

“Daddy, what did you do in the Great Culture War of 2020?”

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THE United Kingdom is at war. A uniquely pernicious civil war being waged on multiple fronts. Indeed while the UK is currently fighting in a global war together with every other nation against a belligerent invisible entity, a characteristically postmodern war has plagued a hitherto fractured post-Brexit Britain. This war, burgeoning out of the pandemic, actuated in the wake of the tragic murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police in the US on May 25th 2020, regressed precipitously from a Black Lives Matter led protest for Black justice to the largest national culture war for black lives of the modern era. One that has scorched the United Kingdom, perpetuated by the National media, destroying any sense of structural improvement for the black emancipatory cause in its path.

The term culture war has been frequently used, perhaps somewhat anachronistically, to describe the American civil rights movements on the 1960s. I say anachronistically however from a modernist perspective as this terminology in recent times has acquired a far more pejorative status on both sides of the political spectrum. While “culture war” may have been a sufficient description of the post-war struggles for the instatement/inscription of universal rights for African-Americans and LGBT communities, the term has now shifted into describing social discourse and actions that fundamentally contradict revolutionary gains in the material conditions for fighting marginalized communities; While the American civil rights movements forced through policies that directly benefited African-American lives on systemic and institutional levels, the current culture wars in the west, particularly in the UK, seem to be completely antithetical to progress.

So what exactly constitutes a 2020 Culture war? What differentiates this struggle from its social justice predecessor of the 60s? One injurious difference lies in the contemporary movement’s fixation on iconographical gains. One of the most celebrated and subsequently debated occurrences from the BLM protests was the taking down of the statue of Edward Colston at the first Bristol protest. Irrespective of your opinion on the tearing down of the Colston Statue in Bristol last Sunday, it is impossible to deny its significance as a precipitant catalyst for the tearing down/defacing of past monuments across the globe. The taking down of an infamous

slave trader that was positioned at the heart of Bristol was naturally perceived as a monumental win for the anti-racist protestors, and from someone who read History and Politics at University, I wholeheartedly endorse this perspective. If Britain (and the West in general) is ever going to come to terms with its racist history it is certainly of vital importance to remove iconographic endorsements of racist figures, and tearing down of statues such as Colston in Bristol or Cecil Rhodes in Oxford will ultimately do more to educate the public on their acts of racial terror and violent colonialism than keeping up the statues ever could; It is heartening to see that, subsequently to the drowning of the statue, the general public has been made conscious of Colston's central involvement with the Royal African Company from 1680 to 1692 that transported over 84,000 African men, women and children to the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas, of whom as many as 19,000 may have died on the journey.

The clear problem that has arisen out of this emphasis on tearing down racist iconography however is that the Black Lives Matter movement has inadvertently lost control of the racial discourse, in turn allowing the media to take the debates away from black liberation from institutional discrimination and social justice, instead focusing entirely on a culture war of ideological iconography and vacuous cultural disputes. Rather than the narrative being focused on far more pressing structural issues of racism that BLM was created to challenge on the first place. Rather than succeeding in bringing justice for black station worker Belly Mulinga, the conversation has become fixated on taking racially questionable films such as *Gone With the Wind* off streaming sites. While media corporations have co-opted the movement by removing TV shows such as *Little Britain* and *Faulty Towers* for their uses of blackface and racial stereotypes, an action that BLM protestors have categorically not campaigned for, still no one has been made accountable for the 72 lives lost (at least) at the foundationally racialised devastation of Grenfell 3 years on, and still 500,000 predominantly BAME people are living in blocks with combustible cladding.

White London-based Quinn's beautifully powerful steel and resin sculpture erected in the early hours of Tuesday morning in Bristol (titled "A Surge of Power (Jen Reid)") at face value appeared a fitting replacement to Colston. I however ultimately concur with artist Thomas J Price's description of it as an "opportunistic stunt". He told *The Guardian* "I think it would be far more useful if white artists confronted whiteness, as opposed to using the lack of Black representation in art to find relevance for themselves"; Not only did Quinn, in characteristically

white-saviour fashion, neglect to amplify the very voices he purported to support by allowing a Black sculptor take centre-stage in this creation, such as Favour Jonathan or PJ Harper, but this barely a day long performative allyship allowed the media to once again ignite the flames of the culture war. While the Black Bristolian community is currently fighting against the Council's decision to sell of the Rastafarian Community Centre in St Pauls that acted as an "invaluable service of mentoring, spiritual guidance, counsel and trade that extends across and beyond the black community of Bristol", a iconographic stunt has been the only story in Bristol given national attention.

While the left and BLM are fighting for racial liberation, the culture war persists to completely decimate the cause. The left can ultimately never win this culture war. The game has always been rigged against leftist progression due to the fact that cultural discourse acts as distractions from revolutionary actions that translate to material improvements for marginalised communities. To win this War, progressives have to fly the white flag of surrender to the neoliberal forces of the culture war, instead focusing its efforts on creating radical changes within local communities. If I ever have a child who asks me "Daddy, what did you do in the 2020 Great Culture War?", I would like to be able to say I stood firmly out of it.