathleen Stock has put it, ‘immersed in a fiction’. In spite of their determination, this is not an argument that they can win. As the author and critic Leslie Stephen noted in *Hours in a Library* (1892): ‘Facts revenge themselves upon the man who denies their existence’.

In the ongoing cultural battle between those who value liberal principles and those who favour the intolerance of ideological cliques, Rowling’s refusal to kowtow to voguish groupthink is a promising sign that all is not lost. There is always value in telling the truth in the face of pressure to conform. Even for those who take issue with Rowling’s perspective, she surely deserves respect for her honesty in such a pyretic atmosphere. When it comes to contentious issues we need more conversation, not less. This can never happen while the new puritans are blurring the line between truth and illusion.

Safetyism

Up until relatively recently I led a course on stand-up for aspiring young comedians, whose sessions took place on Saturday afternoons at a theatre in Central London. It was a forum in which the group’s members could develop new material, hone their performance skills, and offer each other criticism and advice. I was always pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm of the group and the genuine desire to improve, given that I have long recognised that stand-up appears to be the favoured career path for egoists. I once shared a flat at the Edinburgh festival with a young woman who claimed she had no interest in comedy but was only performing stand-up in order to become famous. One has to admire her honesty, if not her narcissism.

The groups I taught at the theatre were, on the whole, not so cynical. It was enjoyable to work with talented people who cared about the craft for its own sake, some of whom went on to pursue a career in stand-up. I only ran the course for six years, but over that time there was an undeniable shift in how these young comics perceived their roles. Cultural developments are typically imperceptible, yet here I could see evidence of the sea change with each term’s new cohort. Discussions about limitations in comedy became increasingly fraught, with more and more participants pushing back against the notion that their peers ought to be able to joke about anything. By the end of my time at the theatre, there were members of the group who seemed intent on policing the material of others and assessing its moral quality. One even boasted about how she had taken to going to open mic nights to castigate comics who had offended her sensibilities. It was as though one of the Pharisees of the New Testament had been reincarnated in teenage form.

One day I was asked to attend a meeting to address a complaint which had been made by a member of the group. Apparently, a joke I had posted on Twitter had made her feel ‘unsafe’, and so the theatre felt they could not renew my contract. I was not too aggrieved; by this point I had other sources of income and was only really continuing out of a sense of loyalty. Yet the idea that someone who had been appointed in his capacity as a stand-up should become unemployable for the crime of telling jokes seemed incoherent. We parted on congenial terms, but the theatre’s failure to defend artistic freedom in the face of palpably disingenuous appeals to ‘safety’ was certainly disappointing.

Claiming to feel ‘unsafe’ when faced with an alternative worldview has become a grimly predictable strategy of the new puritans. In September 2018, activist Dr Adrian Harrop appeared on *Sky News* and claimed that a poster which quoted the dictionary definition of ‘woman’ made trans people ‘feel unsafe’. In October 2020, students at Cambridge University mobilised to have a porter at Clare College sacked because he had resigned from his seat on the city council in opposition to a motion relating to trans rights. Their assertion that he made them feel ‘unsafe’ is in keeping with an ideology that sees words as little grenades, primed to explode. More recently, students at Wolfson College said they were ‘made to feel unsafe’ due to a photographer’s words at a matriculation ceremony. As students attempted to dismount from a raised platform, the photographer said: ‘For any women that are having any problems, there are a couple of gentlemen that are here to help you’. One can only guess at the scenes of panic and horror that ensued. It certainly doesn’t take much to breach the protocol of the new puritanism. For a close approximation, simply imagine the Debrett’s guide to etiquette having been rewritten by someone with a histrionic personality disorder.

The inevitable letter of complaint claimed that the photographer’s remark was ‘not in keeping with the university’s ethos as a safe space for people of all genders’ and created a ‘targeted atmosphere of inequality’. Luckily he wasn’t fired, but he was forced to make an apology. There is something unappetising about the idea of a group of some of the most privileged young people in the country castigating a working-class individual for failing to observe their code. Little wonder that the mostly bourgeois firebrands of the culture war have earned themselves the sobriquet of ‘cry-bullies’.

Complainants, then, are following a predetermined linguistic formula, a kind of liturgical call-and-response that overrides the necessity for individual thought. Reading any number of online petitions of this kind, one quickly becomes familiar with the jigsaw puzzle of pre-digested maxims out of which the prose is formed. Take, for instance, this testimony from one student who attended a Christmas dinner at South College, University of Durham, at which journalist Rod Liddle had been invited to speak.

I have not felt this unwelcome, ostracised, and unsafe since arriving at the university. LGBT students shouldn't be subjected to this treatment. Enabling homophobia enables hate crimes and discrimination. To see this from my college principal has sent a clear message: Durham is not a safe space for LGBT individuals such as myself. I'm furious that this was allowed to happen. If there is no apology or repercussions, I cannot see myself remaining here.

This account is quoted in an open letter – penned by the university's Intersectional Feminist Society, LGBT+ Association, Labour Club and Womxn's [sic] Association – calling for an immediate apology from the event organiser and an acknowledgement from the college principals that it is 'inappropriate' to invite 'harmful guests'. Anyone remotely familiar with the language of the new puritans could have pieced together this complaint in advance. Note how 'safety' is invoked twice, not merely as a hyperbolic means to express a sense of discomfort, but to demand action. Note also the conflation of words and violence in the belief that the speaker's language equates to 'enabling' hate and discrimination. Then, of course, there is the air of finality to the tone. There is no discussion to be had with those who have already made clear that alternative voices are not to be heard. The way in which the word 'safe' has been weaponised is quite the irony.

We are dealing here with a phenomenon that has been described by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt as 'Safetyism', a culture that appears to be particularly common in higher education. When activists called for the removal of the statue of colonialist Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford, part of their strategy was to insist that it was a form of 'violence' to expect black students to walk in its vicinity. The statue remains in place because the university authorities had the courage not to defer to this kind of entitlement. The same cannot be said for the plaques commemorating the visit of King Leopold II of Belgium to Queen Mary University in London, which were removed because of his tyrannical reign in the Congo, after a student outcry arose about one hundred and thirty years too late.

It should go without saying that nobody's safety is threatened by atrocities committed by long-dead historical figures. The language of physical harm is a rhetorical device intended to strengthen the case for ideological submission. More generally, the lexicon of Critical Social Justice reduces individuals to their corporeal substance; we hear this in phrases such as 'female bodies', 'black bodies' or 'queer bodies', a strangely dehumanising choice of words. Similarly, those who challenge the content of LGBT sex education at schools are accused of 'erasing gay people' and somehow denying their very existence. Even the phrase 'brothers and sisters' can be reframed as genocidal. As one activist put it: 'When you say "brothers and sisters", you're erasing non-binary, two-spirit, and gender-expansive trans folks who live beyond the binary. Constantly being erased is exhausting'.

Many are now asking whether such assertions can possibly persist in the wake of a global pandemic, when one would have thought that the notion of 'safety' could be at least temporarily restored to its original definition. But this is to assume that the conflation of words and violence is anything other than strategic. As the sociologist Frank Furedi has noted, there is a 'performative dimension' to the declaration that one feels 'unsafe'. Employers are unlikely to discipline workers over a simple difference of opinion, but once an allegation is made that personal safety has been jeopardised, they are obliged to take action. The same principle is true of school and university authorities.

One of the most overt instances of the strategic deployment of the rhetoric of 'safety' was the furore at Batley Grammar School in West Yorkshire in March 2021. A teacher who had shown a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson was suspended for causing offence, and soon after went into hiding following death threats. Protesters gathered outside the school and stated that they would not disperse until he was sacked. Given that blasphemy laws no longer exist in the United Kingdom, these protesters inevitably couched their complaints in terms of 'safety and well-being'. One protester, arrogantly claiming to speak on behalf of 'the Muslim community' read out a statement in which the school authorities were accused of failing in their 'duty of safeguarding', and the teacher himself was charged with 'threatening and provocative' behaviour. The Muslim Council of Britain resorted to similar tactics, suggesting that the teacher 'created a hostile atmosphere'. As much as I prefer to take people at their word, it seems unlikely that any of those objecting seriously believed that the children's safety had been compromised by a Religious Studies lesson about free speech. Certainly the pupils did not appear to agree with those who were speaking on their behalf, which is why some of them created an online petition to have their teacher reinstated.

Despite all their talk of 'safeguarding', the protesters seemed to be oblivious to a far more dangerous trend: that as a result of the various Islamist terrorist attacks in France in recent years – from the massacre at the offices of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 to the beheading of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in October 2020 – the right to criticise and ridicule religion has been increasingly under threat. There has never been a more pressing time to engage with these issues in the classroom. Yet such discussions become impossible if activists are insistent that to even broach the subject is to jeopardise their 'safety'.

That this tactic has been successful is clear from the Nexis database of news publications which, as Furedi has noted, reveals that the phrase 'feels unsafe' has risen exponentially over the past forty years. The accusation was levelled at Neil Thin, a senior lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, who subsequently faced a two-month investigation. The complaints began after Thin had criticised the 'Resisting Whiteness' conference for offering racially segregated spaces in September 2019. A year later, the David Hume Tower, named after one of the key philosophers of the Enlightenment, was renamed as '40 George Square' on the grounds that Hume had written passages in an essay in 1753 that would be deemed discriminatory by today's standards. Although the blandness of the new name certainly felt appropriate given the architecture of the building itself, it was a gesture that was doubtless rushed through without sufficient consultation as a means to appease protesters. For raising objections to the conference and the new name of the David Hume Tower, Thin was accused of racism and, bizarrely, rape apologism. To give a sense of the Olympic stupidity of his detractors, one need only consider that his remark that 'civilisation is for everyone' was presented as 'Exhibit A'.

A similar fate befell the former rector of Edinburgh University, Ann Henderson, who was falsely smeared by activists as transphobic and anti-Semitic and 'not fit to hold office', simply for tweeting about a meeting at the House of Commons on the proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act. This vicious campaign was doubtless exacerbated by the university's failure to tackle her abusers. When Henderson suggested that those making false allegations ought to be held to account, the university

principal told her that it would only ‘make matters worse’. The bullies, in other words, had been given *carte blanche* to torment their victim without fear of repercussions. As Solzhenitsyn noted: ‘Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty’.

I have argued that the claim of victimhood as a means to bludgeon others is a hallmark of the new puritans. When Selina Todd, a History professor at the University of Oxford, was assigned security guards in order to attend lectures, is it feasible to suggest that those who felt ‘unsafe’ as a result of her views on feminism were the real victims here? Similarly, after Philosophy professor Kathleen Stock resigned from the University of Sussex following a campaign of abuse and harassment from student activists, who claimed that her very presence ‘excludes and endangers trans people’, there can be few left in any doubt as to which party qualifies as the aggressor. And what of Jo Phoenix, a Criminology professor who was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after a similarly vitriolic campaign while she was working at the Open University?

That such activists have been so indulged for so long should be a grave cause for concern. The vice principal of Edinburgh University, Sarah Smith, has recently drawn attention to this trend, admitting that students ‘increasingly want to challenge what is taught and how it is taught’. This is not a sustainable situation, and it explains why institutions committed to freedom of inquiry and speech – such as Ralston College in Savannah and the University of Texas at Austin – have recently been established. While the older institutions allow themselves to depreciate further under the influence of Critical Social Justice, these new institutions hope to defy this regressive craze.

Who would ever have thought that some of our most prestigious seats of learning would be reduced to that image from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, where ‘the baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart goes all decorum’?

The Purge

In early 897, Pope Stephen VI had the body of his predecessor Formosus exhumed, dressed in its priestly attire, and propped up in the council chamber to face trial for trumped-up charges of perjury and usurping the bishopric of Rome. During what came to be known as the *Synodus Horrenda* (Cadaver Synod), Stephen hurled abuse at the corpse and tauntingly challenged it to reply to his accusations. When he was inevitably found guilty, Formosus was stripped, mutilated, and thrown to mobs who obligingly consigned him to the River Tiber.

Not content with denouncing the living, the new puritans have perfected a form of cancel culture that, like this maniacal pontiff, seeks to condemn the dead. In February 2019, an interview with screen legend John Wayne for *Playboy* magazine ‘resurfaced’ when screenwriter Matt Williams posted screenshots on Twitter. The outrage was mostly confined to social media, until mainstream publications such as the *Independent* deemed it to be newsworthy. Eight months later, students at the University of Southern California – Wayne’s *alma mater* – were demanding that an exhibit in his honour be removed.

Such incidents are now typical. In January 2018, the poet Liz Lochhead proclaimed that Scottish literary icon Robert Burns was a ‘sex pest’, citing a private letter in which he had boasted of his sexual encounters with his lover Jean Armour by saying he had ‘fucked her until she rejoiced’. In July 2018, a group of students at Manchester University covered up a mural in the union building which included the text of Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘If’; the student diversity officer pointed out that Kipling held views about ethnic minorities which are ‘not in line’ with twenty-first century values. In June 2021, English Heritage condemned the children’s author Enid Blyton for being ‘racist and xenophobic’ and updated its website accordingly. In September 2021, academics appointed as part of the Globe Theatre’s anti-racist programme decried *The Tempest* for Shakespeare’s ‘violent colonial ideas’ and claimed that the play could cause ‘harm’ to modern audiences.

There is nothing new about any of this. Every generation produces those who insist on digging up the corpses of the past and putting them on trial, and they have always seemed faintly ridiculous. The online video of plummy-voiced activists barging into a Winston Churchill-themed café in north London to protest against ‘colonialism’ went viral, not because of a mass surge of approval for their cause, but because the spectacle was inherently funny. They are Malvolio reborn, the puritanical archetype that recurs with each successive moral panic. And just like Shakespeare’s cross-gartered loon, their bloated sense of self-importance and need to enforce moral standards makes them a perennial target for satirists and comedians. In the 1960s, such figures drew the ire of playwright Joe Orton, whose farces brutally mocked the pomposity and hypocrisy of the establishment. In *Loot* (1965), the character of Fay solemnly places a copy of the Ten Commandments on the casket of the dead Mrs McLeavy and says: ‘The Ten Commandments. She was a great believer in some of them’.

Anything that contradicts the alternative reality of the Counter-Enlightenment faces the possibility of being purged. In 2020, the new puritans took to the streets in the form of mobs who toppled statues of historical figures if they were deemed to be ‘problematic’. Academic allies were posting advice on how to safely pull down monuments; after the Lincoln Memorial had been vandalised in Washington, Sarah Parcak, a professor of Egyptology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, tweeted instructions on how to demolish obelisks, implying strongly that the Washington Monument ought to be next. Madeline Odent, curator of the Royston Museum in Hertfordshire, singled out the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square as a potential target, suggesting certain corrosive chemicals that were easy to obtain and could cause permanent damage. More recently, a golden coach used to transport the Dutch royal family on ceremonial outings has come under fire because of an illustration of slaves on one of its panels. That it was built in the late 1800s is considered irrelevant. One of the activists said that ‘they should chop it up and burn it’.

As expected, the threshold for what constitutes unacceptable behaviour, even from long-dead historical figures, has begun to spread. There have been calls in the English town of Poole to remove the statue of the founder of the boy scout movement, Robert Baden-Powell, in spite of leading historians pointing out that the allegations of his Nazi sympathies are unfounded, while in Leicester there has been a petition to pull down a statue of Mahatma Gandhi, claiming that he was a ‘fascist, racist and sexual predator’. Even a bust of the abolitionist Thomas Henry Huxley has been targeted on the grounds that he held outdated views on race. As someone who was born in 1825, it would be extremely odd if his views were not ‘outdated’. One would have

thought that his campaigns against the slave trade would have been cause for leniency.

Sometimes the connections are extraordinarily tenuous. The National Maritime Museum has commissioned a review into the ‘heroic status’ of Lord Nelson, given that he was a leading figure in the Royal Navy. There is no firm evidence of Nelson’s views on the subject of race, but it is alleged that the Navy’s involvement in slave trafficking is sufficient to see him condemned. Of course, the Navy also spent a full century suppressing the Atlantic slave trade, but such details are overlooked for the sake of a more readily digestible and simplistic view of history. A particularly feeble connection was found by the curators of a recent exhibition of the eighteenth-century satirical artist William Hogarth at Tate Britain. Various notes were added by curators to highlight the ‘sexual violence and slavery’ of the works, including a comment on a self-portrait which explains that the chair upon which Hogarth is sitting would have been constructed from ‘timber shipped from the colonies’ and asks whether it could ‘stand in for all those unnamed black and brown people enabling the society that supports his vigorous creativity?’

William Gladstone, the nineteenth-century Prime Minister, has repeatedly been made the target of activists’ ire. There have been calls to remove his statue and change the name of the Gladstone Library in Hawarden, Wales, in spite of the fact that he bequeathed £40,000 and much of his own book collection to the institution. In the council of Brent in London, a report was approved to consider renaming the Gladstone Park Gardens and Gladstone Park Primary School. At the University of Liverpool, a student accommodation block called Gladstone Hall was renamed after communist activist Dorothy Kuya. All of this defies reason, given that Gladstone was an outspoken critic of slavery, referring to the trade as ‘by far the foulest crime that taints the history of mankind’. He has been damned because of the sins of his father, who owned plantations in the Caribbean. Leaving aside the oddity of naming a building after Kuya, an enthusiastic ally of the Soviet regime even after news emerged of Stalin’s labour camps and the mass slavery he had reintroduced, how can it be legitimate to judge Gladstone for the behaviour of his father? I cannot help but think of the racing driver Conor Daly, who lost a sponsorship deal due to a racial slur uttered by his father before he was even born.

At no point does it appear to enter the minds of these protesters that there might be other, more generous assessments of the lives and careers of these historical figures. They are convinced that Gandhi’s statue remains in place in order to celebrate his most ‘problematic’ aspects, rather than a commemoration of his successful campaign of peaceful resistance to British rule in India. One suspects that their expertise on the subject is limited to a few Google searches of websites that are sympathetic to their cause.

Much of this comes down to a fundamental disagreement over what purpose these monuments serve. For instance, activists have successfully petitioned to have the statue of Thomas Guy at the hospital in London that bears his name relocated to a ‘less prominent place’. The governing body has announced that a plaque will accompany the statue in its new home to offer an account of his connections to the slave trade. Few would deny that Guy’s investments in the South Sea Company – a group that did transport slaves and supplied them to Spanish plantations in Central and South America – and the money he eventually made from selling his shares enabled him to establish the hospital in 1721. But was the statue erected to celebrate his indirect involvement in slavery, or was it rather to acknowledge the role he played in providing healthcare to the poor and destitute?

If we were to apply the standard of moral purity to any figure who has been immortalised in statue form, none could remain standing. One might counter this view by arguing that slavery is an especially egregious moral evil, and that anyone involved in its perpetuation, however tangentially, should not be commemorated. How far does one take this reasoning, and how far back in time must it apply? Are we to bulldoze the Parthenon, given that slavery was a mainstay of Athenian society? Is Buckingham Palace to be demolished, given the royal family’s history of involvement in colonial enterprises? As a shareholder in slaving voyages, should Queen Elizabeth I – the subject of London’s oldest statue – not also be torn down? One wonders how the bronze bust of Karl Marx over his grave in Highgate Cemetery will fare, given that his political philosophy and his casual use of racial slurs makes him a potential target for both the right and the left. And where does this leave the *Guardian*, that propaganda wing of the identitarian movement? The publication was founded by John Edward Taylor, a man who made his fortune from the cotton trade. Its editorials openly supported the South in the American Civil War, opposed abolition, and denounced Abraham Lincoln for freeing the slaves. Should every copy be incinerated? If we tolerate iconoclastic demolition on the basis of subjective judgement we establish a precedent that we may well live to regret.

Our shared humanity will help us to find some common ground here. We all understand the strength of feeling when it comes to racism and the exploitation of our fellow human beings. White supremacy is, as Ibram X. Kendi rightly says, ‘a nuclear ideology that poses an existential threat to human existence’. To raise questions about the wisdom of permitting mobs to destroy public landmarks in no way implies any degree of approval for the crimes of the past. ‘How you feel about that statue is how you feel about slavery’, wrote LBC radio presenter James O’Brien in relation to the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020. But the chances of finding anyone in the United Kingdom who would defend slavery are infinitesimal, and it is surely inconceivable that anyone making these allegations sincerely believes otherwise.

This debate is not about the rights and wrongs of slavery, a matter that was settled in Western nations in the nineteenth century. It seems strange that the new puritans do not focus their energies on addressing the very real problem of global slavery in the twenty-first century, rather than attempting to revise the inescapable facts of Britain’s past. Historical artefacts are part of the cultural landscape, a reminder of a society that is long dead. They record not only the triumphs of the past, but its follies and villainies too. Good historians avoid making moral judgements, because to assess individuals from the past on the basis of whether or not they satisfy the ethical standards of today is to be guilty of ‘presentism’. If the activists currently calling for the removal of statues had been born at the height of British colonialism, they would almost certainly have endorsed slavery as well. It takes genuine freethinkers like the anti-slavery campaigners Olaudah Equiano (1745–97), Elizabeth Heyrick (1769–1831) and William Wilberforce (1759–1833) to envisage a moral framework beyond the conventions of the day. Those with a tendency towards groupthink, such as the new puritans of today, could never have conceived of a concept so radical as abolitionism.

We often hear the new puritans dismiss as clichéd the charge that they have ‘Orwellian’ tendencies, but it is impossible to

read of their revisionist shenanigans without being reminded of Winston Smith's words in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped'. We cannot change the past, but we can learn from it. As platitudinous as this might sound, it is worth reiterating at a time when cultural revolutionaries are promoting a tunnel-visioned approach to history and the arts. An alternative reality based on a denial of the past is no kind of reality at all.

Transcendence

Life Seen Through a Temperament

From where I am sitting I can see two giant rocks emerging from the sea, geometrical in nature but suggestive of the pincers of a crab. To the west an even larger, boxlike formation breaks up from the water's surface, its ledges populated with squalling guillemots.

These are Les Autelets at Port du Moulin on the island of Sark, prominent sea stacks that the artist and writer Mervyn Peake once described as a 'natural effort at cubism'. Just as the interlocking pillars of basalt at the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland seem designed to enable the visitor to hop across the plateau with ease, these landforms at Port du Moulin feel as though they have been planted here purposefully by some omniscient artist. It hardly matters that they are the product of thousands of years of coastal geomorphology. God is in these stones, whether he exists or not.

There's a dramatic oil painting of Les Autelets in the Guernsey Museum by Charles Temple Dix (1838–73), in which a storm rages at night, the waves exploding into spray against the towering granite bluffs. A lone wooden barrel flounders on the billowing sea, possibly all that remains of a lost cargo ship. Sark has claimed many lives over the centuries, thanks to its erratic tides; islets are scattered about its perimeter like so many landmines, waiting to catch a vessel and bludgeon it against the rocks. At low tide it's still possible to find the remnants of a shipwreck in the shadow of the Grand Autelet, the barest skeleton of steel and rust.

From this vantage point on the high outcrop known as Tintagieu, I am able to view the rocks and shoals that were the seeds of inspiration for the key scenes of Victor Hugo's novel, *Toilers of the Sea* (1866). Les Autelets are the distinctive promontories against which the steamship *Durande* is wrecked, and where our hero Gilliat struggles with the giant octopus. Further north from here are the Boutique caves where, according to Hugo, an octopus once chased his infant son.

Cultural conservatives are right to emphasise the significance of our relationship to the past. Certain aspects of postmodernism have had a degrading effect on humanity, concerned as they are with the demolition of grand narratives and the reduction of human experience to a transactional relationship to power and language. By contrast, Oscar Wilde makes the claim that 'cultivated leisure' is the 'aim of man'. True individuality, he says, is realised by 'making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight'.

It's as good a reason as any to come to Sark. Those who are inspired by the island tend to stay, and it has a particular appeal for artists. After a visit in the early 1880s, the painter William Toplis decided to settle here with his family. By the time of his death he had immortalised the island in an array of works that captured the coves, caves and winding stone peninsulas, many of which were reproduced in *The Book of Sark* (1908), an expensive limited edition volume bound in vellum. His painting of the 'Venus Pool' – a popular local site for bathing which only materialises at low tide – took him twenty-two years to complete and is intensely detailed. Toplis paints as one following John Ruskin's advice to young artists to 'go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing'.

Mervyn Peake too spent his most productive years on Sark. He is one of the few successful novelists who also excel in the visual arts; his prose has a painterly quality about it, an 'almost paranoiac denseness of detail', as Anthony Burgess put it. Sark was a good fit for him; the landscapes beg to be considered, not simply observed, as one would an artwork in a gallery.

And so I find myself returning to Sark whenever I have a deadline looming. Not only is it an endless source of inspiration, but there are few distractions. Cars are illegal, and the closest one gets to a traffic jam is a flock of wayward sheep on a dirt track. John Cleese, in his book *Creativity* (2020), notes that the 'greatest killer of creativity is interruption'. He is right. The last thing a writer needs is pesky people from Porlock hammering at his door. This is an unlikely occurrence on Sark. The island feels as though it is seized in aspic, a way of life incommensurable with the culture wars that rage elsewhere, a solace in which the eldritch shrieking of ideologues could not possibly reverberate.

I will refrain here from attempting a definition of 'art' – far more intelligent people have tried and failed – but Émile Zola's description of art as 'life seen through a temperament' has always struck me as sound. The artist forges his own little worlds, plundering his memories and psyche for the necessary raw materials. As E. M. Forster has it, they 'let down buckets into their underworld'. The essence of creative genius, then, is that it elevates the individual and rages against conformity. The artist must, in the words of William Blake, 'Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's.'

Such a view cannot possibly be compatible with the collectivist outlook of Critical Social Justice. Art and literature are natural targets for the new puritans, because if all human endeavour is perceived as a manifestation of the will to power, the creative spirit is reduced to simply another means by which subordination of the marginalised is guaranteed. When the new puritans call for the demolition of the Western canon on the grounds that most of its luminaries are straight, white and male, they betray the destructive impulse at the heart of their creed. This is a worldview that is essentially opposed to the artistic enterprise. In their reductive view of the history of humankind's achievements – one characterised by an identity-based monomania – the new puritans have wished the cage of their own oppression into existence and lack the imagination, or the

will, to wish it away.

This misapprehension invites the desecration of great art, or at the very least a negation of its potency. The end result is paradoxical; by dismissing the work of the creative geniuses of history as little more than elaborate power-grabs, the new puritans are able to assert their own cultural pre-eminence. They reject the appreciation of beauty because it both demands and evokes humility. To souls numbed by ideology, Raphael's *Transfiguration* is little more than pigments on wood, daubed by a powerful white man in the interests of other powerful white men. They forget, or do not know, that transcendental art is a reminder of our smallness in a vast and unfathomable world.

Ruskin was correct to take the view that the artistic achievements of our forebears are the wellspring of a cohesive society. This isn't to be mistaken for conservative nostalgia, a longing for a golden age that never was. A great error of postmodernism is the assumption that tradition and innovation cannot co-exist. Moreover, there is a direct correlation between critical thinking and the appreciation of art, because in order to interpret we must be able to think freely.

We have veered a long way from the notion of art as the synthesis of matter and form, expressed so perfectly by Walter Pater in his famous essay on Giorgione. Aesthetic criticism is undeniably passé, and a form of identity politics has assumed its place. The question of how a work of art offers us insight into the soul of the artist, or even a glimpse of the numinous, is rejected in favour of whether or not the piece communicates the 'appropriate' message, one that falls in line with intersectional dogma. The annual Turner Prize, for instance, has become a celebration of banal ephemera; all five nominees in 2021 were activist collectives committed to art as a form of 'social change'. One cannot effectively assess artistic worth if one's sole criterion is the extent to which it fortifies contemporary trends. As the writer Julie Burchill so memorably puts it: 'Woke is the revenge of the dullard on the wit, the curtain-twitcher on the hedonist, the wallflower on the whirling dancer'.

I recently spoke to a playwright who told me about his experience of rehearsing for a production which was staged in early 2019. A director had been enlisted to take charge, and from the outset was determined to impose her ideological values on to the production. Before long she was cutting lines that she considered 'problematic', and policing how these topics were discussed in rehearsal. The characters as portrayed in the script were morally ambiguous but, to the frustration of the writer, this director was adamant that the show must convey a 'socially responsible' outlook. For her, theatre was simply another tool to spread the hallowed gospel of Critical Social Justice.

Most of those who make their living in arts and entertainment will be aware of the deleterious impact that the doctrine of group identity has had on creative freedom, although few are bold enough to admit it publicly. That this director was enjoying her power was obvious, and I did suggest to this playwright that perhaps a more open-minded practitioner might have improved the process. 'That's the trouble', he said to me, 'we couldn't find one.' By the time the production's run had started, he was struck by a terrible realisation. He had been treating this director as one might a dangerous dog: overly anxious not to cause her any displeasure, and always aware that she could lash out and bite at any moment.

If you have ever had dealings with identity-fixated ideologues, this analogy will doubtless ring true. The rapid advance of their worldview in mainstream cultural, educational and political institutions has been accelerated by one factor above all: intimidation. According to surveys by social scientists, the percentage of American citizens who are afraid to express their political views openly has tripled since the McCarthy era. As I have argued elsewhere, self-censorship rather than state censorship represents the most direct threat to the intellectual health of contemporary society. This is what John Stuart Mill meant when he wrote about the 'despotism of custom' and 'the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling'.

While those responsible for commissioning creative work are ideologically driven, the most exciting artists are condemned to obscurity. Not that there is anything new about any of this. Many of the most important artists in history have been unrecognised in their lifetime. William Blake lived a life of penury and was both angry and bitter to see his less talented peers flourish. As Blake's biographer Peter Ackroyd points out, 'he knew that he was greater than any of them, and yet he was forced to toil in their shadow and sometimes at their behest'. Such examples, of course, serve to remind us just how wrongheaded it is to assume that the canon has been wholly shaped by artists in positions of privilege.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that much of our great cultural heritage would have been lost were it not for the patronage of those in authority. The artists of today who refuse to self-censor in accordance with the new puritanism, or who are disinclined to produce didactic work that reinforces the required messages, are likely to struggle financially in the current climate. This is because the gatekeepers of the various creative industries have been almost entirely captured by an ideology that is profoundly antagonistic to the artistic instinct. Paradoxically, it demands groupthink from the most independent of minds.

With its narrow perception of art and its prudish impositions, is it conceivable that the new puritanism will ever achieve anything of lasting artistic value? This is the gang that would happily see Dionysus turn teetotal and Eros fitted with a chastity belt. Artists who are in the grip of this worldview tend to produce bloodless and dispensable plays, books, films and other creative works, which are interlarded with Critical Social Justice boilerplate. So much of it seems interchangeable, like a mass frenzy of plagiarism. In its barefaced ideological ambition, it has all the subtlety of a suicidal man colliding with a pavement. How could such a movement ever give us a Michelangelo, a Bach, a Yeats, a Marlowe, a Brontë? Their half-made bed will not admit such weighty occupants.

The Morality of the Artist

It is commonly assumed that the lot of human existence inevitably improves with the passage of time, that each successive generation must be more enlightened than the last. This is the fallacy of mistaking change for progress. No doubt the Iranian revolution of 1979 felt like a step in the right direction for Islamic fundamentalists, but women who bore the brunt of the reimposition of strict religious codes of conduct and dress were, on the whole, less enthusiastic. Similarly, the new puritans are determined to promote the notion that they are 'on the right side of history', as though any such thing exists. This is not so much clairvoyance as wishful thinking, rooted in the arrogant conviction that they have found all the answers. As *Spectator*

columnist Stephen Daisley has remarked: ‘One of the joys of living through a period of cultural revolution is watching all the new moralities arrive and declare themselves eternal truths’.

While the triumph of civil rights and social liberalism over the past half-century is something to be cherished, complacency could well establish the conditions for its undoing. We should, of course, retain the necessary self-awareness to accept that changes in society are likely to unsettle us as we grow older. Intergenerational resentment is a fixture of human society; old age has always tended to judge youth too harshly. A debate in Aristophanes’s *The Clouds* (423 bc) sees one character railing against the feckless and dissolute behaviour of young men, typified by their habit of taking hot baths. Those of us who are lucky enough to reach old age are time travellers; we carry into late adulthood the remote world in which we were born. Only through memory are we able to step back into that mezzotint, and even then it is likely to take an inauthentic and idealised form.

Yet it should not be forgotten that the new puritans are a minority even among the youngest generations and, in any case, the teleological fantasy of inexorable human progress is just as naïve as our tendency to romanticise the past. With their meta-narrative of being on ‘the right side of history’, the new puritans have disengaged themselves from pausing to consider whether they might be steering the course of human history in reverse gear. They have not only mistaken change for progress, but have persuaded those in power to accept their dubious narrative. Even an unfettered marketplace of ideas is no guarantee that the most progressive outlooks will prevail. In *Literature, Politics and National Identity* (1994), Andrew Hadfield makes the case that the literary canon is not necessarily a case of ‘survival of the fittest’ or ‘survival of the best’ but ‘merely the most suited to prevailing conditions’. He quotes Stephen Jay Gould’s book *Wonderful Life* (1989), which outlines how scientists’ faith in ‘the march of progress’ has often left them struggling to comprehend the extinction of certain sophisticated species as they studied the fossil records. Why is it that the early apex predator known as the *Anomalocaris* should die out, while the relatively insignificant *Pikaia* lasted so much longer?

Looking over the roster of authors on my bookshelf, I can see that Hadfield is right. Some of the best writers fade into obscurity for no other reason than they cease to be fashionable. One of my favourite novelists is Stella Benson (1892–1933), and it is a source of continual frustration to me that few have even heard her name. If there were any automatic justice in the formation of the literary canon, Benson would occupy a significant role. Her travel writing has the effect of capturing her experiences so precisely that they feel familiar, almost like a shared memory. I have never seen the Grand Canyon, but having read Benson’s account I feel as though I have:

The Grand Canyon of the Colorado River in Arizona is the only object in creation that cannot possibly be coldly or superciliously seen. I wonder, in passing, whether the word *creation* can be properly used of the Canyon. Rather it is an interruption in the order of creative things. Here is a desert, as flat and everyday and conventional as any desert can be; it is moulded in cream-coloured sand and spotted with chaparral and low trees and white poppies; mirage lakes shimmer in gold and blue on its horizon. As a desert, in fact, it is aggressively orthodox, the eye travels serenely across Arizona towards equally serene Utah, when suddenly – Good God, what has happened? There is no desert – the desert has fallen through the world into hell – here is nothing but blue air perforated by blood-red towers. Gashed by chasm within chasm, the world crashes down, from midday into twilight, from twilight into night.

How could a writer capable of such evocative prose be consigned to oblivion?

The answer is that fashion kills as much as it creates, and beautiful things are as apt to be forgotten as the mundane. When Walter Pater wrote his essay on Sandro Botticelli in 1870, his work was still relatively obscure. In championing this undeservedly neglected artist, Pater was fulfilling one of the most valuable functions of the critic. But the dominance of the religion of Critical Social Justice has given rise to an expectation of moral purity from artists in both the present and the past, which means that overlooked writers such as Stella Benson could not possibly be resurrected. She was a genuine freethinker, which is why she was able to advocate for women’s suffrage at a time when feminism was a radical and improbable proposition. For all that, a smattering of outdated depictions of race that appear in her early work makes any revival a near impossibility. Her failure to live up to the standards of twenty-first century intersectionalists can, of course, be explained by the fact that she was born in 1892. One wonders how she would fare under the scrutiny of a ‘sensitivity reader’, those priggish moralists who are regularly employed by publishing houses to ensure that authors are not inadvertently causing offence? In particular, her debut novel *I Pose* (1915) contains passages that would be deemed extremely problematic by modern sensibilities. Still, it is a captivating and eccentric book that defies all expectations and deserves to be more widely read.

Most writers, of course, are destined to be forgotten. But it is troubling to note that the same bloodlust for moral purity that we have seen in the calls for statues to be toppled and history to be revised has quickly spread to the arts, literature and entertainment. At the Whitney Biennial exhibition in New York in 2017, there were calls for the destruction of a painting by Dana Schutz which depicted the death of Emmett Till – a black boy who was murdered in 1955 – on the grounds that the artist was white. And just a few weeks before that, a Canadian painter known as Amanda PL had an exhibition cancelled because her work was overtly based on the Woodlands style of indigenous Anishinaabe artists. Not content with the charge of cultural appropriation, one critic raised the stakes by referring to the paintings as acts of ‘cultural genocide’. By having the temerity to paint whatever she likes, this artist was deemed no better than Hitler.

To accuse an artist of cultural appropriation is to betray a meagre understanding of the history of art, music and literature. It goes without saying that cross-cultural inspiration has always been a driving force behind artistic development. One need only consider the Japanese artist Hokusai (1760–1849) to appreciate the extent of his influence on European modernism. The same goes for popular culture. Few would deny that The Beatles owe much of their success to the precedent set by influential African-American musicians.

The rise of the new puritans has meant that the moral policing of art has become depressingly routine. In December 2017, the Royal Court theatre in London announced that it was cancelling a run of Andrea Dunbar’s play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982) on the grounds that, in the current climate, ‘the staging of this work, with its themes of grooming and abuses of power on young women . . . now feels highly conflictual’. Not only is this an anachronistic misreading of the play, it makes the mistake of assuming that the dramatist’s work should present characters and relationships that are morally unambiguous. The

theatre later reversed its decision following widespread criticism, but its original statement regarding the perceived immorality of the play reveals just how far the prevailing philistinism has spread.

It goes without saying that art and literature can be political or pedagogic, but often the most effective work has little to do with morality. Artistic beauty can make even the most wicked figures seem alluring. Moreover, the idea that we should expect high standards of behaviour from fictional characters, or that we as audiences or readers should be left in no doubt as to how we should judge them, reduces us to the status of infants in need of moral tutelage. It's as though the rather fundamental distinction between imagination and reality no longer applies.

Then there is the question of the morality of artists themselves. I have always maintained that we should not judge a work of art on the basis of the behaviour of its creator. The curators of the Queer British Art exhibition at Tate Britain, for instance, were happy to include pieces by Kenneth Halliwell, in spite of the fact that he beat his lover Joe Orton to death with a hammer. And there is certainly no shortage of talented artists throughout history whose conduct was inexcusable. The celebrated writer William S. Burroughs shot his wife in the face. The novelist Anne Perry helped to bludgeon her best friend's mother to death with a brick. Lord Byron committed incest with his half-sister. It is said that Caravaggio murdered a man while attempting to castrate him. Should we therefore hurl his *Bacchus* and his *Judith Beheading Holofernes* onto the bonfire? For over a hundred years it was believed that Brahms strangled cats in order to replicate their dying cries in his symphonies. If this had been accurate, would we be justified in consigning his music to the abyss? And what of the rumours that Michelangelo crucified a model in order to precisely reproduce the muscular contortions and agony of Christ on the cross? Even if this turned out to be true, only a philistine would delight in seeing the Sistine Chapel given a fresh lick of paint.

More recently, the epidemic of sexual allegations in Hollywood has had a tangible impact on the industry's creative output. The actor Kevin Spacey was systematically erased from Ridley Scott's film, *All the Money in the World* (2017), and soon afterwards Netflix announced that it was scrapping Spacey's biopic of Gore Vidal. Similarly, the release of Louis C.K.'s film *I Love You, Daddy* (2017) appears to have been indefinitely postponed, in response to the comedian's admission that he masturbated in front of women on numerous occasions, albeit consensually. 'If you laugh at Louis CK now, you're accepting his worldview', claimed a headline in the *Guardian*. The best kind of laughter is an involuntary reflex, one that Louis C.K. is particularly adept at provoking. To claim that he is no longer funny since the scandal broke is demonstrably false.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to those who believe that one should separate the art from the artist is the novelist Norman Douglas (1868–1952). In her recent biography of Douglas, Rachel Hope Cleves does not even include her subject's name in the book's title; it is simply called *Unspeakable: A Life Beyond Sexual Morality*. For all his renowned generosity and loyalty to his friends, and his tendency to exaggerate his misdeeds for shock value, Douglas was undeniably a sexual criminal. A womaniser in his youth and a pederast in middle-age, he also claimed to have had sex with a dog and, on one occasion, raped a drunk soldier he found lying unconscious in a ditch. In his memoir *Looking Back* (1933), he recounts the moment when, having won a lawsuit against his wife, he walked to a remote location in the middle of the night and laughed out loud with vindictive glee until the dawn. His appalling behaviour guarantees that his work is unlikely to regain the popularity it once had, but his travel books *Siren Land* (1911), *Old Calabria* (1915) and *Alone* (1921) are masterworks of the genre, and his novel *South Wind* (1917) is a subversive and satirical *tour de force*. Is it too much of a stretch to consider that perhaps it took a figure as depraved as Douglas to produce it?

Then there is the sculptor Eric Gill (1882–1940), who admitted in his diaries to molesting two of his daughters and his pet dog. In June 2020, I wrote a piece for the *Spectator* in which I predicted that his statue of Prospero and Ariel on the façade of the BBC's Broadcasting House would soon become a target given the recent craze for demolishing statues. In January 2022, a man climbed a ladder to reach the sculpture and vandalised it with a hammer until he was intercepted by police. As much as I would like to claim the power to prophesy the future, Gill's moral depravity made this an inevitability given the determination of today's culture warriors to purify the past.

Gill's crimes were unforgivable, but the statue is blameless. Are we to suppose that a work of art is somehow magically invested with the soul of its maker? I think not, and I worry that in taking this line we are legitimising future acts of vandalism against some of our most important cultural artefacts. To be a great artist takes a kind of mania, an unrelenting obsession to see one's dreams and visions brought to life. Not all artists are morally repugnant, but many of the most important ones throughout history have been. So while it would be a public duty to see Gill on trial for his crimes were he alive today, we achieve nothing but cultural immiseration by destroying the beautiful works he left behind.

It is of course entirely understandable that Gill's crimes are such that some of us cannot appreciate his work without a gnawing sense of unease. But this is a subjective feeling, not a mandate to destroy art. Nobody who appreciates Gill's work is thereby excusing paedophilia, any more than those of us who object to mobs tearing down statues of slave-traders are endorsing human trafficking. It is tempting to reduce such issues to simplistic binaries of Good versus Evil, or those who are on the 'right' or 'wrong' side of history, but this is an infantile approach to matters that require nuance. It is far better, surely, to have these difficult conversations without the aid of hammers.

The novelist Anatole France once remarked that it is just as well that the heart is naïve and the mind is not. If the angels were to write, he opined, they would doubtless produce bad literature. Oscar Wilde put it another way in 'The Critic as Artist' (1891) when he noted that 'all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling'. One need only visit a graveyard to see that he is right; some of the most mawkish epitaphs I've ever seen have clearly stemmed from profound sorrow and the most compassionate of instincts. Perhaps, then, we should be grateful that many of the best artists have the touch of the demonic.

Representation

Every August, comedians, actors, musicians and other performers gravitate towards Edinburgh for the largest arts festival in the world (pandemics permitting). It is a misanthropist's nightmare; by the second week even a casual stroll through the city centre

becomes an impossibility. An attempt to traverse the ‘Royal Mile’ of an afternoon is quickly thwarted by student theatre groups accosting you with flyers, and dancing minstrels with little respect for personal boundaries. By comparison, when one happens upon the occasional Christian evangelist protesting this month-long bacchanal, it almost feels like light relief.

There is a shared sense among stand-up comedians that one ought to participate in the festival, even though the financial cost is prohibitive for most. Even those acts who have been lucky enough to migrate to television usually lose money, while the corporate-sponsored venues flourish. After more than ten years of performing at the festival fringe, I must confess to feeling a little jaded by the whole experience, although I still enjoy seeking out little-known acts in the various crypts, caverns and other firetraps that are temporarily converted into venues. In this environment, even the most cringe-making amateur theatricals are endearing. There’s a sense of everyone throwing themselves into a collective fantasy, doubtless augmented by the various bars and fleshpots of the city whose opening hours have been extended to accommodate the extra demand. Many performers spend their days bothering the public with flyers until their show, and afterwards drinking until dawn. For a while, we forgot that – come September – we will be shunted back into real life.

One of the highlights for me was in my third year at the Edinburgh fringe. I was performing in a show with two other stand-ups – Joleed Farah and Ben Van der Velde – in a dingy bar which was rumoured to be owned by the Russian mafia. As a free show in a central location, we were often blessed with large audiences, but this was somewhat offset by the fact that tourists and barflies who had no interest in watching a live comedy show would flutter in and out. Our first show of the run was enlivened by the sudden appearance of a dozen drunken men in football shirts who caused indescribable havoc while I was on stage. They shouted homophobic slurs, emitted braying sounds that defied interpretation, and one of them even vomited into a pint glass. In theatrical terms, I had most definitely been upstaged.

Fortunately this was an aberration, and most of the shows went by with little or no threat of physical violence. One night, an audience member joined us for a drink. As bizarre as it seems, she had been attracted to our show because it featured the same ethnic composition – one black man and two white – as the Jimi Hendrix Experience, a band for which she felt an especially strong affinity. She was performing a one-woman show at the venue down the road from ours and invited us to see it. We were all instantly struck by her energy and passion for her subject, and before long Joleed had agreed to a cameo in her show in which he would smash up an electric guitar live on stage. These are the kinds of conversations that only make sense at the Edinburgh fringe.

The woman’s name was Marsha Hunt, an American singer and former model who had appeared in the original London production of *Hair* in 1968. She became famous largely due to an iconic naked photograph of her taken by Justin de Villeneuve which became the musical’s most recognisable image. She was later to have a child with Mick Jagger, and she told me that she had been the inspiration for one of the Rolling Stones’s most famous songs. As she so memorably said to me during our conversation: ‘I’m brown sugar, motherfucker!’

Hers was by some measure the most impressive performance I saw at the festival that year, made all the more impactful by the simplicity of its format. After Joleed had destroyed the guitar, and the naked hippies had cleared from the stage, Marsha spent the hour reminiscing about her early days. She recalled with unalloyed passion the moment she had first become familiar with Jimi Hendrix, and how the vision of a confident, popular and hyper-talented black personality had inspired her to follow her musical vocation.

I had always been sceptical regarding the importance of representation in the arts. As a child it never crossed my mind that the heroes of the books and films I enjoyed should resemble me. My favourite novels tended to feature girls as the protagonists. I saved up my pocket money in order to buy the hardback edition of Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* (1988), and as a small child I never tired of re-reading *Rebecca’s World* (1975) by Terry Nation. Perhaps the male authorship explained my interest, but my obsession with certain films also suggested a reluctance to ‘stay in my lane’. My favourite genres were musicals and martial arts, and I would endlessly re-watch films such as *Annie* (1982), *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Enter the Dragon* (1973). As a white boy known for his physical cowardice and poor singing voice, I had little in common with either Julie Andrews or Bruce Lee, and even less so with ginger-haired orphan girls from New York City.

And yet seeing gay people depicted on screen and in literature was doubtless important for me, given that I grew up at a time when homosexuality was widely perceived as a perversion or, at best, a kind of disorder. I was seventeen before I met an openly gay person, and I was genuinely astounded to do so. It didn’t matter to me that the gay celebrities of the time tended to play on their sexuality for the purposes of self-deprecation, or that the gay comedians were invariably camp. Watching the comedian Julian Clary on television, or the overtly homoerotic films of Derek Jarman, at least gave me a sense that my natural instincts need not be a source of shame or a guarantee of social ostracism. Where representation in the arts and media is rare, it can have a liberating impact.

This is perhaps why Marsha Hunt’s performance resonated with me. Trailblazers such as Hendrix made it possible for black artists like her to be taken seriously in an industry which had previously tended to exclude them. Similarly, when in 1983 Michael Jackson’s ‘Billie Jean’ became the first music video by a black artist to be regularly featured on MTV, it paved the way for the channel to embrace a far more wide-ranging playlist. At a time when prejudice on the basis of race, sex and sexual orientation still retained some degree of societal acceptability, the need for greater diversity in popular culture was self-evident.

It is thanks to these ground-breaking moments in entertainment history that, by the 1990s, racial and sexual diversity in music and television had become the norm. Few, if anyone, remarked on the fact that two of the main characters in the BBC’s comedy series *Red Dwarf* were portrayed by black actors; it was considered a wholly unremarkable aspect of a hugely popular show. Gay representation took a little longer to be normalised, but by the late 2000s few would even have noticed when homosexual subplots cropped up in popular soap operas. And while we have never come close to eliminating racism, misogyny or anti-gay prejudice, we had reached a moment in our cultural development in which those who still openly peddled such unreconstructed notions were largely shunned.

This is perhaps the most unforgivable aspect of the new puritans’ cultural revolution. They have rehabilitated racial thinking to such an extent that we are overly conscious of race in all circumstances, meaning that people are encouraged to see each

other primarily in terms of group identity. When the rapper Stormzy claimed that he was the ‘first black British artist to headline Glastonbury’ in 2019, he was gently corrected by Skin – the black lead singer of Skunk Anansie – who had headlined the festival a full twenty years earlier. ‘Sorry Stormzy’, she posted on Instagram, ‘but we beat you to it in 1999!’ The mistake is telling. In the late nineties, fans were generally interested in the quality of the music, not the colour of the performers’ skin. Such progress has been seemingly reversed by the rise of Critical Social Justice, and shows just how regressive its impact has been.

The British Broadcasting Corporation, for instance, has recently committed to spending £100 million on improving diversity in television, even though, according to the most recent survey from the Creative Diversity Network (of which all UK broadcasters are members), ‘those who identify as female, transgender, BAME and lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) are all represented at levels comparable with (or above) national population estimates’. In other words, the BBC is spending a significant amount of licence-payers’ money to resolve a problem that has not existed for many years.

I have already argued in favour of ‘colour blindness’ as a progressive ideal worth reclaiming, but to emphasise the point it might be useful to consider an analogy offered by the neuroscientist Sam Harris on his *Making Sense* podcast:

Imagine a world in which people cared about hair color to the degree that we currently care – or seem to care, or imagine that others care, or allege that they secretly care – about skin color. Imagine a world in which discrimination by hair color was a thing, and it took centuries to overcome, and it remains a persistent source of private pain and public grievance throughout society, even where it no longer exists. What an insane misuse of human energy that would be. What an absolute catastrophe.

Harris envisages a future in which an individual’s superficial qualities are deemed ‘morally and politically irrelevant’. In such a society, discrimination according to skin colour would make as much sense as prejudice against brunettes. ‘And if you don’t agree with that,’ he asks, ‘what did you think Martin Luther King Jr was talking about?’

Harris is here lamenting the jettisoning of the ongoing project of social liberalism in favour of a movement that is antagonistic to its ideals. In the midst of the current culture war, any diverse cast in a film, play or television series somehow feels like a political statement, with the anaemic quality that one tends to find in state-sanctioned art. One can only imagine how revolutionary and exciting it would have been to see *The Wiz*, an all-black retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, when it opened on Broadway in 1974. But in today’s context such endeavours seem mundane and tokenistic: garden-variety submissions to a cultural and political establishment obsessed with group identity. Similarly, when Frances de la Tour played Hamlet in 1979 at the Half Moon Theatre in London, it was a daring and radical directorial choice; now it would seem every bit as banal as the repeated calls from activists for a female James Bond.

Eunuchs in a Harem

The infatuation with representation in the entertainment industries has been largely reinforced by the influence that the new puritans have exerted on the discipline of literary and artistic criticism. Praise for Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk* (2017), for instance, was offset by those who complained that he had not included a sufficiently diverse cast, in spite of the historical fact that the overwhelming majority of those evacuated were young white men. It seems to me that if your initial reaction to a work as arresting as *Dunkirk* is to appraise the degree to which its auteur has fulfilled diversity quotas, then you are not well equipped to judge his artistry.

The actor Kenneth Williams once compared critics to eunuchs in a harem: ‘They’re there every night, they see it done every night and they know how it should be done every night. But they can’t do it themselves’. It’s difficult not to enjoy the barbed wit of Williams, even when he’s indulging in this kind of unfair generalisation. Criticism, if done well, is an art form in its own right, but in our age of identity politics the standards have undeniably dropped. Those critics who have converted to the religion of Critical Social Justice can rarely lay claim to individuality in their analysis. The cumulative effect feels like the product of a hive mind, one that is less concerned with artistic merit than with matters of diversity, inclusivity and representation.

Let us consider a recent example of how critics of popular culture have generally succumbed to the identitarian impulse. For all my efforts, I have been unable to find a single negative review of Quentin Tarantino’s film *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019) that does not favour tedious moralising over meaningful analysis. Richard Brody in the *New Yorker* complains that the film is ‘obscenely regressive’, ‘ridiculously white’, and ‘celebrates white-male stardom’. Matthew Rozsa in *Salon* dismisses it as ‘sexist historical revisionism’. Writing for the *Observer*, Wendy Ide mars an otherwise insightful review by expressing frustration at ‘the positioning of middle-aged white males as the real victims’.

Brody’s *New Yorker* review is particularly egregious. It’s a well-written piece that is rendered incompetent by a myopic devotion to identity politics. ‘It’s far more revealing about Tarantino than about Hollywood itself,’ Brody remarks. One would hope so, given that Tarantino is an auteur rather than documentary filmmaker. Needless to say, Brody’s criticism would be best levelled elsewhere. His review says far more about him than the movie it purports to assess. One of Brody’s many bugbears is the representation of Bruce Lee, played by Mike Moh, who is humiliated in a scuffle with stuntman Cliff Booth, played by Brad Pitt, on the set of *The Green Hornet*. Shannon Lee, Bruce Lee’s daughter, has described the portrayal as ‘irresponsible’ and ‘belittling’. Former basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar considers it ‘somewhat racist’. Lee biographer Matthew Polly calls it ‘inaccurate’. In reality, the scene in question is a strong comedic set piece with an impressive performance from Moh, which also happens to serve an important function in the narrative. A screen idol like Bruce Lee hardly needs to be protected from caricature, and it is surely demeaning to his legacy to suggest otherwise. As to the question of whether or not Cliff could have bested Lee in a fight, Tarantino had this to say: ‘If you ask me the question, “Who would win in a fight: Bruce Lee or Dracula?”, it’s the same question. It’s a fictional character. If I say Cliff can beat Bruce Lee up, he’s a fictional character so he could beat Bruce Lee up’. Unlike his critics, Tarantino understands the difference between art and reality.

It's not a distinction that troubles film critic Larushka Ivan-Zadeh. Writing for *The Times*, she attacks Tarantino's 'sadistically violent, casually racist and misogynistic fantasies, which, he insists, are just movies, not real life'. She identifies a number of supposedly offensive instances of violence against women in Tarantino's back catalogue, which not only reveals her ongoing struggle with the concept of fiction, but also conveniently neglects the fact that his male characters tend to fare even worse.

The most soft-witted response to *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* has come, perhaps predictably, from the *Guardian*. Indulging in the most spurious cod-psychanalysis, Caspar Salmon claims that 'Tarantino's filmography reveals a director in search of increasingly gruesome settings to validate his revenge fantasies and confer legitimacy on his bloodthirst'. Again, the charge of misogyny is made on the grounds that Tarantino depicts 'morally repellent' violence against women. Identity politics has turned contemporary film critics into prissy, sermonising bores, determined to see artists as moral educators for those poor, suggestible plebeians who might be exposed to dangerous work.

Much of the opprobrium in the press has centred around Tarantino's depiction of Sharon Tate, played by Margot Robbie. Tate was an actress and the wife of director Roman Polanski. Her murder at the hands of members of the Charles Manson 'family', along with her three houseguests and her unborn child, provides the backdrop to the fictional story of TV and film actor Rick Dalton (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) and his stuntman Cliff. Dalton lives on Cielo Drive in the Hollywood Hills, next door to Polanski and Tate's residence where the murders took place on 8 August 1969. Many have since romanticised this date as marking the sunset of the 'golden age' of Hollywood, and there is little doubt that Tarantino's affection for this era is the film's driving force.

Sharon Tate was on the cusp of stardom when Tex Watson, Susan Atkins and Patricia Krenwinkel – acting on the instructions of their cult leader Manson – invaded her home and butchered the occupants. Tate had appeared in Polanski's film *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967) and had been nominated for a Golden Globe for her performance in *Valley of the Dolls* (1967). Young, talented and beautiful, she had all the makings of a screen icon. Her death looms large throughout *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Much like the audience in a Greek tragedy, we know what is coming. Tarantino allows us glimpses of her day-to-day life. She dances to Paul Revere records in her home, goes to a party at the Playboy Mansion, buys her husband a copy of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (another woman whose life is unjustly cut short). The inevitability of her murder adds potency to these snapshots. As Tarantino himself put it: 'She has been defined by the tragedy of her ending. So I thought there was something special about just seeing her live life'.

So when a *New York Times* reporter at the Cannes Film Festival asked why Tate wasn't assigned more dialogue in the film, Tarantino was right to point out the stupidity of the question. It was somewhat reminiscent of the BBC article that rated *Game of Thrones* episodes as 'good' or 'bad' based on the percentage of female dialogue, seemingly promoting the false correlation of gender representation and artistic merit. *Time* magazine even published an article entitled 'We counted every line in every Quentin Tarantino film to see how often women talk'. If this fatuous trend is to continue, critics may as well be replaced with computer algorithms producing pie charts instead of reviews.

The moments in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* when Tate is alone, and therefore unlikely to be speaking, are some of its most powerful. In one key scene, we see Tate attend a screening of *The Wrecking Crew* (1968), in which she played a minor role. She spends much of the time enjoying the responses of the audience, who laugh along at her performance. Anyone in the creative arts will appreciate the harmless vanity of seeing one's work appreciated by strangers. It is a simple conceit, made poignant by our knowledge of the future she was to be denied. Ivan-Zadeh dismisses the scene as mere 'masturbatory fantasy' because, like most critics with an intersectionalist bent, she is more interested in passing moral judgements on the filmmaker than assessing the merits of his work.

For those who understand that cinema is a quintessentially visual art, and who reject the idea that a character's impact can be measured by a quick word-count, it is clear that Tarantino's depiction of Tate is a gesture towards the iconic onscreen status that, in reality, was thwarted by her premature death. The effect is accentuated by her relative silence. We can admire her, catch brief moments of her life and speculate about her private thoughts, but there our relationship ends. So when Salmon insists that Tarantino should have spent more time 'fleshing out the character', he is spectacularly missing the point. Icons cease to be icons once we know them too well.

The success of *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* neither stands nor falls on its putative morality. But if these critics are right, and movies ought to be morally pure, there is certainly a case to be made in Tarantino's favour. In his version of events, Sharon Tate lives on, while her would-be murderers are gruesomely dispatched. For all Salmon's handwrapping about how 'it's rancid to stage these killings as entertainment', the sheer extremity of the violence in the final act pivots the film into laugh-out-loud absurdist territory. It's a tradition that goes back at least as far as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, whose excessive brutality, as I have already noted, is far funnier than many critics have been willing to admit. That the moralists have taken umbrage at a film that punishes the guilty shows the incoherence of their position. In Tarantino's Hollywood, the golden age does not draw to a close with the screams of the innocent. Instead, Sharon Tate emerges victorious, and Charles Manson's devotees are degraded to mere stooges of high farce. It's surely no less than they deserve.

That is not to say that total objectivity is either possible or desirable when it comes to criticism. But the best critics are able to appreciate a piece of work on its own terms, whereas the worst seem to believe that success should be measured on the basis of how closely the artist reflects their own ideological perspective. Consider the reaction in the left-wing press to Morrissey's album *California Son* (2019). The *Guardian*'s one-star review offers very little insight into the music itself, and might best be paraphrased as 'I despise Morrissey's politics'. A critic for the *Independent* was at least able to admit the quality of the album, but could muster no more than two stars for 'an old hero who's broken our hearts'. It is dispiriting to see critical faculties so easily overwhelmed by the intolerance of moral certitude.

Recent examples of this kind of shoddy analysis are myriad. One *Guardian* critic was so offended by the comedian Chris Lilley's series *Lunatics* (2019) that he admitted to feeling 'personally insulted'. Good criticism, on the other hand, is able to balance the subjectivity of personal temperament with the objectivity of professional experience. To put it another way, a critic

who is offended is unlikely to offer much in the way of insight. According to Vyvyan Holland, Oscar Wilde's second son, his father's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), was universally condemned by critics on the basis that it was 'prurient, immoral, vicious, coarse, and crude'. When the novel was republished, Wilde added a preface as a form of rebuttal, which should be required reading for all critics today. In it, he explains that vice and virtue are simply 'materials' for artists, reminding us that the depiction of immorality is not necessarily an endorsement of such behaviour. Even if it were, why should it matter? 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book', Wilde proclaims. 'Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'

Art is the ultimate expression of individuality, the interpretation of life through a singular lens. Just as there is artistry in criticism, there is a critical component to all forms of art. This is why the critic deserves our respect as much as the artist does, but it is also why he or she should be held to account when failing to live up to the high standards of the craft. A critic who is driven primarily by their politics, who is blinded by their own sense of moral superiority, or who cannot temporarily surrender to the worldview of their subject, can barely be said to be a critic at all. And those who fall into this category should not be surprised to hear themselves compared to eunuchs.

Clowns

One of my more vivid memories from early childhood is of when I was cornered by a group of older boys behind a disused greenhouse near to my school. Over months of neglect, a thick patch of nettles and brambles had broken out against the glass panes, and inevitably I was pushed into this mass of clawing weeds. I was wearing my summer uniform at the time, which meant shorts and a short-sleeved shirt that left a good deal of skin exposed. I could not have been much more than six years of age, unaccustomed to physical confrontation and, in any case, hopelessly outnumbered. Each time I attempted to stand, the boys would simply push me back, and their laughter seemed to amplify with my cries. Admittedly, there is something quite creative about using foliage as a means of torture.

Although I was stung and scratched relentlessly for what felt like hours, it's the laughter of my assailants rather than the pain that I remember. The relationship between comedy and cruelty merits consideration, not least because we live in an age in which comedians who misjudge the public mood or transcend the arbitrary and ever-shifting 'red line' set by the new puritans can risk the abrupt termination of their careers. Stand-up comedians in particular have found themselves in the trenches of the culture war.

Of course, such debates are perennial. My first press interview for my debut stand-up show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2011 – a discussion on BBC radio with the journalist Kate Copstick and the comedian Mark Cooper-Jones – was framed around the question of whether 'comedians rely on toilet humour too much'. Yet the creed of the new puritans that demands we see language as potentially toxic has led to a new article of faith: that jokes can 'normalise' bigotry. As the writer and lawyer Helen Dale puts it, 'When you think language makes the world, you are frightened of words'. In this climate, comedians who cause offence are perceived as the equivalent of the playground bully, their jibes as potent as physical assault.

The comedian Simon Evans has written about how rapidly this view has seeped into the mainstream, recalling a discussion with a fellow stand-up who claimed that 'jokes are *dangerous*: they work like spells or incantations – and once out there, who knows where they will end up, whose ears they will fall into, which playground or gender-reveal party where someone who is not adequately robust to deal with them will either be hurt or provoked into harming others?' It is striking that this fear of the impact of humour should now be so commonly held by those who work in the entertainment industry. There is a sense in which the court jesters, those whose traditional role is to articulate subversive ideas, are marshalling themselves along establishment lines. 'And if that's what it's like in comedy clubs,' writes Evans, 'what chance do the universities have?' What chance indeed.

Throughout history, clowns have occupied the privileged position of being able to speak provocatively, whether they believe what they say or not. King Lear's fool can openly criticise his master because he entertains him in the process. As Salman Rushdie puts it in his short story 'Yorick', a court jester was empowered 'to tell the truth, yet keep his head, jingling as it was with silly bells'. Likewise, some of the most effective stand-up is able to challenge our certainties by making us laugh. This is how we should judge its success, not by whether or not it accords with any particular moral standards.

This view of comedy as a prospective social hazard means that those with unorthodox instincts are encouraged to self-censor. One cannot imagine an Andy Kaufman, Patrice O'Neal or Joan Rivers achieving success in such a climate, and there have been numerous attempts to 'problematis' comedians of the past for their contentious material. A 2019 article in the *Guardian* saw various relatively inexperienced young comics taking Bill Hicks to task for his routines twenty-five years after his death. He is accused of misogyny, 'mansplaining' and recycling 'patriarchal' tropes. That is to say, the reactions are mostly based on a literal-minded interpretation of his work that, moreover, perceives humour as potentially noxious.

Perhaps it's a failure to appreciate the theatricality of stand-up. It's the ambiguity of intention, the shifting back and forth from the persona to the authentic self, that makes the medium so exhilarating. By its nature, subversive humour teases and tests the limits of our tolerance. John Cleese has pointed out that 'all comedy is critical'. Sam Kinison put it more bluntly when he asked: 'When has stand-up comedy been kind to anyone? It goes after anyone who's the target. Comedy attacks'. This is not to deny that humour can be a weapon for bullies, but the small barbarities of the playground are not in the same category as the theatricalised cruelty of a stand-up routine.

Let's take the example of Canadian comedian Mike Ward who, in 2016, was fined \$42,000 by Quebec's Human Rights Tribunal for a joke he told about Jérémie Gabriel, a young man suffering from a disfiguring condition known as Treacher Collins syndrome. In 2006, a children's foundation flew Gabriel to Rome to sing for the Pope. In his routine, Ward spoke about how he had supported the charity's gesture on the understanding that the boy was terminally ill. 'But now, five years later, and he's still not dead,' Ward said. 'Me, I defended him, like an idiot, and he won't die.' Taken literally, these words would seem callous. In the context of a stand-up comedy show, the joke works well. For one thing, the target is Ward, not Gabriel. The notion of a man who feels duped by a terminally ill child who has failed to die is self-evidently absurd. Then there is the

ambiguity behind the sentiment; can Ward actually mean what he is saying, or are we witnessing an irrational outburst from his theatrical persona? Given that most humour relies on the element of surprise, we cannot pretend that shock is not a valuable comedic tool. Nor should we expect a stand-up to break character and expose his true moral compass. By all accounts, Ward is a thoroughly decent and kind-hearted individual. His onstage persona is not, and is all the funnier for it.

The widespread mistrust of jokes that veer into morally ambiguous territory is understandable, not least because of the ways in which humour can be weaponised. Any schoolchild knows that the bully will always resort to his get-out clause: ‘It was only a joke.’ But while humour can certainly be used as an excuse for slander, or as a device to cause harm to vulnerable people, in practice this is hardly ever the case when it comes to professional comedians. Whenever stand-ups are accused of bullying, more often than not it is because the critic has approached their performance with an assumption of bad faith. When Louis C.K. performed a routine about the Parkland school shooting, he was accused of ‘mocking the survivors’. It takes quite a leap of the imagination to suppose that a comedian genuinely relishes the deaths of innocent children. As Ricky Gervais has observed, ‘People confuse the subject of the joke with the target of the joke, and they’re very rarely the same.’

But the essence of bullying is that it is not subversive; rather, it is a means by which those with power may assert their dominance. In these ongoing debates about comedy and social responsibility, a common distinction is made between what has become known as ‘punching up’ and ‘punching down’. In these terms, comedy becomes predominately a matter of status. As audience members, are we watching Louis C.K., a powerful multi-millionaire ranting about those who are much less fortunate? Or are we watching ‘Louis C.K.’, a caricature of his true self, whose moral deficiencies and petty hypocrisies are laid bare through the process of performance? Better still, perhaps the performer is occupying both roles at once, his status continually oscillating between high and low, toying with our certainties and blurring the boundaries of authenticity and fantasy. In any case, that so many seem determined to interpret stand-up as a literal expression of the comedian’s true feelings is suggestive of the low regard in which the art form is held.

These suspicions make even less sense when one considers that there are virtually no working comedians whose intention is to attack marginalised groups. We have seen that one unfortunate by-product of the culture war is that a new generation of activists has become convinced that our society has made little progress over the past fifty years. The new puritans rail against the comedians of the present as though they were peddling the racist tropes of the past. It seems fitting, then, that these same activists have taken up the mantle of Mary Whitehouse, whose ‘Clean Up TV’ campaign of the 1960s was based on the premise that popular entertainment, if not properly regulated, could have a corrupting influence on the masses.

For all their fusty moralising, these activists have had considerable influence on the comedy industry. In launching the 2018 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Comedy Awards director Nica Burns declared that she was ‘looking forward to comedy’s future in the woke world’. Similar sentiments are routinely expressed by powerful commissioners in television comedy, which accounts for the dearth of viewpoint diversity on mainstream panel shows and televised stand-up. While there is nothing wrong with comedians choosing to advance an ideological agenda, when prominent figures in the industry are urging them to do so, the potential for genuinely innovative and subversive work is limited. The ‘woke world’ is a sanctuary for conformists, and where self-censorship is a prerequisite for commercial success, artistic expression is bound to suffer.

These developments have only come about because of a general misunderstanding of how ‘punching up’ and ‘punching down’ ought to be defined. Recently we have seen comedy in the firing line for its ‘problematic’ representations of race, with shows such as *Little Britain*, *The Mighty Boosh* and *The League of Gentlemen* removed from television streaming services. Leaving aside the question of whether or not these companies should be acting as parents in deciding what their customers should and shouldn’t watch, such gestures demonstrate a form of comedic illiteracy. When an episode of *Fawlty Towers* was temporarily removed from UKTV’s streaming site, the explanation given was that it contained ‘racial slurs’ and ‘outdated language’. The offending character was the Major, described by the show’s co-writer John Cleese as ‘an old fossil left over from decades before’. By putting offensive terms into his mouth, Cleese was quite obviously making fun of him, not promoting his views. It goes without saying that anyone who fails to grasp this basic premise probably shouldn’t be involved in the broadcasting of comedy. The episode was eventually fished out of the memory hole after a public backlash, although the offending scene is no longer extant if one watches it on BBC iPlayer. In all this hysteria, it has apparently never occurred to anyone involved that the best solution to feeling offended by a particular show is simply not to watch it.

But if punching up can be so readily misinterpreted as punching down, even by those who make their living from the creative arts, where does this leave the satirist? A few years ago I appeared on a panel in Stockholm to debate this very issue. One of the other speakers, the political satirist Aron Flam, made the point that satire cannot flourish in a society which is incapable of understanding how it functions, and certainly not when the doyens of the comedy industry are determined to ringfence their ideological allies from ridicule. It is in the nature of satire to attack the powerful, to expose the moral shortcomings of its targets. This becomes infinitely more difficult if their efforts are perceived as a form of bullying. When a cartoonist at the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* depicted Justice Minister Christiane Taubira as a monkey, commentators were quick to condemn the image as racist. The true target of the cartoon was Anne-Sophie Leclère, the Front National politician who had made the offensive comparison in the first place. Satire cannot survive if context is ignored.

To my mind, the distinction between comedy and satire has been most succinctly expressed by W. H. Auden in his introduction to Byron’s *Selected Poetry and Prose* (1966): ‘Satire is angry and optimistic – it believes that the evil it attacks can be abolished; Comedy is good-tempered and pessimistic – it believes that however much we may wish we could, we cannot change human nature and must make the best of a bad job’. Auden repeated this pithy rubric in his foreword to Angus Stewart’s poetry collection, *Sense & Inconsequence* (1972). Rather audaciously, he took the opportunity to criticise the author for describing his poems as ‘satirical’. Stewart’s little book, he insisted, was in fact ‘nonsense verse’. To take a representative example:

The Berkshire girls are big and brawny
(Unlike ’tricia who’s rather scrawny).

What-ho, boys, mount the Berkshire girls!
Cunts like caves, and tits like pearls!

If there is a satirical element to this piece, I must confess it has escaped me.

The confusions I have outlined – between high status and low status, punching up and punching down, a joke’s subject matter and its target – present a unique challenge to modern-day satirists and comedians alike. As we have seen, in the current climate even a joke about racism is likely to be interpreted as perpetuating the very prejudice it seeks to deride. This problem calls for creative solutions from comics who are willing to take the risk not to self-censor, and to find a way past the gatekeepers of an industry who are beholden to the very ideological worldview that is most in need of the satirist’s attention.

Satirists have always been risk-takers, not least because their targets so often have the power to jeopardise their livelihood, their reputation, or even their liberty. ‘The greatest enemy of authority’, wrote Hannah Arendt, ‘is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter’. Stalin never forgave the poet Osip Mandelstam for a caustic epigram which mocked his ‘cockroach whiskers’ and fingers, ‘fatty like worms’. In just two stanzas, Mandelstam had sealed his fate. He was exiled and, after years of desperate attempts to redeem Stalin’s favour, was sentenced to serve five years in a corrective labour camp for ‘anti-Soviet activity’. He died from malnutrition in the first year of his incarceration and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Even today, regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Morocco and Cambodia have *lèse-majesté* laws in place to punish those who might denigrate the king. Since he came to power, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey has relied on an obscure and rarely used law to prosecute thousands who have insulted him. Former beauty queen Merve Büyüksaraç was convicted and received a suspended sentence for a satirical poem about the president posted on Instagram. German comic Jan Böhmermann produced a music video which ridiculed Erdoğan, leading to demands from the Turkish government that he be prosecuted. One can only presume that UK prime minister Boris Johnson’s now famous limerick, in which Erdoğan is depicted as copulating with a goat, has somehow evaded his attention.

Comedy is a serious business. The romanticised view of the court jester, uniquely licensed to speak truth to power and evade the executioner’s axe, doesn’t quite do justice to the risks involved in making genuinely subversive jokes. With pressure mounting on comedians to reinforce the creed of the new puritanism, to propagandise as they play the clown, it will be interesting to see how the art form develops. For all the moral panic over ‘hate speech’, the misinterpretations of acerbic humour as ‘bullying’, and the literal-mindedness of those who fail to appreciate the inherent theatricality of stand-up, there is every reason to feel optimistic. The best comedians have rarely been inclined to work within the parameters of those in authority. Even if the comedy industry achieves its longed-for ‘woke world’, there will always be a few mischief-makers hankering for the next revolution.

Exodus

The New Normal

We have grown accustomed to hearing about the ‘new normal’, a phrase that government officials like to use to describe our changed circumstances after the advent of coronavirus. However, it could just as easily be applied to the way in which we have all become steadily resigned to the worst excesses of the Critical Social Justice movement. News stories that only five years ago would have been dismissed as asinine aberrations now recur with a quotidian certainty.

Often such stories invite our laughter rather than our despair. The headline in *British Vogue* that asked ‘Is having a baby in 2021 pure environmental vandalism?’ is one of many examples of the self-satirising nature of contemporary media outlets. Similarly, when an academic confidently states that debate is ‘an imperialist capitalist white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal technique that transforms a potential exchange of knowledge into a tool of exclusion and oppression’, many of us will now simply shrug, reconciled to the fact that such mechanical prattle now passes for scholarly thought. Such people are the most arcane of theologians, spinning their gods into existence through their orotund and empty words. If such people really are on ‘the right side of history’, we are doomed to a future in which no one will be able to communicate with clarity and verve.

We have seen how the culture war is not just a matter of competing ideologies, but competing realities. The first is the liberal model deriving from the Enlightenment, promoting human and civil rights, free speech, scientific enquiry, individualism and justice. The second maintains that truth is illusory, speech can be violence, and we are products of systems of power and privilege revolving around group identity. The paradox of this model of reality should not go unnoticed; it believes that the only truth is the one we feel as individuals – ‘lived experience’ – but at the same time it promotes a collectivist view of humankind. One of the reasons why the religion of Critical Social Justice has been so difficult to combat is precisely because it rejects the concept of reason that is so key to Enlightenment thinking. One cannot argue with someone who believes that the argument itself is an oppressive denial of his or her truth.

The culture war, as properly understood, is the attempt to destroy the progress of social liberalism in favour of a return to the politics of division. It is sustained only through an imagined dreamscape in which fascism is flourishing, which in turn justifies the aggressive demolition of a liberal system that has failed to bring about the desired utopia. While virtually nobody is denying that hatred against minority groups still exists and needs to be tackled, the new puritans see evidence of it everywhere, even in the most innocuous of places. The only solution, as far as they see it, is a wholesale cultural revolution. They are like the mad physician who would amputate a leg to cure an ingrowing toenail.

But while the powerful pygmies of Critical Social Justice are busy attacking figments of their imagination, drunk on a heady brew of outrage and self-idolatry, a counter-offensive is taking place by those of us who wish to reassert the liberal consensus that we, as a society, exodus have fought so hard to reach. This is why the very notion of a ‘culture war’ is so contentious; nobody really knows who it is they are fighting.

Let’s call the new puritans ‘Group A’ and the champions of social liberalism ‘Group B’. The latter far outnumbers the former, but the former is more powerful; perhaps Group A is armed with shotguns whereas Group B has to make do with sticks. Group A believes that Group B is actually part of Group C, a tiny army of neo-fascists that consists of a few bloated nonentities huddled together on the sidelines. Group C is delighted that Group A has declared Group B to be its allies. This artificially swells the ranks of Group C in the popular consciousness, much to the chagrin of Group B, which fundamentally opposes Group C. In short, Group A is fighting Groups B and C as though they were a single army, while Group B is fighting both Groups A and C in the knowledge that the battle will only be won once these two small extremist factions have accepted defeat and left the field for good. To make matters worse, while Group A is busy lobbing grenades at enemies both real and imagined, it is simultaneously denying that there is a battle going on at all.

If this seems confusing, that’s because it is. The culture war is one of oppositional narratives advanced by small groups of antagonists, while the majority of us are left looking on and scratching our heads. The *Guardian*, for instance, has done more than any other publication to stoke the culture war, and yet articles often appear within its pages either denying its existence or claiming that it is an invention of ‘the right’. According to a study by the Policy Institute and King’s College London, the *Guardian* was the publication that used the term ‘culture wars’ most frequently between 1993 and 2020. Owen Jones maintains that ‘a lot of what’s called “the culture war” is just younger people trying to assert their different social and moral values over older generations who run most of the media’. Yet, as I have noted, there is no majority support for the new puritanism in *any* generation, and some of its fiercest advocates are well into middle age.

Indeed, these enemies of progress are so established that they have now attained undeniable power and influence in universities, businesses and civic institutions. They have ensured that our typical manner of defeating bad ideas – through discussion and evidence-based analysis – is being pulled away from us through the construction of multiple ‘ways of knowing’ and a relentless onslaught on our language. The continual manipulation of words means that definitions are insecure and subject to sudden revision, so that one is forever doubting one’s senses. If the meanings of phrases are the direct opposite of what they imply, and definitions change from one day to the next, we are far more prone to submit to an authority who might clear up this

vexing business. Thinking is hard at the best of times, but attempting to process ideas when our means of expressing them are in continual flux is maddening. Enter the new puritans; conformists with pretensions of radicalism, crowned with haloes of their own making. Telling others what to think is their speciality.

If we are to have any chance of preserving the liberal values upon which our society depends, and which still function as our best defence against racism and other forms of intolerance, we need to find a way to navigate the binary thinking that comes with ideologically driven movements. The first step is to acknowledge common ground. In all my life I have never met a single person who would not agree with the proposition that ‘black lives matter’, so that seems as good a place to start as any. It has been many years since racism has been in any way tolerated in civilised company, one of the undeniably positive outcomes of the ‘Political Correctness’ campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s. A further point on which we can surely all agree is that racism exists and should be resisted wherever it occurs. This may seem obvious, but since any opposition to the religion of Critical Social Justice is automatically taken as a denial of the fact of racism, it is worth making the point explicitly.

Those who would deny the existence of racism, or do not agree that black lives matter, or do not accept that racism is an evil that must always be confronted, are already beyond the scope of rational adult conversation. The vast majority of the population believe in our shared values of equality and fairness, although the new puritans prefer to ignore this reality in favour of a fantasy Britain awash with unreconstructed jingoists. We saw this in the way that Brexit voters were consistently smeared as xenophobic, even though such a label could only possibly apply to a tiny minority. We saw this in the myth that those who voted Leave were nostalgic for a colonial past, a virtually non-existent mindset that was assumed to be widespread on the basis of no evidence at all. These kinds of prejudices, largely levelled against working-class people by relatively affluent commentators, in turn provoked the kind of resentment that almost certainly tipped the scales in favour of Brexit and ultimately led to the collapse of Labour’s ‘red wall’ in the 2019 general election. These outcomes were in themselves taken as proof of Britain’s inherent racism, and so we find ourselves caught in this perpetual square dance of straw men.

The rise of various ‘Antifa’ groups, and the now common tendency for social media users to describe themselves as ‘anti-fascist’, offers another case in point. Not only is fascism vanishingly rare in the United Kingdom, but you would be hard pushed to find anyone who isn’t wholeheartedly *opposed* to fascism. We are all anti-fascist, which makes Antifa’s claim to be resisting a popular tyrannous force seem about eighty years out of date. The difference is that most of us understand that pepper-spraying a Trump enthusiast, or striking a UKIP voter over the head with a bike lock, or punching gender-critical feminists, doesn’t put us in the same bracket as those who fought actual fascists at Cable Street in 1936.

The new puritans would like to think of themselves as the underdogs, brave tellers of truths in a corrupt and unequal world. But if the ideas you are advancing are endorsed by Hollywood, big tech, all major corporations, academia, the mainstream media, the United States government and the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, it’s difficult to make any great claims to radicalism. Far from fighting against the establishment, the ‘woke’ *are* the establishment.

Folk Devils

I have attempted in this book to outline the key tenets of the new puritanism and how it came to dominate our major institutions, but it would be remiss of me not to consider how we might put a stop to their regressive influence. We have seen how their various philosophies amount to a repudiation of reason and evidence-based judgement – what we might call the ‘Counter-Enlightenment’. The priestlings of Critical Social Justice offer infantile remedies to complicated problems, which is why the ideology has a tendency to destroy where it purports to heal. It only takes a few members to absorb this narcotic before an entire institution turns, largely because there are few with the courage to object to those who play the victim in order to assert their power. The dogmata of this movement are unsustainable when subjected to rational enquiry, and so any such interrogation is denied. To weaken its stranglehold on our culture, then, we must first reignite our appetite for critical thinking, freedom of speech and open debate. This is particularly important when it comes to our educational system.

As a first step, we must do our uttermost to challenge the sectarianism of the culture war. This means resisting the temptation to interpret our opponents’ motives in the least charitable manner. Most of us are trying to leave the world in a better condition than we found it; it simply comes down to a disagreement over how best this can be achieved. Even the most authoritarian impulses of the new puritans can arise from noble intentions. ‘Of all tyrannies,’ wrote C. S. Lewis, ‘a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive’, for ‘those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience’. To presuppose bad faith is to betray a certain narcissism by which one considers one’s own worldview to be the default, and any divergent opinions to be the consequence of either error or mendacity. Of course, it is always possible that someone is arguing dishonestly in order to advance an abominable cause. Even if your suspicions are aroused, it is always best to err on the side of generosity. Bad ideas will collapse under investigation irrespective of whether or not their proponents are sincere. In other words, you have nothing to lose in assuming that they are telling the truth, because if their ideas are wrong they will soon be exposed, in spite of any bad intentions that might lie beneath the surface.

When I taught courses on Critical Thinking, I would always impress upon my students from the outset that once they have resorted to throwing insults, or guessing the motives of their opponents, they have lost the argument. I encouraged them to be aware of their natural tendency to indulge in *ad hominem* attacks and fallacies. I cannot help but think that if mainstream commentators were to take a basic course of this kind, the standards of contemporary debate would be exponentially improved. The ‘appeal to motive’, a form of *ad hominem* circumstantial argument, is particularly common among the new puritans. They do not consider their detractors to be merely wrong; they see them as malevolent. It is rarely possible nowadays to read an article by those who have succumbed to this ideology without the writer at some point divining the secret intentions of his or her adversaries. I opened this book with an example of a friend turning nasty because he had attributed views to me that I do not endorse in any way. This desire to manufacture folk devils is nothing new, but it seems to have become more prevalent in recent

years.

After the election of Donald Trump, many leftists desperately sought to understand why people had not voted for their preferred candidate. It soon became clear that a nuanced discussion of the possibilities was to be rejected in favour of groundless assertions. For instance, cultural commentator Laurie Penny decided that Trump won because of ‘white resentment’ born of a frustration that ‘women, migrants and people of colour no longer seem to know their proper place’. When Trump voters express concern for ‘ordinary people’, Penny tells us, ‘they mean white people’. Few would be foolish enough to deny that there are many individuals whose politics are motivated by prejudice, but this kind of blanket assessment of such a broad contingent of the electorate is hardly a productive approach. Nor is this kind of airy postulation ever likely to be accurate.

Whenever I read remarks of this kind, I am always struck by the sheer sense of certitude on display. This sort of rigidity is inevitable when critical thinking is abandoned. To close oneself off to the possibility of alternative opinions, and only to see the world through the lens of confirmation bias, is a form of intellectual death. It is always worth remembering the uncomfortable truth that, to borrow the words of novelist Philip Roth, ‘our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong’. We live, as George Orwell put it, in a state of ‘star-like isolation’. Empathy is our attempt to make connections against terrible odds, without which humanity flounders.

Similar assumptions were made by celebrities and other public figures after the Conservative victory in the 2019 United Kingdom general election. ‘Turns out we’re a country of racists’, wrote the actor John Hannah after the results of the exit poll were announced. This was ‘a victory of the old over the young, racists over people of colour’, tweeted journalist Paul Mason. Television presenter Terry Christian took to Twitter to ask which area was ‘the biggest poorest shithole in the north that has made itself look the stupidest by voting for the tories and brexit’. Singer Lily Allen said the Conservative triumph was evidence of ‘this country’s deep-rooted racism and misogyny’. There was even a comedy club in London that posted a statement that the United Kingdom is ‘literally Hitler now’ and that Tory voters were no longer welcome to perform at their shows. Such mischaracterisations might provide balm for the wounds of defeat, but they were only ever likely to exacerbate the very antipathy that led to the result in the first place. As politics becomes more polarised, each side is resorting to increasingly distorted caricatures of the other. It’s like a pair of duellists retreating indefinitely until they are no more than blurs on the horizon.

This leaves us in a conundrum. More than ever, we are in need of frank discussion about the issues that matter most. But with figures on all sides of the political spectrum so determined to double down on their alienating *ad hominem* strategies, the possibility of debate is seriously curtailed. The rapper Joyner Lucas addressed this problem in his viral hit ‘I’m Not Racist’, which presents two men – one white, one black – candidly airing their grievances. One commentator found the conceit ‘exhausting’, claiming that ‘the notion that social divisions [can] be reconciled through “honest” conversation’ is ‘hopelessly outdated’. God help us if he’s right.

It should go without saying that nobody has ever been persuaded to alter their convictions by having them misrepresented or insulted. For all that we might be tempted to assume the worst of those with whom we disagree, we will never win anyone over if we have already decided that their very opposition is a moral flaw. I do not disbelieve these prominent voices on the left when they tell us how frustrated they are at what they perceive to be the rise of the far right in mainstream politics. I also have little doubt that their intentions are good, even if their conclusions are bad. But if they are serious about changing minds, it would serve them well to try arguing against their opponents’ actual viewpoints rather than those they imagine them to hold. By maligning others from the outset, they undermine their own cause.

Consider the example of Jordan Peterson. As a public figure, there are two versions of the man. The first is a professor of psychology with a particular interest in religious and ideological belief systems. Many of his lectures on self-improvement have been circulated via YouTube, and his measured and compassionate approach has enabled him to cultivate a loyal following. The second Jordan Peterson is a notorious firebrand of the alt-right. He is a transphobic provocateur whose lectures amount to little more than hate speech. Of these two Jordan Petersons, only the first actually exists.

Presenter Cathy Newman’s now famous interview for *Channel 4 News* exemplified this problem. Her continual misrepresentation of Peterson’s position ultimately forced him to make an objection. ‘You’re not listening’, he said, ‘you’re just projecting’. A similar accusation could be made of those employees at the Canadian branch of Penguin Random House, who called for Peterson’s book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (2021), to be cancelled. After multiple complaints were filed, they confronted their management at a meeting in which some burst into tears and shared their stories of how the evil Professor Peterson had caused such emotional havoc in their lives due to his ‘problematic’ opinions. According to a report in *Vice*, ‘one co-worker discussed how Peterson had radicalised their father and another talked about how publishing the book will negatively affect their non-binary friend’. In the days following the announcement of the book, it was widely denounced on social media for its hateful content. This was quite a feat of collective fancy, given that nobody had read it yet.

These viperous attacks on Peterson can only be described as a kind of hysteria. He has been smeared as a ‘Nazi apologist’ and a ‘fascist’ by people whose familiarity with Peterson’s work amounts to a few bad-faith articles and a smattering of quotations taken out of context. He has routinely been called ‘far right’, even though the core tenets of the actual far right – a sense of racial or national superiority, support for authoritarianism and the worship of the state – represent the polar opposite of Peterson’s worldview. Many critics have attempted to broaden the traditional definition of the ‘far right’ – incorporating cultural conservatism, a belief in the importance of personal responsibility and an awareness of biological sex differences – so that it can then be applied to Peterson. This is the equivalent of attaching plastic horns to a bulldog so that you can call it a monster.

Peterson’s key thesis is that life is unbearable without a sense of purpose, and that this can largely be achieved through taking charge of one’s life. He believes that civilisations collapse without structure, which is why children ought to be socialised in accordance with the ethical parameters we set for ourselves. He maintains that science and technology have improved our lives, but do not satisfy our need for meaning. This is why his work focuses on the stories that recur in ancient traditions and religious beliefs. There is wisdom in these narratives, he argues, even if their supernatural elements have no basis in reality. Yet this bears little relation to how he was described by one junior employee at Penguin Random House who said that Peterson is

'an icon of hate speech and transphobia' and 'an icon of white supremacy, regardless of the content of his book'. When pushed for further detail, such people invariably claim the power to divine Peterson's private feelings, but simply declaring that your ideological opponents are harbouring malevolent intentions is only evidence of your desire that they should.

Even when dealing with genuinely controversial figures, the assumption of fascism is generally counter-productive. When the Oxford Union extended an invitation to Donald Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, there was heavy criticism in the media. He is an undeniably polarising figure; one writer for the *Washington Post* summarised his reputation as that of 'a megalomaniacal mastermind practiced in the dark arts of political subterfuge and neo-fascist provocation'. When asked to defend Bannon's invitation, the president of the union, Stephen Horvath, explained that it 'is only through listening to the opinions of others that we can fully understand those opinions'. This is not only a reasonable and measured response, it also has the advantage of being true.

In an article for the *Guardian*, Fred Dimbleby attacked the union for its decision, and in doing so exemplified one of the most troubling aspects of the censorial mindset. 'So why has the Oxford Union invited him?', he asked, a somewhat redundant question given that he had already quoted Horvath's answer. But Dimbleby apparently knows the ghastly truth: 'It's for the excitement. Leaders of the union are titillated by the idea of having someone like Bannon speak at their institution.' Speculation would be one thing, but Dimbleby is another one of those ubiquitous telepaths whose insight into the motives of his opponents is reflected in the conviction of his prose. Not only does he claim to have a sixth sense when it comes to the minds of the Oxford Union's standing committee, he also knows for sure that Bannon is a fascist. As far as I am aware, Bannon has never expressed support for imperialism, the violent suppression of political opposition, a white ethno-state, or a paramilitary populist coup. Bannon may be a right-wing nationalist with whom I share little common ground, but I also know that to brand him a fascist would be to open myself up to accusations of historical illiteracy.

The temptation to intuit motive is not solely a feature of left-wing discourse, of course, but here it is far more common. It is partly a remnant of the deconstructive approach propounded by Jacques Derrida, with its focus on unconscious elements that manifest in any given text. Many on the left display an unfortunate – and frankly childish – tendency to dismiss those on the right as evil, whereas right-wing dismissals of leftist ideas usually come down to a suspicion that they are naïve, deluded, or a combination of the two. Neither prejudice is helpful, but one is certainly more pernicious than the other.

After the Brexit debate was misrepresented as a conflict between left and right – in spite of the obvious point that few genuine socialists would have supported a pro-corporate trading bloc with capitalism at the heart of its constitution – we saw how many self-proclaimed 'leftists' who voted to remain in the European Union sought to monster the opposing side. A broad poll analysis by the Centre for Social Investigation at the London School of Economics found that those who voted Leave in the EU referendum were 'better at characterising Remainers' reasons than vice versa – something which may be linked to progressives' greater tendency to disengage from their political opponents'. And a YouGov survey found that 41 per cent of Labour voters and 40 per cent of Remain voters judge those who vote differently in a negative light, as compared to 19 per cent of Conservative voters and 13 per cent of Leave voters. Depressing as these findings may be, they come as little surprise.

We are left with a simple but crucial question: how can we argue with those who are incapable of argumentation? This is a dilemma I have been grappling with for quite some time. The new puritans are unable or unwilling to engage in debate without assuming bad faith on the part of their opponents; many of them consider dialogue to be a tool of the privileged to retain their privilege. Mudslinging is now a standard substitute for rebuttal, and anecdotal evidence is taken as gospel. But for those of us who still believe in the power of persuasion and the capacity of human beings to keep an open mind, there is a moral duty to enter into dialogue with our critics. We do so in order that we might see our own certainties challenged, on the understanding that we are often mistaken. But when our detractors are unable or unwilling to leave aside their prejudices, are convinced of their own infallibility, and perceive any dissent as a signifier of villainy, how is this duty to be undertaken? Under such circumstances, argument is no longer feasible. It's like a boxer adhering to the Queensberry Rules only to find that his challenger has brought a machine gun into the ring.

By way of example, consider what happened in May 2019 when I entered into a Twitter discussion with a *Guardian* columnist. I had made the point that there were a number of prominent writers for her publication who would often claim to be victims of oppression in spite of their independently wealthy origins. I was criticising the way in which the word 'oppression' was commonly misused, and suggesting that a privately educated millionaire did not qualify. This columnist claimed that I was lying and, when I cited a number of specific examples which proved my case, she replied by saying: 'Thanks for naming the individual women you loathe. I suspected you were a misogynist'. It would have been perfectly possible for her to have disagreed with my premise, and to have countered by arguing that the concept of 'oppression' could be extended to the super-rich. This, after all, is the commonly held view of intersectionalists, who so often emphasise tokenistic identity politics over economic inequality. Instead, when faced with the very evidence she had requested, her instinct was to resort to baseless smears.

What is one to do in the face of such infantile behaviour? How can a dialogue possibly proceed any further when one party is willing to make such unpleasant and unsubstantiated assumptions about the other? There are many who have reached the conclusion that, in the midst of this culture war, the liberal approach no longer has any utility. Many of us who oppose the intolerance of culture warriors have abandoned all belief in the art of persuasion, and would rather embrace the echo chamber into which we have been herded. As someone who is continually attempting to initiate honest discussions with the new puritans, I find it exasperating when they invariably decline. I suppose when one is so utterly convinced of one's flawlessness, what is there to discuss?

It comes down to the difference between those who wish to be combatants in the culture war and those who, like me, wish to see it come to an end. I have come to the conclusion that in order to reinvigorate social liberalism we need to be more selective. There is little point in attempting to reason with zealots who have abandoned reason in favour of insults and mindless platitudes, and who only assume the worst of anyone who dares to disagree. This is why I always block those on social media who cast insults or insist on deliberate misconstructions of my words. We make ourselves foolish by wasting our time on the

congenitally intransigent. As Thomas Paine put it: ‘To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, and whose philosophy consists in holding humanity in contempt, is like administering medicine to the dead, or endeavouring to convert an atheist by scripture’.

That said, we should be keen to engage with those who take issue with our viewpoints in the spirit of generosity. It is only a handful of ideologues who are no longer open to persuasion, even though many of them unfortunately now occupy positions of cultural power. Nor should we expect an easy ride from those who take a different view. Conflict is the palpitating heart of politics. As Bernard Crick once argued, political discourse is a form of conflict resolution, an answer to ‘the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence or coercion’. Although human instinct does not lend itself readily to diplomacy, somewhere between fight and flight there is the impulse for compromise. It may not come easily when passions are inflamed, but there is nothing shameful in striving, and occasionally failing, to realise an ideal.

Civil discussion is a skill like any other; it requires a grounding in the basics. How do we retain friendships in the face of seemingly irreconcilable differences? How do we begin to reinstate the value of discourse when so many prominent figures in the media and the political commentariat are so adamant that their opponents’ views are outside the Overton window? In this age of unreason, we must find a way to learn again how to talk to each other.

First and foremost, we need to consider what we are arguing for. Do we really expect our intervention to prompt some kind of Damascene conversion? Is our intention to persuade or to demean? In their book, *How to Have Impossible Conversations* (2019), Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay advocate a return to the Socratic method, a drawing out of ideas through the dialectical process. Too often we are guilty of treating an argument as an opportunity to enhance our status, to defeat our rival, or to convey a message, when we ought to be listening. Boghossian and Lindsay also caution against the tendency to intuit motive: ‘If you must make an assumption about your partner’s intentions, make only one: their intentions are better than you think’. This has become a thorny proposition, because many now consider their politics to be not so much a set of values but a kind of identity in and of itself. Little wonder, then, that a study in *Scientific Reports* in 2016 found that most people perceive challenges to their political beliefs to be personal attacks. In Carol Hanisch’s famous 1969 essay she declared that ‘the personal is political’. Now, it seems, the political is personal.

To induce the new puritans into opening their minds to other perspectives seems like an impossible task, because to make any concessions would destabilise the core of their sense of purpose. At this point it feels as though it is not so much persuasion that is required as deradicalisation. I am reminded of Edmund Gosse’s autobiography *Father and Son* (1907), in which he recounts how his father, the naturalist Philip Gosse, was forced to confront the ways in which the emerging facts of evolutionary science were contradicting his literal belief in holy scripture. His solution was elegantly expressed in his book, *Omphalos* (1857), in which he argued that the creator had left deliberate markings on the Earth to suggest that it was much older than it was. After all, the first trees in the Garden of Eden would have had growth rings and yet were brand new. This would account for the existence of seemingly ancient fossils, as well as Adam’s *omphalos*, the Greek word for ‘navel’, which was suggestive of a mother who did not exist.

There is something profoundly moving about Philip Gosse’s need to incorporate these fresh scientific discoveries into the purview of his Christian faith. This is what is known as an ‘identity quake’, one so seismic that it could easily have driven him to despair. *Omphalos* was widely ridiculed at the time, but I cannot help but sympathise with his efforts, and the sheer poeticism of his vision. For anyone who wishes to understand the emotional impact of identity quakes, Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* is a good place to start.

That political affiliation has become a form of personal identity presents difficulties for those of us who still believe in the importance of discussion and debate. Leaving aside the obvious merits of civility for its own sake, the hostile approach is always counter-productive in purely strategic terms. It is difficult to maintain respect for an interlocutor while he’s shouting and spitting bile. We argue because we value the opinions of others and seek to interrogate our own certainties. We argue because by doing so we refine our propositions and our ability to persuade. Above all, we argue because we know that there is a kernel of truth in every viewpoint.

There’s a moment in *Father and Son* in which the young Edmund Gosse kneels and prays to a chair in order to test whether God would react to such flagrant idolatry. Nothing happens, and he is left questioning whether God even exists. For a child raised in the evangelical traditions of the Plymouth Brethren, this was no small matter. We all need to be willing to challenge our most treasured convictions, and to be empathetic when we challenge those of others. It isn’t easy to abandon or modify one’s belief system, especially when it has become so interlinked with notions of personal identity. Changing minds is necessary, but it is never painless.

With this in mind, it would be premature to jettison the liberal approach. The armies of the unpersuaded are far more abundant than the new puritans would have us believe. If liberalism is to have any hope of prevailing, we should at least make an effort to recruit them to our cause. We somehow need to initiate an exodus from this stifling and self-destructive ideology that has captured the Western world. Kant described the Enlightenment as ‘man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity’, but how are we to reassert its values when so many are determined not to grow up?

Critical Thinking

Many years ago I gave a talk at the London Metropolitan Archives in which I outlined my reasons for rejecting the then fashionable theory of social constructionism in relation to human sexuality. In the coffee break that followed, I was approached by a lesbian activist, who claimed to have chosen her orientation as a means to oppose the patriarchy. She demanded to know why I would not accept that sexuality had no biological basis, even though I had spent the best part of an hour answering this very question. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘but I’ve already explained why I don’t agree with you’. ‘But why won’t you agree?’ she shouted in response. ‘Why?’

Primary school teachers are familiar with such frustrated pleas. The anger of children is so often connected with incomprehension, a sense of injustice, or both. When it persists into adulthood it represents a failure of socialisation. We frequently hear talk of our degraded political discourse – and there is some truth to that – but really we are dealing with mass infantilism. Its impact is evident wherever one cares to look: online, in the media, even in Parliament. Argumentation is so often reduced to a matter of tribal loyalty; whether one is right or wrong becomes secondary to the satisfaction of one's ego through the submission of an opponent. This is not, as some imagine, simply a consequence of the ubiquity of social media, but rather a general failure over a number of years to instil critical thinking at every level of our educational institutions.

To be a freethinker has little to do with mastery of rhetoric and everything to do with introspection. It is all very well engaging in a debate in order to refine our persuasive skills, but it is a futile exercise unless we can entertain the possibility that we might be wrong. In Richard Dawkins's book, *The God Delusion* (2006), he relates an anecdote about his time as an undergraduate at Oxford. A visiting academic from America gave a talk on the Golgi apparatus, a microscopic organelle found in plant and animal cells, and in doing so provided incontrovertible evidence of its existence. An elderly member of the Zoology Department, who had asserted for many years that the Golgi apparatus was a myth, was present at the lecture. Dawkins relates how, as the speaker drew to a close, 'The old man strode to the front of the hall, shook the American by the hand and said – with passion – "My dear fellow, I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these fifteen years." We clapped our hands red'.

This is the ideal that so few embody, particularly when it comes to the unexamined tenets of political ideology. We often see examples of media commentators or politicians being discredited in interviews or discussions, but how often do we see them concede their errors, even when they are exposed beyond doubt? There is a very good reason why the sociologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer opened his *First Principles* (1862) by asserting that there exists 'a soul of truth in things erroneous'; but such concessions can only be made by those who are able to prioritise being right over being seen to be right. Too many are seemingly determined to turn difficult arguments into zero-sum games in which to give any ground whatsoever is to automatically surrender it to an opponent.

The discipline of critical thinking invites us to consider the origins of our knowledge and convictions. A man may speak with the certainty of an Old Testament prophet, but has he reached his conclusions for himself? Or is he a mere resurrectionist, plundering his bookshelves for the leather-bound corpses of other people's ideas? Hazlitt expounded at length on how sophistry might be mistaken for critical faculties, noting that the man who sees only one half of a subject may still be able to express it fluently. 'You might as well ask the paralytic to leap from his chair and throw away his crutch,' he wrote, 'as expect the learned reader to throw down his book and think for himself. He clings to it for his intellectual support; and his dread of being left to himself is like the horror of a vacuum'.

The natural human instinct for confirmation bias presents a further problem, one especially prominent among ideologues. Anything can be taken to bolster one's position so long as it is perceived through the lens of pre-judgment. We can see this most notably in the proponents of Critical Social Justice, who start from the premise that unequal outcomes – disparities in average earnings between men and women, for instance – are evidence of structural inequalities in society. They are beginning with the conclusion and working backwards, mistaking their own arguments for proof.

Worse still, such an approach often correlates with a distinctly moralistic standpoint. Many of the most abusive individuals on social media cannot recognise their behaviour for what it is because they have cast themselves in the role of the virtuous. If we are morally good, the logic goes, it must be assumed that our detractors are motivated by evil and we are therefore relieved of the obligation to treat them as human beings. What they lack in empathy they make up in their capacity for invective.

Again, we must be alert to the danger of cheapening argumentation and analysis to the mere satisfaction of ego. One of the reasons why disagreements on social media tend towards the bellicose is that the forum is public. Where there is an audience, there is always the risk that critical thinking will be subordinated to the performative desire for victory or the humiliation of a rival. In these circumstances, complexities that require a nuanced approach are refashioned into misleading binaries, and opponents are mischaracterised out of all recognition so that people effectively end up arguing with spectres of their imagination. The Socratic method, by contrast, urges us to see disputation as essentially cooperative. This is the ideal that should be embedded into our national curricula. Children need to be taught that there are few instances in which serious discussions can be simplified to a matter of right or wrong, and fewer still in which one person's rightness should be taken as proof of another's wrongness. In the lexicon of Critical Thinking, this is called the fallacy of 'affirming a disjunct'; that is to say, 'either you are right or I am right, which means that if you are wrong I must be right'. One cannot think critically in such reductionist terms.

To attempt seriously to understand an alternative worldview involves, as Bertrand Russell put it, 'some effort of thought, and most people would die sooner than think'. In the study of psychology this is termed the 'cognitive miser' model, which acknowledges that most human brains will favour the easiest solution to any given problem. These mental shortcuts – known as heuristics – are hardwired into us, which is why being told what to think is more pleasurable than thinking for ourselves. I remember an English lesson in which I had initiated a discussion with my students about the representation of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a topic that routinely comes up in exams. I wanted to know what they thought, and why. One student was sufficiently bold to ask: 'Can't you just tell us what we need to write to get the highest marks?'

This was not the fault of the student; there has been a trend in recent years, most likely influenced by the pressures of league tables, for schools to engage in 'spoon-feeding'. Schemes of work and assessment criteria are made readily available to the pupils so that they can systematically hit the necessary targets in order to elevate their grades. The notion of education for education's sake no longer carries any weight. I have even seen talented pupils marked down by moderators for an excess of individuality in their answers. In such circumstances, even a subject like English Literature can be reduced to a kind of memory test in which essays are regurgitated by rote.

It is hardly surprising, then, that pupils who opt for Critical Thinking courses at GCSE or A-level often perceive it to be a light option, a means to enhance the *curriculum vitae* without too much exertion. Courses are generally divided into Problem Solving and Critical Thinking, the former concerned with processing and interpreting data, and the latter covering the

fundamentals of analysis and argumentation. Pupils learn about common fallacies such as the *ad hominem* (personal attack), *tu quoque* (counter-attack) and *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (mistaking correlation for causality), along with others derived from Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*. The Latin may be off-putting, but in truth these are simple ideas which are readily digestible. If one were to discount arguments in which these fallacies were committed, virtually all online disputes would disappear.

That said, the existence of Critical Thinking as an academic subject in its own right might not be the best way to achieve this. As the psychologist Daniel T. Willingham has argued, cognitive abilities are redundant without secure contextual knowledge. Critical thinking is already embedded into any pedagogical practice that focuses on how to think rather than what to think. The increased influence of the new puritans in education presents a problem in this regard, given that they are particularly hostile to divergent viewpoints. Any institution which becomes ideologically driven is unlikely to successfully foster critical thinking, and this is particularly the case when teachers are at times expected to proselytise in accordance with fashionable identity politics.

The depoliticisation of schools is just the first step. Critical thinking requires humility; this involves not just the ability to admit that one might be wrong, but also to recognise that an uninformed opinion is worthless, however stridently expressed. Interpretative skills are key, but only when developed on a secure foundation of subject-specific knowledge. This is the basis for Camille Paglia's view that art history should be built into the national curriculum from primary school level. In her book, *Glittering Images* (2012), Paglia explains that children require 'a historical framework of objective knowledge about art', rather than merely treating art as 'therapeutic praxis' to 'unleash children's hidden creativity'. Potato prints and zigzag scissors have their place, but we mustn't forget about the textbooks.

When I was a part-time English teacher at a private secondary school for girls in London, one of my favourite exercises for the younger pupils was to ask them to study a photograph of a well-known work of art for five minutes without speaking, after which time they would share their observations with the rest of the class. So, for instance, I would give them each a copy of Paul Delaroche's 'Les Enfants d'Edouard' (1831), which depicts the two nephews of Richard III in their chamber in the Tower of London just prior to their murder. My pupils knew nothing of the historical context, but after minutes of silent consideration were able to pick out details – the ominous shadows under the door, the dog alerted to the assassins' footfall, how the older boy stares out at us with a sense of resignation – and offer some personal reflections on their cumulative impact. To create, one must first learn how to interpret.

The kind of humility fostered in the appreciation of great art could act as a corrective to the rise of narcissism and decline of empathy that psychologists have observed over the past thirty years. According to the National Institutes of Health, millennials are three times more likely to suffer from narcissistic personality disorder than those of the baby boomer generation. Writers such as Peter Whittle, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett have traced the rise of hyper-individualism in Western culture. One particular study revealed that in 1950 only 12 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement 'I am a very important person'. By 1990, this figure had risen to 80 per cent and the trajectory shows no signs of stopping. One of the ways in which this trend manifests itself is the now common tendency for arguments to deteriorate into accusations of dishonesty. After all, it takes an extreme form of egotism to assume that the only possible explanation for an alternative point of view is that one's opponent must be lying. In order to think critically, we cannot be in the business of simply assessing conclusions on the basis of whether or not they accord with our own.

An education underpinned by critical thinking is the very bedrock of civilisation, the means by which chaos is tamed into order. Tribalism, mudslinging, the inability to critique one's own position: these are the telltale markers of the boorish and the hidebound. A society is ill-served by a generation of adults who have not been educated beyond the solipsistic impulses of childhood. At a time when so many are lamenting the degradation of public discourse, a conversation about how best to incorporate critical thinking into our schools is long overdue. Our civilisation might just depend on it.

Epilogue

Susanna Martin's laughter was a clarion of reason echoing through the court. One can only imagine how the villagers reacted to this little act of defiance from the accused. To see these poor afflicted girls, writhing and wailing, openly mocked in a court of law by their victimiser was too much for the magistrates to bear. Perhaps it was Martin's laughter that sealed her fate.

Salem had been drawn into a pseudo-reality that few dared to question. With every absurdity accepted by the good people of the village, what else could Martin do but laugh? She had attempted the rational approach to no avail. Why was it, she reasoned, that the girls' claims to have seen various disembodied spectral images of villagers were taken as proof of their guilt? As she said to the judges: 'He that appeared in the shape of Samuel, a glorified saint, may appear in anyone's shape'. By invoking the biblical story of the Witch of Endor, she was reminding them that the devil can take any form he pleases, including those of the faithful. Her logic was impeccable, and so it had to be ignored so that the illusion could be sustained. The power of the accusers was absolute. As John Proctor says in *The Crucible*, 'the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom', safe in the knowledge that those who cross them will be the next to be condemned.

Although Susanna Martin did not escape the hangman's noose, her laughter may have sown the seeds of doubt in the minds of her fellow villagers. The new puritans also deserve to be laughed out of existence; Critical Social Justice is every bit as mirthless as the Christianity it has usurped. But to mock its high priests is to make an enemy of martinet who will happily lie and smear and bully their way to victory. For all that, the escape routes from hysteria are available, should we wish to take them.

This is no easy feat. Many who have found themselves on the receiving end of 'cancel culture' have been helpless to prevent the obliteration of their reputations and careers. Those who have been first to challenge the false reality promoted by the new puritans have paid a considerable price, and others will continue to do so. But there will come a point at which the numbers are too great to be ignored. To uphold liberal values has become a risky endeavour, but it is only the silence of the majority that makes it so. Even after his experiences in the Soviet gulags, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was able to reflect on the possibility that, had more people spoken out, the atrocities might have been avoided. 'So why did I keep silent?' he asks. 'Every man always has handy a dozen glib little reasons why he is right not to sacrifice himself.'

Twenty innocent people lost their lives in the Salem witch hunts, but by the end of 1692 this short-lived spate of madness was almost at an end. Too many prominent citizens had been accused, and the cost of sustaining the fantasy for those in power became too great. Arguably, the process began when some of the girls accused the Reverend Samuel Willard, a highly respected minister of the Old South Church of Boston, possibly due to his known scepticism about the admissibility of 'spectral evidence'. As one who had adjured caution against taking the word of the accusers as confirmation of another's guilt, he represented a direct threat to the girls and their credibility. However, by 'crying out' on such an esteemed figure as Willard, the acting president of Harvard College, no less, the accusers had made a grave error.

Faced with such audacity, the judges were surely jolted back into the real world, if only momentarily. They gently corrected the girls, assuring them that they must have made a mistake. Perhaps they had confused the Reverend Samuel Willard with Constable John Willard, who was already in prison awaiting execution for witchcraft? But if the girls were fallible, and if the identities of their tormentors could be so easily confused, what was the implication for those who had already been convicted?

Nor was Willard the only example of this kind. When judge Jonathan Corwin's mother-in-law was repeatedly implicated, no arrests were carried out. Nor was any action taken when the wife of William Phips, the colony's governor, was identified as a witch. The most telling example was when the girls 'cried out' on an esteemed gentleman in Andover, who promptly issued a writ 'to arrest these accusers in one thousand pound action of defamation'. Threatened with legal consequences by a man who had the wherewithal to carry it through, the accusers quickly turned their attention elsewhere. If God was indeed on their side, it would seem they found the forces of Mammon more intimidating.

Could it be, then, that many of the accusers, magistrates, and ministers knew that they were complicit in a mass delusion? How else might they explain the sudden silence of the accusers when threatened with a lawsuit? Had they been bewitched only temporarily? Or could it be that the Prince of Darkness, the Arch-Fiend, Hell's Dread Emperor, the Antagonist of Heaven, the Infernal Serpent whose mighty form recalled the Titans who warred on Jove, the False Dissembler who erected Pandemonium upon the burning marl, would scurry away at the slightest whiff of litigation? One suspects that the magistrates and ministers of Salem had succumbed to what the economist Timur Kurian calls 'preference falsification', by which the opinions one expresses are more closely aligned to societal expectations than authentic feelings. If so, then those in authority were only partially committed to the make-believe world they had helped to sustain.

All the convictions had come about due to a reliance on 'spectral evidence'; without the visions of the girls there was nothing left to justify the verdicts. It was the girls' 'lived experience' that damned the accused, and anyone who expressed scepticism was inviting the spotlight of suspicion to fall upon them. Until, that is, Joseph Dudley – deputy governor of Massachusetts – drew up a list of eight questions concerning the witchcraft trials and sent them to some of the most prominent ministers in the colony. He had asked whether spectral evidence could be trusted. 'By no means!' came the response.

Once these fresh standards were applied, all ongoing prosecutions for malefic witchcraft instantaneously collapsed. The magistrates had assumed that Satan could not mimic the form of an innocent person, and so the 'shapes' that visited the children

at night must have been authentic. Susanna Martin's reference to the Witch of Endor in her trial had prompted some of the villagers to reconsider the accusers' testimonies, but now her view had been confirmed by some of the most reputable clergymen in the country. This was the tipping point. The judges had been wrong, and innocent men and women had paid the price.

We find ourselves in a similar position with the culture warriors of the present day. While their power often makes it seem as though they represent the consensus, their views have never been shared by the cowed majority. The new puritans, in other words, rely on our complicity to keep us as their marionettes, but cutting the strings would doubtless conduce to a healthier society. Self-censorship is always a choice, even when the consequences for speaking our minds can be dire. The story of Salem can be considered a microcosm of a culture that is learning to draw itself out of a collective delusion. The first to speak out are invariably the casualties, but their sacrifice lessens the risk for those who follow. Ultimately, even those who are most responsible for perpetuating the fantasy come to their senses. With any luck, it will be same with the new puritanism.

It is my wish, in other words, that within a generation this book will be obsolete. The few who remain with any interest in perusing these pages will, I hope, smile and shake their heads at the bubble of absurdities that enveloped us in the first few decades of the millennium. They will vaguely recall those outlandish years when verifiable truths were ignored or denied, when a few powerful cliques attempted to sabotage our educational and political systems, and when we were all expected to parrot the same shibboleths to appease this obnoxious elite. And to think, they might reflect, authors wasted their time writing whole books about such nonsense, only to see it dissipate like every other ephemeral trend. Did they really think these unhappy few could reset the clock to Year Zero, that they might raze our civilisation to a heap of broken images?

While liberals call for progress, the new puritans call for change. The distinction is worth noting. I am optimistic that social liberalism will win out; the alternative is too grim to contemplate. Of course, I do not discount the possibility that the damage is irreparable, but the liberal project has done more to promote equality and freedom than any other in human history. It would surely be unwise to allow it to be derailed without a fight. Solzhenitsyn's writings remind us that it is worth speaking out even in the midst of hopelessness, not least so that we can say we made the attempt. Wasn't it Saint Denis who carried his head for many miles after it was severed from his body? I admire that kind of tenacity.

Our challenge lies in restoring the need for nuance, but this will not be easy when so many of the new puritans cannot see that objections to their creed are rooted in liberal values. Where we hear reason and dispute, they hear the barking of Satan's hordes. Of course, this in itself is overly simplistic. For all the collectivism and pigeonholing of human experience that we see from the high priests of Critical Social Justice, those who have succumbed to these new orthodoxies cannot be dismissed as a monolithic group, incapable of individual thoughts and responses. Like any congregation, some have been wholly transfixed by the preacher's words, while others retain some reservations. The most militant and doctrinaire are not representative; they are merely those whose voices reverberate with greater force. It is in the lacunae of doubt that reason can find a way to penetrate, even when widespread institutional capture has generated the illusion of a society that has lost its mind.

In all of this, we need to remember why we were dragged into this culture war in the first place, and to communicate the key points with clarity and civility. To oppose the new puritans is to be concerned about an inherently divisive ideology whose natural terminus is segregation according to race, gender and sexuality. It is to be concerned about a worldview based on the faith of intersectionality, which pits minority groups against each other in ever-more elaborate hierarchies of 'privilege'. It is to be concerned about how many of those who believe themselves to be 'on the right side of history' are increasingly intolerant of viewpoints that do not precisely match their own, and have no compunction about bullying, demonising and threatening those who step out of line. It is to be concerned about those who claim the power to intuit the secret motives of others, who interpret their detractors' words in the most uncharitable possible way, and who consider all forms of dissent as an expression of evil. It is to be concerned about the way in which terms such as 'racist', 'white supremacist', 'homophobe', 'transphobe', 'fascist' and 'Nazi' have been rendered virtually meaningless through continual misapplication, and how even liberals and left-wingers are now routinely mischaracterised as 'far right' for the slightest point of disagreement. In short, it is to resist the ongoing infantilism of public discourse.

It is always possible, of course, that the new puritanism will self-destruct. I have pointed out that their nature is cannibalistic, and with every progressive figure they assail, they further alienate the doubters within their clan. When activists turned on the poet Kate Clanchy, whose progressive credentials could not be better established, many were awoken to their essentially destructive worldview. Her award-winning book *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* (2019) led to accusations of racism and ableism for some of the depictions of minorities. Those described in the book were quick to defend Clanchy, asserting her 'unequivocal care and support' for them. As usual, the new puritans had claimed to be offended on other people's behalf, and the 'victims' were having none of it.

After Clanchy agreed to rewrite the book following consultation with 'sensitivity readers', there were further objections. A spokesperson from Picador, the imprint of Pan Macmillan which had published Clanchy's book, issued a statement that included a future commitment to recognise his 'privileged position as a white middle-class gatekeeper'. As Sonia Sodha noted in the *Observer*, this very much 'read like a hostage note'. As a writer with a high profile who has supported young people from marginalised communities, Clanchy seems like the least likely target for excommunication. To an extent, the move has backfired. Her case is one of many which has prompted those normally sympathetic to the new puritans and their various causes to think again. For all their posturing as guardians of public morality, such activists have been exposed as both fallible and cruel. Increasingly, their followers are beginning to understand that such hypocrisy fatally undermines their expectations of moral purity.

These occasional struggle sessions might have the desired impact of dissuading other would-be heretics from straying from the approved course, but they also serve as a reminder that to be one of the faithful is no guarantee of protection. The new puritans are particularly severe in their treatment of apostates, or of those within their ranks who fail to uphold their impossible standards. The girls of Salem achieved fame and power through their roles as the persecuted saviours of the community, but they also created what Marion L. Starkey describes as 'a little lifeless vacuum about them wherever they moved'. Few would

dare to associate with them either during or after the trial, and once the mania had subsided they were no longer trusted by their peers. At time of writing, the new puritans are very possibly at the apotheosis of their power, but who would seek them out as friends? They can only associate with the like-minded because they are so feared, which is one reason why the ‘echo chamber’ effect is self-perpetuating. In the absence of those who would challenge their beliefs in any way, they must always relapse into their joyless fantasy. As Lady Caroline Lamb said of Byron, they are ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’.

In November of 1692, a soldier in the city of Gloucester in Massachusetts became convinced that his sister had fallen under the influence of witches. The girls from Salem were duly called to verify the presence of Satan, but on their journey something unexpected occurred. As they crossed the Ipswich Bridge they passed by an elderly woman. Almost by instinct, the girls broke into convulsions and cried out their usual accusations of sorcery. But the passers-by simply ignored them, or moved away. Without an audience to validate their cries, the girls had little choice but to fall silent and resume their journey. After this remarkable event, it is said that the girls made no further accusations.

This is our Ipswich Bridge moment. While those in authority continue to heed the cries of the new puritans, our society will continue to be dominated by the witches of their imaginations. If we continue to indulge them, we make ourselves party to their collective delusions. Starkey rightly observes that the half-truth is the most dangerous of falsehoods, and while we are right to be alert to the ongoing injustices in society, we would be unwise to give too much credit to those who exaggerate them for their own ends.

As the new puritans gain momentum, and their power over us increases, it will become apparent that to ignore them will only guarantee their ongoing dominance. They will continue to deny biological reality and threaten you if you will not acquiesce. They will tell you that the kind of colour blindness advanced by Martin Luther King is a form of racism, rather than an exquisite goal worth pursuing. They will bully people in the name of compassion, promote division and call it progressive, and rehabilitate a new form of racism under the guise of tolerance. They will insist on fabricating realities that correspond with their emotional states and couch their nebulous theories in fustian and obfuscation. They will use inflammatory language to misrepresent your concerns, accuse you of ‘erasing’ people’s existence, or committing acts of ‘violence’ through speech. They will claim that there is no such thing as objective truth but demand that you acknowledge the truth of their ‘lived experience’. They will carry on feeding the far right by elevating identity politics and claim to be opposing fascism through their authoritarian methods. And if you dare to suggest that any of their demands should be subject to discussion or debate, they will not hesitate to brand you a bigot.

When this happens, it is our responsibility to resist and restate the case for liberal values. It will be a long, uncomfortable, but necessary process, like the setting of a broken bone. Along the way, we should defend those who are the targets of bullying campaigns, whether they are being attacked for what they have said or what they refuse to say. We should not allow ourselves to be intimidated by threats, insults and false accusations. We should reclaim the courage to think for ourselves, as encapsulated in Horace’s phrase *sapere aude* – ‘dare to know’ – which Kant appropriated as the motto of the Enlightenment. The desire for a quiet life is entirely understandable, but surely we have reached the point where the keys of the kingdom must be wrenched back from the hands of the crazy children.

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Notes

Prologue

- 2 ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence’: This is known as the ‘Sagan standard’. It is a rewording of a principle advanced by the psychologist Théodore Flournoy (1854–1920): ‘the weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness’. Flournoy attributed this formulation to the astronomer and mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), so its origin remains uncertain. See Paul Ratner, ‘How the Sagan standard can help you make better decisions’, *Big Think* (23 December 2019). Others have cited Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) as an early exponent of the principle from a letter dated 15 February 1808: ‘A thousand phenomena present themselves daily which we cannot explain, but where facts are suggested, bearing no analogy with the laws of nature as yet known to us, their verity needs proofs proportioned to their difficulty’. H. A. Washington, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 9 vols. (New York: H. W. Derby, 1861), vol. 5, p. 245.
- 3 ‘symptomatic of an evil nature’: In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill cautions against the tendency ‘to stigmatise those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men’. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), p. 53. Originally published in 1859.
- 4 ‘all sorts of major political disputes’: The phrase is taken from Stephen Heuser, ‘Editor’s Note’, *Politico* (November/December 2018).

Maleficia

- 5 until she faced them in court: An account of the trial of Bridget Bishop is included in Cotton Mather’s *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (London: John Russell Smith, 1862), pp. 129–38. Originally published in 1693.
- 5 cited as evidence against her: See Wendy Lucas, ‘Damned by a red paragon bodice’, *Massachusetts Historical Review*, vol. 20 (2018), pp. 119–49.
- 5 did oftentimes very grievously Pinch them, Choak them, Bite them, and Afflict them’: Mather, op. cit., p. 130.
- 5 urged them to sign the Devil’s book: Ibid.
- 6 an unnatural hybrid of chicken, monkey and human: See Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry Into the Salem Witch Trials* (London: Robert Hale, 1949), pp. 132–33.
- 6 proof of her malefic powers: Ibid., p. 133.
- 6 I know not what a witch is’: See *Records of Salem Witchcraft, Copied from the Original Documents*, vol. 1 (Roxbury: W. Elliot Woodward, 1864), pp. 140–142. The line eventually found itself into the script of Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, albeit in the mouth of Martha Corey. Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 77. Originally published in 1953.
- 6 accounts of the court sessions and the aftermath make for such compelling reading: Daniel A. Gagnon, *A Salem Witch: The Trial, Execution, and Exoneration of Rebecca Nurse* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2021).
- 7 uniquely inclined to this practice’: Marilynne Robinson, ‘Puritans and prigs: an anatomy of zealotry’, *Salmagundi*, no. 101/102 (Winter–Spring 1994), pp. 36–54. Quotation taken from p. 37.
- 7 an ‘evil hand’ had fallen upon them: Starkey, op. cit., p. 34.
- 8 the full fervour of Calvinism: ‘Poor Betty quailed before such terrible realities as predestination and damnation. Ever since she had had the latter explained to her, she had taken damnation to herself personally. How could a little girl hope to escape it? Why even a sinless newborn infant went straight to hell (albeit to the easiest room in it) if it died unbaptized. What chance was there for a child who, baptized or not, had been sinning for nine years with her hands, her tongue, her teeth, with every part of her? Damnation was under these circumstances as inevitable as death, and the imminence of death was a fact which Betty, in common with most well brought up Puritan children, had not been allowed to forget long at a time.’ Ibid., p. 18.
- 8 the restrictive nature of the puritan community: Of Abigail Williams, Starkey writes: ‘Placed in a less rigid society she might have been a gay little girl, but not here. Too much of her native gusto had been repressed by an environment as confining to her spirit as her neat long-gown was to her coltish legs. She was a child who longed to make far more noise in the world than she had ever been permitted to make.’ Ibid., p. 19.
- 8 an end to resurrection and judgement, to punishment and shame’: Ibid., p. 160.
- 8 collective mania was always likely to gestate: While undertaking research for *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller was struck by the possibility that repressed sexuality was at the heart of the motives of the adolescent accusers. This, he believed,

extended to those who confessed. ‘The relief that came to those who testified was orgasmic,’ he wrote in his autobiography, ‘they were actually encouraged in open court to talk about their sharing a bed with someone they weren’t married to, a live human being now manacled before them courtesy of God’s lieutenants’. See Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 341. Miller was of the view that John Proctor and Abigail Williams had been lovers – a notion that remains unsupported by the available evidence – and accordingly made Abigail’s jealousy of John’s wife Elizabeth the underlying motivation behind her allegations. At the time of the trials, Abigail was eleven years old and John sixty, so for *The Crucible* Miller changed their ages to seventeen and thirty respectively to make the plotline more feasible. In *A Delusion of Satan* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), Frances Hill echoes Miller’s contention that the events of Salem constitute a textbook case of clinical hysteria, actuated by sexual and emotional repression: ‘In Salem Village young women were as rigidly controlled, as powerless, and as dissatisfied as perhaps they have ever been anywhere. In the backwaters of New England, the exercise of the private will was regarded as inherently evil. Men and women were expected to subjugate themselves to the church, the community, and God. Young women had also to subjugate themselves to their elders and to men. Their human urges to express their emotions, fulfill their desires, exercise personal will, and exert control over others were pushed out of sight. But, alas for Massachusetts, they were not destroyed’ (pp. 22–23). As far as any psychoanalysis of long-dead individuals can go, this is reasonably persuasive. In truth, the possible explanations are as wide-ranging as they are unverifiable. Whether it be emotional or sexual repression, political or communal tensions, fears arising from frontier conflicts, a crisis of faith, economic hardship, disease, revenge or, as Emerson W. Baker has argued, a concatenation of all these factors, the emergence of hysteria of this kind was not unique to this little part of the world. See Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

- 8 ***more and more witches were identified in the subsequent frenzy:*** As the trials went on the girls grew bolder, accusing ever more reputable local figures of being in consort with the devil. Perhaps most shocking of all were the charges against Rebecca Nurse, one of Salem’s most upstanding and pious citizens. So outraged were other villagers that they took the risk of mounting a petition to testify to Nurse’s unblemished name. When the jury found her not guilty, the girls were displeased. They erupted into ear-splitting ululations, a manic and terrifying soundscape that wouldn’t seem out of place by the shores of the River Styx. Under such unmistakable signs of demonic influence, the jury revised their verdict. Later, Governor William Phips signed a reprieve for Nurse, only to retract it once he had heard that some of the girls were on the verge of death at the hands of her malevolent spirit. The children would not be denied their prey.
- 9 ***‘living up to so severe a creed put a strain on anyone’s good temper’:*** Starkey, op. cit., p. 20.
- 9 ***‘little ice ages’:*** Emily Oster, ‘Witchcraft, weather and economic growth in Renaissance Europe’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 215–28.
- 9 ***an already vulnerable population:*** Much ink has been spilled over the possible motives of the girls. Linnda R. Caporael has argued that the consumption of rye bread might have caused an outbreak of convulsive ergotism which can have hallucinatory effects, but anyone who has worked with children understands that behavioural contagion requires no such catalyst. Is it really all that surprising to see young people exploiting the opportunity to break all of society’s rules, to not only evade punishment but be praised for their transgressions? See Linnda R. Caporael, ‘Ergotism: the Satan loosed in Salem?’, *Science*, vol. 192, issue 4234 (2 April 1976), pp. 21–22.
- 10 ***‘substituting for theological dissension a whole complex of warring ideologies’:*** Starkey, op. cit., p. 11.
- 11 ***a strategic silence to ensure their survival:*** Arthur Miller, ‘Why I wrote “The Crucible”’, *New Yorker* (13 October 1996).
- 11 ***‘being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly’:*** Ibid.
- 12 ***for fear of ‘cancellation’:*** The swimmer Sharron Davies, who has campaigned for female-only sports, has experienced something similar: ‘I can’t tell you the number of parents, and the numbers of athletes, who’ve told me privately that they agree with me 100 percent. It’s not that people disagree with me, it’s that they’re frightened of the activists.’ Quoted by Helen Joyce, *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* (London: Oneworld, 2021), p. 195.
- 12 ***there is overwhelming evidence that such schemes are unreliable and ineffective:*** Kevin Rooney, ‘Is unconscious bias the new Brain Gym?’, *Times Education Supplement* (8 July 2020).
- 12 ***he was reported to Prevent, the government’s anti-terrorism programme:*** See my interview with Reverend Dr Bernard Randall on *Free Speech Nation* (3 July 2021), available on the GB News YouTube channel.
- 12 ***there is an ‘urgent’ need to decolonise every subject and every stage of the school curricula:*** Ewan Somerville, ‘Decolonise your desks, demands teaching union in “sinister” new escalation of culture wars’, *Telegraph* (3 July 2021).
- 13 ***never having questioned their own ideological certainties:*** That said, early historical accounts of the puritans – most notably David Hume’s *The History of England* (1754–61) – saw them as fanatics whose claims to virtue and piety were a mask for political and social subversion. In this sense, the direct comparisons with the high priests of Critical Social Justice seems at least partly justified.
- 13 ***some kind of infallible ‘elect’:*** The singer Nick Cave has described cancel culture as ‘mercy’s antithesis’. See Nick Cave, ‘Why cancel culture destroys the creative soul’, *Spectator* (31 December 2020).
- 13 ***‘haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy’:*** H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 624. Of course, Mencken’s definition was never meant to be taken seriously. Some of his other

memorable definitions include ‘Creator – A comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh’ (p. 624) and ‘Misogynist – A man who hates women as much as women hate one another’ (p. 620).

- 14 **a pejorative term which was eventually adopted by its targets:** It is supposed that ‘whig’ came from an early seventeenth-century word for ‘country bumpkin’, and ‘Tory’ was once a pejorative term for Irish rebels (from the sixteenth-century Irish and Scots Gaelic word *tóraidhe*, meaning ‘thief’ or ‘outlaw’).
- 15 **‘imagined that they were only hating the enemies of heaven’:** John Canning (ed.), *The Illustrated Macaulay’s History of England* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), p. 30.
- 15 **Every day on social media there is a fresh Hester Prynne to force onto the pillory steps:** As the meme has it: ‘Each day on Twitter there is one main character. The goal is never to be it’. This meme originated from a Twitter user known as @maplecocaine.

Creed

- 17 **‘Is wokeness the new religion?’:** As far as I am aware, Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay were the first to make the comparison between religion and the Critical Social Justice movement in May 2016 in an article on the website *All Think* entitled ‘Privilege: The Left’s Original Sin’. The website no longer exists, but the piece is discussed by Jerry Coyne, ‘Is “privilege” like Original Sin?’, *Why Evolution Is True* (24 May 2016).
- 19 **‘for good people to do evil – that takes religion’:** Steven Weinberg, ‘A designer universe?’, *New York Review* (21 October 1999).
- 19 **their values should be imposed on the populace for its own sake:** ‘A world where only you and people who think like you are good is also a world where you are surrounded by enemies bent on your destruction, who must be fought.’ Jordan Peterson, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 176.
- 20 **‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’:** Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1972), p. 80. Originally published in 1871.
- 21 **and then blame those who are offended for being insufficiently schooled:** Priyamvada Gopal, Twitter (23 June 2020).
- 21 **Debate is a fetish:** The Labour party politician Nadia Whittome claimed that ‘we must not fetishise “debate” as though debate is itself an innocuous, neutral act’ in an article for the *Independent* (23 July 2020).
- 22 **‘We like Dave’:** Nick Monroe, ‘Counter-protesters speak out after standing up for Dave Chappelle against the Netflix mob’, *Post Millennial* (21 October 2021).
- 22 **‘a strong belief that content on screen doesn’t directly translate to real-world harm’:** Kari Paul, ‘Netflix employees join wave of tech activism with walkout over Chappelle controversy’, *Guardian* (20 October 2021).
- 23 **‘dangerous transphobic content’:** Mary Biekert, ‘Netflix writer-producer exits in protest over Chappelle’s trans jokes’, *Bloomberg* (8 October 2021).
- 23 **While Sarandos had called into question the possibility that jokes could result in violence, Moore had asserted it to be the case:** In a sense, Chappelle’s jokes had resulted in violence, given that one protester – a Netflix employee no less – physically assaulted Gesualdi’s friend and fellow comedian Dick Masterson, whose crime had been to hold up a placard bearing the phrase: ‘we like jokes’.
- 23 **‘of course storytelling has real impact in the real world’:** Matt Donnelly, “I screwed up”: Netflix’s Ted Sarandos addresses Dave Chappelle fallout’, *Variety* (19 October 2021).
- 23 **a struggle session orchestrated by his subordinates:** ‘Struggle sessions’ were mass events of public humiliation in Maoist China. Crowds would gather to witness the victim being abused and tortured; these were typically figures of authority who had been denounced as ‘class traitors’.
- 23 **the hypothesis of a malleable public who act on cue from the mass media they consume has been roundly discredited:** In his book *Mass Communication: Living in a Media World*, Ralph E. Hanson outlines how researchers who had sought to find evidence of ‘direct effects leading to opinion and behavioural changes’ after the Second World War were unable to do so. ‘In fact,’ he writes, ‘in the 1940s and 1950s researchers sometimes doubted whether media messages had any effect on individuals at all.’ He emphasises that between ‘sender and audience’ there are all kinds of mediating factors. The direct-effects model fails to take into account that ‘audience members perceive and interpret these messages selectively according to individual differences’. Ralph E. Hanson, *Mass Communication: Living in a Media World* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), pp. 47–48.
- 24 **many failed even to detect their presence:** Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 533.
- 24 **‘goldfish swimming in Christian waters’:** Tom Holland, Twitter (23 October 2021).
- 24 **under the First Amendment:** James Lindsay, ‘A First-Amendment Case for Freedom from the Woke Religion’, *New Discourses* (9 September 2020).
- 24 **‘gives rise to duties of conscience’:** Ibid.
- 24 **why not social justice?:** Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

- 24 **a religion in an authentic, rather than merely analogous, sense:** John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (New York: Portfolio, 2021), pp. 23–60; Vivek Ramaswamy, *Woke, Inc.: Inside the Social Justice Scam* (London: Swift, 2021), pp. 240–60.
- 25 **'semantic fraud from the same stable as People's Democracy':** Charles Curran, 'Political commentary', *Spectator* (6 July 1956), pp. 7–8. Quotations taken from p. 8. The meaning of the term 'social justice' has been through various evolutions, and was supposedly coined by the Jesuit scholar Luigi Taparelli (1793–1862).
- 25 **'the instruments for the destruction of all values of a free civilization':** F. A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. xi–xiii.
- 26 **'biggest Antifa rally in history':** Mara Liasson, Twitter (6 June 2020).
- 26 ***an image of Winston Churchill captioned simply with 'ANTIFA'*:** Billy Bragg, Twitter (31 May 2020).
- 26 ***to distinguish the ideology from the principle*:** Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (North Carolina: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).
- 27 **'recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this':** Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), p. 20.
- 27 ***Pluckrose's distinction of 'Critical Social Justice' and 'Liberal Social Justice'*:** Helen Pluckrose, 'We need Liberal Social Justice, not "Critical Social Justice"', *Substack* (15 April 2021).
- 28 ***the inherent bigotry of the scientific method*:** For more on Disability and Fat Studies, see Pluckrose and Lindsay, op. cit., pp. 159–80.
- 28 ***a biological female who identifies as male*:** Julie Mazziotta, 'Transgender activist freebleeds to show men can menstruate too: it's "harmful to equate periods with womanhood"', *People.com* (25 July 2017).
- 29 ***a mere 13 per cent of the population*:** The report classifies these people as 'progressive activists'. These are defined as a 'vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth and other forms of privilege'. See the report by More in Common, *Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain* (October 2020), available online.
- 29 ***Some of the most vehement pushback against this ideology is coming from Generation Z*:** In his analysis of the British Election Study going back as far as 1964, Eric Kaufmann has observed that 'those under the age of 22 seem to be diverging from voters aged between 22 and 39, and appear considerably more conservative, to the point where today's 18-year-olds are about as right-wing as 40-year-olds'. Eric Kaufmann, 'Are young people turning to the Right?', *UnHerd* (8 July 2020).
- 30 ***to dismiss the younger generation as 'snowflakes' is both counter-productive and inaccurate*:** Andrew Doyle, 'Enough with the "snowflake" slur', *spiked* (14 March 2017). The term 'snowflake' to describe the fragility of young people became popular around November 2015, after Erika Christakis, a professor and head of Silliman College at Yale, sent an email to challenge the banning of certain types of Halloween costumes. Later, Yale students clustered around Christakis's husband in the college quad in order to berate him, all of which was caught in a video that went viral. One particularly shrill undergraduate is heard screaming: 'It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It's about creating a home here. You are not doing that!' Her peers click their fingers approvingly, because applause is a potential 'trigger'. See Erika Christakis, 'My Halloween email led to a campus firestorm – and a troubling lesson about self-censorship', *Washington Post* (28 October 2016).
- 30 ***the symphony of the world would be insufferably bland if all the instruments in the orchestra played the same note*:** C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Centenary Press, 1940), p. 138.
- 30 ***an approach to anti-bullying that has encouraged young people to believe that trauma is inevitable and permanent*:** Claire Fox, *I Find That Offensive!* (London, Biteback, 2016), pp. 91–105.
- 31 ***the idea that to be challenged is a form of emotional abuse*:** This is not to deny that emotional fragility among students is a growing concern. Anyone in any doubt should read Peter Gray's article 'Declining student resilience: a serious problem for colleges' in *Psychology Today* (22 September 2015). Whereas students in previous generations sought to reject the *in loco parentis* approach of university administrators, many today are turning to authority figures to solve their problems. That said, we need to recognise that Generation Z are the products of an over-pampering culture. If anyone is to be criticised for this increasing trend of hypersensitivity, surely it should be the older generations who allowed these conditions to flourish in the first place.

Cataclysm

- 33 ***clearly defined and oppositional goals*:** The *Kulturkampf* of the late nineteenth century, for instance, saw the Catholic church resisting the secular reforms of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.
- 34 ***'all went through the crash barrier'*:** Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 7.
- 34 ***absurd headlines in the news media*:** Carolyn Centeno Milton, 'Is "toxic masculinity" the reason for climate change?',

Forbes (5 April 2019); Ekow N. Yankah, ‘Can my children be friends with white people?’, *New York Times* (11 November 2017); Helen Whitehouse, ‘Transgender man gives birth to non-binary partner’s baby with female sperm donor’, *Daily Mirror* (28 December 2019).

- 34 **writers making asinine claims:** Lyz Lenz, ‘Women are evil’, *Huffington Post* (21 June 2018); Rudy Martinez, ‘Your DNA is an abomination’, *University Star* (28 November 2017).
- 34 **At Yale University, it was suddenly possible to graduate in English Literature without having studied Chaucer or Shakespeare:** Aryssa Damron, ‘Yale “decolonizes” English dept. after complaints studying white authors “actively harms” students’, *College Fix* (27 October 2017).
- 35 **‘enbyphobia’:** ‘Enbyphobia’ is a recent addition to the ever-expanding lexicon, meaning a fear or hatred of those who identify as ‘non-binary’.
- 36 **‘if the first step in an argument is wrong, everything that follows will be wrong’:** Lewis, op. cit., p. 104.
- 36 **a method of public humiliation and harassment which could often lead to the target losing his or her means of income:** I provide a fuller account of ‘cancel culture’ and its impact in my book *Free Speech and Why It Matters* (London, Constable, 2021), pp. 25–30.
- 36 **‘non-crime hate incidents’:** Charlie Parker, ‘Police arresting nine people a day in fight against web trolls’, *Times* (12 October 2017); Izzy Lyons, Jack Hardy and Martin Evans, ‘Police record 120,000 “non-crime” hate incidents that may stop accused getting jobs’, *Telegraph* (15 February 2020). The figure of 120,000 relates to the period between 2014 and 2019.
- 36 **activists had managed to restrict the ‘Overton window’:** The ‘Overton Window’ is the range of opinions that are considered to be socially acceptable at any given moment in time. It was conceived by Joseph P. Overton, specifically in relation to how the opinions of politicians would be generally received.
- 38 **the pandemic had been accelerated by ‘white male privilege’ and the ‘racist white voters’:** Chauncey Devega, ‘Donald Trump, the coronavirus and the power of white privilege’, *Salon* (18 March 2020).
- 38 **the postponement of trans surgery in favour of coronavirus victims:** Kaye Loggins, ‘As hospitals prepare for COVID-19, life-saving trans surgeries are delayed’, *Vice* (19 March 2020).
- 38 **‘How social distancing could lead to a spike in white nationalism’:** E. J. Dickson, ‘How social distancing could lead to a spike in white nationalism’, *Rolling Stone* (18 March 2020).
- 38 **CNN criticised President Donald Trump’s coronavirus ‘task force’ for its lack of diversity:** Brandon Tensley, ‘Coronavirus task force another example of Trump administration’s lack of diversity’, *CNN* (30 January 2020).
- 38 **‘a gendered crisis’:** Mehreen Faruqi, Twitter (25 March 2020).
- 38 **‘Covid relief should be drafted with a lens of reparations’:** Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Twitter (3 April 2020).
- 38 **‘an intersectional view of the coronavirus pandemic’:** See the anonymous article on the Queen Mary University website entitled ‘Queen Mary research calls for an intersectional view of the coronavirus pandemic’.
- 38 **‘the intersectional failures that Covid lays bare’:** African-American Policy Forum, ‘Under the blacklight: the intersectional failures that COVID lays bare’ (15 April 2020).
- 39 **‘Coronavirus won’t kill the culture wars’:** Andrew Doyle, ‘Coronavirus won’t kill the culture wars’, *spiked* (8 April 2020).
- 40 **a bewinged Floyd with the addition of a halo:** For images of some of these murals, see Jonathan Jones and Mee-Lai Stone, ‘Ghost, angel, martyr: the brutal brilliance of George Floyd murals from Syria to Belfast’, *Guardian* (5 June 2020).
- 40 **a piétà with a figure resembling Floyd taking the place of Jesus in the arms of a black Virgin Mary:** In an interview with Robert Lower for *The Christian Century* (26 April 2021), Kelly Latimore states that he was commonly asked whether the figure in the painting was Floyd or Jesus. ‘My answer was yes,’ he says.
- 41 **‘destroying property, which can be replaced, is not violence’:** For an overview of the errors in the 1619 Project see James M. Masnov, ‘History killers: the academic fraudulence of the 1619 project’, *New Discourses* (7 July 2020).
- 41 **Activist Vicky Osterweil even wrote a book entitled In Defense of Looting:** Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).
- 41 **A viral video taken in Houston, Texas:** Leah Simpson, ‘Amazing moment white parishioners gather and kneel in George Floyd’s hometown of Houston and beg for black community’s forgiveness for their “systemic racism”’, *Daily Mail* (1 June 2020).
- 41 **white crowds were seen sitting on the ground with their arms raised in supplication:** Emma Colton, “Everything in my power to educate my community”: protesters recite oath to speak out against racism’, *Washington Examiner* (4 June 2020).
- 42 **‘the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits’:** Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), p. 65.

- 42 ***After the New York Times ran an article by a Republican senator calling for military intervention, an in-house dispute broke out:*** Tom Cotton, ‘Send in the troops’, *New York Times* (3 June 2020).
- 42 ***Her first act in her new role was to issue a directive to her staff:*** Sean Collins, ‘A woke coup at the *New York Times*’, *spiked* (9 June 2020).
- 42 ***‘institutional racism’, a term that dates back to the Black Power movement of the late 1960s:*** ‘Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism.’ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p. 4.
- 43 ***consulting with ‘diversity experts’ to determine which historical landmarks ought to be removed:*** ‘Londoners are right to be angry about the systemic racism black Londoners face.’ Sadiq Khan, Twitter (5 June 2020). For details of Khan’s review of London’s street names and statues see Ross Lydall, ‘Sadiq Khan orders review of slavery link statues amid racism row’, *Evening Standard* (9 June 2020).
- 43 ***quick to rebuke customers via Twitter for any signs of non-conformity:*** In response to a tweet congratulating the company for not supporting Black Lives Matter, the official Yorkshire Tea Twitter account posted: ‘Please don’t buy our tea again. We’re taking some time to educate ourselves and plan proper action before we post. We stand against racism’ (8 June 2020). The official PG Tips Twitter account added: ‘If you are boycotting teas that stand against racism, you’re going to have to find two new tea brands now’ (8 June 2020). See Archie Bland and Martin Farrer, ‘#Solidaritea: Yorkshire Tea and PG Tips join brands in backing BLM’, *Guardian* (9 June 2020).
- 43 ***Popular comedy shows were removed from streaming services:*** Katie Rosseinsky, ‘From Little Britain to The Mighty Boosh: the shows removed from streaming services over blackface’, *Evening Standard* (11 June 2020).
- 43 ***Gone with the Wind (1939) lived up to its name when it was excised from HBO Max:*** Todd Spangler, ‘HBO Max restores “Gone With the Wind” with disclaimer saying film “denies the horrors of slavery”’, *Variety* (24 June 2020).
- 44 ***a commitment to ‘dismantle cisgender privilege’, foster a ‘queer-affirming network’ and ‘disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement’:*** These statements were included in a section on the official Black Lives Matter website called ‘What We Believe’, although this page has since been deleted. The key quotations are recorded by Alex Nitzberg, ‘Black Lives Matter’s agenda is about more than race’, *The Hill* (6 September 2016).
- 45 ***urged its staff members to add a banner to their emails that displayed the raised fist emblem of Black Lives Matter against a backdrop of a rainbow pride flag:*** Ewan Somerville, ‘NHS child gender clinic drops plans to use Black Lives Matter logo on staff email signatures’, *Telegraph* (5 March 2022).
- 45 ***‘all TERFs [Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists] are white supremacists’:*** Emily Gorcenski, Twitter (16 September 2020).
- 45 ***gender-critical feminists are ‘white supremacists who’ve co-opted feminism to mask their bigotry’:*** Roslyn Talusan, Twitter (18 July 2021).
- 46 ***‘identity is reality – without identity there’s just a corpse’:*** Luke Easley’s comment was made during his testimony at the hearing of Maya Forstater (see Chapter 10 for more details). The transcripts of the hearing are available at the Twitter account @tribunaltweets (quotation tweeted on 14 March 2022).
- 46 ***the ‘postmodern knowledge principle’ (‘that objective knowledge cannot be obtained’) and the ‘postmodern political principle’ (‘that society is structured into systems of power and privilege’):*** Pluckrose and Lindsay, op. cit., p. 156.
- 46 ***LGBT-only dormitories have already appeared on many American university campuses:*** Abby Young-Powell and Natalie Gil, ‘No straight people allowed: students share views on LGBT-only halls’, *Guardian* (16 May 2016).
- 46 ***It has become common for activists to insist that ‘People of Color Need Spaces Without White People’:*** Kelsey Blackwell, ‘Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People’, *The Arrow* (9 August 2018).
- 46 ***student diversity officer Bahar Mustafa organised events which debarred white men from participating:*** Benedict Moore-Bridger and Matt Watts, ‘Bahar Mustafa: Goldsmiths student diversity officer in race storm “I’m quitting”’, *Evening Standard* (20 November 2015).
- 46 ***Jews and white people were banned from attending a student meeting on ‘Palestinian liberation’:*** ‘London university students ban Jews, whites from meeting’, *Jewish Chronicle* (9 December 2021).
- 47 ***one is left holding ‘a dead dogma, not a living truth’:*** Mill, op. cit., p. 35.
- 47 ***the kind of critique one has come to expect from activists of an identitarian disposition:*** Mustafa’s comment is taken from a discussion filmed at Conway Hall, London, at the event ‘Trigger warning!’ organised by London Thinks. Uploaded to YouTube on 18 September 2015.
- 47 ***‘insider epistemology’:*** Hailey Branson-Potts, ‘San Francisco State investigating confrontation over man’s dreadlocks’, *Los Angeles Times* (29 March 2016); Avery Matera, ‘ASOS faux chandelier hair clip slammed for cultural appropriation’, *Teen Vogue* (7 April 2017); Justin Wm. Moyer, ‘University yoga class canceled because of “oppression, cultural genocide”’, *Washington Post* (23 November 2015).
- 47 ***reprimanded on Twitter for using a term that ‘belongs to First Nations culture and is not appropriate’:*** Adele McAlear, Twitter (7 April 2017).

- 48 ***Most of us who oppose ‘wokeness’ do so precisely because it represents a direct threat to social liberalism:*** For an alternative view see Ellie Mae O’Hagan, ‘The “anti-woke” backlash is no joke – and progressives are going to lose if they don’t wise up’, *Guardian* (30 January 2020).

Denominations

- 52 ***I been sleeping all my life. And now that Mr Garvey done woke me up, I’m gon’ stay woke:*** Some have claimed that the term was coined by the novelist William Melvin Kelley, who published an essay in the *New York Times* in 1962 entitled ‘If you’re woke, you dig it’ (20 May 1962).
- 52 ***a protest song that addressed the trial of nine young black men accused of raping a white woman in 1931:*** In a spoken afterword to an early recording of the song, Lead Belly can be heard saying: ‘I made this little song down there [Scottsboro]. So I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there – best stay woke, keep their eyes open’. See Aja Romano, ‘A history of “wokeness”’, *Vox* (9 October 2020).
- 52 ***readers soon became accustomed to headlines such as:*** André Wheeler, ‘Toy stories: can a woke makeover win Barbie and Monopoly new fans?’, *Guardian* (17 September 2019); Kimberly McIntosh, ‘My search for Mr Woke: a dating diary’, *Guardian* (11 August 2018).
- 52 ***In the US, articles such as:*** Pat King, ‘Keeping your classroom woke’, *Metro US* (4 December 2017); Adrienne Seal, ‘Becoming woke in the wake of “Me Too”; everyday sexism’, *Spirit Tree Consulting* (12 November 2019); Maisha Z. Johnson, ‘The woke black person’s guide to talking about oppression with family’, *Everyday Feminism* (21 February 2016).
- 52 ***A 2021 study by the Centre for Policy Studies found that only 37 per cent of respondents understood the meaning of the term:*** The study was undertaken by the pollster Frank Luntz, and the findings supported his view that the kind of culture war currently raging in the US is rapidly making its way to the UK. The dividing lines appear to be correlated to political affiliation. For instance, 52 per cent of Labour voters consider the UK to be ‘institutionally racist’, as compared to 19 per cent of Conservative voters. See Frank Luntz, *Britain Speaks: The New Language of Politics and Business* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2021).
- 52 ***23 per cent of respondents said that they were not ‘woke’, while 12 per cent believed that they were:*** For an overview of the findings of the YouGov study, see Matthew Smith, ‘What does “woke” mean to Britons?’, *YouGov* (18 May 2021).
- 53 ***‘the licence to use it in any which way expanded and its meaning became diluted’:*** Daniel Kidane, ‘Why, this year, Last Night of the Proms will be woke’, *Guardian* (14 September 2019).
- 53 ***‘Woke Handbook’ for The Times which aims to explain this mysterious concept to an older generation:*** Stuart Heritage, ‘The woke handbook for boomers’, *Times* (20 March 2021).
- 55 ***both are responsible for creating the conditions within which the far right can flourish:*** Mill, op. cit., p. 13.
- 56 ***‘they sometimes even reify race and racism’:*** See episode 12 of the Jacobin podcast Stay at Home, ‘The pitfalls of liberal antiracism and woke neoliberalism’, streamed live on YouTube on 7 April 2020.
- 56 ***‘likely to be a right-wing culture warrior angry at a phenomenon that lives mainly in their imagination’:*** Afua Hirsch, ‘The struggle for equality is real. The “woke police” are a myth’, *Guardian* (26 September 2019).
- 56 ***‘a woke reimaging’:*** Charles Bramesco, ‘Saved by the Bell review – self-aware reboot isn’t quite smart enough’, *Guardian* (24 November 2020); Brianna Holt, ‘White clicktivism: why are some Americans woke online but not in real life?’, *Guardian* (9 December 2020).
- 56 ***‘2020 will not be 2016 . . . People are woke’:*** See the editorial piece in *spiked* entitled ‘Kamala, Chris and all kinds of cringe’ (11 October 2019).
- 57 ***‘Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’:*** Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 93. Originally published as *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
- 58 ***the Ministry of State Security during the era of Soviet forced labour camps did not ‘sentence’ a person, but rather ‘imposed an administrative penalty’:*** Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willetts (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 116. Originally published in 1973.
- 58 ***‘obtained a 100 per cent mortality response’:*** Salman Rushdie, ‘Michael Herr: an interview’, in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Vintage, 2010), pp. 333–36. Quotation taken from p. 333. Article originally published in 1988.
- 59 ***a conflict between liberalism (‘anti-woke’) and authoritarianism (‘woke’):*** John Stuart Mill called this the ‘struggle between Liberty and Authority’. Mill, op. cit., p. 5.
- 59 ***‘intersectionality’:*** Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, issue 1.
- 60 ***‘Without frames that allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, many will fall***

- through the cracks of our movement:** Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘The urgency of intersectionality’, TEDWomen (October 2016), available online.
- 60 **If you are a victim at the intersection, you will feel the impact from multiple directions:** For further reading, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color’, *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (July 1991), pp. 1241–99.
- 60 **the illusion that we live in a country plagued by social injustice is more common than ever before:** Gary LaFree, ‘American attitudes are disconnected from reality on crime trends’, *The Hill* (31 January 2018).
- 60 **a lack of equality around access to the outdoors:** Patrick Kelleher, ‘Meet the queer hikers proving the great outdoors isn’t just for cis, straight, middle class folk’, *Pink News* (5 March 2022).
- 60 **‘contemporary society’s sanctification of victimhood’:** Brendan O’Neill, ‘Jussie Smollett and the coveting of victimhood’, *spiked* (9 December 2021).
- 61 **‘an epidemic of hoaxes’ which ‘provide support for the meta-narrative of majority group bigotry’:** Wilfred Reilly, ‘Hate crime hoaxes and why they happen’, *Commentary* (April 2019). See also Reilly’s book *Hate Crime Hoax: How the Left Is Selling a Fake Race War* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2019).
- 62 **‘Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female’:** Frances M. Beal, ‘Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female’, in Robin Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 340–53.
- 62 **‘impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained’:** Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 6. Originally published in 1990.
- 62 **‘It’s not identity politics on steroids’:** Katy Steinmetz, ‘She coined the term “intersectionality” over 30 years ago. Here’s what it means to her today’, *Time* (20 February 2020).
- 62 **cancelled because the organisers feared that too many white women would attend:** Daniella Silva, ‘Women’s March in California canceled over concerns it would be “overwhelmingly white”’, *NBC News* (31 December 2018).
- 63 **apologised and deleted the knitting pattern from her website:** James Delingpole, “‘Pussy hat’ design withdrawn after activists insist some women have penises”, *Breitbart* (7 September 2018).
- 63 **white women are inherently privileged and a ‘menace’ that has ‘yet to be reckoned with’:** Lenz, op. cit.
- 63 **treating people equally irrespective of the colour of their skin is ‘dangerous’, because it fails to account for oppressive power structures which are embedded in society:** Diana Soriano, ‘White privilege lecture tells students white people “dangerous” if they don’t see race’, *College Fix* (6 March 2019).
- 63 **‘to serve as symbolic “viruses” that infect, unsettle, and disrupt traditional and entrenched fields’:** Breanne Fahs and Michael Karger, ‘Women’s Studies as Virus: Institutional Feminism and the Projection of Danger’, *Géneros: Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (February 2016), pp. 929–57.
- 64 **‘is it not damnation itself?’:** Norman Douglas, *Fountains in the Sand: Rambles Among the Oases of Tunisia* (London: Martin Secker, 1912), pp. 130–31.
- 64 **‘never judge an impoverished man by your own standards of right and wrong’:** Ibid., p. 131.
- 65 **‘poverty, real poverty, was nothing so much as it was the permanent sense that nothing ever works’:** Thomas Chatterton Williams, *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 73.
- 65 **‘you are stopped, suspected, and made ridiculous at every turn’:** William Hazlitt, ‘On the want of money’ in *Literary Remains*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836), vol. II, pp. 229–60. Quotation taken from p. 229. This was a posthumous publication, as Hazlitt died in 1830.
- 65 **‘She’s actually very unconventional. She went to a day school’:** Johann Hari, ‘If you’re looking for class war, just read Cameron’s policies’, *Independent* (23 October 2011).
- 66 **his time among the working-class mining communities of the industrial north:** George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937).
- 66 **his experiences of purposefully living for a time as homeless:** George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933).
- 66 **stays for a night in a squalid workhouse in London:** George Orwell, ‘The spike’, in *Essays* (London: Everyman’s Library, 2002), ed. Peter Davison, pp. 8–16.
- 66 **deliberately drinks to excess so that he will be arrested and be forced to spend a night in prison:** George Orwell, ‘Clink’, in *Essays*, ibid., pp. 21–30.
- 66 **the claim that the ‘real oppression is class’ is an example of ‘white fragility’ in action:** Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 119. Originally published in 2018.

- 66 **white people are unlikely to experience racial discrimination in white-majority countries:** As Reni Eddo-Lodge puts it, ‘white privilege is the fact that if you’re white, your race will almost certainly positively impact your life’s trajectory in some way’. Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2017), p. 87.
- 67 **‘the defense of a system from which advantage is derived on the basis of race’:** David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 210. First edition published in 1977.
- 67 **‘you can be homeless and still have white privilege’:** Nosheen Iqbal, ‘Munroe Bergdorf on the L’Oréal racism row: “It puzzles me that my views are considered extreme”’, *Guardian* (4 September 2017).
- 67 **white people are always privileged irrespective of ‘where they are on the rung or ladder of success’:** Hannah Sparks, ‘Oprah labeled a “fraud” for calling out “white privilege” since she’s so rich’, *New York Post* (5 August 2020).
- 68 **The concept was popularised by feminist writer and activist Peggy McIntosh:** Peggy McIntosh, ‘White privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack’, *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (July/August, 1989), pp. 10–12.
- 68 **the ability to ‘dress in second-hand clothes, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race’:** Ewan Somerville, ‘Wearing second hand clothes “an example of white privilege”, students told’, *Telegraph* (27 September 2021).
- 68 **Its closest counterpart in Christianity would be the notion of original sin:** Ibram X. Kendi explicitly uses the term when he calls on Americans to ‘fix the original sin of racism’. See Ibram X. Kendi, ‘Pass an anti-racist constitutional amendment’, *Politico* (3 October 2019).
- 69 **‘white privilege’ has ‘muddled’ policy thinking:** Andrew Woodcock, “Culture wars” row over parliamentary report’s attack on use of term “white privilege”, *Independent* (21 June 2021).
- 69 **overwhelmingly dominant in politics, business, and the creative industries:** *Elitist Britain 2019: The Educational Backgrounds of Britain’s Leading People* (London: The Sutton Trust, 2019). The report found that privately educated people represent 29 per cent of Members of Parliament, 57 per cent of members of the House of Lords, 48 per cent of FTSE 350 CEOs, 59 per cent of civil service permanent secretaries, 52 per cent of Foreign Office diplomats, 45 per cent of Public Body Chairs, 65 per cent of senior judges, 49 per cent of highest ranking members of the armed services, 37 per cent of rugby international players and 43 per cent of the England cricket team.
- 69 **ethnic minority groups are far more prevalent in the lower income bracket:** A report by the New Policy Institute published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that approximately ‘two-fifths of people from ethnic minorities live in income poverty, twice the rate for white people’. The income poverty rate was highest for Bangladeshis (65 per cent), Pakistanis (55 per cent) and black Africans (45 per cent). Peter Kenway and Guy Palmer, *Poverty Among Ethnic Groups: How and Why Does it Differ?* (London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007), p. 11.
- 69 **‘to lecture staff about their alleged racism than it is to offer them better pay and working conditions’:** Tom Slater, ‘The year the ruling class got woke’, *spiked* (26 December 2020).
- 70 **part of the prestigious Russell Group:** The *spiked* Free Speech University Rankings project ran from 2015 until 2019.
- 70 **‘almost half of the new places created at Russell Group institutions over the past decade have gone to privately educated individuals’:** Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, ‘Higher education: the fair access challenge’ (June 2013).
- 70 **the ‘cultural turn’:** Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998).
- 70 **For the left, this approach has been a form of electoral hemlock:** For a persuasive account of how identity politics has obliterated the left’s chances of electoral success, see Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).
- 71 **such instances had a cumulative impact on his credibility:** Nick Duffy, ‘Jeremy Corbyn shares his pronouns in solidarity with trans community at Pink News awards’, *Pink News* (16 October 2019); Dan Martin, ‘Tories accuse Labour of racism over tiered charges to hear Jeremy Corbyn speak in Loughborough’, *Leicester Mercury* (21 January 2018). These examples point to a burgeoning tendency within the ranks of the party. One of the earliest examples was the cringe-making spectacle of Harriet Harman trundling around the country in the run-up to the 2015 election in her ‘pink battle van’ in the hope of enticing female voters, as though women are generally more interested in pretty colours than political ideas. Then in May of 2017, Corbyn tweeted the following: ‘Only Labour can be trusted to unlock the talent of black, Asian and minority ethnic people’. Jeremy Corbyn, Twitter (30 May 2017).
- 71 **‘We do not believe this to be a controversial statement’:** See Caroline Hill and Jasmin Beckett, ‘Why our Young Labour conference “excluded” straight, white, able-bodied men’, *Guardian* (12 February 2018).
- 72 **‘a generation of liberals and progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups’:** Mark Lilla, ‘The end of identity liberalism’, *New York Times* (18 November 2016).

Genesis

- 73 **it was even more exhaustive than I had anticipated:** Robin Robbins (ed.), *The Poetry of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Harlow: Longman, 2008).

- 74 ***high shelves of ancient tomes, many of which are still chained down to prevent theft:*** The Duke Humfrey's Library will be recognisable to anyone who has seen the *Harry Potter* film series as one of the locations in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. During the period of filming a number of the old books disappeared. Robin was adamant that they had been stolen by members of the film crew, presumably as a souvenir. He was told by the university authorities not to publicly declare his hypothesis, so asked me to spread the information as far and wide as I could. Hence this footnote.
- 74 ***'slowly poisoned by the dust of accumulated knowledge':*** Anatole France, *The Revolt of the Angels*, trans. Wilfrid Jackson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1941), p. 223. Originally published as *La Révolte des Anges* (Paris: 1914).
- 75 ***'various playful because inconsequential forms of jargon-rich lubrication take the place of substantive commentary':*** He continues: 'Postmodern thought thus appears as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the professionalization of the humanities in higher education when real content has been exhausted and salaries have still to be earned'. A. C. Grayling, *Ideas that Matter: A Personal Guide for the 21st Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), p. 278.
- 75 ***'obscurity creates an aura of importance':*** Martha C. Nussbaum, 'The professor of parody', *New Republic* (22 February 1999). Judith Butler famously secured first place in the 1998 'bad writing contest' run by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, which aims to recognise 'the most stylistically lamentable passages found in scholarly books and articles'. Her prize-winning passage reads as follows: 'The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.' See Judith Butler, 'Further reflections on the conversations of our time', *Diacritics*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 13–15. Butler's key point here – that there has been a shift from a Marxist perspective of power relations to a Foucauldian one – hardly justifies the tortuous syntax.
- 75 ***'half expecting it to be every bit as convoluted as her books: Gender Trouble***, op. cit; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 75 ***it makes us look as though we have something to hide:*** 'Words can be relied on only if one is sure that their function is to reveal and not to conceal.' Arendt, op. cit., p. 66.
- 75 ***'one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy':*** George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' (1945), in *Essays* (London: Everyman's Library, 2002), ed. Peter Davison, pp. 954–67. Quotation taken from p. 962.
- 76 ***'unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church':*** Ibid., p. 963.
- 76 ***'thought-terminating clichés':*** Joyce, op. cit., p. 154. Joyce is quoting from Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in Communist China* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961).
- 76 ***the 'incorporation of perversions' into 'a new specification of individuals':*** *The History of Sexuality*, op. cit., pp. 42–43.
- 77 ***Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis (1892), in which the Latin/Greek compound 'homosexual' was first used:*** As Joseph Cady points out, Krafft-Ebing's term 'homosexual' can be traced as far back as 1868, in a letter by Károly Mária Kertbeny to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. The term appeared in print the following year, 'in two pamphlets Kertbeny published anonymously in Berlin to protest the harsh laws against male homosexuality that the North German Confederation was in the process of adopting from the Prussian Penal Code'. See Joseph Cady, "Masculine Love," Renaissance Writing, and the "New Invention" of Homosexuality, *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 23 (1992), pp. 9–40. Quotation taken from p. 33.
- 77 ***'I'm sorry, you did not exist before we named you':*** Camille Paglia, 'Junk bonds and corporate raiders: academe in the hour of the wolf', in *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (London: Viking, 1992), pp. 170–248. Quotation taken from p. 177. Paglia's work offers a refreshing departure from the overbearing prominence of constructionist emphasis in the humanities. She describes Foucault's *La Volonté de savoir* as 'a disaster' (p. 187), challenging the deification of Foucault in the strongest possible terms: 'The truth is that Foucault knew very little about anything before the seventeenth century and, in the modern world, outside France. His familiarity with the literature and art of any period was negligible. His hostility to psychology made him incompetent to deal with sexuality, his own or anybody else's. The elevation of Foucault to guru status by American and British academics is a tale that belongs to the history of cults' (p. 174).
- 77 ***The poststructuralists had been virtually canonised by this point:*** David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 77 ***an onslaught against the insular and self-satisfied nature of this parasitic branch of the humanities:*** Paglia, op. cit. See also David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London: Routledge, 1990). Such academics bear a strong resemblance to those described by Hazlitt: 'They pile hypothesis on hypothesis, mountain high, till it is impossible to come at the plain truth on any question. They see things, not as they are, but as they find them in books; and "wink and shut their apprehensions up," in order that they may discover nothing to interfere with their prejudices, or convince them of their absurdity'. William Hazlitt, 'On the ignorance of the learned', in *Table Talk* (London: Everyman's Library, 1959), pp. 70–77. Quotation taken from p. 76. Originally published in 1821.

- 78 ‘allows him to emerge in the post-Foucault landscape as king of the pygmies’: Paglia, op. cit., p. 176.
- 78 **less than 12 per cent of teaching staff support right-wing political parties:** Noah Carl, *Lackademia: Why Do Academics Lean Left?* (London: Adam Smith Institute, 2017).
- 78 **one in three right-leaning scholars claim to self-censor ‘for fear of consequences to [their] career’:** *Academic Freedom in the UK: Protecting Viewpoint Diversity* (London: Policy Exchange, 2020).
- 79 **three in four conservative academics occasionally self-censored while at work:** Edward Malnick, ‘Right-wing academics feel need to “self-censor” political beliefs on campus’, *Telegraph* (15 January 2022).
- 79 **the long march was to be an inchmeal affair in plain sight:** The Fabian Society took its name from the Roman general Quintus Fabius, otherwise known as ‘Cunctator’ ('the delayer') due to his war of attrition against the invading Carthaginians in the Second Punic War. The choice of name was explained in the society’s first pamphlet: ‘For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did most patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless.’
- 80 **only a minority of academics who voted to leave the European Union would feel comfortable admitting this to colleagues:** *Academic Freedom in the UK*, op. cit., p. 40.
- 80 **‘It’s just one fucking thing after another’:** Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 85.
- 80 **denounced the likes of D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer for their supposedly sexist and patriarchal tropes:** Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971).
- 80 **‘culture of repudiation’:** Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts*, second edition (London: Encounter Books, 2018), pp. 69–70. Originally published in 2007.
- 81 **Paglia once described Millett as the woman who ‘made vandalism chic’:** Camille Paglia, ‘Academic feminists must begin to fulfil their noble, animating ideal’, in *Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, Feminism* (New York: Pantheon, 2017), pp. 109–117. Quotation taken from p. 110. Essay originally published in *Chronicle of Higher Education* (25 July 1997).
- 81 **obsessed with the behaviour of writers and other artists:** Roland Barthes, ‘The death of the author’, in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–48.
- 81 **probably the very characteristic that enabled him to produce such twisted classics:** ‘Dahl, it appears, was mean to his wife. He was explicitly anti-Semitic. He’s been accused of giving dope and booze to his own kids to keep them quiet. So, is it true? Of course it’s bloody well true. How else could Dahl have kept children enthralled and agreeably disgusted and pleasurable afraid? By being Enid Blyton?’ Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 168.
- 82 **‘reality is ultimately the product of our socialization and lived experiences, as constructed by systems of language’:** Pluckrose and Lindsay, op. cit., p. 30.
- 82 **‘four pillars of postmodernism’:** Pluckrose and Lindsay are here paraphrasing from Walter Truett Anderson (ed.), *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), pp. 10–11.
- 82 **the kind of ‘power-knowledge’ that Foucault sees running through all strata of society:** For example, see Michel Foucault, ‘The order of discourse’, in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Massachusetts: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 51–78. This is Ian McLeod’s translation of Foucault’s 1970 lecture *L’Ordre du discours*.
- 83 **it had been broadened from the arts and literature to incorporate architecture:** Joseph Hudnut was the first to introduce the term into the field of architecture in his essay ‘The post-modern house’, *Architectural Record*, vol. 97, no. 5 (May 1945), pp. 70–75.
- 83 **‘postmodernism’ was a literary genre of poetry that sought to curb the excesses of modernism:** See Federico de Onis (ed.), *Antología de la Poesía Española e Hispanoamericana (1882–1932)* (Madrid, 1934).
- 83 **‘postmodernism’ was a specific historical period of late capitalism:** Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991).
- 83 **the postmodern era heralded the decline of Western civilisation:** Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934–1961). See vol. 9 (1954), pp. 468–69.
- 83 **‘sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university’:** The open letter appeared in *The Times* on 9 May 1992.
- 83 **not agitating for direct societal change on the basis of his ideas:** Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).
- 85 **‘Freedom of expression is the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every other form of freedom’:** Quoted by Suzanne Nossel, *Dare to Speak: Defending Free Speech for All* (New York: Dey Street, 2020), p. 258.
- 85 **the triumph of social liberalism:** See Tom Slater (ed.), *Unsafe Space: The Crisis of Free Speech on Campus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1–4.
- 85 **its champions seek to ‘reform in order to conserve’:** Quoted by Roger Scruton, ‘The Tories will stay lost until they

- relearn how to be conservative', *Sunday Times* (13 August 2017).
- 85 **'Rather, they are being trained to mimic the moral certainty of ideologues'**: Peter Boghossian, 'My university sacrificed ideas for ideology. So today I quit', *Substack* (8 September 2021).
- 86 **'a loophole exploited with impunity by trolls, racists and ethnic-cleansing advocates'**: Nesrine Malik, 'Hate speech leads to violence. Why would liberals defend it?', *Guardian* (22 March 2018).
- 87 **a group of contemporary feminists from the realms of journalism, politics, the arts and social media**: Eva Wiseman, 'Meet the new suffragettes', *British Vogue* (8 March 2018).
- 88 **'racism's adaptations over time are more sinister than concrete rules such as Jim Crow'**: *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 50.
- 88 **the kind of censorial police intervention or the mob-driven retributive 'cancel culture' that we see today**: Edward Stourton, *It's a PC World: What It Means to Live in a Land Gone Politically Correct* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).
- 88 **This was a man who had openly endorsed apartheid**: Stuart Jeffries, 'Britain's most racist election: the story of Smethwick, 50 years on', *Guardian* (15 October 2014).
- 89 **'political correctness' is nothing more than a synonym for 'politeness'**: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *In Defence of Political Correctness* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2018).
- 89 **laments the passing of 'a civilised consensus about sensible, flexible limits'**: Ibid., p. 7.
- 89 **that does not mean that we should expect such incivility to be widely approved**: Alibhai-Brown believes in the concept of 'verbal violence' (ibid., p. 10). As she writes in her introduction: 'Words, I believe, hurt, wound, incapacitate and cause mental distress. Worse than all that, they intimidate and silence certain voices' (ibid., p. 14). This argument locates her firmly in the Critical Social Justice camp; we are back to the unproven postmodernist insistence that discriminatory power structures are sustained and disseminated through language. Nobody would deny that we all face social pressure to conform, but it is unconvincing to assert that robust criticism – or even rudeness or ridicule – is tantamount to a form of censorship.
- 89 **'confrontation between advocates of uninhibited communication and those who believe in self-restraint and fairness'**: Ibid., pp. 1–2.
- 90 **'hate speech' laws, often now abused by the state to clamp down on controversial opinions**: Ibid., p. 12.
- 91 **calling as it does for militant disobedience and an intolerance of the intolerant**: Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive tolerance', in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr. and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 81–123.
- 91 **a generalised 'false consciousness' by which the dominance of oppressive forces is secured**: Ibid., p. 121 and p. 110.
- 92 **the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion**: Ibid., p. 100.
- 92 **a pre-emptive measure against the resurgence of totalitarianism**: Ibid., p. 109.
- 92 **requires the withdrawal of tolerance before the deed, at the stage of communication in word, print, and picture**: Ibid.
- 92 **manifest most dangerously in the existence of various groups within the disparate 'Antifa' movement**: For a comprehensive overview of the 'hate speech' laws currently in place throughout Europe, see Paul Coleman, *Censored: How European 'Hate Speech' Laws are Threatening Freedom of Speech*, second edition (Vienna: Kairos Publications, 2016).
- 92 **an explicitly anti-liberal movement which opposes freedom of speech for the intolerable**: 'At the heart of the anti-fascist outlook is a rejection of the classical liberal phrase incorrectly ascribed to Voltaire that "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". After Auschwitz and Treblinka, anti-fascists committed themselves to fighting to the death the ability of organized Nazis to say anything.' Mark Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook* (London: Melville House, 2017), p. xv.
- 92 **the notion of a 'historical continuity' that is clearly tenuous**: Ibid., p. xix.
- 92 **mobbed by groups calling themselves 'Antifa'**: Josephine Bartosch, 'Wheesht Spa', *Critic* (6 September 2021).
- 92 **in today's society where such taboos already exist**: Bray, op. cit., p. xvi.
- 93 **he misreads the Brexit vote of 2016 as being 'largely fueled by the far-right'**: Ibid., p. 79.
- 93 **We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant**: He continues: 'We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, exactly as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping; or as we should consider incitement to the revival of the slave trade.' K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1945), vol. 1, p. 226.
- 94 **If someone is using hate speech or making racially charged comments, physical violence can be justified to prevent this person from espousing their hateful views**: Taken from a 2017 study by McLaughlin and Associates, quoted by

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), p. 86.

- 94 **as though she were invoking the spirit of Breivik:** Peter Walker, ‘Tory MP criticised for using antisemitic term “cultural Marxism”’, *Guardian* (26 March 2019).
- 95 **but many readers would certainly have heard a dog whistle’:** Owen Jones, ‘Why we need to talk about the media’s role in far-right radicalisation’, *Guardian* (28 March 2019).
- 95 **‘to seize the means of cultural production’:** Marc Sidwell, *The Long March: How the Left Won the Culture War and What to Do About It* (London: New Culture Forum, 2020), p. 3.
- 95 **many academics have used the term ‘Cultural Marxism’ to describe this shift in focus:** See Robert E. Smith, ‘Cultural Marxism: imaginary conspiracy or revolutionary reality?’, *Themelios* vol. 44, issue 3. Smith cites numerous books and articles that use the term ‘either dispassionately or favorably’, including: Richard R. Weiner, *Cultural Marxism and Political Sociology* (California: Sage, 1981); Joan Davies, ‘British Cultural Marxism’, in *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* vol. 4, no. 3 (Spring 1991), pp. 323–44; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 95 **‘one-dimensional man’:** Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
- 95 **sees consumers of the popular arts as susceptible to moral corruption:** Edmund Burke, ‘Reflections on the revolution in France’ (1790), in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 12 vols. (London: John C. Nimmo, 1887), vol. 3, pp. 231–563. Quotation taken from p. 307.
- 96 **‘There cannot be any excuse for it once the Message has been revealed’:** Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, fourth edition (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1954), p. 5. First edition published in 1943.

Blasphemy

- 99 **‘tyranny of heaven’:** John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667, revised 1674), in *The Complete English Poems* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), ed. Gordon Campbell, pp. 143–441. The phrase ‘tyranny of heaven’ is quoted from p. 153.
- 99 **‘the moon, whose orb / Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views’:** Ibid., p. 157.
- 100 **required all printed texts to be approved by a censor before publication:** John Milton, *Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing, to the parliament of England* (1644), in *The Complete English Poems* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), ed. Gordon Campbell, pp. 573–618. The text of the Licensing Order of 14 June 1643 is also included in this edition (pp. 619–20). According to Milton, Galileo had been arrested for ‘thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought’ (p. 602).
- 100 **living out his final days under house arrest in his villa among the picturesque hills of Arcetri:** Quoted by Maurice A. Finocchiaro, ‘Myth 8: That Galileo was imprisoned and tortured for advocating Copernicanism’ in Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 68–78. For the quotation from Voltaire see p. 68.
- 101 **defined according to the perception of the ‘victim’:** ‘For recording purposes, the perception of the victim, or any other person, is the defining factor in determining whether an incident is a hate incident, or in recognising the hostility element of a hate crime. The victim does not have to justify or provide evidence of their belief, and police officers or staff should not directly challenge this perception. Evidence of the hostility is not required for an incident or crime to be recorded as a hate crime or hate incident.’ Home Office, *Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2018/19* (15 October 2019).
- 101 **as yet there is no evidence that her instructions are being followed:** Jonathan Ames, ‘Priti Patel orders police to stop recording hate incidents that are not crimes’, *Times* (26 April 2021).
- 101 **‘a serious “chilling effect” on public debate’:** Jamie Phillips, ‘Landmark victory for free speech after Court of Appeal rules police’s definition of a “hate incident” is unlawful and had “chilling effect” on ex-cop’s freedom of expression after he was visited over trans tweets’, *Daily Mail* (20 December 2021).
- 102 **‘Being offensive is an offence’:** Madeline Grant, ‘Causing offence is at the heart of our right to free speech’, *Telegraph* (23 February 2021).
- 102 **being offensive ‘is not in itself an offence’:** The apology by Merseyside Police is quoted on the *BBC News* website: ‘Merseyside Police apologise over incorrect “offensive” claim’ (22 February 2021).
- 102 **posting something online which causes offence:** Charlie Parker, ‘Police arresting nine people a day in fight against web trolls’, *Times* (12 October 2017).
- 103 **mutilated in 1790 by souvenir hunters, who exhumed his body and sold his teeth, bones and locks of hair:** See Carol Barton, “Ill fare the hands that heaved the stones”: John Milton, a preliminary thanatography”, *Milton Studies*, vol. 43 (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2004), pp. 198–260.
- 104 **‘to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience’ is the ultimate liberty:** Milton, op. cit., p. 613.
- 104 **has fallen under the influence of the new puritans:** Nick Busvine, ‘Identity politics and impartiality are not compatible’, *Briefings for Britain* (3 July 2021). Busvine points out that the partisan nature of the civil service became

apparent in the wake of the European Union referendum. The near-universal opposition to Brexit within the civil service was possibly best exemplified by Lord Robert Kerslake, who believed that the government's authority should be bypassed in order to prevent a no-deal scenario. Busvine quotes from Kerslake's interview with a *Guardian* journalist in which he said: 'We are reaching the point where the civil service must consider putting its stewardship of the country ahead of service to the government of the day.' See Polly Toynbee, 'A civil war state of mind now threatens our democracy', *Guardian* (28 August 2019).

- 105 **a civil service in the grip of identitarianism inevitably surrenders the very impartiality it requires to undertake its duties:** An article in the *Mail on Sunday* revealed that white civil servants have been supplied with ideologically partisan reading lists which encourage them to 'confront their privilege'. The recommended books include *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *In Defense of Looting* by Vicky Osterweil and *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Y. Davis. See Georgia Edkins, 'White civil servants are told to "confront their privilege" with "woke" reading list which includes books calling for the abolition of police and prisons – and defending looting', *Mail on Sunday* (31 October 2021).
- 105 **prevented patients from reaching hospital:** Damien Gayle, 'Drivers clash with Insulate Britain activists blocking three London roads', *Guardian* (4 October 2021).
- 105 **prosecuted for vandalising a number of buildings at Cambridge University:** Cameron White, 'Three Extinction Rebellion activists found guilty of criminal damage during protest last August', *Varsity* (25 March 2021).
- 105 **smashed windows at the headquarters of J.P. Morgan with hammers decorated with the words 'live', 'laugh' and 'love':** Lily Russell-Jones, 'Extinction Rebellion activists smash JP Morgan windows', *City AM* (1 September 2021).
- 106 **only to be thwarted by the Supreme Court:** Stuart Walton, 'Good riddance to the Named Person scheme', *spiked* (23 September 2019).
- 107 **proposed bans on two-for-one pizza deals and minimum pricing on cheaper alcoholic drinks:** Katy Pagan, 'Pizza-loving Scots react to news Nicola Sturgeon plans to ban two-for-one deals in the best way', *Scottish Sun* (17 May 2018); Charlie Peters, 'Minimum pricing for alcohol: another nanny-state flop', *spiked* (14 October 2021).
- 107 **'significant threat to freedom of expression':** Iain Macwhirter, 'Scottish government's illiberal hate crime bill must be sent to the knackers yard', *Herald* (2 August 2020).
- 108 **even an old-fashioned 'Scotsman, Irishman and Englishman' joke might be perceived as discriminatory:** Arthi Nachiappan, 'Hate law "may criminalise comedy"', *Times* (9 July 2020).
- 109 **owning a copy of the Bible could become a criminal offence:** Katrine Bussey, 'Bishops fear owning a Bible could be hate crime offence under new Scots law', *Scotsman* (30 July 2020).
- 109 **the SNP's Justice Secretary Humza Yousaf asserted that:** Humza Yousaf, 'Hate crime bill does not undermine free speech . . . it protects it', *National* (2 August 2020).
- 109 **Yousaf's stated belief that 'free speech itself is never an unfettered right' strongly suggests that the bill's ambiguity is no accident:** Quoted by Macwhirter, op. cit.
- 110 **'I believe he deserved to be drawn and quartered just for the lives of those six Tsarskoye Selo peasants!':** Solzhenitsyn, op. cit., p. 132.
- 110 **'so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors':** Ibid., pp. 77–78.
- 111 **'almost no expression whatever in the printed word':** Ibid., p. 198.
- 111 **'would leave a deep mark on our hearts for all eternity':** Ibid., p. 135.
- 111 **'regular classes, book clubs, newspaper editorial teams, sports, theatre & performance groups':** Media Mole, "'Compassionate, non-violent course of action)": Goldsmiths University students defend the gulag', *New Statesman* (11 September 2018).
- 112 **'And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?':** Solzhenitsyn, op. cit., p. 75.
- 113 **their intentions were deemed inconsequential to the perceived transgression:** Ibid., pp. 239–41.
- 113 **'And would arrests perhaps no longer have been so easy?':** Ibid., p. 11.
- 114 **'The simple act of an ordinary brave man is not to participate in lies':** Ibid., p. xii.
- 114 **'people were arrested who were guilty of nothing and were therefore unprepared to put up any resistance whatsoever':** Ibid., p. 9.
- 114 **'arrested for nothing and interrogated about nothing':** Ibid., p. 56.
- 115 **his claim that the virus was likely to 'burn out' and that levels of public immunity had been underestimated:** Freddie Sayers, 'Banned by YouTube: Professor Karol Sikora discusses Covid-19', *UnHerd* (21 May 2020).
- 116 **censorship can only be enacted by the state:** *Free Speech and Why It Matters*, op. cit., pp. 11–14.
- 116 **'to weed out anyone with the wrong ideological inclinations':** Murray, op. cit., pp. 110–11.
- 116 **Twitter has still to this date not removed a post by Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, calling for the wholesale eradication of Israel:** 'Our stance against Israel is the same stance we have always taken. #Israel is a

malignant cancerous tumor in the West Asian region that has to be removed and eradicated: it is possible and it will happen.' Ali Khamenei, Twitter (3 June 2018).

- 118 **a dystopian future in which human beings are wired into a mass computer simulation and are brought out by the symbolic means of swallowing a red pill:** Feminists tend to favour the term 'peaked', the moment at which an individual realises that he or she has blindly been following the dogma of trans activism at the expense of the truth.
- 119 **convicted at Airdrie Sheriff Court and fined £800 for breaching Section 127 of the 2003 Communications Act:** Meechan decided not to pay the £800 fine as a matter of principle, instead donating the money to a children's charity. However, the money was eventually taken from his bank account at the behest of the court.
- 120 **many will be drawn to fascism and criminality on the basis of a misinterpreted prank:** On the day of the arrest, one police officer affirmed that Meechan must be 'an actual Nazi trying to inspire people to become Nazis'. Count Dankula, Twitter (1 March 2017).
- 120 **In 1941, a dog in Finland sparked a three-month investigation by Germany's Nazi government:** 'Hitler-mocking dog enraged Nazis, according to new documents', *Telegraph* (7 January 2011).
- 121 **They didn't want us in mainstream society in the first place, and now they're trying to kick us out of the world we created for ourselves:** The concept of a community united by a sense of mischief is perhaps best exemplified by the fictional nation of 'shitposters' known as 'Kekistan'. Many outsiders have taken the Nazi-style design of the Kekistani flag as evidence that this subculture is simply a front for white supremacists. However, as Meechan explained to me: 'Kekistan was invented to satirise identity politics. It's a completely fake country with an invented history. The flag started as a meme. People think it's out of reverence for the Nazis, but it's the opposite. The Nazi flag is one of the most powerful symbols of the neo-Nazi movement. They hang it on their walls and praise it. Well, now it belongs to a bunch of neckbeards who masturbate to hentai.' It is small wonder that the alt-right has little time for Markus or his videos, many of which are openly disparaging of white nationalists and their desire for an ethno-state. It is curious, then, that so many media pundits have attempted to tar him with the same brush.
- 123 **'the right to offend is far more important than any right not to be offended':** Toby Helm, 'Atkinson defends right to offend', *Telegraph* (7 December 2004).
- 125 **the court had taken faith and intuition as a form of conclusive proof:** The prosecution also made their fair share of nonsensical statements; notably, that Meechan harbours a secret desire to murder whole stadiums full of Jewish people, which was greeted in the courtroom with the derisive laughter it deserved.

Exegesis

- 128 **to conceive of the liberated world in the language of the existing world:** Horkheimer stated that one cannot determine 'what a good, a free society would look like from within the society which we live in'. See Mark Murphy, "The more justice, the less freedom": Max Horkheimer on Critical Theory', *Social Theory Applied* (3 October 2014).
- 128 **like a rerun of Mussolini's march on Rome:** For example, Andy Beckett directly advocates the policy of 'no platforming' on the spurious grounds that mainstream rhetoric is fuelling the far right. He sees a continuum between Oswald Mosley's fascist movement and present-day conservatism, even citing Priti Patel's speech at the Tory party conference as adopting 'the boot-boy phrases and demagoguery of the far right'. See Andy Beckett, 'Britain was complacent about the far right. Now it's out in force', *Guardian* (5 October 2019).
- 128 **'fascist extremism and terrorism is being legitimised and fuelled by "mainstream" newspapers and politicians alike':** Owen Jones, Twitter (13 August 2017).
- 128 **'all white people' are implicated 'in white supremacy':** Lola Okolosie, 'Emma Watson's willingness to face the truth about race is refreshing', *Guardian* (10 January 2018).
- 129 **why the far right has lately been recruiting members with greater ease:** For details on the rise of far-right extremism, see United States Government Accountability Office, *Countering Violent Extremism: Actions Needed to Define Strategy and Assess Progress of Federal Efforts* (April 2017). See also Jack Buckby, *Monster of their Own Making: How the Far Left, the Media, and Politicians are Creating Far-Right Extremists* (New York: Bombardier Books, 2020), pp. 62–66, and Rakib Ehsan and Paul Stott (eds.), *Countering the Far Right: An Anthology* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2020).
- 129 **we should not allow the truth to be distorted through lazy hyperbole:** As an example of just how marginal this type of extremism has become, consider the overtly racist 'Unite the Right' rally which took place in Washington, DC, in 2018. It attracted a paltry twenty or so attendees, a marked contrast to the thousands of counter-protesters who also turned up. See Fraser Myers, 'Where are all the white supremacists?', *spiked* (15 August 2018).
- 130 **he is either being disingenuous or naïve:** Peter Walker, Twitter (25 June 2018).
- 131 **a time when the right-wing press seemed to be dominated by fantasists:** On 8 November 2011, under 'Clarifications and corrections', the *Daily Mail* acknowledged its error in previously stating that Christmas was being renamed as 'Winterval' in some areas of the United Kingdom. As the paper now made clear, 'Winterval was the collective name for a season of public events, both religious and secular, which took place in Birmingham in 1997 and 1998'. In spite of the *Daily Mail*'s apology, the misconception that Winterval had replaced Christmas persisted for many years in the right-wing tabloids. The fantasy of 'PC gone mad' was too appealing to dismiss.
- 131 **typically propagated by reactionary tabloid polemicists:** On 7 March 2006, the *Daily Express* ran on its front cover the

story ‘Political correctness goes mad at the nursery: now it’s Baa Baa Rainbow Sheep’. Although the song has often been adapted to teach children about the colours of the rainbow, it has been repeatedly misrepresented as an instance of how ‘political correctness’ is destroying society to the extent that it has become a cliché.

- 132 **more than three hundred authors on a watchlist if they have even the flimsiest of connections to the slave trade:** The former poet laureate Ted Hughes was included on this watchlist due to a family connection with Nicholas Ferrar (1592–1637), who had been involved in the Virginia Company and the establishment of colonies in America that imported slaves to work on their plantations. After critics pointed out that Hughes was not directly descended from Ferrar, who had died childless, the British Library issued an apology. See Jack Malvern, ‘British Library sorry for linking poet Ted Hughes to slave trade’, *Times* (25 November 2020).
- 132 **texts that might cause offence due to outdated racial stereotypes:** Eleanor Harding and Julie Henry, ‘Extremely offensive house on the prairie: Cambridge University archive slaps “trigger warnings” on classic children’s books because of potentially “harmful content”’, *Daily Mail* (24 October 2021).
- 132 **various books by Dr Seuss:** On 2 March 2021, Dr Seuss Enterprises (the business managing the author’s legacy) posted a message on his birthday to announce that six titles would no longer be published or licensed because they ‘portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong’. The titles were: *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), *McElligot’s Pool* (1947), *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953), *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955) and *The Cat’s Quizzer* (1976).
- 133 **‘because the word was triggering’:** Jeannie Suk Gersen, ‘The trouble with teaching rape law’, *New Yorker* (15 December 2014). She further notes that some students ‘even suggested that rape law should not be taught because of its potential to cause distress’.
- 133 **‘avoiding triggers is a symptom of PTSD, not a treatment for it’:** Lukianoff and Haidt, op. cit., p. 29.
- 133 **‘Trigger warnings are counter-therapeutic because they encourage avoidance of reminders of trauma, and avoidance maintains PTSD’:** Ibid.
- 134 **We feel that this movement is already having a chilling effect on our teaching and pedagogy:** Anonymous, ‘Trigger warnings are flawed’, *Inside Higher Ed* (29 May 2014).
- 135 **not to be taken as a sign that the ancient world lacked diversity:** Camilla Turner, ‘Cambridge museum to explain “whiteness” of its sculptures under anti-racism campaign’, *Telegraph* (22 August 2021).
- 135 **‘oppressive language list’ of phrases best avoided by students and staff:** John McWhorter, ‘Even trigger warning is now off-limits’, *Atlantic* (4 July 2021).
- 135 **A category headed ‘violent language’ featured phrases such as ‘rule of thumb’:** The folk etymology of ‘rule of thumb’ as relating to the maximum width of a rod allowed in the practice of wife-beating in English law has been roundly discredited. Rather, it originates from the habit of carpenters and other tradesmen using their thumb to approximate an inch in measurement. See James E. Clapp’s entry on ‘rule of thumb’ in James E. Clapp, Elizabeth G. Thornburg, Marc Galanter and Fred R. Shapiro, *Lawtalk: The Unknown Stories Behind Familiar Legal Expressions* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 219–25.
- 135 **apparently a university for the congenitally literal-minded:** Most bizarre of all was the inclusion of the word ‘picnic’ on the supposition that it bears historical connotations of racist lynchings in the United States. The author Joyce Carol Oates pointed out the word ‘lynching’ had not itself been censored by Brandeis, and so it seemed incoherent that ‘picnic’ should be singled out as problematic. Joyce Carol Oates, Twitter (24 June 2021).
- 135 **it was decreed that the phrase ‘trigger warning’ might itself be triggering as it invokes guns and violent imagery, and so ‘content advice’ was to be preferred:** This is reminiscent of when a website called ‘Geek Feminism’ added a trigger warning to its definition of ‘trigger warning’.
- 135 **Other universities have competed to see who can invent the most asinine warnings:** Paul Drury, ‘Students warned of kidnap in classic book by Robert Louis Stevenson’, *Times* (29 November 2021); Alexander Adams, ‘Trigger warnings have jumped the shark’, *spiked* (9 March 2022).
- 135 **a warning that students might find the contents ‘offensive and upsetting’:** Brendan O’Neill, ‘Now even 1984 comes with a trigger warning’, *spiked* (24 January 2022).
- 136 **‘a slippery form of censorship’:** Ibid.
- 136 **identified and removed books that were considered ‘harmful to staff and students’:** Doug Coxson, ‘Books deemed “harmful to staff and students” are being removed from region’s public school libraries’, *Cambridge Today* (26 October 2021).
- 136 **justice is the right of every man ‘be he any colour of the rainbow’:** Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 31 and p. 227. Originally published in 1960.
- 137 **particularly in the treatment of women and the assumption of their inherent servility:** See Gerald Peary, “‘The Handmaid’s Tale’: If puritans ruled . . . Atwood’s story on screen”, *Los Angeles Times* (4 March 1990).
- 137 **white wings around the face that prevent them ‘from seeing, but also from being seen’:** Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 18. Originally published in 1985.

- 137 **Atwood has described her ‘take on American Puritanism’ as ‘not that far behind’ Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*:** Peary, op. cit.
- 138 **‘found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light’:** See Alfred Kazin’s introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), pp. v–xv. Quotation taken from p. vii. The novel was originally published in 1850.
- 138 **‘who was hanged for being a witch in 1683 but survived the execution process’:** Atwood spoke of Mary Webster’s story in a 1990 interview: ‘She must have had a tough neck and been very light because, the next day, she was still alive . . . Under laws of double jeopardy, she couldn’t be hanged again. She was cut down, and died years later of natural causes.’ Peary, op. cit.
- 138 **‘the themes of the book ‘were outdated and too focused on white, male power structures’:** Coxson, op. cit.
- 138 **‘to bowdlerise Jackie Collins novels with a felt-tip pen and draw bras on the women in breastfeeding manuals’:** For the script of this episode see Victoria Wood, *Mens Sana in Thingummy Doodah and Other Nuggets of Homely Fun* (London: Methuen, 1991), pp. 33–59.
- 138 **‘She thinks book-burning is a sensible alternative to oil-fired central heating’:** Ibid., p. 35.
- 138 **‘the absurdist notion of a librarian who approves of censorship would become a habitual figure in the industry’:** Admittedly, there is nothing new in the idea of librarians attempting to protect the public from the influence of corrupting texts. In the fourth volume of Compton Mackenzie’s autobiography, he relates how in the early 1910s ‘the libraries had exercised a kind of semi-censorship on books’ and ‘did not display books they disapproved of’. Compton Mackenzie, *My Life and Times: Octave Four 1907–1915* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 192.
- 138 **‘destroyed or recycled if they were judged to contain outdated racial stereotypes’:** Tyler Dawson, ‘Book burning at Ontario francophone schools as “gesture of reconciliation” denounced’, *National Post* (7 September 2021).
- 139 **‘if one ignores the overtones of Fahrenheit 451’:** Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1953).
- 139 **‘to change the definition of the word ‘racism’ to ‘reflect systemic oppression’:** Janice Gassam Asare, ‘Merriam-Webster is changing the definition of racism to reflect systemic oppression’, *Forbes* (11 June 2020).
- 139 **‘the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people’:** This alteration on the website of the Anti-Defamation League took place in the summer of 2020. See Nicole Chavez, ‘Anti-Defamation League revised its definition of racism because it was “so narrow”’, CNN (4 February 2022).
- 139 **‘intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals’:** *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 9.
- 139 **‘racism is ‘a system’ or ‘a structure, not an event’’:** Ibid., pp. 20–21. DiAngelo is quoting here from Patrick Wolfe via Kēhaulani Kauanui’s essay “‘A structure, not an event’: Settler Colonialism and enduring indigeneity”, *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 2016).
- 139 **‘prejudice plus power’:** Robin DiAngelo puts it this way: ‘When a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism’. *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 9.
- 139 **‘the perpetrators were ‘enacting whiteness’:** Nell Irvin Painter, ‘A racist attack shows how whiteness evolves’, *New York Times* (26 October 2019).
- 139 **‘colourism’:** The term ‘colorism’ is said to have been coined by the novelist Alice Walker in 1982, who defined it as the ‘prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color’. Quoted by Kimberly Jade Norwood, “‘If you is white, you’s alright . . .’ Stories about colorism in America”, *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, vol. 14, issue 4 (2015).
- 140 **‘Beware the TERF’:** Dictionary.com, Twitter (6 August 2020).
- 140 **‘punch a TERF’:** When discussing this on my GB News podcast *Free Speech Nation*, Helen Joyce pointed out to me that the example phrase ‘punch a TERF’ was probably settled upon due to an algorithm that would identify the most common usage of the phrase. If true, this would make its inclusion even more disturbing than I had thought. See *Free Speech Nation: The Podcast*, episode 5 (17 July 2021) on the YouTube channel of GB News.
- 141 **‘the word ‘black’ has been capitalised, but the word ‘white’ has been left in lower case’:** See entry for ‘I have a dream’ at the *Encyclopedia Britannica* website.
- 141 **‘white people in general have much less shared history and culture, and don’t have the experience of being discriminated against because of skin colour’:** David Bauder, ‘AP says it will capitalize Black but not white’, Associated Press (20 July 2020).
- 141 **‘If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words’:** See the 1978 speech, ‘How to build a universe that doesn’t fall apart two days later’ in Philip K. Dick, *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1986), pp. 1–23. Quotation taken from p. 8.
- 141 **‘be compelled to speak only according to the dictates of the supreme power’:** R. H. M. Elwes (trans.), *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, 2 vols. (London: Chiswick Press, 1883), vol. I, p. 258.
- 141 **‘his opposition to the compelled use of gender-neutral pronouns’:** Jason McBride, ‘The Pronoun Warrior’, *Toronto Life*

(25 January 2017).

- 141 **'But each retreat increases the possibility of the next retreat':** *Beyond Order*, op. cit., p. 147.
- 142 **Kate Scottow was convicted under the Communications Act:** George Odling, 'Mother who called trans woman "he" on Twitter is cleared of wrongdoing after appealing against conviction', *Daily Mail* (11 December 2020).
- 142 **Journalist Caroline Farrow was subjected to a six-month-long investigation by police:** Martin Evans and Gabriella Swerling, 'Devout Catholic "who used wrong pronoun to describe transgender girl" to be interviewed by police', *Telegraph* (20 March 2019).
- 142 **members of staff at the British Library were being encouraged to wear pronoun badges:** Craig Simpson, 'British Library gives staff "woke" pronoun badges, so they're not judged by their cover', *Telegraph* (1 February 2022).
- 142 **Scottish civil service staff were being asked to sign off emails with their preferred pronouns:** Marc Horne, 'Most civil servants dubious of pronoun pledge plan', *Times* (30 July 2021). As the article makes clear, many people are uncomfortable with these measures. An internal survey at the Scottish civil service revealed that 60 per cent have no intention of adding pronouns to their emails.
- 142 **the BBC issued new guidelines to encourage its staff to make similar gestures:** Bhvishya Patel, 'BBC encourages staff to say if they want to be called he, she or they in their email signatures in a drive to be more inclusive', *Daily Mail* (10 July 2020).
- 143 **Advance publicity for the Netflix series The Sandman included pronouns for cast members:** Netflix, Twitter (26 May 2021).
- 143 **make it policy for staff to state their preferred pronouns in formal communications:** Charlotte Wace, 'Leeds University students demand staff state their gender', *Times* (30 October 2021).
- 143 **urging spies to acknowledge their 'white privilege' and declare their pronouns:** Daniel Martin, 'Security chief tells our spies to go woke', *Daily Mail* (24 February 2022), p. 1.
- 143 **discussions about pansexuality and asexuality:** Ministry of Defence LGBT+ Network, Twitter (24 February 2022).
- 143 **A striking example was published on the BBC's news website in March 2022:** 'Pensioner arrested after dismembered body found', *BBC News* (14 March 2022).
- 144 **a condition of the womb:** Tea Kane, 'As a nonbinary person, I know it's not just women who get endometriosis', *Metro* (25 February 2022).
- 145 **'look like men':** Julie Bindel, 'Don't you dare ask my pronouns', *UnHerd* (18 October 2019).
- 147 **they are not compatible with standard English:** One English teacher told me that if presented with a singular 'they' in an essay he would be obliged to correct it. Moreover, he said, the now common practice of 'peer marking' means that pupils have the opportunity to correct each other's work, and that they would be the first to find fault when it comes to poor grammar. 'Teachers are more prone to fashionable nonsense than pupils,' he said to me. 'Trust the kids. They know bullshit when they see it.'

Revelation

- 149 **'Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man . . . who fucks around with guys':** Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (London: Nick Hern, 2007), pp. 51–52. First performed in 1991 at the Eureka Theatre, San Francisco.
- 150 **something that the Party could at any time impose on its citizens:** George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 83. Originally published by Martin Secker & Warburg in 1949.
- 150 **'should therefore be treated with suspicion, maybe dismantled, decolonized, or banned':** James Lindsay, Twitter (6 June 2020).
- 150 **it is fundamentally opposed to liberalism:** In its earliest incarnation, postmodernism was a conservative reaction against the degradation of Western culture. The theologian Bernard Iddings Bell, the first to refer to postmodernism in print, rejected both liberalism and totalitarianism and suggested postmodernism as a viable alternative, describing it as a 'religion for living'. Bernard Iddings Bell, *Postmodernism and Other Essays* (Milwaukee: Morehouse, 1926).
- 150 **'Counter-Enlightenment':** Isaiah Berlin, 'The Counter-Enlightenment', in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), pp. 1–24.
- 150 **'conspiracy of dead white men in periwigs':** The phrase is taken from Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 336. Foucault argued that we must free ourselves from what he called the 'intellectual blackmail' of the Enlightenment, a condition by which we are expected to be either 'for' or 'against' its principles. Rather, he argued that we ought to understand ourselves as products of its influence. Michel Foucault, 'What Is Enlightenment?', in Michael Drotle (ed.), *The Postmodern Reader: Foundational Texts* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 41–52.
- 151 **'little occasion to prove the Witchcraft, it being evident and notorious to all beholders':** Mather, op. cit., p. 129.
- 151 **broadening of definitions and changes in how such incidents are recorded:** According to the Home Office, 'increases in police recorded hate crime in recent years have been driven by improvements in crime recording and a better identification of what constitutes a hate crime'. See the Home Office report on *Official Statistics: Hate Crime, England*

and Wales, 2020 to 2021 (12 October 2021). Fraser Myers notes that hate crime is seen to drop when these changes in policy have not been implemented, offering the example of the ‘long-term decline in hate crime’ in the Crime Survey for England and Wales. See Fraser Myers, ‘The manufacturing of a hate-crime epidemic’, *spiked* (23 August 2021).

- 151 ***in spite of overwhelming evidence that this is not the case:*** Madison Smith has cited research that reveals the ‘average adult in England and Wales has a one-in-100,000 chance of being murdered in a given year whereas the average trans person has a one-in-200,000 to one-in-500,000 chance of being murdered in the UK over the course of a year’. She further notes that, even with the misleading recording methods, anti-trans hate crimes are consistently less frequent than those against other minority groups, and trans people are far less likely to be murdered than the average person. Madison Smith, ‘Neither marginalised, abused nor vulnerable’, *Critic* (21 October 2021).
- 152 ***The justification for the change is well meaning:*** This is, in part, the legacy of Keir Starmer’s tenure as Director of Public Prosecutions (from 2008 to 2013) and the subsequent politicisation of the Crown Prosecution Service. The presumption of guilt and the pressure to convict people for political reasons has been particularly corrosive in rape cases. In June 2018 it was revealed that prosecutors and police had withheld evidence in forty-seven cases of rape and sexual assault which would have seen innocent defendants exonerated. See Caroline Davies and Vikram Dodd, ‘CPS chief apologises over disclosure failings in rape cases’, *Guardian* (5 June 2018).
- 152 ***a meticulous and sobering account of the North Wales care workers sex abuse scandals of the 1990s and the fantasists that fuelled them:*** Richard Webster, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn* (Oxford: Orwell Press, 2005).
- 152 ***without a scrap or tittle of evidence:*** Simon Warr, ‘Carl Beech and his enablers’, *spiked* (23 July 2019).
- 153 ***in spite of the clearly visible backdrop of burning cars and buildings:*** Lia Eustachewich, ‘CNN blasted for caption calling Kenosha protests “fiery but mostly peaceful”’, *New York Post* (27 August 2020).
- 153 ***‘largely peaceful’ protests:*** ‘London anti-racism protests leave 27 officers hurt’, *BBC News* (7 June 2020).
- 154 ***‘alternative facts’:*** The phrase ‘alternative facts’ was famously used by Kellyanne Conway, Senior Counsellor to the President, during a press conference on 22 January 2017 in which she defended the Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s inflated estimation of the number of attendees at Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony.
- 154 ***claims made by Meghan Markle in an interview with Oprah Winfrey:*** This discussion is available on the *Good Morning Britain* YouTube channel under the title ‘Piers and Alex clash over Prince Harry and Meghan’s accusation of racism’, uploaded on 9 March 2021.
- 154 ***as though the recital of a cliché was any kind of adequate surrogate for the facts:*** One is reminded of *The Clouds* (423 BC) by Aristophanes, in which Unjust Discourse claims to triumph over Just Discourse by ‘the invention of new maxims’. Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, in Arthur Zieger (ed.), *Plays of the Greek Dramatists: Selections from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes* (Cheshire: Biblo and Tannen, 1946), pp. 297–328. Quotation taken from p. 316.
- 155 ***to even raise the question was an example of ‘white privilege’:*** This discussion is available on the *This Morning* YouTube channel under the title, ‘Is racism at the heart of Meghan and Harry’s departure?’, uploaded on 13 January 2020. Similarly, journalist Kelsey Borresen has argued that for a white person to claim that he or she does not have white privilege is evidence of white privilege: ‘For white people to dismiss the benefits they’ve reaped because of their whiteness only goes to show how oblivious – and privileged – they really are’. Kelsey Borresen, ‘6 things white people say that highlight their privilege’, *Huffington Post* (11 June 2020).
- 155 ***Markle’s ‘lived experience’ apparently confirms that the royal family is inherently racist, but Prince William’s ‘lived experience’ that his family is ‘very much not’ racist can be readily dismissed:*** Caroline Davies, ‘Royal family is “very much not” racist, says Prince William’, *Guardian* (11 March 2021).
- 155 ***The concept was arguably popularised by the feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir:*** Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde (London: Vintage, 2010). Originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949.
- 157 ***Science is about deepening our knowledge of what is true, not what is less likely to cause offence or promote diversity and inclusion:*** For an alternative view, see Daniel Akinbosede, ‘Science curricula must be decolonised too’, *Times Higher Education* (5 June 2020).
- 157 ***‘they can be harmful for intersex and transgender people’:*** Vadim M. Shteyler, Jessica A. Clarke and Eli Y. Adashi, ‘Failed assignments – rethinking sex designations on birth certificates’, *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 383, no. 25 (December 2020), pp. 2399–401. The quotation is taken from the article abstract.
- 157 ***‘minimise the risk of publishing inappropriate or otherwise offensive content’:*** The guidelines define ‘offensive content’ as ‘Any content that could reasonably offend someone on the basis of their age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious or political beliefs, marital or parental status, physical features, national origin, social status or disability’. For more details, see Lawrence Krauss, ‘Why the easily offended are a threat to scientific progress’, *National Post* (5 December 2021).
- 157 ***‘on many levels, mathematics itself operates as whiteness’:*** Lucy Pasha-Robinson, ‘Teaching maths perpetuates white privilege, says university professor’, *Independent* (25 October 2017).
- 157 ***raindrops are the tears of the goddess Papatuanuku:*** Jerry Coyne, ““Ways of knowing”: New Zealand pushes to have “indigenous knowledge” (mythology) taught on parity with modern science in science class”, *Why Evolution Is True* (3 December 2021).

- 157 ***an open letter in the Listener which advised against this approach:*** See ‘In defence of science’, *Listener* (31 July 2021).
- 158 ***it would be like teaching ‘Druid “ways of knowing” in British science classes’:*** Richard Dawkins, Twitter (6 December 2021).
- 158 ***a simple but pertinent question:*** Toby Young, ‘Why punish a scientist for defending science?’, *Spectator* (4 December 2021).
- 158 ***‘objectivity’ on a short list of ‘harmful research practices’:*** Lauren Farrell, ‘Equitable research requires questioning the status quo’, *Urban Institute* (20 September 2021).
- 158 ***‘there is a cognitive asymmetry between the standpoint of the oppressed and the standpoint of the privileged’:*** José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 197.
- 159 ***‘Great Awokening’:*** We can relate this to Hegel’s ‘master–slave dialectic’, an idea 159 by Marx, which posits that the slave experiences a heightened consciousness because he occupies the world of both the master and his subordinate.
- 159 ***‘an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else’:*** Bari Weiss’s resignation letter is available online at www.bariweiss.com/resignation-letter.
- 160 ***LGBTQIA+, LGBTQ2SIA and LGBTQIP2SAA:*** LGBTQIA+ stands for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual’ with the plus for ‘related communities’. LGBTQ2SIA stands for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit, intersex and asexual’. LGBTQIP2SAA stands for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, asexual and ally’.
- 160 ***the resentment between the dissident factions in Monty Python’s Life of Brian:*** A viral video of Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau saw him struggling to remember the initialism 2SLGBTQQIA+ in the correct order. The meaning of this initialism is ‘two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual and related communities’. See Clare McCarthy, ““Headbutting a keyboard is now a sexuality”: Justin Trudeau is mocked for using the latest sexual identities acronym 2SLGBTQQIA+”, *Daily Mail* (7 October 2021).
- 162 ***Telling people you’re virtuous isn’t a virtue, it’s self-promotion:*** See Norman Doidge’s foreword to Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), pp. vii–xxiv. Quotation taken from p. xx.
- 163 ***almost a third of American millennials now claiming membership of the LGBTQIA+ community:*** The study has been undertaken by the Arizona Christian University, and surveyed six hundred people between the ages of 18 and 37. Of those in the lower age bracket (18 to 24), 39 per cent identified as ‘LGBT’. For details, see Gareth Roberts, ‘Being “LGBT” has become cosplay for millennials’, *UnHerd* (10 November 2021).
- 163 ***a registered charity that campaigns solely for the rights of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals:*** The LGB Alliance was formed in 2019 by founding members Bev Jackson, Kate Harris, Allison Bailey, Malcolm Clark and Ann Sinnott.
- 163 ***commentator Owen Jones has repeatedly smeared the LGB Alliance as a ‘hate group’, and comedian Matt Lucas has branded it ‘anti-trans’:*** Owen Jones, Twitter (19 January 2020); Matt Lucas, Twitter (30 September 2021).
- 164 ***‘to cut out the T is to kill’:*** Emma Powys Maurice, ‘Russell T Davies takes down LGB Alliance in incendiary speech: “To cut out the T is to kill”’, *Pink News* (14 October 2021).
- 165 ***our focus is on lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people and their issues:*** See the LGB Alliance website (www.lgballiance.org.uk/myths).
- 165 ***it was considered an outlandish proposition:*** Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).
- 166 ***states the law as Stonewall would prefer it to be, rather than the law as it is’:*** Nicola Woolcock, ‘Stonewall “gave bad advice” to university in free speech row’, *Times* (20 May 2021).
- 167 ***excludes most gay people, for whom gender identity is simply not relevant to their sexuality:*** Many gay activists have also taken umbrage at the recent revisionist phenomenon of rebranding gay historical and literary figures as trans, thereby diminishing the significance and contribution of gay lives. Examples include Stormé DeLarverie (a lesbian who participated in the Stonewall riots of 1969) and Radclyffe Hall (the lesbian author of *The Well of Loneliness*). See Joyce, op. cit., p. 143.
- 167 ***they were not attracted to female-identifying individuals with penises:*** Caroline Lowbridge, ““We’re being pressured into sex by some trans women””, *BBC News* (26 October 2021).
- 167 ***‘sexual racists’:*** Josephine Bartosch, ‘Trans lobby group Stonewall brands lesbians “sexual racists” for raising concerns about being pressured into having sex with transgender women who still have male genitals’, *Daily Mail* (20 November 2021).
- 167 ***‘how societal prejudices may have shaped your attractions’:*** Quoted by Lowbridge, op. cit.
- 167 ***claiming that the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s was a positive thing:*** For those in any doubt, see the anonymous website called ‘Woke homophobia: anti-gay hatred & boxer ceiling abuse from trans activists & gender-identity ideologues’. The ‘glass ceiling’ is a phrase used by feminists to describe the career limitations that women face in a patriarchal system. The ‘cotton ceiling’ and ‘boxer ceiling’ – allusions to female and male underwear – are new variations on the concept

which refer to the barriers that trans people might face in attempting to have sex with individuals who are same-sex attracted.

- 168 **a majority of Catholics believe it to be a merely symbolic ritual:** A recent survey found that 69 per cent of Catholics said that they did not believe the bread and wine literally turned into flesh and blood. Gregory A. Smith, ‘Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ’, *Pew Research Center* (5 August 2019).
- 169 **the notion that we each have an innate gender identity that transcends physiological considerations:** Sarah Ditum, ‘The taboo trans question’, *UnHerd* (10 March 2022); Joyce, op. cit., p. 2. Ditum quotes Julia Serano: ‘Many cissexual people seem to have a hard time accepting the idea that they too have a subconscious sex – a deep-rooted understanding of what sex their bodies should be. I suppose that when a person feels right in the sex they were born into, they are never forced to locate or question their subconscious sex, to differentiate it from their physical sex. In other words, their subconscious sex exists, but it is hidden from their view. They have a blind spot.’
- 169 **a ‘woman’ is simply one who identifies as a woman:** ‘Given that gender is a set of social stereotypes about how male and female people should behave, and no one has been able to give meaning to the idea of gender identity that doesn’t invoke those stereotypes, then it seems that how people understand their “gender identity” is, in good part, a social phenomenon.’ Dr Jane Clare Jones, ‘Owen Jones vs Robert Webb’, *Critic* (30 April 2021).
- 169 **she resorted to meandering obfuscation:** Sabina Rouse, ‘J.K. Rowling slams Labour leader Keir Starmer as “unable to defend women’s rights”’, *Express* (12 March 2022).
- 169 **babies are born without a sex:** Brendan O’Neill, ‘Dawn Butler’s transgender madness’, *Spectator* (18 February 2020).
- 169 **‘It’s not right’:** Andrew Woodcock, ‘Labour conference: wrong to say that only women have a cervix, says Keir Starmer’, *Independent* (26 September 2021).
- 169 **I don’t think we can conduct this debate’:** Quoted by Brendan O’Neill, ‘Everyone who has a penis is a man’, *spiked* (30 March 2022).
- 170 **asked to provide the dreaded definition:** David Averre and Katelyn Caralle, ‘Biden’s Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson refuses to define the word “woman” because she’s “not a biologist” as she is grilled on day two of her confirmation hearing’, *Daily Mail* (23 March 2022).
- 170 **has little merit as a source of reliable information:** Alia E. Dastagir, ‘Marsha Blackburn asked Ketanji Brown Jackson to define “woman.” Science says there’s no simple answer’, *USA Today* (24 March 2022).
- 170 **a father discusses his experience of raising a transgender child:** John Conroy (director), *Transgender Kids: Who Knows Best*, BBC (April 2017).
- 171 **because they do not fulfil old-fashioned gender stereotypes:** A leaked recording from a 2019 training session run by Mermaids, a group that campaigns for childhood transitioning, included details of a ‘gender spectrum’ that ran from Barbie to GI Joe. This gives us some sense of the conservative views of gender that underpin much of this discourse. Joyce, op. cit., pp. 116–17.
- 171 **‘there would be no gay people left’:** Ibid., p. 86. For more on the Tavistock Clinic see Jamie Doward, ‘Gender identity clinic accused of fast-tracking young adults’, *Observer* (3 November 2018).
- 171 **A preponderance of ‘detransitioners’ are gay men and lesbians:** One of the most publicised cases of detransitioning is that of Keira Bell, who underwent surgery to transition from female to male in her teens following guidance from the Tavistock Centre. She was to later bring legal claims against the clinic. ‘There was never anyone telling me to love myself and that I was fine the way I was,’ she claims. ‘It was just, “change yourself and you’ll be better”.’ Joyce, op. cit., p. 90.
- 171 **‘I don’t have a body, I am a body’:** Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 41.
- 171 **the number of referrals to the Tavistock clinic, which was 2 in 1989 and 2,378 in 2020:** Joyce, op. cit., p. 91.
- 171 **Social contagion, particularly common among teenage girls:** Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: Teenage Girls and the Transgender Craze* (London: Swift Press, 2020). Shrier’s book has been the subject of ongoing controversy. It was temporarily withdrawn from sale at Target and on the Amazon website, and employees at Spotify threatened to strike if Shrier’s appearance on Joe Rogan’s podcast was not edited or removed. Chase Strangio, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union – a group formerly committed to upholding free speech – tweeted on 13 November 2020 that ‘stopping the circulation of this book and these ideas is 100% a hill I will die on’. See Abigail Shrier, ‘Does the ACLU want to ban my book?’, *Wall Street Journal* (15 November 2020). Having been invited to speak at Princeton University in December 2021, Shrier was forced to move the event off campus and limit the audience to thirty-five after threats were issued by activists and the police were called. She later published a transcript of the speech on Substack under the title ‘What I told the students of Princeton’ (9 December 2021).
- 171 **‘can lead someone to conclude that deviating from sex stereotypes makes a person trans’:** Joyce, op. cit., p. 10.
- 172 **‘not encouraged to believe that they are members of the opposite sex’:** Ibid., p. 33.
- 172 **violence against them is overwhelmingly caused by male perpetrators:** ‘Women are around five times more likely than men to be the victim of a sexual crime, and men are one hundred times more likely to be the perpetrator of one’. Joyce, op. cit., p. 156.

- 172 ***the ways in which women's rights depend upon a recognition of biological truth:*** Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (London: Fleet, 2021).
- 172 ***the indisputable physical advantage enjoyed by male athletes:*** ‘The average adult man has 41 percent more non-fat body mass (blood, bones, muscles and so on) than the average woman, 50 percent more muscle mass in his legs and 75 percent more in his arms. His legs are 65 percent stronger, and his upper body is 90 percent stronger.’ Joyce, op. cit., p. 178. See also the editorial piece in *Quillette* entitled ‘Accommodating trans athletes without rejecting the reality of human biology’ (17 February 2021).
- 173 ***'Facts, concrete existences, are stubborn things, and are not so soon tampered with or turned about to any point we please, as mere names and abstractions':*** William Hazlitt, ‘On reason and imagination’, in *The Plain Speaker* (London, Everyman’s Library, 1928), pp. 44–55. Quotation taken from p. 52. Originally published in 1826.
- 173 ***raped on a hospital ward:*** See my interview with Baroness Emma Nicholson on *Free Speech Nation* (20 March 2022), available on the GB News YouTube channel.
- 173 ***'therefore the rape could not have happened':*** Zachary Evans, ‘British hospital allegedly denied rape claim because perpetrator was transgender’, *National Review* (18 March 2022).
- 173 ***'the trans person's view takes priority':*** See ‘Delivering same-sex accommodation’ (September 2019), available on the NHS England website.
- 173 ***The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears: Nineteen Eighty-Four,*** op. cit., p. 84.
- 174 ***Mixed-Sex Accommodation (MSA):*** See Jeremy Burrows and Matthew March, ‘Mixed-sex accommodation specification’, (Information Standards Board for Health and Social Care, 30 November 2010), available on the UK government’s archive web service.
- 174 ***gender was to be the determining factor:*** Gavin Cordon, ‘Hospitals to face fines over mixed sex wards’, *Independent* (16 August 2010).
- 174 ***'symbolic glue' which has supposedly been forged between feminists and right-wing populist groups in Europe:*** Sophia Siddiqui, ‘Feminism, biological fundamentalism and the attack on trans rights’, *Institute of Race Relations* (3 June 2021).
- 174 ***'anti-gender ideology is one of the dominant strains of fascism in our time':*** Jules Gleeson, ‘Judith Butler: “We need to rethink the category of woman”’, *Guardian* (7 September 2021). Butler’s remarks were deleted from the online article within hours of its publication with the following explanation appended: ‘This article was edited on 7 September 2021 to reflect developments which occurred after the interview took place’. See Julie Bindel, ‘No Judith Butler, gender-critical feminists aren’t “fascists”’, *UnHerd* (8 September 2021).
- 174 ***compared gender-critical feminism to anti-Semitism:*** Simon Fanshawe, ‘Stonewall in crisis: “Why can’t we have civil debates any more?”’, *Telegraph* (12 June 2021).
- 175 ***'U ok hun?':*** Stonewall, Twitter (23 May 2021).
- 176 ***'The doshes are what the gostak distims':*** Quoted by David E. Wright Sr., ‘Do words have inherent meaning?’, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 65, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 177–90. Quotation taken from p. 189.
- 177 ***the move to gender-neutral uniforms:*** Rachel Hosie, ‘40 secondary schools across England have banned pupils from wearing skirts’, *Independent* (2 July 2018).
- 178 ***judged sex itself to be a social construct: One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,*** op. cit., p. 151.
- 178 ***'there is no such thing as a "biologically female/male body":'*** Victoria Ward, ‘Action Aid is embroiled in trans row after declaring there is “no such thing” as biological sex’, *Telegraph* (17 July 2020).
- 178 ***'attempt to jump the epistemological shark':*** Colin Wright, ‘The new evolution deniers’, *Quillette* (30 November 2018).
- 178 ***A useful way of classifying this division within the constructionist camp:*** Celia Kitzinger, ‘Social Constructionism: Implications for Lesbian and Gay Psychology’, in Anthony R. D’Augelli and Charlotte J. Patterson (eds.), *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities Over the Lifespan: Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 136–61.
- 178 ***'Weak' social constructionism:*** Ibid., p. 142.
- 179 ***'Strong' social constructionism:*** Ibid., pp. 142–43. Kitzinger offers the following two examples of arguments for ‘strong’ social constructionism: Rhoda Kesler Unger, ‘Psychological, Feminist and Personal Epistemology’, in Mary McCanney Gergen (ed.), *Feminist Thought and the Structure of Knowledge* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), pp. 124–41; Celia Kitzinger, ‘Deconstructing Sex Differences’, *British Psychological Society Psychology of Women Section Newsletter* 4 (1989), pp. 9–17.
- 179 ***infiltrated peer-reviewed medical literature:*** For an overview of the ways in which medical and scientific literature has become overwhelmed by gender identity ideology, see Colin Wright, ‘On sex and gender, the New England Journal of Medicine has abandoned its scientific mission’, *Quillette* (23 December 2020).
- 179 ***the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality:*** *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., p. 173.

Dogma

- 181 **the CIA's investigations into Soviet armaments during the Cold War comes under scrutiny:** Adam Curtis (writer and producer), *The Power of Nightmares*, episode 1: 'Baby It's Cold Outside'. Originally broadcast on BBC2, 20 October 2004.
- 182 **proof that racism is the explanation for the disparity:** We find the equivalent assumptions in discussions of the 'gender pay gap'. For an overview, see Joanna Williams, *Women vs Feminism: Why We All Need Liberating from the Gender Wars* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2017), pp. 49–68. See also Ella Whelan, *What Women Want: Fun, Freedom and an End to Feminism* (Brisbane: Connor Court, 2017), pp. 72–75.
- 182 **'racial inequity is evidence of racist policy':** Ibram X. Kendi, 'Pass an anti-racist constitutional amendment', *Politico* (3 October 2019).
- 182 **'a ghostly system of power relations that produces certain gestures, moods, emotions and states of being':** Rachel Poser, 'He wants to save classics from whiteness. Can the field survive?', *New York Times Magazine* (2 February 2021).
- 182 **'Like the Holy Ghost?':** Andrew Sullivan, 'The unbearable whiteness of the Classics', *Weekly Dish* (5 February 2021).
- 183 **black Londoners face 'systemic racism':** Sadiq Khan, Twitter (5 June 2020).
- 183 **'the pervasive force of white supremacy':** Quoted by Jacob Howland, 'Scientific tyranny has captured America', *UnHerd* (31 January 2022).
- 183 **'the public health risks of not protesting to demand an end to systemic racism greatly exceed the harms of the virus':** Jennifer Nuzzo, Twitter (2 June 2020). Tom Frieden, former head of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, offered similar advice: 'The threat to Covid control from protesting outside is tiny compared to the threat to Covid control created when governments act in ways that lose community trust. People can protest peacefully AND work together to stop Covid. Violence harms public health.' Dr Tom Frieden, Twitter (2 June 2020).
- 184 **For those who are interested in an accessible primer:** Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, third edition (New York: New York University Press, 2017). For further reading see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.), *Critical Whiteness Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).
- 185 **"outsider groups" that experience racism first hand':** Quoted by Peter Monaghan, "Critical Race Theory": some startling analyses', *Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 June 1993).
- 185 **we are right to ask for clear and irrefutable proof:** Nigel Biggar has cited statistics that show how claims of structural racial bias in British universities are unsound: 'On the latest figures, the BAME population of people aged 19–26 in England and Wales is 18.3%, but the non-white undergraduate student intake in UK universities is 26.2%, and even at stereotypically elitist and hide-bound Oxford it is 22.1 per cent. Moreover, 9.7% of BAME academic staff are professors, only 1.4 percentage points lower than their white peers. Within BAME groups, the professorial proportion of black staff is just under five per cent, but for their Chinese colleagues it is over 16% – much higher than for whites.' Nigel Biggar, 'Why shouldn't the curriculum be "Eurocentric"?' , *UnHerd* (9 July 2020).
- 185 **an investigation ought to be launched:** Fraser Myers, 'Finally, woke "racists" are being held to account', *spiked* (18 September 2020).
- 186 **'a critical race theoretical perspective in education analogous to that of critical race theory in legal scholarship':** Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV, 'Toward a critical race theory of education', *Teachers College Record*, vol. 97, no. 1 (Fall 1995), pp. 47–68. Quotation taken from p. 47.
- 186 **For those who sincerely believe that Critical Race Theory is unrelated to the field of education:** Adrienne D. Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau Anderson (eds.), *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song* (London: Routledge, 2006); Laurence Parker and David Gillborn (eds.), *Critical Race Theory in Education* (London: Routledge, 2020); Gloria Ladson-Billings, *Critical Race Theory in Education: A Scholar's Journey* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021).
- 187 **'How did racism manifest in that situation?:** *Cynical Theories*, op. cit., p. 133. Robin DiAngelo argues that we ought 'to focus on how – rather than if – our racism is manifest'. *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 129.
- 187 **'pervades every vestige of our reality':** Omowale Akintunde, 'White racism, white supremacy, white privilege, and the social construction of race: moving from modernist to postmodernist multiculturalism', *Multicultural Education*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1999). Quoted by DiAngelo in *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 72.
- 187 **'every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups':** Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (London: Bodley Head, 2019), p. 18. For Kendi's description of Critical Race Theory and intersectionality as 'foundational' to his work, see his interview on the Slate podcast *A Word . . .* with Jason Johnson (11 June 2021).
- 187 **anything can be problematised as racist:** Adam Forrest, 'Former Labour MP suggests Kellogg's monkey logo on Coco Pops is racist', *Independent* (16 June 2020); Helena Horton, 'British countryside is racist, says Countryfile presenter', *Telegraph* (15 October 2020); Kevin Hylton, 'The unbearable whiteness of cycling', *The Conversation* (27 April 2017); Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, 'The racist history of tipping', *Politico* (17 July 2019); Jada Gomez, 'The unintentional racism found in traffic signals', *Medium* (9 July 2020); Alex Ross, 'Black scholars confront white supremacy in classical

music’, *New Yorker* (14 September 2020); Bryan W. Van Norden, ‘Western philosophy is racist’, *Aeon* (31 October 2017); Jessica Salter, ‘Interior design has a race problem – and it needs to be addressed’, *Vogue* (28 June 2020); Will Humphries, ‘Orcs in The Lord of the Rings “show Tolkien was racist”’, *Times* (27 November 2018); Tré Goins-Phillips, ‘Clemson University: expecting people to show up on time is racist’, *Blaze Media* (14 April 2017); Alexandre Antonelli, ‘The time has come to decolonise botanical gardens like Kew’, *Independent* (26 June 2020).

- 187 **a black guest is startled to see Blanche and Rose wearing dark brown mud-masks:** Deirdre Simonds, ‘*The Golden Girls* episode removed from Hulu over blackface joke involving Rue McClanahan and Betty White’, *Daily Mail* (28 June 2020).
- 187 **racism in higher education is remarkably uncommon:** David Batty, ‘UK universities condemned for failure to tackle racism’, *Guardian* (5 July 2019). The headline in the print edition was ‘Revealed: the scale of racism at universities’.
- 188 **racism in higher education is ‘endemic’:** The article quoted Labour MP David Lammy, who claimed that these findings confirmed his view ‘that many universities are not treating racism with the seriousness it deserves. If universities do not act fast to change the culture, from the lecture hall to the student union, talented students from BME backgrounds will continue to be locked out.’ A follow-up comment piece in the *Guardian* drew similar conclusions, arguing that the results of the poll demonstrate ‘a lack of progress that borders on the obstinate’. See Lola Okolosie, ‘No wonder UK universities are failing on racism – most don’t value diversity at all’, *Guardian* (8 July 2019).
- 188 **trust in figures of authority is irreparably depleted:** Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), trans. Thomas McCarthy. Originally published as *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* in 1973.
- 188 **‘brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership’:** Quoted by Kendi, op. cit., p. 46.
- 189 **the vast majority of people in Britain are opposed to any form of racial prejudice:** See, for example, ‘Race and ethnicity in Britain’, Ipsos MORI (June 2020). The vast majority of respondents (89%) said that ‘they would be happy for their child to marry someone from another ethnic group’ and an even higher majority (93%) disagreed with the statement that ‘to be truly British you have to be White’.
- 189 **‘a valuable strain of egalitarianism which may exist despite, and not because of, liberalism’:** Derrick Bell, ‘Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory?’ in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.), *The Derrick Bell Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 78–84. Quotation taken from p. 79.
- 190 **‘They support the status quo and do not challenge racism in any way significant enough to be threatening’:** *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 27.
- 190 **‘all white people are racist’:** Ibid., p. 13.
- 190 **‘all white people are racist’:** Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 16.
- 191 **‘a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy’:** *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 113.
- 191 **‘social life is patterned and predictable in measurable ways’:** Ibid., p. 12.
- 191 **‘it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions’:** Ibid. p. 129. See also her assertion on p. 73: ‘I am still affected by the forces of racism as a member of society in which racism is the bedrock’.
- 192 **‘they receive harsher sentences than whites do for the same crimes’:** Ibid., p. 62.
- 192 **more likely to reach the interview stage than those whose names are African or Asian:** Eddo-Lodge, op. cit., pp. 68–69.
- 192 **For DiAngelo, race is a monomaniacal obsession:** *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. xiii, p. 2 and p. 19.
- 192 **her work urges people to identify racially above all else:** Ibid., p. 149.
- 192 **She strives to be ‘less white’:** Ibid., p. 150.
- 192 **her presentation which urged staff members to ‘try to be less white’:** Jade Bremner, ‘Coca-Cola faces backlash over seminar asking staff to “be less white”’, *Independent* (24 February 2021).
- 192 **‘trying to be less white is literally the whitest thing anyone can do’:** Heydon Prowse (writing under the pseudonym ‘They/Them’), ‘Shelter and the world of white homeless privilege’, *Spectator USA* (1 July 2021).
- 192 **the essentially anti-liberal identitarianism of today:** ‘All progress we have made in the realm of civil rights has been accomplished through identity politics’, *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. x.
- 192 **‘critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order’:** Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, op. cit., p. 3.
- 193 **‘The mere possibility that I might have to experience not belonging racially was enough to raise racial discomfort’:** *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 53.
- 193 **projecting her own racism onto the racial demographic to which she belongs:** DiAngelo is clear about her own racist feelings, which apparently stem from childhood: ‘Still, although working-class whites experience classism, they aren’t also experiencing racism. I grew up in poverty and felt a deep sense of shame about being poor. But I also always knew that I was white, and that it was better to be white’ (ibid., p. 19). Later, she accounts for her own racism by an explicit

appeal to the collective. ‘When you consider the moral judgment we make about people we deem as racist in our society,’ she writes, ‘the need to deny our own racism – even to ourselves – makes sense. We believe we are superior at a deeply internalized level and act on this belief in the practice of our lives, but we must deny this belief to fit into society and maintain our self-identity as good, moral people’ (*ibid.*, p. 47).

- 193 **‘we become highly fragile in conversations about race’**: *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 193 **‘the collective white consciousness’**: *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 193 **DiAngelo can speak only for herself**: Examples of DiAngelo speaking on behalf of all white people are peppered throughout the book. She claims that ‘anti-blackness is foundational to our very identities as white people’ (*ibid.*, p. 91), and that white people are uninterested in learning about racism because of ‘our own lack of interest or motivation’ (*ibid.*, p. 146). She claims that ‘the white collective’ delights in ‘inflicting pain on African Americans’ through ‘blackface and depictions of blacks as apes and gorillas’ (*ibid.*, p. 94), thereby insisting on collective guilt for the behaviour of an unpleasant minority.
- 194 **she cannot be held responsible for her own racist thoughts**: ‘I believe that in the white mind, black people are the ultimate racial “other”, and we must grapple with this relationship, for it is a foundational aspect of the racial socialization underlying white fragility’. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 194 **as a white person, she could not have been socialised in any other way**: *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 194 **‘never known what it means to embrace a person of colour as a true equal, with thoughts and feelings as valid as their own’**: Eddo-Lodge, op. cit., p. x.
- 195 **‘channel switching’**: *White Fragility*, op. cit., pp. 134–35.
- 195 **a common trait among fragile white men**: *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 195 **‘White people find it very difficult to think about whiteness as a specific state of being that could have an impact on one’s life and perceptions’**: *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 195 **‘the definition of whites as the norm of standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm’**: *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 196 **she is making all white people, or ‘people who identify as white’, as complicit in extremism**: *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 196 **it is clear that skin colour was one of their major considerations**: Auslan Cramb, ‘Anti-racism event hosted by Edinburgh University bans white people from asking questions’, *Telegraph* (27 September 2019).
- 196 **‘an anti-Blackness that is foundational to our very existence as white’**: Robin DiAngelo, *Nice Racism* (London: Penguin, 2021), p. 53.
- 196 **‘ideologies of racism’**: *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 89.
- 196 **‘interrupting’ racism**: ‘While the idea of color-blindness may have started out as a well-intentioned strategy for interrupting racism, in practice it has served to deny the reality of racism and thus hold it in place’. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 197 **‘aversive racism’**: *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 197 **‘the ways in which structural power manifests in these exchanges’**: Kendi, op. cit., p. 10; Eddo-Lodge, op. cit., p. 82.
- 197 **‘the claim that you are color blind is not a truth; it is a false belief’**: *White Fragility*, op. cit., p. 127.
- 197 **‘if we pretend not to notice race, then there can be no racism’**: *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.
- 197 **‘under the skin, there is no true biological race’**: *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 197 **Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) which divided humanity into racial ‘varieties’**: See Brittany Kenyon-Flatt, ‘How scientific taxonomy constructed the myth of race’, *Sapiens* (19 March 2021).
- 197 **the decoding of the human genome has entirely discredited any possibility of the concept of ‘racial superiority’**: ‘The unspooling of the skein of the genome has effectively abolished racism and creationism, and the amazing findings of Hubble and Hawking have allowed us to guess at the origins of the cosmos. But how much more addictive is the familiar old garbage about tribe and nation and faith.’ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (Massachusetts: Basic Books, 2001), p. 108.
- 198 **if he were permitted to write ‘human’**: Christopher Hitchens, ‘The Perils of Identity Politics’, *Wall Street Journal* (18 January 2008).
- 198 **‘the essential and unarguable core of King’s campaign was the insistence that pigmentation was a false measure’**: *Ibid.*
- 198 **‘we are all either racists or antiracists’**: Kendi, op. cit., p. 9 and p. 143.
- 198 **to be ‘not racist’ is ‘a form of discursive racist violence’**: Alana Lentin made these remarks during a webinar, ‘The racist violence of “not racism” and the role of “contrarian” academics’, for the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, University of Calgary (12 November 2020). See also Alana Lentin, *Why Race Still Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).
- 199 **‘a committedly anti-racist organisation’**: See the article on the Mayor of London’s website: ‘Mayor declares City Hall

- an anti-racist organisation' (13 October 2020).
- 199 **'anti-racism message'**: See the statement on the Channel 4 website: 'Channel 4 commits to being anti-racist organisation' (9 June 2020).
- 199 **'it isn't enough to not be racist, we must be actively anti-racist'**: See the statement on the Girl Guides' website: 'How we're making our organisation more inclusive' (17 May 2021).
- 199 **'I don't think you fully understand the extent of that covert racism that pervades across our institutions'**: Universities UK, Twitter (25 November 2020).
- 200 **'anti-racism action plan'**: RADA students, 'Anti-Racism Action Plan' (1 July 2020).
- 202 **'homogenous, North European, white, male, and elite'**: Billy Kenber, 'It's elitist to mark down bad spelling, universities insist', *Times* (12 April 2021).
- 202 **'unless the brief states that formally accurate language is a requirement'**: Ibid.
- 202 **'masks the fact that our schools are not delivering and ensures only rich white guys will ever succeed'**: Katharine Birbalsingh, Twitter (12 April 2021).
- 203 **pupils from ethnic minority groups consistently outperformed their white peers**: The full report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (March 2021) is available on the government's website.
- 203 **qualities such as independence, rational thought, hard work, respect for authority and politeness**: Chacour Koop, 'Smithsonian museum apologizes for saying hard work, rational thought is "white culture"', *Miami Herald* (17 July 2020).
- 203 **'neo-racism'**: The term 'neo-racism' originated at FAIR: the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism.
- 203 **'universities should be punished for giving black students lower grades'**: Steven Spier, 'Universities should be punished for giving black students lower grades', *Guardian* (20 February 2019).
- 203 **allowing 'text speak' in English examinations so long as the meaning was clear**: David Cohen, 'Does using text English reflect linguistic realities?', *Guardian* (17 November 2006).
- 204 **'only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination'**: Kendi, op. cit., p. 19.
- 204 **identity as seen through the lens of Critical Race Theory**: See 'Advancing racial equality and tackling racism in education: selected reading' (12 June 2020) on the website for the Chartered College of Teaching.
- 206 **the proof was lacking**: The Runnymede Trust's report is replete with assertions in lieu of evidence. Take, for instance, the following statement: 'We are concerned that the under-representation of BME groups in journalism will feed into inaccurate reporting about minority groups'. A valid concern, but is any evidence offered to support the case that this could be likely? A footnote to the statement simply takes us to an article in the *Guardian* by a like-minded commentator who simply repeats the identical assertion. This is the researcher's equivalent of pointing to a friend and saying 'Well he agrees with me, so it must be true'.
- 206 **the very fallacy that the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities had exposed**: To take a representative example from the Runnymede Trust's findings: 'Our report shows that racism is systemic in England and impacts BME groups' enjoyment of rights. Legislation, institutional practices and society's customs continue to combine to harm BME groups. As a result, in England, BME groups are consistently more likely to live in poverty, to be in low-paid precarious work and to die of COVID-19'. The report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities argued that crude racial aggregates are misleading, and favoured a multivariate analysis that would incorporate other factors such as higher proportion of ethnic minority people in poorer communities. By contrast, the Runnymede Trust's approach is to say that because there are more ethnic minority people in poorer communities, this is evidence of discrimination rather than an obvious cause.
- 206 **a two-year investigation into racism in the United Kingdom**: Martin Bentham, 'Critics of a "racist" Britain are misguided, says report', *Telegraph* (8 October 2000).
- 206 **'white nationalist agenda'**: Haroon Siddique, 'UK government accused of pursuing a "white nationalist" agenda', *Guardian* (29 December 2020).
- 206 **citizens of the United Kingdom are among the least racist in the world**: See the report *Discrimination in the European Union* (September 2019) by the European Commission, available on the EU website. See also 'New Runnymede Trust report promotes the myth of a systemically racist Britain – DDU responds' on the *Don't Divide Us* website.
- 206 **'prejudice against immigrant workers or minority ethnic and religious groups is rare in the UK'**: Sarah Knapton, 'British prejudice against immigrants is among lowest in Europe, study shows', *Telegraph* (26 February 2019). For full report see M. D. R. Evans and Jonathan Kelley, 'Prejudice against immigrants symptomizes a larger syndrome, is strongly diminished by socioeconomic development, and the UK is not an outlier: insights from the WVS, EVS, and EQLS surveys', *Frontiers in Sociology* (26 February 2019).
- 206 **'one of the lowest reported levels of race-related harassment and violence in the 12-country study'**: 'The highest violence rates were reported in Finland (14 per cent), closely followed by Austria and the Republic of Ireland (13 per cent). The figure among UK respondents was 3 per cent.' Rakib Ehsan and Doug Stokes, 'Poor white men and Labour's identity trap', *Critic* (May 2021).

- 207 ***in the more affluent institutions such as Eton College:*** Faith Ridler, ‘Eton College promises to “decolonise” its curriculum and hire more black teachers after appeal from parents and students’, *Daily Mail* (26 June 2020).
- 207 ***numerous cases of school districts explicitly promoting Critical Race Theory:*** Christopher F. Rufo, ‘Subversive education’, *City Journal* (17 March 2021); Christopher F. Rufo, ‘Failure factory’, *City Journal* (23 February 2021); Christopher F. Rufo, ‘Gone crazy’, *City Journal* (18 February 2021); Christopher F. Rufo, ‘Woke elementary’, *City Journal* (13 January 2021); Christopher F. Rufo, ‘Radicals in the classroom’, *City Journal* (5 January 2021).
- 208 ***after-school activities in which children were separated by race:*** Nicola Woolcock, ‘American School in London accused of “racial indoctrination”’, *Times* (25 November 2021).
- 208 ***‘a dog whistle that the Republicans are using to frighten people’:*** Quoted by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, ‘Critical Race Theory’s new disguise’, *UnHerd* (7 October 2021).
- 209 ***‘to shift away from meritocracy in favour of an equality of outcome system’:*** Ibid.
- 209 ***‘the Jedi are inappropriate symbols for justice work’:*** J. W. Hammond, Sara E. Brownell, Nita A. Kedharnath, Susan J. Cheng, W. Carson Byrd, ‘why the term “JEDI” is problematic for describing programs that promote justice, equity, diversity and inclusion’, *Scientific American* (23 September 2021).
- 209 ***‘Critical Race Theory is our lens for developing our understanding of the complexities of racism’:*** Jody Doherty-Cover, ‘Brighton council says it is not teaching white privilege to school children’, *Argus* (29 June 2021).
- 209 ***‘stop teaching our kids that they are racists or victims of their classmates’:*** I was involved in the establishment of ‘Don’t Divide Us’ in June 2020. The original letter, with its thirty-six signatories, was published by the *Spectator*. See Claire Fox, Andrew Doyle and Inaya Folarin Iman, ‘Racial division is being sown in the name of anti-racism’, *Spectator* (30 June 2020).
- 209 ***without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views:*** Jessica Murray, ‘Teaching white privilege as uncontested fact is illegal, minister says’, *Guardian* (20 October 2020).
- 210 ***key historical events relating to black Britons that are often overlooked:*** Eddo-Lodge, op. cit., pp. 1–56.
- 211 ***a ‘better fit’ in an academic culture of whiteness:*** Camilla Turner, ‘Shakespeare, Blake and Woolf are on the curriculum due to “racial bias”, university says’, *Telegraph* (31 January 2020).
- 211 ***on the grounds that it is too white and ‘Eurocentric’:*** See Rachel Poser’s profile of activist classicist Dan-el Padilla Peralta, ‘He wants to save classics from whiteness. Can the field survive?’, *New York Times Magazine* (2 February 2021).
- 211 ***‘It’s beyond even an anachronism’:*** ‘The unbearable whiteness of the Classics’, op. cit.
- 211 ***eleven-year-old pupils are separated by race and asked to reflect on their ethnicity:*** Rachel Dupuy and David Harris (directors), *The School That Tried to End Racism*, Channel 4 (June 2020).
- 212 ***‘O that I could steal all the daughters from their mothers and lock them in a monastery’:*** Quoted by Norman Douglas, *Siren Land* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), p. 130. Originally published in 1911.
- 212 ***‘if you only begin to inculcate it before the age of five’:*** Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism: A Series of Essays* as translated by T. B. Saunders (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1891), p. 78.
- 212 ***intended to produce a whole new generation of activists:*** The rise of progressive children’s books arguably began with *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (London: Particular Books, 2017) by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo. The idea was a charming one; it contained profiles of exceptional women throughout history offered up as role models for young readers. Examples included Michelle Obama, Maya Angelou, Yoko Ono, and even Coco Chanel, whose collaboration with the Nazis was tactfully omitted.
- 212 ***the multiplicity of fashionable new identities such as ‘genderqueer, non-binary, bigender, neutrois and two-spirit’:*** Brook Pessin-Whedbee, *Who Are You? The Kid’s Guide To Gender Identity* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2016).
- 212 ***doctors ‘made a guess’ as to whether they were male or female:*** Theresa Thorn, *It Feels Good To Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2019).
- 212 ***Other recent examples include:*** Mahogany L. Browne, *Woke Baby* (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2019); Loryn Brantz, *Feminist Baby* (New York: Hyperion, 2017); Ibram X. Kendi, *Antiracist Baby* (New York: Kokila, 2020); Amy Charlotte Kean, *The Little Girl Who Gave Zero Fucks* (London: Unbound, 2018).

Inquisition

- 215 ***‘Revenge wants the evil of the bad man to be to him what it is to everyone else’:*** Lewis, op. cit., p. 82.
- 215 ***‘When and how can I be revenged?’ It’s incredibly primitive’:*** Russell Davies (ed.), *The Kenneth Williams Diaries* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 238.
- 216 ***after hanging his jacket and cap on a bust of Lenin:*** Solzhenitsyn, op. cit., p. 240.
- 216 ***it doesn’t feel much like a valiant blow against plutocracy and the ruling class:*** Basit Mahmood, ‘Disabled granddad sacked from Asda for sharing Billy Connolly sketch on Facebook’, *Metro* (24 June 2019).
- 216 ***in spite of attempts to see her ‘cancelled’:*** For example, see Emma Kelly, ‘J.K. Rowling isn’t being cancelled, she’s just

facing the consequences of her actions', *Metro* (10 July 2020).

- 216 **'anything other than intellectual comfort food with which they already agree':** Helen Dale, 'Policing words', *Law & Liberty* (24 January 2022).
- 217 **'the haulage industry is far more supportive and inclusive – and a lot less misogynistic – than the world of children's writing':** Gillian Philip, 'From children's author to Queen of the Road . . . Writer on becoming a lorry driver', *Express* (20 September 2021).
- 217 ***her embroidery work removed from sale at the gift shop of the Royal Academy of Arts:*** David Sanderson, 'Jess de Wahls: Royal Academy shop ditches work by artist accused of transphobia', *Times* (18 June 2021).
- 217 **'There's nothing comparable in "real life":'** Damian Whitworth, 'Jess de Wahls: Death wishes and fear after the Royal Academy cancelled me', *Times* (22 June 2021).
- 217 **'petitions that resulted in cancelled exhibitions and collaborations':** Louise Perry, 'The Jess De Wahls debacle shows you can only really be cancelled by your friends', *New Statesman* (29 June 2021).
- 218 ***this instinct to smear an entire crowd on the basis of a minority contingent is telling:*** See Damien Gayle, 'Thousands march in "free speech" protest led by rightwing figures', *Guardian* (6 May 2018).
- 218 ***the justification offered by those venues who sought to deprive Von Glow of an income:*** 'The problem is that the far left don't just go for calling you names', Von Glow told Sky News after the boycott began. 'Their party trick at the moment is to go for your source of income. At the moment they've been making sure that my shows are cancelled. They want to see me unemployed, possibly they want to see me homeless. It's quite an aggressive tactic.'
- 218 **'serious safeguarding issue':** Andy Jehring, 'Bad rap: Primary teacher sacked after being outed as foul-mouthed YouTube rapper and internet sensation MC Devvo', *Sun* (7 August 2019).
- 219 ***some of the more controversial aims of the Black Lives Matter organisation:*** Nick Buckley, *Lessons in Courage: How I Fought Back Against Cancel Culture and Won* (London: Academica Press, 2021).
- 219 ***banned from playing for eight months due to offensive tweets he posted as a teenager:*** Jordan Tyldesley, 'Cancel culture knows no mercy', *spiked* (7 June 2021).
- 219 ***fined £3,200 and was compelled to participate in 'anti-discrimination' training:*** Ali Martin, 'Ollie Robinson clear for cricket return after ban over racist and sexist tweets', *Guardian* (3 July 2021).
- 219 ***investigated by authorities at Abertay University in Scotland for saying that women have vaginas:*** Tom Gordon, 'Abertay University student Lisa Keogh cleared after being investigated for saying women have vaginas', *Herald* (9 June 2021).
- 219 ***Such examples of cancel culture in action are endless:*** For other examples of cancel culture, see the editorial piece '25 times cancel culture was real', *spiked* (14 July 2020). There is an extensive thread compiled on Twitter by one Philip K. Fry (@SoOppressed), which provides links to hundreds of examples of cancellation covered by the media. The website www.canceledpeople.com also provides a useful database.
- 219 ***after a joke he made in a private email was posted online:*** Brendan O'Neill, 'Mocking vegans should not be a sackable offence', *spiked* (31 October 2018).
- 220 ***the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive:*** Emily Ekins, 'Poll: 62% of Americans say they have political views they're afraid to share', *Cato Institute* (22 July 2020).
- 222 ***lost a tribunal against her employers for wrongful dismissal:*** In June 2021, the decision of the tribunal in the Maya Forstater case was overturned by the High Court, with the judge ruling that her views were protected in law by the Equality Act 2020. See Sam Damshenas, 'Maya Forstater wins appeal against employment tribunal over "gender critical" views', *Gay Times* (10 June 2021). Once Forstater's appeal was upheld, she was able to take legal action against the Center for Global Development for wrongful dismissal. Her erstwhile employer's case rested on the view that Forstater's belief that sex is immutable was a sackable offence. The tribunal was particularly revealing, because the typical strategies of gender ideologues – to cry 'hate' or 'transphobia', or to proclaim that there must be 'no debate' – simply could not be deployed in a court of law. As a result, the interrogation by Ben Cooper QC, counsel for Forstater, provided a rare opportunity for people to see what happens when the high priests of gender ideology are forced to defend their creed.
- 222 ***'But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?:'*** J.K. Rowling, Twitter (19 December 2019).
- 222 ***'paper the house with them':*** J.K. Rowling, Twitter (22 November 2021).
- 223 ***some former Harry Potter fans even went so far as to burn their copies of Rowling's books:*** Many of the most abusive public online messages that Rowling received were collated on the website *Medium* under the title 'J.K. Rowling and the trans activists: a story in screenshots'.
- 223 ***the incredible conclusion that Rowling had been 'radicalised online':*** Louis Staples, Twitter (29 May 2020).
- 223 ***'It isn't hate to speak the truth':*** J.K. Rowling, Twitter (6 June 2020).
- 223 ***'faced swift and abundant critique':*** Steph Herold, Twitter (19 October 2021).

- 224 ***mass surges of moral condemnation and demands for moral purity:*** Lukianoff and Haidt, op. cit., pp. 99–121.
- 224 ***three key features common to these outbreaks:*** Albert Bergesen, ‘A Durkenheimian theory of “witch-hunts” with the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966–1969 as an example’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March 1978), pp. 19–29.
- 224 ***the charges are often based on minor or seemingly insignificant acts:*** To Bergesen’s three key features of witch hunts, Lukianoff and Haidt add a fourth: ‘fear of defending the accused’. They point out that, in many cases, even friends of the accused are unwilling to speak out in their defence even when their innocence is beyond question. Lukianoff and Haidt, op. cit., p. 102.
- 224 ***posted an image of a T-shirt that she had bought from ‘Wild Womyn Workshop’:*** Reiss Smith, ‘JK Rowling platforms anti-trans shop selling “lesbians don’t have penises” and “f**k your pronouns” merch’, *Pink News* (23 September 2020).
- 224 ***seem to involve the most petty and insignificant behavioural acts:*** Quoted by Lukianoff and Haidt, op. cit., p. 102.
- 225 ***the slew of negative press following Rowling’s detective novel Troubled Blood:*** Robert Galbraith, *Troubled Blood* (London: Sphere, 2020).
- 225 ***a killer who, at one point, disguises himself in a ‘woman’s coat’, was likely to stir ire in some quarters:*** Jake Kerridge, review of *Troubled Blood* by Robert Galbraith, *Telegraph* (13 September 2020).
- 225 ***it was the Pink News whose coverage was the most fearmongering:*** Reiss Smith, ‘JK Rowling’s latest book is about a murderous cis man who dresses as a woman to kill his victims’, *Pink News* (14 September 2020).
- 225 ***her thought process surrounding this apparently most controversial of topics:*** See ‘J.K. Rowling writes about her reasons for speaking out on sex and gender issues’ at www.jkrowling.com (10 June 2020).
- 225 ***The Weald Community School in West Sussex imbibed this moonshine:*** Tom Pyman, ‘School drops plans to name house after JK Rowling amid “transphobia” row telling parents the author is “no longer an appropriate role model”’, *Daily Mail* (11 June 2020).
- 226 ***A year later, the Holy Trinity Church of England Primary School in Richmond followed suit:*** Camilla Turner, ‘JK Rowling and Churchill axed as school house names to “boost diversity”’, *Telegraph* (18 November 2021).
- 226 ***explicitly opposed Rowling’s views in the midst of the controversy:*** Isobel Lewis, ‘JK Rowling trans row: what have Emma Watson, Daniel Radcliffe and Rupert Grint said in response?’, *Independent* (12 June 2020).
- 226 ***when you can’t get a woman sacked, arrested or dropped by her publisher, and cancelling her only made her book sales go up, there’s really only one place to go:*** J.K. Rowling, Twitter (19 July 2021).
- 226 ***you sound scientifically ignorant and you elevate transphobia:*** George Takei, Twitter (10 June 2020).
- 227 ***Without it, there is no such thing as being trans:*** Blaire White, Twitter (19 December 2019).
- 227 ***immersed in a fiction:*** Stock, op. cit., pp. 178–211.
- 227 ***Facts revenge themselves upon the man who denies their existence:*** Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, vol. III, new edition (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1892), p. 245.
- 229 ***a poster which quoted the dictionary definition of ‘woman’ made trans people ‘feel unsafe’:*** Harrop was later suspended from practising medicine for a month after posting abusive messages to women online. James Gant, ‘Troll GP is “humiliated but determined” to “improve things for trans people” after being suspended from job for “offensive” tweets’, *Daily Mail* (2 December 2021).
- 229 ***an ideology that sees words as little grenades, primed to explode:*** An example of this elision of words and violence occurred in a debate on *The Agenda with Steve Paikin* on TVO, Ontario’s public television broadcaster, between Nicholas Matte and Jordan Peterson. Matte, a teacher at the University of Toronto’s faculty of sexual diversity studies, accused Peterson of ‘abusing students’ for his refusal to be compelled to use gender-neutral pronouns when referring to students. His actions, Matte said, were ‘tantamount to violence’. Another activist withdrew from the panel on the grounds that to even hold a debate with Peterson was ‘an act of transphobia’.
- 229 ***a photographer’s words at a matriculation ceremony:*** Ewan Somerville, ‘Photographer accused of sexism after asking male Cambridge students to “help the ladies”’, *Telegraph* (20 November 2021).
- 230 ***If there is no apology or repercussions, I cannot see myself remaining here:*** Open letter to Jeremy Cook, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Colleges and Student Experience), 4 2021.
- 230 ***Safetyism’, a culture that appears to be particularly common in higher education:*** Lukianoff and Haidt, op. cit., pp. 19–32.
- 230 ***a form of ‘violence’ to expect black students to walk in its vicinity:*** See Andrew Anthony, ‘Is free speech in British universities under threat?’, *Observer* (24 January 2016).
- 231 ***the courage not to defer to this kind of entitlement:*** A less generous interpretation would be that the Oriel college authorities kept the statue in place for financial reasons. It is well known that a number of powerful donors threatened to withdraw funding if it was removed.
- 231 ***a student outcry arose about one hundred and thirty years too late:*** Eleanor Harding and Neil Sears, ‘Top university

tears down memorials to brutal Belgian king after students say they are “racist and pay homage to a genocidal colonialist”, *Daily Mail* (16 December 2016).

- 231 **a strangely dehumanising choice of words:** For examples of books that consistently use the term ‘bodies’ in this way, see Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (London: Random House, 2015) and Kendi, op. cit.
- 231 **‘Constantly being erased is exhausting’:** See Rod Liddle, ‘The wrong kind of diversity’, *Spectator* (15 June 2019).
- 231 **‘performative dimension’ to the declaration that one feels ‘unsafe’:** Frank Furedi, ‘Does the word “ladies” make you feel unsafe?’, *spiked* (22 November 2021).
- 232 **has risen exponentially over the past forty years:** ‘The phrase “feels unsafe” rose from 341 uses between 1970 and 1980 to 44,440 uses between 1990 and 2000. In January 2021 alone there were 9,698 references to feeling unsafe’ (*ibid*).
- 233 **passages in an essay in 1753 that would be deemed discriminatory by today’s standards:** Hume’s offending comments appear in his essay ‘Of national characteristics’: ‘I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.’ Quoted by John Immerwahr, ‘Hume’s revised racism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 53, no. 3 (July–September 1992), pp. 481–86.
- 233 **simply for tweeting about a meeting at the House of Commons on the proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act:** Ann Henderson, ‘Reflections on the University of Edinburgh, and women in public life’, *Woman’s Place UK* (9 June 2021).
- 233 **‘Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty’:** Solzhenitsyn, op. cit., p. 285.
- 233 **is it feasible to suggest that those who felt ‘unsafe’ as a result of her views on feminism were the real victims here?:** Camilla Turner and Ewan Somerville, ‘Oxford University professor given security guards for lectures after threats from transgender activists’, *Telegraph* (23 January 2020).
- 233 **there can be few left in any doubt as to which party qualifies as the aggressor:** Stock eventually felt compelled to quit from her post at Sussex University after she was targeted by activists who dressed up in masks, set off flares, put pressure on to the university to have her fired, and generally created an environment in which it was impossible to work. See Julie Bindel, ‘Why liberals must stand with Kathleen Stock’, *Spectator* (11 October 2021).
- 234 **diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after a similarly vitriolic campaign while she was working at the Open University:** Frances Hardy, ‘A fellow academic compared me to the racist uncle at Christmas dinner – I was even told that my views were like Holocaust denial: An Open University professor’s harrowing account of what it feels like to be targeted by a trans hate mob’, *Daily Mail* (24 November 2021).
- 234 **increasingly want to challenge what is taught and how it is taught’:** Mark McLaughlin, ‘Students want to dictate teaching, says Edinburgh University’, *Times* (18 June 2021).
- 234 **‘the baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart goes all decorum’:** Measure for Measure, Act I, sc. iii.
- 234 **thrown to mobs who obligingly consigned him to the River Tiber:** The details are recounted in E. R. Chamberlain, *The Bad Popes* (New York: Dorset Press, 1969), pp. 19–21.
- 235 **the Independent deemed it to be newsworthy:** Clémence Michallon, ‘John Wayne lays out racist, homophobic views in resurfaced Playboy interview: “I believe in white supremacy”’, *Independent* (20 February 2019).
- 235 **demanding that an exhibit in his honour be removed:** Ellie Harrison, ‘John Wayne: Californian university students want actor exhibit removed after his “legacy of white supremacy” revealed’, *Independent* (10 October 2019).
- 235 **saying he had ‘fucked her until she rejoiced’:** John Dugdale, ‘Robert Burns: was the beloved poet a “Weinsteinian sex pest”?’, *Guardian* (24 January 2018).
- 235 **Kipling held views about ethnic minorities which are ‘not in line’ with twenty-first century values:** Frances Perraudin, ‘Manchester University students paint over Rudyard Kipling mural’, *Guardian* (19 July 2018).
- 235 **updated its website accordingly:** Roisin O’Connor, ‘English Heritage acknowledges Enid Blyton’s work as “racist and xenophobic”’, *Independent* (17 June 2021).
- 235 **the play could cause ‘harm’ to modern audiences:** Cameron Charters, ‘Storm brews over Shakespeare’s “colonial” Tempest’, *Times* (16 September 2021).
- 235 **the spectacle was inherently funny:** Abe Hawken, Kate Ferguson and Xantha Leatham, ‘Boris Johnson calls on Jeremy Corbyn to denounce “hard left mob” for their “disgraceful” attack on Churchill as MPs slam group who stormed “Blighty” café inspired by Britain’s wartime PM’, *Daily Mail* (29 January 2018).
- 236 **Joe Orton, whose farces brutally mocked the pomposity and hypocrisy of the establishment:** Joe Orton was also known for his satirical hoaxes. He was so bored by the bland selection at his local library that he and his partner Kenneth Halliwell would modify the books by adding suggestive images to the covers and pasting new offensive blurbs on the dust jacket. For this small act of creative vandalism, they each served six months in prison.

- 236 **'The Ten Commandments. She was a great believer in some of them':** Joe Orton, *Loot*, in *The Complete Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), pp. 193–275. Quotation taken from p. 212. Once Orton was established as a playwright, he would write letters to the press to complain about his own work under the pseudonym of Mrs Edna Welthorpe. He managed to capture the frosty and meddling nature of someone who wants to police the morality of the public, and to be offended on everyone else's behalf. One particularly memorable letter found its way into the pages of the *Daily Telegraph*, and referred to his play *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964): 'I myself was nauseated by this endless parade of mental and physical perversion. And to be told that such a disgusting piece of filth now passes for humour! Today's young playwrights take it upon themselves to flaunt their contempt for ordinary decent people. I hope that the ordinary decent people of this country will shortly strike back!' See John Lair (ed.), *The Orton Diaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 281. Orton even wrote a letter claiming that he was going to contact the Lord Chamberlain to see about getting his own plays censored. One can only imagine the glee with which he would have lampooned the new puritans, who seem to have taken Mrs Edna Welthorpe as their role model.
- 236 ***implying strongly that the Washington Monument ought to be next:*** Alex Swoyer and Valerie Richardson, 'Univ. of Alabama Birmingham professor instructs rioters on how to tear down monuments', *Washington Times* (1 June 2020).
- 236 ***suggesting certain corrosive chemicals that were easy to obtain and could cause permanent damage:*** Brittany Vonow and Robert Pattinson, 'Caustic twit: outrage as American Oxford graduate tweets how to destroy statues with household chemicals – and says Churchill is next', *Sun* (10 June 2020).
- 236 ***'they should chop it up and burn it':*** Matthew Campbell, 'Dutch slavery debate grinds on beneath wheels of "racist" royal coach', *Times* (12 September 2021).
- 236 ***As expected, the threshold for what constitutes unacceptable behaviour, even from long-dead historical figures, has begun to spread:*** Claire Hayhurst and Anna MacSwan, 'Statue of Robert Baden-Powell boarded up after appearing on protest target list', *Mirror* (13 June 2020); Alex Regan, 'Calls to remove "racist" Gandhi statue in Leicester', *BBC News* (12 June 2020).
- 236 ***As someone who was born in 1825, it would be extremely odd if his views were not 'outdated':*** Ewan Somerville, 'Imperial College told to remove bust of slavery abolitionist because he "might now be called racist"', *Telegraph* (26 October 2021).
- 237 ***given that he was a leading figure in the Royal Navy:*** Craig Simpson, 'Lord Nelson's "heroic status" to be reviewed by National Maritime Museum', *Telegraph* (10 October 2020).
- 237 ***Various notes were added by curators to highlight the 'sexual violence and slavery' of the works:*** Harry Howard, 'Woke curators target Hogarth: famous cartoonist's depictions of 18th century Britain now come with notes about their "sexual violence and slavery" in new Tate Britain exhibition', *Daily Mail* (2 November 2021).
- 237 ***in spite of the fact that he bequeathed £40,000 and much of his own book collection to the institution:*** Lydia Morris, 'Gladstone Library responds to calls for statue to be removed and name to be changed amid BLM protests', *Daily Post* (10 June 2020).
- 237 ***In the council of Brent in London:*** Adam Shaw, 'Naming of Brent's public spaces after William Gladstone to be scrutinised', *Brent & Kilburn Times* (11 September 2020).
- 237 ***Gladstone Hall was renamed after communist activist Dorothy Kuya:*** Robert Tombs, 'The daftest lecture in wokery yet: Iconic Prime Minister William Gladstone loathed slavery. But because his father once owned them, Liverpool University has replaced his name on a building with a communist activist', *Daily Mail* (4 May 2021).
- 238 ***Conor Daly, who lost a sponsorship deal due to a racial slur uttered by his father before he was even born:*** Jenny Green and Jim Ayello, 'Conor Daly's Lilly sponsorship deals removed because of father's use of racial slur in 1980s', *Indianapolis Star* (24 August 2018).
- 238 ***relocated to a 'less prominent place':*** Katie Feehan, 'Guy's Hospital charity accused of "cultural vandalism" as it announces it will move statue of "slave-trading" founder Thomas Guy to a "less prominent place" after pressure from BLM protests – despite 75% of public voting to keep listed monument where it is', *Daily Mail* (1 September 2021).
- 239 ***As a shareholder in slaving voyages:*** This statue of Queen Elizabeth I was originally located at the entrance to the City of London, above Ludgate. It is currently situated on Fleet Street, in a niche on the wall of the Guild Church of St Dunstan-in-the-West.
- 239 ***'a nuclear ideology that poses an existential threat to human existence':*** Kendi, op. cit., p. 132.
- 239 ***'How you feel about that statue is how you feel about slavery':*** James O'Brien, Twitter (7 June 2020).
- 240 ***'History has stopped': Nineteen Eighty-Four,*** op. cit., p. 162.

Transcendence

- 241 ***'natural effort at cubism':*** Mervyn Peake, *Mr Pye* (London: William Heinemann, 1953), p. 202.
- 242 ***where our hero Gilliat struggles with the giant octopus:*** In the novel, these rocks are known as the 'Douvres', described by Hugo as one of nature's 'terrible masterpieces': 'They were two vertical points, sharp and curved – their summits almost touching each other'. Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea* (London: Everyman's Library, 1961), p. 132. Originally published in 1866. Hugo is credited with introducing the word 'pieuvre' as a synonym for 'octopus' into the French

language through this novel. For many years, this was assumed to be a variation on the Guernseiais word ‘*peuvre*’ (the book was written while Hugo was in exile on Guernsey and is largely set there). Lately it has become apparent that he most likely borrowed the term from the Sark dialect because ‘*pieuvre*’ corresponds with the word’s pronunciation in Sercquiais. See Matthew Leach, ‘New research suggests that Victor Hugo’s octopus originates from Sark’, *Bailiwick Express: Guernsey Edition* (23 July 2021).

- 242 ***an octopus once chased his infant son:*** ‘He who writes these lines has seen with his own eyes, at Sark, in the cavern called the Boutiques, a *pieuvre* swimming and pursuing a bather.’ Hugo, op. cit., p. 292.
- 242 ***‘cultivated leisure’ is the ‘aim of man’:*** Oscar Wilde, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1991), pp. 389–421. Quotation taken from p. 402. Originally published in 1891.
- 242 ***‘simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight’:*** Ibid.
- 242 ***took him twenty-two years to complete and is intensely detailed:*** According to Sark resident Margaret Waller, ‘Mr. Toplis’ method of painting was to decide upon a certain lighting effect at a certain time of the day, on a certain day of the year. Of course, he could not finish the picture in one day. He would spend two or three days painting a particular subject then, as the sun “moved around”, the shadows would change. Mr. Toplis put his unfinished picture away until the same time the following year! This explains why it could take T.P. [Waller’s shorthand for Toplis] twenty years to complete one picture’. Quoted by Chris Andrews, Fiona Kelly and Amy McKee, *The Centenary Book of Sark: Commentary Volume* (Sark: Gateway Publishing, 2008), p. 13.
- 243 ***‘rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing’:*** Ruskin was not, as many assumed, making a case for the supremacy of realism, but rather acknowledging the necessity for artists to discipline themselves in their craft before embarking on more ambitious works.
- 243 ***‘almost paranoiac denseness of detail’:*** See Anthony Burgess’s introduction to Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1968), pp. 9–13. Quotation taken from p. 13. The novel was originally published in 1946.
- 243 ***‘greatest killer of creativity is interruption’:*** John Cleese, *Creativity: A Short and Cheerful Guide* (London: Hutchinson, 2020), p. 46.
- 243 ***‘life seen through a temperament’:*** I am here adopting Forrest Reid’s memorable translation of Zola’s phrase ‘*un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament*’. See Émile Zola, *Mes Haines: Causeries Littéraires et Artistiques* (Paris: Achille Faure, 1866), p. 25. Reid was fond of repeating the phrase in his discussions on art, and his translation appears in his novel *Brian Westby* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), pp. 165–66.
- 243 ***‘let down buckets into their underworld’:*** E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1951), p. 93.
- 243 ***‘Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s’:*** Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 284.
- 244 ***the notion of art as the synthesis of matter and form:*** Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 130–54. The essay on Giorgione was originally published in 1877.
- 244 ***one that falls in line with intersectional dogma:*** ‘Everyone has to be the same, and have the same reactions to any given work of art, or movement or idea, and if you refuse to join the chorus of approval you will be tagged a racist or a misogynist. This is what happens to a culture when it no longer cares about art.’ Bret Easton Ellis, *White* (New York: Picador, 1992), p. 92.
- 245 ***a celebration of banal ephemera:*** Alex Cameron, ‘The Turner Prize is now a tool of woke’, *spiked* (5 December 2021).
- 245 ***‘Woke is the revenge of the dullard on the wit, the curtain-twitcher on the hedonist, the wallflower on the whirling dancer’:*** Julie Burchill, ‘Sacked to appease the snowflake sociopaths’, *Daily Mail* (14 June 2021).
- 245 ***the percentage of American citizens who are afraid to express their political views openly has tripled since the McCarthy era:*** James L. Gibson and Joseph L. Sutherland, ‘Americans are self-censoring at record rates’, *Persuasion* (31 July 2020).
- 246 ***the most direct threat to the intellectual health of contemporary society:*** *Free Speech and Why It Matters*, op. cit., pp. 55–64.
- 246 ***‘the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling’:*** Mill, op. cit., p. 68 and p. 8.
- 246 ***‘he was forced to toil in their shadow and sometimes at their behest’:*** Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 182.
- 247 ***‘watching all the new moralities arrive and declare themselves eternal truths’:*** Stephen Daisley, ‘Asking about male inmates in women’s jails isn’t transphobic’, *Spectator* (27 January 2022).
- 247 ***typified by their habit of taking hot baths:*** Aristophanes, op. cit.
- 248 ***‘merely the most suited to prevailing conditions’:*** Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 24.
- 248 ***struggling to comprehend the extinction of certain sophisticated species as they studied the fossil records:*** Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

- 249 ‘*Gashed by chasm within chasm, the world crashes down, from midday into twilight, from twilight into night*’: Stella Benson, *The Little World* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1925), p. 156.
- 249 **his work was still relatively obscure:** Pater, op. cit., pp. 50–62.
- 249 **overlooked writers such as Stella Benson could not possibly be resurrected:** For those new to the work of Stella Benson, I would recommend *The Poor Man* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), *Pipers and a Dancer* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), *Goodbye Stranger* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926) and her last completed work *Tobit Transplanted* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1931). This last book was originally published as *The Far-Away Bride* in 1930.
- 250 **passages that would be deemed extremely problematic by modern sensibilities:** Stella Benson, *I Pose* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1915).
- 250 **on the grounds that the artist was white:** Oliver Basciano, ‘Whitney Biennial: Emmett Till casket painting by white artist sparks anger’, *Guardian* (21 March 2017).
- 250 **overtly based on the Woodlands style of indigenous Anishinaabe artists:** Katherine Timpf, ‘Gallery cancels art show after accusations of “cultural genocide”’, *National Review* (3 May 2017).
- 251 ‘... now feels highly conflictual’: Alexandra Topping, ‘London theatre axes Rita, Sue and Bob Too amid harassment claims’, *Guardian* (13 December 2017).
- 252 ‘**If you laugh at Louis CK now:**’ Jack Bernhardt, ‘If you laugh at Louis CK now, you’re accepting his worldview’, *Guardian* (14 November 2017).
- 252 **In her recent biography of Douglas:** Rachel Hope Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life Beyond Sexual Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- 252 **Douglas was undeniably a sexual criminal:** The claim that Douglas had sexual intercourse with a dog comes from a diary written by his friend Pino Orioli, the bookseller who became famous for publishing the first edition of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) by D. H. Lawrence. The relevant passage is quoted by Mark Holloway, *Norman Douglas: A Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1976), p. 409. The alleged rape of the unconscious soldier is discussed on p. 255.
- 252 **In his memoir:** Norman Douglas, *Looking Back: An Autobiographical Excursion*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1933), pp. 295–97.
- 252 **are masterworks of the genre . . . a subversive and satirical tour de force:** Norman Douglas, *Siren Land* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1911); Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria* (London: Martin Secker, 1915); Norman Douglas, *Alone* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1921); Norman Douglas, *South Wind* (London: Martin Secker, 1917).
- 253 **given the recent craze for demolishing statues:** ‘Is it really any great leap to suppose that the same activists who would see a statue of Mahatma Gandhi toppled for his “problematic” views might not wish the same fate on Eric Gill’s sculpture of Prospero and Ariel on the façade of the BBC’s Broadcasting House? After all, this was a man who admitted to sexually abusing his daughters and the family dog, without the saving grace of having liberated India from the Raj. This week I’ve read the autobiography of the 16th-century Florentine goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini, whose bronze sculpture of Perseus with the head of Medusa is one of the defining images of Italian Mannerism. In spite of his claim to have developed a visible halo, it is clear that Cellini was no saint. He admits to seducing a 13-year-old girl, committing multiple homicides, and conjuring demons in the Colosseum. His Perseus stands in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, his eyes lowered from the severed head he proudly holds aloft. It is an unforgettable sight, at once elegant and brutal, and I am relieved that the mania for expunging the sins of the past has not caught the imagination of our Italian cousins.’ Andrew Doyle, ‘We are living through a frenzy of conformity’, *Spectator* (20 June 2020).
- 253 **vandalised it with a hammer until he was intercepted by police:** ‘Protester attacks statue at BBC headquarters by sculptor who sexually abused his own daughters’, *Telegraph* (12 January 2022). This was a week after a judge cleared the four activists of charges of criminal damage after they toppled the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol. Few were surprised to see activists taking matters into their own hands after having seen attacks on statues tacitly approved by the judiciary. Gordon Rayner, ‘“Colston four” walk free as jury finds no crime was committed in toppling statue’, *Telegraph* (5 January 2022).
- 253 **this is a subjective feeling, not a mandate to destroy art:** The destruction of art on the basis of subjective feeling is undemocratic, a means to impose our value judgements onto others who may not share them. For example, when campaigners in Worthing appealed for the removal of a plaque commemorating Oscar Wilde – on spurious charges that he had sex with minors – they were acting as moral arbiters seeking to change an important aspect of the town’s landscape. See Tracy McVeigh, ‘Unworthy of Worthing? Resort is split over honouring its Wilde child’, *Guardian* (4 January 2009).
- 254 ‘**all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling:**’ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1991), pp. 1–67. Quotation taken from p. 58. Originally published in 1891.
- 256 **she had been the inspiration for one of the Rolling Stones’s most famous songs:** The Rolling Stones have since dropped the song ‘Brown Sugar’ from their live shows after complaints that the lyrics are ‘gross, sexist, and stunningly offensive towards black women’. Marsha Hunt, after whom the song was likely named, clearly does not share this view. The band’s guitarist Keith Richards has responded to critics with incredulity: ‘Didn’t they understand this was a song

- about the horrors of slavery? But they're trying to bury it'. Nadia Khomami and Rachel Hall, 'Rolling Stones drop "insensitive" Brown Sugar song from US tour setlist', *Guardian* (13 October 2021).
- 258 **headlined the festival a full twenty years earlier:** Will Lavin, 'Stormzy apologises to Skunk Anansie after claiming he was the first black British artist to headline Glastonbury', *NME* (1 July 2019).
- 258 **'those who identify as female, transgender, BAME and lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) are all represented at levels comparable with (or above) national population estimates':** Fraser Myers, 'The BBC is already diverse', *spiked* (24 June 2020).
- 259 **'And if you don't agree with that, what did you think Martin Luther King Jr was talking about?:'** Sam Harris, 'Can we pull back from the brink?', *Making Sense* podcast (18 June 2020).
- 259 **when Frances de la Tour played Hamlet in 1979:** For more on Frances de la Tour's performance see Jonathan Croall, *Performing Hamlet: Actors in the Modern Age* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2018), pp. 31–46.
- 259 **the overwhelming majority of those evacuated were young white men:** Scott Campbell, "Historical accuracy . . . how dare they!" US film critic is ridiculed after complaining there are not enough women and "actors of colour" in World War II movie *Dunkirk*', *Daily Mail* (23 July 2017).
- 260 **'But they can't do it themselves':** Kenneth Williams, *Just Williams: An Autobiography* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1985), p. 219.
- 260 **'celebrates white-male stardom':** Richard Brody, 'Review: Quentin Tarantino's obscenely regressive vision of the sixties in "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood"', *New Yorker* (27 July 2019).
- 260 **'sexist historical revisionism':** Matthew Rozsa, "Once Upon a Time In Hollywood" is Quentin Tarantino at his revisionist worst', *Salon* (30 July 2019).
- 260 **'the positioning of middle-aged white males as the real victims':** Wendy Ide, 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood review – uneven ode to a lost era', *Observer* (18 August 2019).
- 260 **'irresponsible' and 'belittling':** Adam Starkey, 'Bruce Lee's daughter criticises "irresponsible" Quentin Tarantino over Once Upon a Time in Hollywood', *Metro* (22 August 2019).
- 260 **'somewhat racist':** Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 'Bruce Lee was my friend, and Tarantino's movie disrespects him', *Hollywood Reporter* (16 August 2019).
- 260 **'inaccurate':** Gabrielle Bruney and Brady Langmann, 'Why the Bruce Lee fight in Once Upon a Time in Hollywood became the movie's most controversial scene', *Esquire* (30 June 2021).
- 261 **'he's a fictional character so he could beat Bruce Lee up':** Dano Nissen, 'Quentin Tarantino defends "arrogant" portrayal of Bruce Lee in "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood"', *Variety* (12 August 2019).
- 261 **'sadistically violent, casually racist and misogynistic fantasies, which, he insists, are just movies, not real life':** Larushka Ivan-Zadeh, 'Does Quentin Tarantino have a woman problem?', *Times* (8 August 2019).
- 261 **'confer legitimacy on his bloodthirst':** Caspar Salmon, 'Tarantino's gruesome revenge fantasies are growing more puerile and misogynistic', *Guardian* (23 August 2019).
- 262 **'I thought there was something special about just seeing her live life':** Quoted by Ben Travis, 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood: 10 things Quentin Tarantino told us', *Empire* (22 August 2019).
- 262 **to point out the stupidity of the question:** Ramin Setoodeh, 'Quentin Tarantino snaps at reporter when asked about Margot Robbie's limited role in "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood"', *Variety* (22 May 2019).
- 262 **the false correlation of gender representation and artistic merit:** See the anonymous article on the BBC website entitled 'Game of Thrones: How much do women speak in the show?' (22 May 2019).
- 262 **Time magazine even published an article:** Anna Purna Kambhampaty and Elijah Wolfson, 'We counted every line in every Quentin Tarantino film to see how often women talk', *Time* (6 August 2019).
- 263 **he is spectacularly missing the point:** Salmon, op. cit.
- 264 **overwhelmed by the intolerance of moral certitude:** Laura Snipes, 'Morrissey: California Son review – clumsy covers with a troll-like spirit', *Guardian* (24 May 2019); Helen Brown, 'Morrissey, California Son, review: Album's missteps might be forgiven if you could dissociate the music from the man', *Independent* (24 May 2019).
- 264 **'personally insulted':** Stuart Heritage, 'Lunatics is nasty and grotesque. Chris Lilley's career is shot', *Guardian* (23 April 2019).
- 264 **'prurient, immoral, vicious, coarse, and crude':** Vyvyan Holland, *Oscar Wilde and His World* (Thetford: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 72.
- 264 **the depiction of immorality is not necessarily an endorsement of such behaviour:** *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, op. cit., pp. 129–30.
- 266 **'When you think language makes the world, you are frightened of words':** Dale, op. cit.
- 266 **'someone who is not adequately robust to deal with them will either be hurt or provoked into harming others':** Simon Evans, 'Heavy weights and hurty words', *Critic* (April 2021), pp. 70–71.

- 266 *a court jester was empowered ‘to tell the truth, yet keep his head, jingling as it was with silly bells’*: Salman Rushdie, ‘Yorick’, *Encounter* (September 1982), pp. 3–8. Quotation taken from p. 7.
- 267 *twenty-five years after his death*: Brian Logan, “Bill Hicks was a bit misogynist” – young comics reassess the standup legend’, *Guardian* (24 February 2019).
- 267 *‘all comedy is critical’*: John Cleese, Twitter (24 June 2020).
- 267 *a joke he told about Jérémie Gabriel, a young man suffering from a disfiguring condition known as Treacher Collins syndrome*: See my interview with Mike Ward on the *spiked* YouTube channel, uploaded on 13 August 2016.
- 268 *His onstage persona is not, and is all the funnier for it*: Mike Ward eventually won his appeal, with the Canadian Supreme Court ruling (by five to four votes) that his joke did not amount to discrimination.
- 268 *‘mocking the survivors’*: Holly Thomas, ‘Louis C.K.’s Parkland joke is what happens when comedy fails’, *CNN* (2 January 2019).
- 269 *‘comedy’s future in the woke world’*: Nica Burns, ‘I am looking forward to comedy’s future in the woke world’, *Chortle* (5 August 2018).
- 270 *‘racial slurs’ and ‘outdated language’*: Callum Wells, ‘John Cleese, 81, blasts “absurd” woke culture as he fronts series examining political correctness . . . after Fawlty Towers “cancellation” row’, *Daily Mail* (23 August 2021).
- 270 *‘an old fossil left over from decades before’*: Ellie Harrison, ‘Fawlty Towers: John Cleese hits back at “stupid” decision to remove episode from UKTV’, *Independent* (12 June 2020).
- 270 *the best solution to feeling offended by a particular show is simply not to watch it*: Sky Cinema introduced warning labels to films deemed to have ‘outdated attitudes, language and cultural depictions which may cause offence today’, including *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and the science-fiction epic *Aliens* (1986), because it features a white actress wearing extensive make-up to play a Hispanic character.
- 271 *‘we cannot change human nature and must make the best of a bad job’*: See W. H. Auden’s introduction to Byron’s *Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: New English Library, 1966), pp. vii–xxiv. Quotation taken from p. xi.
- 271 *Auden repeated this pithy rubric in his foreword*: See W. H. Auden’s foreword to Angus Stewart, *Sense & Inconsequence* (Salisbury: Compton Press, 1972).
- 272 *‘the surest way to undermine it is laughter’*: Arendt, op. cit., p. 45.
- 272 *‘cockroach whiskers’ and fingers, ‘fatty like worms’*: Osip Mandelstam, *Selected Poems*, trans. David McDuff (London: Writers and Readers, 1983), p. 131.
- 272 *a suspended sentence for a satirical poem about the president posted on Instagram*: J. Weston Phippen, ‘A former Miss Turkey’s punishment for reposting a poem to Instagram’, *Atlantic* (31 May 2016).
- 272 *demands from the Turkish government that he be prosecuted*: Jess Staufenberg, ‘German comedian Jan Böhmermann could face prison for “smear poem” against Turkish President Erdogan’, *Independent* (7 April 2016).
- 272 *Boris Johnson’s now famous limerick*: Douglas Murray, ‘Boris Johnson wins the Spectator’s President Erdogan offensive poetry competition’, *Spectator* (18 May 2016).

Exodus

- 273 *the self-satirising nature of contemporary media outlets*: Nell Frizzell, ‘Is having a baby in 2021 pure environmental vandalism?’, *British Vogue* (25 April 2021).
- 273 *such mechanical prattle now passes for scholarly thought*: Sunny Singh, Twitter (24 September 2020).
- 275 *denying its existence or claiming that it is an invention of ‘the right’*: For example, see Nesrine Malik, ‘The right’s culture war is no longer a sideshow to our politics – it is our politics’, *Guardian* (31 August 2020).
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- 275 *‘younger people trying to assert their different social and moral values over older generations who run most of the media’*: Owen Jones, Twitter (11 July 2020).
- 277 *assumed to be widespread on the basis of no evidence at all*: In his keynote speech at the Liberal Democrat spring conference in 2018, Vince Cable peddled the myth that the referendum was connected to the rise of the populist far right. ‘Too many were driven by nostalgia’, he claimed, longing for a past when ‘passports were blue, faces were white and the map was coloured imperial pink’. Sophie Jamieson, ‘Brexit vote was “driven by nostalgia” for a world where “faces were white”, Sir Vince Cable claims’, *Telegraph* (11 March 2018).
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- 279 *‘women, migrants and people of colour no longer seem to know their proper place’*: Laurie Penny, ‘On the election of Donald J Trump’, *New Statesman* (9 November 2016).

- 280 ‘*our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong*’: Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 22.
- 280 ‘*star-like isolation*’: George Orwell, ‘New words’ (1940), in *Essays*, op. cit., pp. 259–69. Quotation taken from p. 262.
- 280 *after the results of the exit poll were announced*: Bronwen Weatherby, ‘Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D actor John Hannah calls Britain “country of racists” in furious general election tweet’, *Evening Standard* (14 December 2019).
- 280 ‘*a victory of the old over the young, racists over people of colour*’: Paul Mason, Twitter (12 December 2019).
- 280 ‘*the biggest poorest shithole in the north that has made itself look the stupidest by voting for the tories and brexit*’: Terry Christian, Twitter (14 December 2019).
- 280 ‘*this country’s deep-rooted racism and misogyny*’: Emily Webber, ‘Lily Allen doubles down on her claim that ‘this country’s deep rooted racism and misogyny’ got Boris Johnson elected as she returns to Instagram’, *Daily Mail* (14 December 2019).
- 280 *Tory voters were no longer welcome to perform at their shows*: Nicholas Hellen and Grant Tucker, ‘No more blue jokes – tables turned on anti-Tory comedians’, *Times* (15 December 2019).
- 281 ‘*the notion that social divisions [can] be reconciled through “honest” conversation*’ is ‘*hopelessly outdated*’: Frank Guan, ‘Joyner Lucas’s viral hit “I’m not racist” is exhausting’, *Vulture* (4 December 2017).
- 282 *forced him to make an objection*: This discussion is available on the *Channel 4 News* YouTube channel under the title ‘Jordan Peterson debate on the gender pay gap, campus protests and postmodernism’, uploaded on 16 January 2018.
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- 282 *children ought to be socialised in accordance with the ethical parameters we set for ourselves*: ‘The individual must be constrained, moulded – even brought close to destruction – by a restrictive, coherent disciplinary structure, before he or she can act freely and competently’. *12 Rules for Life*, op. cit., p. 192.
- 283 ‘*an icon of white supremacy, regardless of the content of his book*’: Krishnan, op. cit.
- 283 ‘*the dark arts of political subterfuge and neo-fascist provocation*’: Ann Hornaday, review of *The Brink* (27 March 2019) for the *Washington Post*.
- 283 ‘*it is only through listening to the opinions of others that we can fully understand those opinions*’: ‘Oxford Union criticised for Steve Bannon invite’, *BBC News* (14 November 2018).
- 283 *one of the most troubling aspects of the censorial mindset*: Fred Dimbleby, ‘A date with Steve Bannon: how can the Oxford Union have sunk so low?’ *Guardian* (15 November 2018).
- 284 ‘*progressives’ greater tendency to disengage from their political opponents*’: The study addressed the widespread assumption that the Brexit vote was predominantly driven by xenophobia, one that the research does not bear out. Ros Taylor, ‘Leavers have a better understanding of Remainers’ motivations than vice versa’, *LSE* (4 May 2018).
- 284 *41 per cent of Labour voters and 40 per cent of Remain voters judge those who vote differently in a negative light, as compared to 19 per cent of Conservative voters and 13 per cent of Leave voters*: Sarah Prescott-Smith, ‘Brexit has caused more arguments than the general election’, *YouGov* (9 December 2019).
- 285 ‘*Thanks for naming the individual women you loathe. I suspected you were a misogynist*’: Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, Twitter (17 May 2019). During the course of our exchange, Cosslett had taken issue with my statement regarding ‘posh privately educated feminists’ who nonetheless claim to be oppressed. She asked me to provide examples. I cited Afua Hirsch and Laurie Penny, whose books are prime examples of the genre. I also pointed out that Caroline Criado-Perez is the daughter of a former CEO of a major supermarket and that Munroe Bergdorf was privately educated. It was at this point that Cosslett made her defamatory statement: ‘Ah there we have it. Thanks for naming the individual women you loathe. I suspected you were a misogynist. I read all those books and they all dissect structural inequality. Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism is especially good’. She is referring here to one of Laurie Penny’s books, although the relevance of this to our discussion remains unclear given that I have never denied that these writers have written on the subject of structural inequality.
- 286 *We make ourselves foolish by wasting our time on the congenitally intransigent*: ‘Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him’ (Proverbs 26:4).
- 286 ‘*endeavouring to convert an atheist by scripture*’: Moncure Daniel Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), vol. I, p. 233.
- 286 ‘*the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence or coercion*’: Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 15. Originally published in 1962.
- 287 ‘*their intentions are better than you think*’: Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay, *How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide* (New York: Lifelong Books, 2019), p. 27.
- 287 *most people perceive challenges to their political beliefs to be personal attacks*: Jonas T. Kaplan, Sarah I. Gimbel and Sam Harris, ‘Neural correlates of maintaining one’s political beliefs in the face of counterevidence’, *Scientific Reports*, vol. 6 (23 December 2016).

- 287 **'the personal is political':** Carol Hanisch, 'The personal is political', in Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (eds.), *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970), pp. 76–78. Hanisch has stated that the title of the piece was the invention of the publication's editors.
- 288 ***the emerging facts of evolutionary science were contradicting his literal belief in holy scripture:*** Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Originally published in 1907.
- 288 ***deliberate markings on the Earth to suggest that it was much older than it was:*** Philip Henry Gosse, *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (London: John Van Voorst, 1857).
- 288 ***an 'identity quake', one so seismic that it could easily have driven him to despair:*** Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay define an 'identity quake' as the 'emotional reaction that follows from having one's core values disrupted', Boghossian and Lindsay, op. cit., p. 167.
- 288 ***he is left questioning whether God even exists:*** Edmund Gosse, op. cit., pp. 31–32.
- 289 ***'man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity':*** Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 1. Originally published in 1784.
- 290 ***'unless we can entertain the possibility that we might be wrong':*** As Kenneth Williams puts it: 'The man who cannot change his mind is in danger of losing it altogether'. *Just Williams*, op. cit., p. 243.
- 290 ***'We clapped our hands red':*** Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), pp. 283–84.
- 290 ***those who are able to prioritise being right over being seen to be right:*** Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, sixth edition (London: Watts & Co, 1937), p. 3. First edition published in 1862.
- 291 ***'his dread of being left to himself is like the horror of a vacuum':*** *Table Talk*, op. cit., p. 71.
- 292 ***'some effort of thought, and most people would die sooner than think':*** Bertrand Russell, *The ABC of Relativity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925), p. 166.
- 293 ***cognitive abilities are redundant without secure contextual knowledge:*** Daniel T. Willingham, *How to Teach Critical Thinking* (London: Future Frontiers, 2019).
- 294 ***art as 'therapeutic praxis' to 'unleash children's hidden creativity':*** Camille Paglia, *Glittering Images* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), p. x.
- 294 ***rise of narcissism and decline of empathy that psychologists have observed:*** Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Atria Books, 2009).
- 294 ***more likely to suffer from narcissistic personality disorder:*** Joel Stein, 'The new greatest generation', *Time* (20 May 2013), pp. 28–35. The National Institutes of Health figures are cited on p. 30.
- 294 ***the rise of hyper-individualism in Western culture:*** Peter Whittle, *Look at Me: Celebrating the Self in Modern Britain* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008); Robert Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How We Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Rugby: Swift Press, 2020).
- 295 ***the trajectory shows no signs of stopping:*** The study is cited by Matthew Syed, 'The war has woken the West to its own decay. Let's pray it's not too late', *Sunday Times* (6 March 2022).

Epilogue

- 297 ***'He that appeared in the shape of Samuel, a glorified saint, may appear in anyone's shape':*** Starkey, op. cit., p. 149.
- 298 ***'the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom':*** Miller, op. cit., p. 72.
- 298 ***'Every man always has handy a dozen glib little reasons why he is right not to sacrifice himself':*** Solzhenitsyn, op. cit., p. 13.
- 298 ***the cost of sustaining the fantasy for those in power became too great:*** Many of the more prosperous villagers who found themselves accused fled to New York. Marion L. Starkey attributes this to the 'influence of the rational Dutch' in that particular colony, which meant that witchcraft 'was not taken very seriously' (Starkey, op. cit., p. 156). She points out that the resources existed to pursue these fugitives, and extradition was certainly possible between counties for capital crimes, yet these measures were never taken for those rich enough to abscond beyond the confines of New England. As Starkey puts it, there was 'no democracy among witches after all'. One of the more revealing cases in this respect was that of Mary Bradbury. As in the case of Rebecca Nurse, the allegations against Bradbury had shocked the community to the extent that a joint statement asserting her pious character had been produced. A witness had claimed that she had metamorphosed into a blue boar, and the judges took him at his word. After sentence of death had been pronounced, Bradbury's friends smuggled her out of the district. Rumours abounded that the magistrates did not exert every effort to locate her; some witches, it seems, were not worth pursuing.
- 299 ***the accusers had made a grave error:*** For an account of the accusation of the Reverend Samuel Willard, see *ibid.*, pp. 144–46.
- 299 ***When judge Jonathan Corwin's mother-in-law was repeatedly implicated, no arrests were carried out:*** Jonathan Corwin's house at 310 Essex Street in Salem is the only extant structure in the city directly connected to the trials.
- 299 ***Nor was any action taken when the wife of William Phips, the colony's governor, was identified as a witch:*** In his

screenplay of *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller adds a scene that does not exist in the stage version, in which we see Abigail Williams – the ringleader of the ‘bewitched’ girls – visit Judge Danforth and accuse the wife of Reverend Hale, a clergyman who has been enlisted to search for signs of demonic possession. Danforth insists that Abigail is mistaken about his colleague’s wife and forces her to withdraw her allegation. Whereas the stage play suggests that Danforth is persuaded by the truth of the children’s testimonies, this additional scene makes it clear that he is not. This addition to Miller’s screenplay is based on a historical reality; Hale’s wife was accused by Mary Herrick, but the charge was dismissed and the community presumed the girl to be lying. The scene changes the entire dynamic of *The Crucible*, and when one looks more closely at the details of the Salem witch hunts, one can see why Miller made this alteration. Take, for instance, the trial of Sarah Good. At one point during the proceedings, one of the girls claimed that she had stabbed her with a knife, and presented a fragment of the weapon as evidence. One of those in attendance alerted the judge to the fact that this small shard had broken off from his own knife days before, and that the accuser had been there to witness it. He produced his damaged knife and demonstrated that the girl’s fragment was a perfect fit. Astonishingly, the chief judge William Stoughton ‘merely told her to confine herself to the facts’ and allowed her to continue her testimony as though nothing had happened. See Starkey, op. cit., p. 148.

- 299 ‘*to arrest these accusers in one thousand pound action of defamation*’: Ibid., p. 163.
- 299 ‘*preference falsification*’: Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 300 ‘*By no means!*’: ‘Could spectral evidence be trusted, Dudley had asked. “By no means!” said the ministers, and referred him to the Book of Job for evidence of how much latitude the Lord could sometimes allow the devil. What of evidence of previous malice, Dudley had inquired further? They answered that it was no evidence at all in proving witchcraft; honest men could have their fallings out, and the devil, subtle as he was, would take pains to avoid performing under such obvious circumstances. On the other hand it was not probable that a person whose whole life had been outwardly virtuous would be guilty of witchcraft; it could happen, given the devil’s duplicity, but it would be rare.’ Starkey, op. cit., p. 197.
- 303 *accusations of racism and ableism for some of the depictions of minorities*: Kate Clanchy, *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* (London: Picador, 2019).
- 303 ‘*read like a hostage note*’: Sonia Sodha, ‘The hounding of author Kate Clanchy has been a witch-hunt without mercy’, *Observer* (23 January 2022).
- 303 ‘*a little lifeless vacuum about them wherever they moved*’: Starkey, op. cit., p. 183.
- 304 ‘*the girls made no further accusations*’: Hill, op. cit., p. 200.
- 304 ‘*the half-truth is the most dangerous of falsehoods*’: Starkey, op. cit., p. 209.
- 305 ‘*dare to know*’: Kant, op. cit., p. 1. The phrase ‘*sapere aude*’ is taken from Horace’s *Epistles* (I, 2. 40).

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