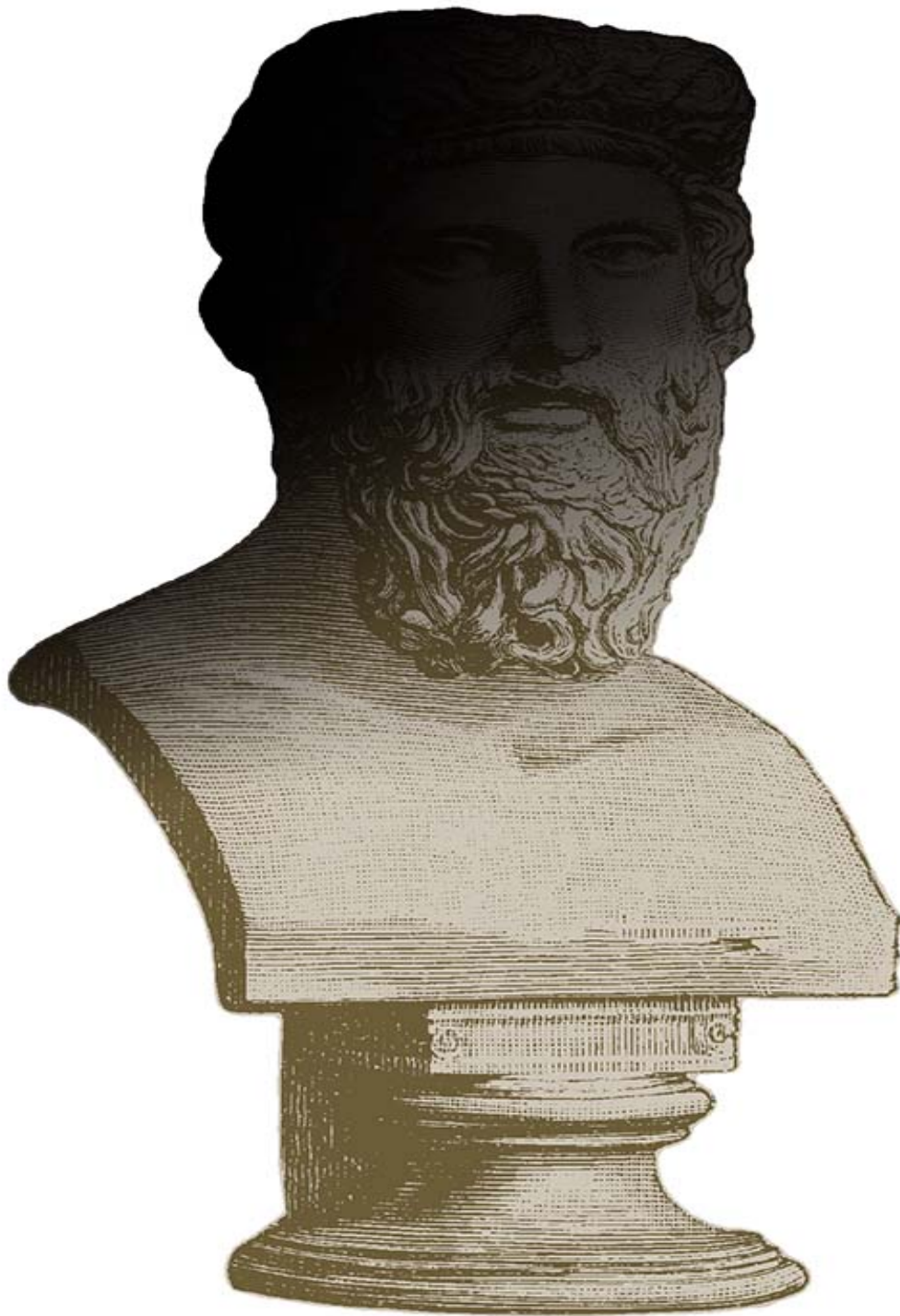


THE NEW DARK AGE



NIGEL BIGGAR

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The New Dark Age

Why Liberals Must Win the Culture Wars

Nigel Biggar

polity

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First published in 2026 by Polity Press Ltd

Polity Press Ltd
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press Ltd.
111 River Street
Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-6833-8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025942073

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The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of
passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming* (1919)

History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this
period of social transition was not the strident clamour of
the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good
people.

Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The
Montgomery Story* (1958)

Preface

The ground of the culture wars is already well trodden. Good, critical books have appeared that cover the phenomenon in general,¹ its intellectual roots,² critical race theory,³ identity politics,⁴ decolonization,⁵ and the allied corruption of higher education.⁶ To these works, I have already added two books of my own that dismantle the historical assumptions of 'decolonization'.⁷ What more remains for me to say?

Since 2015 I have been personally engaged on the colonial front of the culture wars, mainly in an academic environment, and my experience has given rise to reflections, observations and insights that are not, I think, common. So, *The New Dark Age* tells the story of my decade-long experience and explains what I think it reveals.

My focus is mostly on universities, not only because those are the institutions I know best, but also because they are culturally and politically strategic.

The main dimension of the culture wars I treat is the 'decolonizing' one, since I have first-hand knowledge of it. Therefore, while my career as a university ethicist has led me into a variety of academic fields – theology, philosophy, law, political theory, social science, medicine – the one I shall discuss here is history, specifically colonial history. I can vouch that the intellectual corruption I observe there infects other fields, too.

I refer to the 'cultural' or 'progressive' left a lot. By that I mean the part of the political left that has chosen to champion hitherto marginalized sexual or racial minorities, and their identities, rather than the socially and

economically disadvantaged industrial, postindustrial, and agricultural working classes. 'Progressive' is a more respectable synonym for 'woke'. I invariably put the word in inverted commas, or 'scare quotes', to signal that, while 'progressives' identify themselves as the champions of progress, genuine progress is a controversial matter and 'progressives' often fail to champion it.

My use of the word 'liberal' also needs explanation and specification. 'Liberalism' has recently come under fire from a number of critics, including John Gray and Patrick Deneen.⁸ Among their main targets are a belief in radical individualism and a faith in inexorable progress. I prefer to avoid talking of '*liberalism*' altogether, since it implies a single, coherent set of ideas, whereas I think that one can be liberal in significantly different ways. The liberal culture I seek to defend in this book is certainly not radically individualist or utopian. Rather, it takes its cue from the classic liberal thought of J.S. Mill, and specifically his idea that a free marketplace of ideas is the best way of testing and correcting prevailing orthodoxies. Mark Lilla captures this humble liberal view eloquently:

As John Stuart Mill argued so powerfully in *On Liberty*, truth in politics is not delivered from on high so that we can then bring the world to its knees. We discover it together or try to discover it, through inquiry and argument. We even change our minds sometimes – precisely because we want the truth and want to defend it. That is why maintaining norms of open debate and argument is so important in democracies. The alternative is a public square full of competing prophets, each with his own moral clarity, and gangs of followers high on the idea that their co-opted adversaries are traitors against truth and justice ... the truth is that ours is a time when the prophets on their perch see less than those in the fog below who are tapping their canes, taking one step at a time ... achieving moral clarity is the work of a lifetime and we can't do it alone.⁹

The reader will notice a certain political bias in what follows. *The New Dark Age* is exclusively concerned with the threat posed to liberal society by authoritarian, left-wing 'progressivism'. I am well aware that there have been times and places when the threat to liberal society has emanated from the right, most obviously in Fascist Spain and Italy, and Nazi Germany, during the 1930s. However, lest we imagine that authoritarianism is a right-wing preserve, we should recall the communist regimes, whether of the former Soviet bloc and Pol Pot's Cambodia or of current China. And however rudely President Donald Trump's administration is intruding upon the autonomy of institutions of higher education in the United States now, the liberal culture of universities throughout the West, especially its English-speaking reaches, has been under assault from the 'progressive' left for years. That is the specific concern of this book.

Notes

- [1.](#) Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020); *The War on the West: How to Prevail in the Age of Unreason* (London: HarperCollins, 2022).
- [2.](#) Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, And Identity - and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).
- [3.](#) James Lindsay, *Race Marxism: The Truth about Critical Race Theory and Praxis* (Orlando, FL: New Discourses, 2022).
- [4.](#) Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).
- [5.](#) Doug Stokes, *Against Decolonisation: Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West* (Cambridge: Polity, 2023).
- [6.](#) Matthew Goodwin, *Bad Education: How Our Universities Are Broken and How We Can Fix Them* (New York: Bantam Books, 2025).
- [7.](#) Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, 2nd edn (London: William Collins, 2024); *Reparations: Slavery and the Tyranny of Imaginary Guilt* (London: Swift Press, 2025).
- [8.](#) John Gray, *The New Leviathans: Thoughts after Liberalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2024); Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018) and *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future* (New York: Sentinel, 2023).

- [9.](#) Mark Lilla, 'The scribe and the prophet', in Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. David Broder (New York: Eris, 2021 [1927]), pp. xviii, xix.

Introduction: Not Phoney Wars

I

The 'era of the culture wars is over'. So declared Lisa Nandy in her inaugural speech as Britain's new Labour government's culture secretary on 8 July 2024. Those who preferred to think that recent rows over gender, race and colonial history had all been manufactured by Conservative governments for grubby political advantage no doubt nodded their heads in vigorous agreement. After all, left-wing supporters of reigning 'progressive' orthodoxies had good political reason to pretend that heterodox dissent is nothing but a Tory artifice.

A prominent mouthpiece of this view was Sathnam Sanghera, journalist and author of *Empireland*, published in 2021 during the premiership of Boris Johnson. Focusing on the colonial front, Sanghera wrote of 'the government-endorsed front in this imperial culture war', of 'taxpayer funded culture warriors' who are in 'the troubling business of propounding the inane idea that to be proud to be British you need to be proud of British imperial history', and who 'endors[e] campaigns to defend free speech and fight "cancel culture"'. 'What is driving the government culture war?' he asks. Answer: 'The most convincing explanation [is] ... that it was a deliberate political strategy propelled by long-time Tory fixer Douglas Smith.' He concludes: 'This new breed of culture warriors is not interested in national unity: they will sow division, encourage racial discord, do anything, if it wins them elections.'¹

This is stubborn, head-in-the-sands nonsense. I know that because the colonial front of the culture wars came

uninvited to my doorstep eighteen months before Boris Johnson became prime minister. In late November 2017, I published an article in *The Times* making the utterly moderate case that we British can find cause for both pride and shame in our colonial past. A fortnight later, I posted an online description of my Oxford research project, 'Ethics and Empire', which entertained the possibility that imperial rule may sometimes be legitimate. War only broke out when Dr Priyamvada Gopal of Cambridge University responded on 13 December with a tweet at 8.45am. Calling her political allies to arms, she declared: 'OMG. This is serious shit ... We need to SHUT THIS DOWN.' What followed was a campaign of repression, starting the very next day with an online denunciation by a body of Oxford students. This was then supplemented by two further mass denunciations within the space of a week, one signed by 58 Oxford colleagues, the other by more than 190 academics worldwide. None of them was addressed to me, and the third was directed explicitly at my university, urging it to withdraw its support from the 'Ethics and Empire' project. That was my 'lived experience'. Boris Johnson and Dougie Smith had nothing to do with it. Those who chose to make war came from Sathnam Sanghera's political stable. Indeed, the fourth of the 195 signatories to the third denunciation was an historian on whom Sanghera relies heavily in his book: Kim Wagner. He tells us that they travelled together to India.

If further proof is needed, consider Kathleen Stock. I do not know how she votes, but as she is a gay feminist philosopher, I rather doubt she puts her X by the Tory option on the ballot paper. In October 2021, she felt compelled to resign from her professorial post at the University of Sussex, perhaps ending her career in her early forties, because of a sustained campaign of harassment by students and some colleagues - a campaign

that her university somehow failed to stop. What was Kathleen Stock's sin? She held carefully articulated philosophical objections to prevailing views about transgender self-identification, and she persisted in expressing them.

While many on the left dismiss the culture wars as the artifice of a Conservative political conspiracy, some in the centre-right regard them as beneath the dignity of sensible people. Thus, in January 2024, the chancellor of Oxford University and Tory peer, Lord Patten, announcing his intention to retire, urged universities not to let themselves be dragged into the culture wars, which 'are invariably a clash between the ideologues and heresy hunters from the extremes. Scholarship is often abandoned in these somewhat demeaning fights ... Bitterly and often ignorantly contested so-called culture wars are usually a distraction from serious political debate and from the real business of universities - scholarship and teaching.'²

The fact is that the culture wars are neither artificial nor trivial. They are real and important, and much is at stake in them.

II

The first thing at stake is freedom of speech. And if freedom of speech, then also of thought, because what we dare not say out loud becomes, over time, too burdensome to carry on thinking. There is no doubt that the freedom to voice perfectly reasonable thoughts about transgender identity, race and colonial history has come under threat and been constrained in recent years.

It is true that, in my case and in Kathleen Stock's, attempts to silence us have failed. We have continued to say what we believe to be both important and true, but this should not

have cost Kathleen her career. It is a practical certainty that there are many who share her gender-critical views or are sympathetic to them but, having witnessed the high penalty she has been made to pay, have resolved to keep their sympathy to themselves and their mouths prudently shut. A single incident of repression, made public, chills the air around thousands of onlookers. As the playwright Sir Tom Stoppard has observed, the problem is far less cancellation than it is self-cancellation.³ Or, more exactly, a single visible cancellation causes multiple invisible self-cancellations.

What is at stake here is not just the freedom of individuals to speak their minds. Nor is it just the testing of prevailing orthodoxies, which, if they are false and shape public policy, damage us all. What is at stake is the liberal temper of culture and politics. For that to survive, we need liberal citizens who have the strengths of character – the virtues – that make them capable of responding to alien viewpoints thoughtfully and civilly. Universities have an enormously important civic responsibility to help student-citizens grow such virtues. But that is not a duty that academic institutions are generally inclined to own.

III

On the gender front, there is plenty of reason to doubt the intellectual coherence of transgender self-identification. When a biological male believes that his inner, authentic self is female, what exactly does he think being ‘female’ is? I am still waiting for someone to persuade me that this does not trade on socially constructed gender stereotypes that feminists rightly taught us to throw overboard decades ago.

There is even more reason to doubt that the wellbeing of young people is well served by taking their asserted genders at face value and allowing them to align their bodies by making irrevocable physical changes. According to Hannah Barnes's shocking chronicle of the scandal at the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) at the Tavistock Institute in London, there was widespread doubt amongst clinicians about young people's claims of 'an inborn "trans" nature', awareness that these were sometimes correlated with eating disorders and self-harm, and suspicion that they might be caused by abuse or trauma. Furthermore, the long-term effects of using puberty-blockers were 'largely unknown'. There was considerable uncertainty about which patients would benefit from them, and the health of some young patients actually seemed to worsen while on them. Notwithstanding all this, 'the clinical team ... never discussed as a group what it even understood by the word "transgender"', clinicians 'never dream[t] of telling a young person that they weren't trans', and they always prescribed puberty-blockers unless the patient actively refused them.⁴

What is at stake in the culture war over transgender self-identification? Above all, the genuine mental and physical wellbeing of disturbed, vulnerable young people. But also the freedom of transgender sceptics to give lawful expression to important and reasonable doubts, without suffering damage to their careers or the loss of their jobs at the hands of noisy ideologues who want to stop us thinking, lest we see the truth.

IV

On the racial front, what is at stake is the telling of a true story about the improvement of British race relations in recent decades, as well as the effective correction of unfair

racial disadvantages. The story that currently prevails is that Britain is systemically racist. Yet, the 2018 report of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Black in the EU*, found that the prevalence of racist harassment as perceived by people of African descent was lower in the UK than in any other EU country except Malta, and the prevalence of overall racial discrimination was the lowest in the UK bar none. It also found that race relations were worst in Austria, Finland and Ireland – countries with no history of overseas colonization.⁵

Further, the 2021 report of the UK government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED), ten of whose eleven commissioners (including its chair Dr Tony Sewell) were not white, argued that contemporary Britain is not in fact structurally racist. It found that average outcomes vary significantly between different ethnic groups. Chinese and Indian Britons usually outperform West Africans, West Africans outperform Caribbean Britons, and all nonwhite groups outperform poor whites.⁶

Further still, the main thrust of the Sewell report has been confirmed, in effect, by two books published in 2023 and penned by nonwhite Britons – Tomiwa Owolade's *This is Not America* and Rakib Ehsan's *Beyond Grievance*.⁷

Finally, the 2023 World Values Survey showed Britain to be one of the least racist countries in the world: only 5 per cent of British respondents objected to having immigrants as neighbours and only 2 per cent to neighbours of a different race – roughly the same as Norway (5 and 3 per cent), Sweden (3 and 1 per cent) and Germany (4 and 3 per cent), and far better than Iran (42 and 28 per cent), Russia (32 and 16 per cent), China (26 and 18 per cent) and Japan (30 and 15 per cent).⁸

These data simply do not support the claim of 'antiracist' activists that black, Asian and minority ethnic ('BAME')

people in Britain are generally disadvantaged because of the racial prejudice of white Britons – that ‘systemic racism’ is the cause of the problem. They also suggest that some ethnic minorities tend to perform better than others because of internal cultural factors – not least, strong families and high educational aspirations. By the same token, it suggests that the cause of relative disadvantage often lies in culture, not racism. ‘Family dynamics and internal cultural attitudes’, Ehsan writes, ‘can have a very real impact on the life trajectory of people living in Britain’s competitive society.’⁹

Yet, Ehsan notes, in defiance of the empirical data, the Labour Party has given itself over to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, ‘brainlessly’ importing racially polarizing identity politics from the US. This holds, as a matter of political dogma, that we may speak of ‘BAME’ people as if they are a single homogeneous body, united in their common disadvantage, which is simply attributable to a systemic racism rooted in every white person’s ‘privilege’. Ehsan comments that ‘modern left “academivists” ... often prioritise the aggressive promotion of their regressive politics over rigorous academic investigation’. Moreover, he thinks that ‘the identitarian left would love nothing more than to psychologically imprison all of Britain’s ethnic and racial minorities in a hopeless state of grievance’, so as to preserve ‘their precious white-privilege narratives and their perception of Britain as a hellish island of rampant institutional racism’.¹⁰

So, what is important in the culture war over race? Two things. One is an accurate diagnosis of the causes of unfair disadvantages suffered by particular ethnic groups or social classes, which is the prerequisite for effective relief. The other, the avoidance of a demoralizing, polarizing politics that excites groundless racial antagonism between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’.