**Toppling History: Analysing the Political Rhetoric on Contested Statues in the UK**

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(MRes Social Research and Law and Legal Studies)

In Summer 2020, a statue of Edward Colston (philanthropist and slave trader) was toppled and thrown into Bristol Harbour by protesters. This was the catalyst for removal or renaming of 69 statues and place names across the UK, over the next 6 months. The Government response was not to open up debate but to introduce new legislation to ‘protect’ statues. These events are considered part of the “culture wars.” Recent academic literature argues that the “culture wars” are an elite-driven, top-down phenomenon, fabricated by the Right to introduce and maintain a fascist hegemony and purposefully distract attention from substantive issues such as social justice and structural racism. However, no study has focused specifically on the context of contested statues. This project aims to fill that gap by examining the political rhetoric surrounding contested statues in the UK to see if it aligns with these academic arguments. This study will use critical discourse analysis to examine parliamentary debates, press releases, and official letters to explore how power relations are created and sustained. The theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Fairclough and Gramsci’s hegemony will guide this analysis. This study is significant because it explores the dominant discourses and power dynamics underlying new legislation.

Bridget Fish is an MRes Social Research and Law student at Birkbeck, with an undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology and History of Art from SOAS. Growing up in Botswana and traveling extensively in her youth, she developed an interest in diverse perspectives. Following a career in book publishing and a break to raise her family, Bridget returned to academia to explore her research interests in the history of colonialism, empire and the interplay of language and power.