

Defund culture

Gary Hall

Following the spread of the Omicron variant this winter there have been renewed calls for the UK Government to fund the arts and culture through the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic and beyond. 'We are in crisis mode', Nicolas Hytner, former artistic director of the National Theatre, told the BBC's *Newsnight* programme. 'We need to see short-term finance, we need to see loans, we need to see VAT looked at again, we need to see business rates looked at again'.¹ Meanwhile, both the BBC and *Guardian* are running major series, titled *Rethink* and *Reconstruction After Covid*, respectively, to explore how society should change in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.² In the first part of what follows I explore how the 'culture wars' can help to explain the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the current Conservative administration when it comes to supporting the arts during a time of mass contagion. In part 2 I then argue that, if we really want to rethink the future of society post-pandemic, instead of defending existing models of state funding of the arts, we should respond to the latest crisis in the creative industries by *defunding* culture and many of its major institutions.

The culture war and attack on the arts

For more than a decade the British Conservative Party, supported by the country's right-wing media, has relied heavily on a hostility to the European Union to help win elections and remain in power. Since Britain's January 2020 withdrawal from the EU, however, Brussels can no longer be blamed so convincingly for the UK's problems. What we are seeing now is the Conservative Party endeavouring to move on from Brexit by devoting more of its attention to the wider 'culture war' it began during the Vote Leave campaign of 2016. Such a 'war' is portrayed as necessary because of purported attacks on national history and identity. Research reveals that the

total number of articles published in the UK press each year concentrating on the 'existence or nature' of the culture war increased from a mere 21 in 2015 to 534 in 2020.³ Yet this conflict is far from confined to the pages of newspapers and magazines. It is also being conducted on the battlefield of the country's elite institutions. Witness the reaction to the National Trust heritage charity acknowledging in 2020 that almost a third of the stately homes it owns, including Winston Churchill's country estate Chartwell, have links to slavery and colonialism. Sir John Hayes, a former minister and the founder and chair of the Common Sense Group of Conservative MPs, went so far as to tell the House of Commons that 'defending our history and heritage is our era's Battle of Britain'. In another example, this time from 2021, Oliver Dowden, then UK culture secretary, intervened to veto Dr Aminul Hoque, a lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London, from being reappointed to serve a second term as a member of the board of trustees of the Royal Museums Greenwich because of his backing for decolonisation.

Declaring war on the 'wokeism' that is held as leading to the removal of statues (such as that commemorating Bristol slaver Edward Colston) or to the renaming of buildings (including Edinburgh University's David Hume Tower because of the philosopher's writings on race), has several other advantages besides forging electoral coalitions. It has distracted from the UK Government's disastrous handling of the coronavirus contagion, as well as Afghanistan, the Ukrainian refugee crisis, Brexit and the economy: the rising energy prices, petrol, food and labour shortages, along with the revelations of cronyism, corruption and partying during the pandemic. But the culture war also helps to create an environment in which it is acceptable for the Government to reduce the amount of support it provides to those sectors that are liable

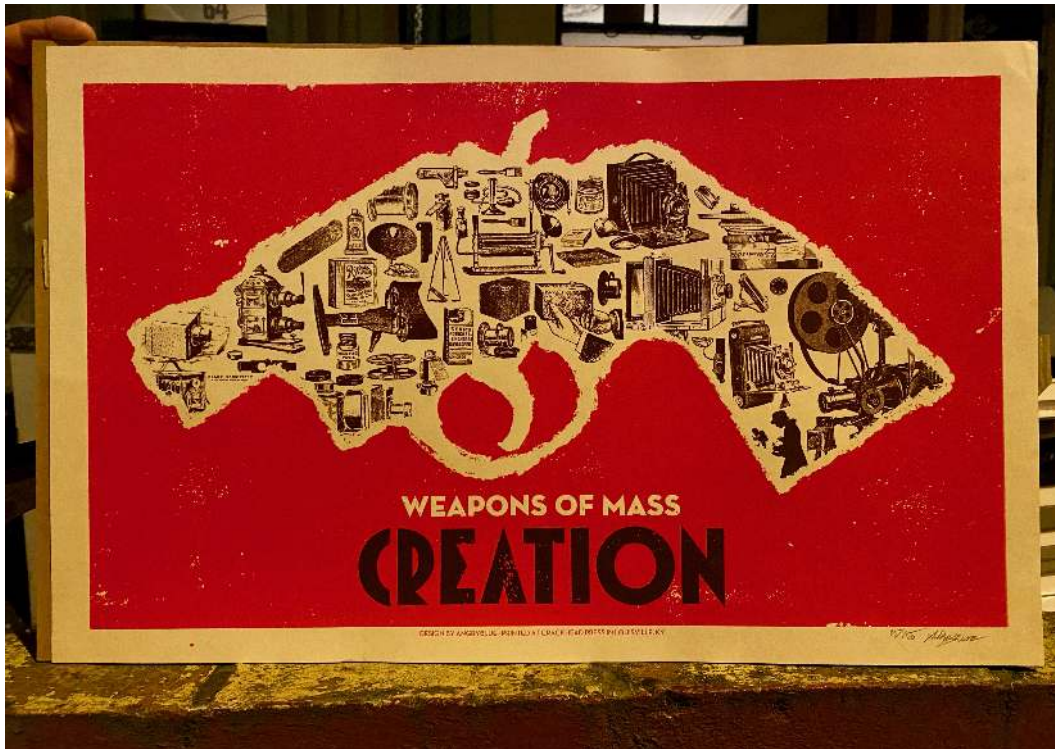


Photo: Panda Mery, 'Weapons of mass creation', 2020.

to be most critical of its socially conservative politics, including on asylum, the right to protest, secrecy laws, and so forth. (Which isn't to say that the Conservatives can't still get things badly wrong in this regard: a 2020 Government-backed advertising campaign encouraging ballerinas to retrain for jobs in cybersecurity had to be quickly withdrawn after it generated a barrage of protests.) Public, local government and business investment all having fallen since 2008, many arts organisations have indeed been left struggling to survive during the pandemic due to a lack of a public funding package.⁴ Nor has the antagonism toward those areas of society perceived as fostering critical thought and dissent been confined to the arts, heritage or media sectors. It is now a decade since Michael Gove, as education secretary, excluded the creative arts from the core school curriculum. A lot of institutions have subsequently scrapped their art, music and theatre programmes. At the same time, well-off private schools have been able to invest in substantial arts centres so their alumni can continue to lead the field.

Yet if the Tories are not committed to protecting the creative industries under Boris Johnson, they *are* apparently in favour of introducing the teaching of Latin. In 2021 the Department of Education announced a £4m Scheme to do just that, with plans to roll it out across

40 schools as part of a four-year pilot programme for 11- to 16-year-olds, beginning in September 2022. At the heart of this is the prospect of a return to an era when, as Richard Beard shows in *Sad Little Men*, his book about the institutions that shaped both Conservative prime ministers David Cameron and Boris Johnson, Britain's private schools were quite explicit in placing greater emphasis on the 'development of character' than on the 'acquisition of knowledge'.⁵ Traditionally, such schools taught very little history, geography or even science, focusing more on sport to exhaust and distract their pupils so they wouldn't be tempted to have sex with one another.⁶ 'Compliance was more important than critical thinking', writes Beard. When it came to academic subjects these schools concentrated mainly on the classics and religion. Along with their nostalgic instinct to 'hide in a glorified' – and often fictitious – past, evident right down to their 'almost accurate historical costumes', and associated aversion to new ideas and to difficulty and complexity, this goes a long way toward explaining why so much culture in England, in particular, has tended to be, as Beard notes, safe, homogenous and anti-intellectual.⁷

The withdrawal of support from creative subjects by successive Conservative governments is also having an impact on universities, and specifically on what courses are available for students to take at which institutions.

Again, arts and humanities education – including media studies, philosophy, history of art, music, dance and performing arts – can continue (in some form at least) at the kind of wealthy ‘global-brand’ institution that admits a lot of private school pupils in a manner it cannot so easily at others. The result? Between 2009-10 and 2019-20 the number of university students enrolled in humanities courses in the UK declined by 18 percent.⁸

In fact, universities are an explicit target in this culture war for their supposed left-wing campus politics, ‘no platforming’ and ‘cancel culture’. (What’s more they’re a target despite research showing that ‘there’s not a great deal of awareness or particular focus among the UK public about universities being in the front line’ of the culture wars, or even of being particularly left-wing.⁹) There has been open Government hostility toward the arts and humanities especially, due to their supposed teaching of ‘cultural Marxism’ and ‘critical race theory’, as well as their ‘low value’ and ‘dead end’ degree courses. Consequently, just as many cultural and arts organisations and venues have suffered from a lack of financial aid during the pandemic, we now have the arts and humanities in education being deliberately defunded because they are not considered ‘strategic priorities’. According to the University and College Union, the cuts ‘halve the amount of money available for creative and arts subjects’ from the beginning of the current 2021/22 academic year. ‘The reforms are part of Government plans to prioritise funding for “high-value” courses like STEM and medicine.’¹⁰

Culture must be ~~defended~~ defunded

Understandably, the response of many liberals, as well as of those on the left, has been to argue, by contrast, that culture *should* be publicly funded, and to an increasing extent, not least because Britain’s creative industries are such a success economically and in terms of soft power. The Government’s own data shows they contribute £111bn to the economy and are second in this respect only to the country’s financial services. This has led to initiatives such as The Public Campaign for the Arts. Established in 2020 ‘to protect UK culture from the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic’, and now the nation’s biggest arts advocacy organisation, their stated ‘mission is to champion the value of the arts and creativity in the UK’.¹¹

However, much as one may wish to dispute the Government’s depiction of arts and culture, or of universities, as being unworthy of substantial financial support, this left-liberal argument also takes aim, I want to argue, at the wrong target. Part of the point of universities, and of the arts and humanities especially, is to provide spaces where society’s accepted, taken-for-granted beliefs can be examined and interrogated. Keeping this in mind, I want to argue that perhaps we can see the defunding of culture – somewhat counter-intuitively – not just as threat but also as an *opportunity*: one that gives us a chance to argue for transformative change by asking *whose*, or indeed *what*, culture it is exactly that we want to be funded?

In my recent book *A Stubborn Fury*, I wrote about how 39% of the UK’s ‘leading people’ are privately educated (that’s more than five times as many as in the general population), with nearly a quarter graduating from Oxford or Cambridge. It is these predominantly upper- and middle-class individuals who receive most of the financial assistance for education in the UK. Approximately £3 is spent on students in private schools for every £1 that is spent on pupils in the state system.¹² The majority of this money is channelled to London and the south-east of England, where there are 3.8 and 3.6 private schools per 10,000 pupils respectively, compared to just 1.2 in the north-east.¹³

The upper and middle class also receive the largest proportion of the available support when it comes to the creative arts. It was found in 2017 that half of the country’s poets and novelists attended private school and 44% were educated at Oxbridge.¹⁴ Yet just 7% of the UK population go to private school and approximately 1% graduate from Oxford or Cambridge.¹⁵ Clearly, not everybody has the same opportunity to contribute to the arts and culture. If you want to be a published literary author, for example, best be in that 1%. Ideally, that means coming from the south-east of England, because then you have a 35% chance of gaining a place at Cambridge if you apply, compared to just 26% if you live in Wales. (This figure drops to 19% for Welsh students who apply to Oxford.) It also means being upper class economically: in 2017 it was revealed that more than four-fifths of offers to Oxbridge were to the ‘sons and daughters of people in the two top socio-economic classes’, and that the situation is steadily growing worse.¹⁶

All of which raises the question: should we simply call for culture to be publicly funded as it has been, and thus continue to bestow opportunities and resources primarily on those who have long received the bulk of these? The evidence is clear that the current institutions and structures are far from working for everyone – especially not working-class, Black and Global Majority people, whose parents largely *do not* belong to the top two socio-economic classes. (Over 50% of Black children in the UK are growing up in poverty, according to analysis of Government statistics released by the Labour Party in 2022.¹⁷) Given the injustice of this situation, should a certain amount of those opportunities and resources not in fact be *disinvested* from the cultural sphere as it currently exists – and strategically transferred to other areas of society instead?¹⁸

My title, ‘Defund Culture’, as well as referring to the Government’s own withdrawal of public backing for the arts, is of course a homage to the contemporary demand for the defunding of the institution of the police. This is a demand with a long history connected to struggles over class and racial injustice.¹⁹ In the US, Angela Davis and other activists were already calling for the defunding of the police in the 1960s. Davis herself traces the history of this demand back to at least 1935: the year when W. E. B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America*, in which he pushed for the abolition of institutions such as prisons and police forces that he saw as being entrenched in racist beliefs.²⁰ It was, however, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and many others, that brought the call to defund the police to renewed prominence. In the UK, this demand was then given further impetus by a number of events that took place in 2021, including the conviction of Wayne Couzens – a serving officer nicknamed ‘the rapist’ by some of his colleagues in the force ‘as a joke’ – for luring Sarah Everard into his car using his police credentials, and then kidnapping, raping and killing her, as well as the arrest and eventual jailing of Jamie Lewis and Deniz Jaffer, a pair of police constables who took ‘inappropriate photographs’ of murdered sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, and then shared them in two WhatsApp groups.

As has often been noted, #DefundThePolice does not necessarily mean abolishing all law enforcement *per se* –

although it’s sometimes interpreted in that way, by its opponents especially, among whom are that powerful minority for whom the role of police is to protect their land, property and interests. Instead, what such a demand is perhaps most commonly taken to mean is that if forces are not serving their communities, and are instead harming large sections of them, including women, working-class people and people of colour, then at least some of the public money the police receive should be transferred to other sections of society – local residents, voluntary organisations, citizens groups, and so forth – to provide community help and resources in different ways. There’s a recognition, too, that the police today are required to deal with a great number of problems they are not properly trained for and that are better handled by others. So, Defund the Police can also mean debundling a lot of their responsibilities and redistributing them to the likes of educators, drug clinicians and mental health specialists, instead of requiring officers to act as everything from social workers and peace negotiators to ambulance crew. Of course, for some radical scholars and activists, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Mariame Kaba among them, defunding the police is undoubtedly about working toward a police-free future. It’s about forces being fully disinvested and disbanded and cities being without police or even policing (which is not the same as their being without help, public safety or first responders).²¹ Whichever way it’s interpreted, though, Defund the Police is concerned with taking a new, different, decriminalising approach to law enforcement, rather than privatising it or reforming it by punishing a few individuals. The idea is to present a radical vision of the future in which the structural and systemic issues that lead to crime, such as social and economic inequality, poverty and homelessness, are addressed in a fashion that offers life-giving alternatives to the carceral logic of the prison industrial complex.

The call to Defund the Police is frequently rejected as unrealistic, as well as threatening. Indeed, the association with #DefundThePolice is one of the reasons that Black Lives Matter is itself often condemned as ‘Marxist’ and extremist. (Most obviously, in the UK, as far as culture is concerned, it is this association that has led the Government and some fans to criticise football players for taking the knee, insofar as this anti-racist gesture is perceived as having politically radical overtones.) Yet Defund the Police is a philosophy that is backed up by

the available research²² – to the extent that, as Howard Henderson and Ben Yisrael point out, at least 13 cities in the United States have more or less successfully engaged in policies designed to defund the police.²³ Similarly, in an article about how it was Elinor Ostrom’s research into defunding the police that led to her celebrated work on the commons – that is, on how people can manage and share resources in their own community – Aaron Vansintjan notes how ‘Indigenous Peoples continue to practice safety without the police, such as [in] a community in Whitehorse, Canada. Indigenous citizens of Chéran, Mexico “threw out” the police and took safety into their own hands. There is now little crime that was otherwise common in this part of Mexico.’²⁴

Can a similarly radical vision of the future be presented regarding the funding and administration of culture in the UK? As with the call to defund the police, until culture is *by* and *for* all of society, and not primarily private school and Oxbridge-educated white people from the south-east of England, should we demand that it, too, be defunded – with some public institutions even abolished – and the responsibilities for participating in, managing and sharing culture redistributed to others? I’m thinking particularly of those who are already exploring antiracist, anticlassist and antiheteropatriarchal models for doing so.

The changes I’m pointing to would go rather further, in this respect, than merely giving more people from a wider range of backgrounds the kind of opportunities that might enable them to contribute to art and culture. That is to say: it’s not just a matter of devising a fairer means of distributing places at private schools and Oxbridge – say, by using a system of quotas, vouchers or even a lottery to be more inclusive of diversity. After the 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests, the journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge became the first Black Briton ever to top both the non-fiction paperback and overall UK book charts, while novelist Bernadine Evaristo became the first woman of colour to top that for paperback fiction.²⁵ In the text of her Goldsmiths Prize Lecture that same year, Evaristo emphasises ‘novels need to be generated by and speak to a variety of demographics’. And, of course, it is extremely important to ‘talk about who is writing the novel and what they are choosing to write about’, as Evaristo says, and to start including those whose histories have long been invalidated and excluded: ‘areas such as women’s

fiction, world literature or the lesbian novel’.²⁶ I’m aware that all this is situated in a particular context. But – and this is a critical aspect of the issue that too often goes unrecognised – there remains a risk that, without a more radical commitment to defunding and reconfiguring the creative industries as they currently are, the dominant culture of privilege will continue to thrive. As I put it in *A Stubborn Fury*, paraphrasing Eddo-Lodge, there will just be more women, northerners and people of colour involved in creating and disseminating it.²⁷

This article is intended more as a speculative provocation than as an actual economic plan. However, there are a number of ways of funding a more radical redistribution of opportunities and resources that it might be worth exploring as a starting point. These include:

- Defunding London and the south-east: for example, by ensuring a disproportionate share of financial support – whether it comes directly from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport or via Arts Council England (ACE) – no longer continues to go to London and the likes of the Tate, National Gallery and V&A (all of which benefited historically from slavery). In spite of repeated calls for a change to this policy, an analysis of data for 2018-19 shows that London still attracts around a third of ACE investment. This works out as £24 per person, with other areas of the country receiving only £8.²⁸
- Defunding private education by taking away the public subsidies and charitable status of private schools and reallocating their endowments, investments and properties with a view to gradually abolishing these establishments.
- Defunding Oxbridge, since it, too, is hardly working for all of society.²⁹ Money could then be redirected to encourage projects such as the attempt of Cambridge PhD student Melz Owusu to set up The Free Black University in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests. Owusu wants to decolonise higher education by redistributing knowledge and funding, and putting Black students and staff at its centre, along with a radically reconceived university structure, curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment system. As Owusu recounts: ‘I was like, hmm, this idea of transforming the university from the inside and having a decolonised curriculum isn’t going to happen with the way the structures of the university are.’

Many universities are ‘built on colonisation – the money, buildings, architecture – everything is colonial’.⁵⁰

It is so apparent as to have become almost a cliché, but the impacts of Sars-CoV-2 have offered us a chance to present a radically different vision of what the future of society can look like and how we can make it happen. Such a transformative change will be disruptive of the status quo. Yet with respect to culture (and much else besides) the coronavirus has already been disruptive of the status quo – albeit in ways that have sometimes served the interests of the Government and their allies in business and the media. Moreover, as the Conservative Party’s response to the Covid-19 crisis shows, we *can* make transformations in our priorities today that previously would have been considered unreasonable. Ideas about big state intervention in social life that might once have been dismissed as Marxist or socialist were suddenly the only thing that could save us. Between February 2020 and July 2021 the UK Government devoted a total of £370 billion to dealing with the pandemic and its economic impact. Not to introduce profound changes in the financing of arts and culture is therefore clearly a political decision, not a pragmatic one.

In arguing for the defunding of culture I appreciate that there’s a danger of building a case that could quite easily appear to lead to a further stifling of critique of the Government, Brexit, authoritarian nationalism or the free market by undermining liberal institutions such as the National Theatre and National Trust. However, the likes of #DefundtheBBC, and the plan of Dowden’s successor, Nadine Dorries, to axe the corporation’s licence fee, which issue from the right, are not the only alternative to advocating for financial assistance to be given to those social and cultural elites who have long received the lion’s share of it.⁵¹ The creative industries can be taken in a very different direction to either of these options. While it may seem a strange thing to say at a time when liberal democracy is under violent attack in many parts of the world, in fact the *undermining* of certain liberal institutions is precisely what is required if we want to reconstruct a better world after the coronavirus crisis – a world in which it is *not* private school and Oxbridge-educated straight white cis people from London and the south-east who receive the vast majority of support, while others in society continue to

be marginalised, overlooked or otherwise silenced.

Gary Hall is Professor of Media and Director of the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University. His books include *A Stubborn Fury: How Writing Works In Elitist Britain* (2021), *Pirate Philosophy* (2016) and *The Uberfication of the University* (2016).

Notes

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6. This point is made by Robert Verkaik in *Posh Boys: How English Public Schools Ruin Britain* (London: Oneworld, 2018), 36. However, Beard provides another reason for the concern these schools have with diverting their pupils away from sex: ‘Post-colonial historians look at “sublimating” as an animating force behind Empire-building, so that public school Englishmen, less distracted by sex than other Europeans, repurposed their frustration by conquering foreign lands’.
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- 16.** David Lammy, 'Oxbridge Access Data' (2017), cited in Hall, *A Stubborn Fury*, 10. Further evidence to this effect is provided by Francis Green and David Kynaston. They, too, show that attendance at private school is 'concentrated at the very top of the income distribution'. See Green and Kynaston, 'Engines of Privilege', <https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/Events-Assets/PDF/2019/01-LT/20190211-Engines-of-Privilege-presentation.pdf>.
- 17.** Jemma Crew, 'More Than Half of Black Children Growing Up in Poverty – Labour', *Independent*, 3 January 2022.
- 18.** Even in those areas where things are a little better, such as the publishing industry, in which women are now taking up 92% of publicity, 88% of rights and 78% of editorial roles, these still tend to be "white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heteronormative women". Sharmaine Lovegrove, founder of Hachette imprint Dialogue Books, quoted in Johanna Thomas-Corr, 'How Women Conquered the World of Fiction', *Observer*, 16 May 2021. The above figures are taken from *UK Publishing Workforce 2020: Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging*, Publishers Association, 2021, 10: <https://www.publishers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-UK-Publishing-Workforce-Diversity-Inclusion-and-Belonging-in-2020.pdf>.
- 19.** A first version of 'Defund Culture' was presented at the Radical Open Access: Experiments in (Post-)Publishing Symposium, organised by Mark Amerika and Janneke Adema, and held at the University of Colorado at Boulder, 1 October 2021. The first of October was also the beginning of the 2021 Black History Month in the UK.
- 20.** Angela Davis, interviewed in Amy Goodman, 'Freedom Struggle: Angela Davis on Calls to Defund Police, Racism & Capitalism, and the 2020 Election', *Democracy Now!*, 7 September 2020, https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/12/angela_davis_on_abolition_calls_to.
- 21.** See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Mariame Kaba, in conversation with Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law, 'Abolish Policing, Not Just the Police', 2 July 2020, <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/184-abolish-policing-not-just-the-police>.
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- 23.** Howard Henderson and Ben Yisrael, '7 Myths About "Defunding the Police" Debunked', *Brookings: How We Rise*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/05/19/7-myths-about-defunding-the-police-debunked/>.
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- 25.** Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Bernadine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019).
- 26.** Bernadine Evaristo, 'The Longform Patriarchs, and their Accomplices', *New Statesman*, 1 October 2020.
- 27.** Hall, *A Stubborn Fury*, 106, n.8.
- 28.** 'London Receives a Third of All ACE Funding', *Arts Professional*, 12 July, 2019, <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/london-receives-third-all-ace-funding>.
- 29.** I am not advocating abolishing Oxbridge, or universities, or indeed all liberal cultural institutions, here. I prefer to go beyond modernist-left liberal discourses to advocate a radically pluralised politics that is capable of including the modernist-left, the liberal and the pluriversal at the same time. For more, see my 'Pluriversal Socialism - The Very Idea', *Media Theory* 5:1 (2021), <http://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/126>. However, I'm aware there are those who do advocate abolishing the university as well as the police and prisons. Harney and Moten, for example, write that the left slogan "universities, not jails," marks a choice that may not be possible. ... Perhaps it is necessary finally to see that the university produces incarceration as the product of its negligence. Perhaps there is another relation between the University and the Prison – beyond simple opposition or family resemblance – that ... of another abolitionism'. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013), 41.
- 30.** Melz Owusu, in Harriet Swain, 'Payback Time: Academic's Plan to Launch Free Black University in UK', *Guardian*, 27 June 2020. For more on the vision of The Free Black University, see <https://www.freeblackuni.com/vision>.
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