

# Agnotology and a Monstrous Ignorance: Race and Curriculum Policy in England

Sally Tomlinson

**Abstract:** This article discusses, through the theory of agnotology, the persistent ignorance as to how Britain became multiracial, multicultural and multifaith in a post-imperial age, the origins of a racist imperial curriculum and the hostility to changes in the school curriculum which would provide a clearer understanding of the imperial past, and the efforts of teachers, schools, and many others to move towards the creation of a socially and racially just society.

**Keywords:** Race, Multiculturalism, Imperialism, Curriculum, Agnotology

**Titel:** Agnotologie und monströse Ignoranz: *Race* und Lehrplanpolitik in England

**Zusammenfassung:** Ausgehend von der Theorie der Agnotologie diskutiert der Beitrag die anhaltende Ignoranz demgegenüber, wie Großbritannien in einem postimperialen Zeitalter *multiracial*, *multicultural* und *multifaith* wurde. Es geht um die Ursprünge eines rassistischen imperialen Lehrplans und die Feindseligkeit gegenüber Änderungen dieses Lehrplans, die ein klareres Verständnis der imperialen Vergangenheit ermöglichen würden sowie um die Bemühungen von Lehrer:innen, Schulen, und vieler anderer eine sozial und *racially* gerechte Gesellschaft zu gestalten.

**Schlüsselwörter:** *Race*, Multikulturalismus, Imperialismus, Lehrplan, Agnotologie

## 1. Introduction

World-wide, many societies are now becoming the ‘risk societies’ suggested by Ulrich Beck in 1986. These are societies experiencing dramatic change and uncertainty and losing faith in government or social institutions to find solutions to problems in individual and collective lives (cf. Beck 1986/1992). This applies particularly to societies which describe themselves as social democracies or simply democratic as opposed to totalitarian and believed their institutions were underpinned by some notions of social justice. It seems that the economic, social and political institutions are losing the power to make attempts to regulate so that all members of the society feel they are fairly treated. Governments still struggle to address the claims of minorities from former colonial countries who are citizens or intended citizens of nation-states and want equitable treatment. Societies that benefited from imperial conquests, looting the land, labour and resources of other countries over hundreds of years, still find it hard to acknowledge their histories and the consequences.

In England by the end of 2022 the governing Conservative Party had chosen five Prime Ministers in twelve years, three over three months in the summer of 2022. Years of austerity (cutting social benefits and protections), leaving the European Union, and three years of a pandemic had reduced faith in government to the point where it was suggested that ‘The Tories have broken Britain’ (cf. Rawnsley 2022). One strategy of the government to deflect

attention from the serious economic and social problems facing the country was to attack the developing attempts to question Britain's imperial past and the current hostile treatment of Black and other minorities. In higher education some universities, notably the centres of the old British empire higher education, Oxford and Cambridge, had made some attempts to 'de-colonise' the university curriculum and university students were at the forefront of calls for a reappraisal of university teaching and the removal of physical symbols of empire (see Chantiluke et al. 2018). But schools and the school curriculum had not really seen serious attempts to change the curriculum. The multicultural and anti-racist work in the 1970s and 1980s by some schools, teachers, teacher educators, community groups and local authorities gradually disappeared in the 1990s, and the new national curriculum from 1988 was subject to government scrutiny, omissions and ignorance (see Tomlinson 2019, Chapter 4). But by the second decade of the 2000s it was becoming impossible for schools to ignore what was happening both in the UK and globally. The 'Black Lives Matter' movement had expanded globally after the murder of black American George Floyd in 2020, and millions of people world-wide increased their protests against injustices suffered by minorities. In England however, despite public action to pull down statues of slave owners (cf. Modhin/Storer 2021), and famous footballer John Barnes writing on *The Uncomfortable Truth about Racism* (cf. Barnes 2022) there continues to be a monstrous ignorance, reflected in the school curriculum, about why and how the country became multiracial, multiethnic, multifaith and multicultural.

Older white people in England found it hard to understand that they were taught that an empire made Britain 'Great' but with the tacit understanding that those in colonies would stay there, and then found their neighbours were from former colonial countries. They may have remembered that in 1955 Prime Minister Winston Churchill had suggested that an election campaign should use the slogan 'keep Britain White'. They remembered that Member of Parliament Enoch Powell had in 1968 claimed, without evidence, that a white working class could not obtain houses or hospitals beds due to immigration and forecast 'rivers of blood' if immigration continued (cf. Powell 1968). At that time there were only some 800,000 colonial migrants working in the country among 58 million in the whole population. The Brexit campaign in 2016 used attacks and false claims about migrants, refugees and 'foreigners' to persuade people to vote to leave the European Union and there was an increase in race hate and racial attacks after the vote, including many on settled Black citizens (cf. Dorling/Tomlinson 2020). The rise in movements for 'white supremacy' and open antisemitism in Europe increased in the 21st century and lies and misinformation extend downwards from the top of governments. A survey of Donald Trump's Presidency in the USA from 2016–2019 concluded that "a defining feature of Trump is the bombardment of lies, 2,700 in one year alone" (Dale 2019). When Boris Johnson had been Prime Minister for eighteen months John Crace wrote that "previous Ministers have at least been on nodding terms with the truth, but Boris Johnson is completely without shame. A sociopath for whom no lie is off limits" (Crace 2021). Yet both Trump and Johnson in 2023 were contemplating returning to the top positions of power in their societies. Why governments that claim to be democratic actually tolerate or encourage the lies and misinformation that results in such hostile divisions in societies is a matter for both sociological explanation and political action.

This chapter uses agnotology – a theory of ignorance developed by Proctor and Schiebinger (2008; also cf. Tomlinson 2022) – to explain the origins of a racist, ethnocentric curriculum, and the persistence in the English school curriculum of myths and lies about the

reality of the British empire and its consequences.<sup>1</sup> The English school curriculum had been influenced in a ‘traditional’ ethnocentric direction by the Conservative government over the past thirteen years, the secondary school curriculum consisting of separate ‘subjects’, with the content approved by central government and its agencies, and directed towards examinations at sixteen and eighteen. There continued to be little in the subject content helping young people to learn the reality of the British Empire and its consequences, and how a multiracial ‘Britain’ is actually part of a racial reframing of the world (cf. Akala 2018).

## 2. Agnotology and schooling

Researching the kinds of ignorance perpetuated in schools and society needs empirical and theoretical evidence and exploration. In the twenty-first century widespread beliefs in conspiracy theories, in proven lies, in false presentations of history, in misinformation and distorted values have expanded nationally and globally. Lies and misinformation are historically not new attributes of government but are now amplified by politicians, demagogues, ‘celebrities’ and TV hosts, using both old and new forms of social media. Creating ignorance has become an industry.

While there are many theories and discussion of the nature of knowledge, theories of ignorance are limited. English philosopher John Locke, in his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1947) was probably one of the first to discuss ‘fake news’, although he could not have foreseen the rise of new, global, privately owned kinds of media that would allow the spread of false information on a daily basis. From the later nineteenth century a sociology of knowledge developed, with discussion as to how the powerful in societies managed keep populations in ignorance, accepting what their rulers thought fit to inform them about. German theorist Jürgen Habermas questioned why and how people come to believe claims made by elites “who close themselves off from potential opponents by dogmatic claims of privileged access to true insights” (Habermas 1974: 16).

One theory attempting to explain the spread of ignorance is agnotology, which examines the deliberate production and creation of ignorance. It was described by Stanford Professor Robert N. Proctor in 1975 and elaborated with Professor Londa Schiebinger in *Agnotology: The making and unmaking of Ignorance* (cf. Proctor/Schiebinger 2008). They researched the ways in which there could be a deliberate cultivation of ignorance or doubt, especially in the scientific, technical and political worlds. The classic cultivation of ignorance was in the tobacco industry, which for years denied the link between smoking and cancer, and even on occasion suggested smoking was good for health. Constant repetition, by people with power and influence, often backed up by spurious ‘scientific’ claims of untruths goes beyond the notion of propaganda. Governments find it useful to maintain what has been called a strategic maintenance of ignorance among sections of the population (cf. Archer 1988). Restricting important knowledge and offering only lower levels of schooling to some sections of the population is one manifestation of agnotology. Repeating spurious claims that some children are not capable of learning to higher levels is another. In the public domain, lies and mis-

1 This chapter refers to policy in England. Scotland has had control of its education system since 1945, Wales and Northern Ireland since devolution.

information continually repeated by politicians, in the tabloid media, on TV channels and on all kinds of social media are taken to be ‘true’ by many people. In England there is a resurgence of eugenic theories about the genetic inheritance of ability and intelligence, claims still made that lower class, Black and other minorities have lower levels of ‘intelligence’ (see Tomlinson 2017). Eugenic beliefs provide justification for class, race and gender assumptions that still resonate in classrooms. Although contemporary work using genome-wide studies seldom claims that genetic make-up significantly determines the social or educational destiny of children, beliefs in the inherent different abilities in children is again being reinforced and underpins the selection and separation of young people in England. The lobby for grammar schools which it is claimed select out ‘bright’ working class children to be socially mobile into the middle classes is still strong. Prominent genetics researcher Robert Plomin who has advised the government in England, has suggested that all children be tested by ‘IQ’ tests, and then given an education suitable to their genetic profiles (cf. Asbury/Plomin 2014).

Despite the moves to include all children in mainstream classrooms during the 21st century, education systems even in democracies have developed strategies and policies that exclude many from a full education, and it is lower class, Black and minority children who are the main victims of agnotology. In my own research over the past forty years I have suggested that politicians, central and local administrators, educational professions and practitioners, through racist institutional structures, either deliberately or through ignorance have been victimising these children and young people.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Opposition to reality

There were several decades of attempts by schools, teachers, local authorities and the inspectorate pre-1993 to educate children about their multiracial multicultural society. Government policies from the 1990s supported efforts to improve the examination results of all young people but were hostile to curriculum changes. Despite the efforts of many teachers, community groups, parents and others, the school curriculum in England remained still basically as it was designed in imperial times (cf. Tomlinson 2019). The ‘national’ curriculum was and is little different to the curriculum taught 120 years ago in grammar schools and still reflects the needs of a white middle class (cf. Reiss/White 2013). The persistence of an ethnocentric curriculum has ensured that many children still leave their schools ignorant and misinformed about their own society and Britain’s place in a post imperial, post-Brexit world. Children learned much in primary school about the Romans in Britain but little about European history and the European Union. In the 1980s the Conservative Hillgate group and other right wing groups accused teacher-training courses in universities of being biased and too concerned with race, gender, and anti-imperialist education, teaching a ‘spurious gospel of equality’ and subverting the traditional curriculum (cf. Furlong 2000: 11). There was particularly hostility to schools developing programmes teaching black history, world studies and peace studies, although a Black history month, suggested in London in 1987, has continued to be celebrated over the years. After much pressure there was a legal requirement that all

2 Examples of Tomlinson’s research can be found in Tomlinson (1981, re-printed 2022), Smith and Tomlinson (1989), Tomlinson (1994) Tomlinson (2008) Tomlinson (2013) Tomlinson (2019).

children aged 13–14 in state-maintained schools (but not private schools) be taught about the Holocaust and from 2001 there is a memorial Holocaust day. It is debatable how far young people going into higher education, vocational education or work have learnt much about antisemitism. A slimmed down national curriculum developed by the then Education Secretary Michael Gove in 2013, left little room for students to learn to think critically or creatively and avoided mention of multiculturalism or antisemitism.

By 2018 more right-wing politicians, ‘think-tanks’, some academics and others were using the label ‘woke’ (a term formally used by Black Americans in the 1960s in their fight for civil rights) to denigrate individuals or groups raising issues of social and racial justice. Hostility to curriculum change was not confined to white politicians. Opposition also came from some Conservative Black and minority politicians. In October 2020, Olukemi Badenoch, the Equalities Minister, herself of Nigerian parentage, announced that schools should be banned from teaching Critical Race Theory, which she claimed criticised all white people. In reality while CRT is taught in universities, alongside other social theories, it is only mentioned briefly in ‘A-Level’ (for 18 year olds) sociology courses in schools, together with functionalist, Marxist and feminist theories. Nadhim Zahawi, born in Baghdad, Education Minister for ten months 2021–2022, claimed at the Conservative Spring conference in March 2022 that some schools ‘were keen to shut down free speech’, there being no evidence for this claim. Zahawi also claimed when questioned by a Parliamentary select committee on education, that there could be a ‘balanced’ way of teaching about the British empire. When asked for an example he replied that when the British took over Iraq (and its oil reserves) they had an excellent civil service which was lost when the country became independent. There was no mention of the British habit of looting the countries they took over. Mr Zahawi was later removed from his government posts for telling ‘untruths’ to Parliament and the public (cf. Crerar 2023). The Parliamentary group also had difficulty suggesting anything positive about slavery (see Education Committee 2022). The idea that there should always be ‘balanced’ arguments between opposing views actually permits arguments against evidence. Climate change deniers do not have actual evidence for their claims, and those trying to argue that the British empire brought benefits to the colonised have to work hard to produce evidence against the disgusting ways in which an empire was acquired and its subjects treated (see Elkins 2022).

#### 4. The origins of the ethnocentric curriculum

The present school curriculum cannot be understood without reference to the past. In the 19th century the expansion of schooling for working class children, initially up to age 11 in elementary schools in 1879 coincided with the high point of the British Empire, with Queen Victoria proclaimed Empress of India in 1877. As more countries were added to the empire, beliefs that “black and brown subjects were natural inferiors” (Lloyd 1984: 180) increased, together with views that even God was in favour of white supremacy, as Lord Roseberry in his inaugural address to the University of Glasgow as Rector proclaimed in 1900. The social and political values of the upper classes in England from the 19th century, came to influence mass education via their ‘public’ (private) schools. Their views and beliefs filtered down to the

middle class grammar schools and the elementary schools. Robert Verkaik has pointed out that “Public schools helped write British History. They have been cheerleaders for colonialism and controlled the narrative of empire” (Verkaik 2018: 45). These schools from the later 19th century produced the political, military, business and administrative leaders with traditions of military self-sacrifice and patriotic duty. They gave rise to many other youth organisations with these values among these the Empire Youth Movement, the Boy Scouts, school Cadet Corps, a Girls Patriotic League and a Lads Drill Association to prepare a healthy working class. This last was set up by the Eton-educated Earl Of Meath, who also suggested schools celebrate an Empire Day, which became Commonwealth Day in 1959. In 1912 an Imperial Union of teachers helped prepare text books and atlases of the British empire, and into the 1970s text books were still used which extolled the goods brought under ‘free trade’ from colonial countries and described ‘races’ as Caucasian, Mongoloid and Negro (cf. Stenbridge 1956). Schools used maps with large areas coloured pink which ‘belonged to us’, as Robert Roberts noted in his description of his old elementary school. He noted that teachers copied their public school superiors in fostering an ethnocentric view of imperial greatness and racial superiority (cf. Roberts 1971).

The imperial values of the public schools were disseminated to all types of school and all social classes were encouraged to believe in their economic, political, and racial superiority over imperial conquests. The English public school ethos and values spread to other countries in Europe and also in elite schools in colonies. *Napolas* – elite schools in Nazi Germany – were based on admiration for the English public schools and between 1934 and 1937 there were many exchange visits between top English public schools and the *Napola* schools (cf. Roche 2022). In both countries the schools were considered to be ‘character forming’ and prepared young men for leadership.

Juvenile literature, comics, art, advertising, radio and film also continued to influence and reinforce English racial opinions and values. The perpetuation of these imperial values goes some way to explaining the xenophobia, racism and ignorance which is still part of the British heritage. The school magazines of *Fettes*, the Scottish public school attended by Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, Labour Prime Minister 1997–2007, excelled in the 19th century in ‘strident jingoism’ (cf. Mangan 1986: 123) defining its boys as warrior patriots. Other public schools made similar assumptions that the pupils would leave to run the empire in military, administrative and missionary role, notably *Haileybury* attended by Labour Prime Minister *Attlee* 1945–51 and *Eton*, attended by Conservative *Alexander Boris de Fieffel Johnson*, Prime Minister 2019–2022. Johnson was well-known for his xenophobic views before he became Prime Minister, joking about ‘picaninies’ in Africa and describing Muslim women wearing the burqa and niqab as looking like ‘letter boxes’. In October 2022 state school students visiting *Eton College* (the well-known private school with fees currently around £40,000 a year) were subject to sexist and racist sneers from the *Eton* students. Although *Eton* teachers apologised and suspended some students it appeared that ignorance and arrogance was still widespread among the privileged young people currently schooled there.

## 5. Multicultural Anti-Racist education

Early attempts by some schools and teachers to overcome ignorance about the children from former or still existing colonial countries demonstrated how difficult it was to attack ignorance. The invited arrival after 1945 of migrants from the Caribbean and the Asian sub-continent to provide an essential workforce in industry, the health and transport services it rapidly became clear that schools were unprepared for the children who came with their parents or later. The lack of preparation and ignorance of teachers and the collusion of all political parties in regarding the children as problems, rather than the school system, has been well-documented over the years. There is now a large literature describing the way injustice and racism permeated all social institutions and the racist treatment of minorities over the years, increasingly from Black and minority people who suffered such treatment, as many still do (see for example Bhopal 2018; Sanghera 2021). Images of Britain as a tolerant country have been strained over the years as over 18 Immigration Control Acts were passed after 1962, the most recent in December 2022 removing safeguards from refugees and asylum seekers. Although three Race Relations Acts were passed outlawing discrimination in social institutions, (in education not until 1976) the political hostility and constant denigration of minorities continued to be intense. Agnotology was continually in evidence as the message was repeated overtly and covertly that ‘black and brown’ people were not welcome and could not be British citizens. This was demonstrated again in November 2022 when at a Buckingham Palace reception one of the late Queen Elizabeth’s lady in waiting persistently questioned a Black woman born in London and a British citizen about ‘where she really came from’ (cf. Davies/Summers 2022).

From the 1970s, when schools and local authorities began to take action and some academic research into preparing all children for life in a multicultural society was funded, political hostility became intense, and much good practice and research was denigrated or ignored. The Labour government in 1977 initiated a critique of the school curriculum, when a paper was produced by Education Secretary Shirley Williams, noting that “Ours is now a multiracial and multicultural country [...] the curriculum appropriate to our imperial past cannot meet the requirements of modern Britain” (DES 1977: 10). No national policies were suggested from any parties, although there were many advocates for a multicultural education, and an equally large literature critiquing suggested changes. A common response from schools in ‘white’ areas was that they had no problems as there were few minority pupils, and even a large scale study on *Education for All*, chaired by the liberal Lord Swann, (cf. DES 1985) which included a whole chapter on curriculum change, was attacked as ‘contemptuous of the rights of the native inhabitants of the UK’ (see Tomlinson 2008: 94). A well-known conservative academic, Roger Scruton, whose death in January 2020 prompted Boris Johnson to praise his work, was a vociferous critic of any changes labelled multicultural and anti-racist education. He edited a journal *The Salisbury Review*, which included articles claiming that British cities had been transformed into foreign enclaves by people with whom the white British could not share their lives.

In the 1980s Prime Minister Thatcher was resolutely opposed to any curriculum changes that might be described as multicultural, and asserted with other right wing politicians that it was left wing ‘Marxists’ who wanted to make changes. Thatcher told the Conservative Party conference in 1987 that “the chances of youngsters getting a decent education was often

snatched from them by hard-left authorities and extremist teachers children who needed to be able to count and multiply are learning anti-racist mathematics, whatever that might be.” (Thatcher reported in Hughill 1987). She was also ‘appalled’ at suggestions made by a history working group for the national curriculum, as she thought there was too little focus on British history (cf. Thatcher 1993, p. 596). Prime Minister John Major, taking over in 1990, also made it clear that any efforts to change the new national curriculum in a multicultural direction were not acceptable. He too, was contemptuous of any teaching described as multicultural or anti-racist, telling another Conservative Party conference in 1992 that teachers should teach children how to read and not waste their time on the politics of race, class or gender. He also asserted that education policies should be colour-blind and just focus on all disadvantaged children. At the same time a Commission for Racial Equality was pointing out that Black and other minorities were being further disadvantaged by being assigned to lower ability sets in schools.

## 6. Agnotology and curriculum in the 21st century

Any school curriculum comprises a selection of knowledge and facts imposed by those with the power to select. ‘Facts’ can be imposed by governments who have their own agendas and interests. Agnotology the creation of ignorance, depends on a repetition of contentious or untrue information and the absence of more accurate ‘truthful’ accounts. During the 1990s university and local authority education courses on multicultural education disappeared and despite the Maastricht Treaty creating a European Union in 1992, there was little enthusiasm for examining Britain’s post imperial place in the world, its relationships with new European partners, or acknowledging the contributions minorities made to the society and the ongoing hostility towards them. Tony Blair took over as Prime Minister in 1997, and was initially enthusiastic about creating a socially and racially just society. He set up and accepted a report by Sir William Macpherson, reporting on the murder of Black student Stephen Lawrence by white youths in 1999 which described the institutional racism built into the education system, as in other institutions (cf. Macpherson 1999). But by 2001 he had reverted to blaming minorities for racial antagonisms and failure to integrate. His government did little to correct public belief which confused the entry of European migrants through free movement of labour, and former colonial subjects who had been settled for years as British citizens.

Agnotology not only includes repetition of lies and misinformation by those in power, but also a denigration of past positive views and actions. The Blair government disregarded the efforts of teachers, local authorities, community groups, academics and others who had worked for years to help develop a school curriculum that was more appropriate for the 21st century. There were few ideas on how a traditional curriculum could become an education for a democratic multicultural society. In 2002 courses in citizenship education were introduced in schools which gave some scope for discussion of political and social issues although Bernard Crick, chair of the government advisory committee on citizenship, advised that ministers should not endorse the term anti-racism. Schools and teachers into the 21st century continued to be constrained in what could actually be taught, and the focus was on assessment and achievement in ever-narrowing subject areas of a national curriculum. Privately schooled



Michael Gove was made Education Secretary under a now Conservative /Liberal government in 2010. A White paper *The Importance of Teaching* (see DfE 2010) and an Education Act in 2011 set out his version of a traditional subject centred curriculum. The national curriculum is not mandatory in Academy schools or private schools. The White Paper described a curriculum intended to cover children's cultural and scientific inheritance, but should 'not become a vehicle for imposing passing political fads on our children' (ibid: 4). The 'fads' included discussion of race, racism, multiculturalism, immigration and even gender issues. The curriculum review in 2013, resulted in an even more tightly controlled curriculum.

## 7. Agnotology and supporters

Attacking the monstrous ignorance perpetuated in schooling faces powerful opposition. Academics, head teachers, government advisers, business people – from both white and minority backgrounds, may have strong vested interests in not only opposing honest teaching about the past and present, but may really believe in their versions of reality. Gove's adviser for the history curriculum was Niall Ferguson, who had written on the 'Greatness' of the British empire with his version of imperialism and how 'Britain made the modern world' (cf. Ferguson 2004). Gove himself had written a book in 2005, before he entered Parliament, which was essentially a diatribe against Islam (cf. Gove 2005). As Education Minister he did not take kindly to critique of his curriculum or other education policies. He described a hundred professors and teachers (the author was one) who had signed a letter in the *Independent* newspaper in March 2013 criticising his plans as "enemies of promise a set of politically motivated individuals who have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children from getting the education they need." (Gove 2013) He wrote that "I refuse to surrender to these Marxist inspired teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools" (Gove 2013). Over the years teachers and academics who were critical of conservative education policies, especially those concerning race and racism, have been accused of being 'Marxist'. Instead of attacking those drawing attention to the racist consequences of a xenophobic curriculum, there could have been a collection of evidence of the views and behaviour of young people who have come through the 'traditional' school system. The results of a curriculum which still encouraged misinformation can be documented by noting the racism and ignorance demonstrated by those who had recently left school. One example could be the behaviour of a group of white students, at Nottingham-Trent University, who had studied the Gove curriculum at school, who were recorded chanting racist abuse outside a Black female student's room. Included in the chants were 'We hate the Blacks' and 'Sign the Brexit papers' (cf. Rawlinson 2018), echoing in the lies spread before the Brexit vote was that anyone from former colonial countries would 'go home'. There are many other recorded instances of the ignorance and hostility of white students who have been given little opportunity in their schooling of learning a more truthful account of the multiracial nature of their society and its past.

Agnotology took the form of an open lie in 2014, when a forged letter claiming a takeover of schools in Birmingham by Islamists led to government panic. One response was the production of a policy requiring all schools to 'actively promote fundamental British values.' Guidance issued by the Department for Education listed the values as democracy, the rule of

law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths. There was minimal guidance on how schools were expected to teach these values but the inspectorate Ofsted were required to check this was happening. It was pointed out to ministers that these values are actually those mentioned in all democratic constitutions and ministers themselves did not always appear to conform to a rule of law. In June 2021 the High Court found Michael Gove, who after being Education Minister had served a term as Justice Minister, guilty of breaking the law by helping to give £560,000 for equipment used in the covid outbreak to a company run by one of his former education advisers. There were also contradictions in trying to explain to students why the British government regarded countries with no regard for democracy and punitive religious laws as friends and allies, even selling them arms.

## 8. Anti-Agnotology

If agnotology involves the efforts of the powerful to present their version of truth, then an anti-agnotology must develop. If the curriculum in English schools over the past has been committed to transmitting knowledge approved by the successive governments, who ignored or were opposed to any inclusion of honest information about the imperial past and the current consequences, there is now a growing opposition and determination to overcome this monstrous ignorance. Courses, resources, including newer text books are in development. Teacher training courses in universities, schools with enlightened Heads and teachers, some local authorities, minority parents and community groups aware of changing needs, have begun to influence what is taught and learned in schools. Much of the recent work concentrates on the positive presentation of the history, presence and attainments of minorities and there is an expanding literature produced by Black and minority academics, fiction and playwrights, journalists, social media contributors and others.

In an effort to subvert any suggested change, the government under Boris Johnson set up a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which was intended to consider “the extent to which children acquire a proper grounding in the national story, including its multi-ethnic character” and create a “sense of belonging” in all children (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021: 184). Its work was to be based on that of the American right-wing academic E. D. Hirsch and his ideas on *How to Educate a Citizen* (Hirsch 2020). Hirsch was well known in the USA for suggesting a ‘knowledge-rich curriculum’ based on teaching unquestioned ‘facts’. The Commission was chaired by Tony Sewell, who was popular with the government but whose own work had been criticised by other academics and teachers for blaming Black youth for their problems (cf. Sewell 1997). The Commission consisted of eleven eminent minority people, including the astronomer and space scientist Maggie Aderin-Pocock. The report of this Commission was widely critiqued, especially for repudiating the view that there was institutional racism. Several academics and Black business and media groups were surprised to find they had contributed to the report when they had not been approached, and a sub-committee of the United Nations Human Rights Council considered that it repackaged racist tropes and stereotypes, twisting data and misrepresenting statistical data. Included in the report was a brief discussion on teaching an inclusive curriculum. Examples given were

teaching classical civilisations, the European Enlightenment, and ‘new arrivals’ after World War 2, (but with no mention of the disgraceful treatment over thirty years later of this ‘Windrush’ generation). A government-inspired and funded resource – the Oak curriculum – had been developed over the period of the covid pandemic, which suggested teaching about ‘inspiring Black people in history’ and local multiracial history and the DfE was to set up an independent panel of experts to offer plans, methods and reading for a ‘knowledge-rich curriculum’. It was unlikely that this curriculum would include teaching about the actual ways in which imperialism developed and countries killed, enslaved and indentured people and looted their lands. All of which did indeed make Britain ‘Great’.

It is also unlikely that governments in England will, in the near future, be much concerned with going beyond platitudes about equality and diversity, and support developments in the school curriculum which would really prepare young people for their multiracial society. There is as yet no whole collection or description of the many projects, initiatives and resources and publications which exist or are in development to overcome imperial ignorance in the school curriculum, and the practical efforts and results to date. Some examples are the ‘Black Curriculum’ a social enterprise organisation set up by Lavinia Stennett in Hackney, London, which has 700 schools signed up; a Runnymede Trust project, the race equality organisation set up in 1968, which with the University of Liverpool carried out a project for teachers on teaching migration, belonging and empire (McIntosh, Todd and Nandini Das 2019); and a further project at the University of Oxford funded by the European Research Council on teaching race, empire and migration.

Agnotology in England has created a monstrous ignorance over three hundred years about empire and its consequences. Into the 21st century research, evidence and new ideas may overcome the monster. The multicultural and anti-racist education initiatives from the later twentieth century may be usefully revisited, but while the now aging proponents argued and debated, the mainly white privately educated politicians and policy makers with the power to control the curriculum content and assessment continue to dominate. In the 21st century with a rise in far-right extremism, antagonism to Jews and Muslims, continued anti-Black racism and questioning of the power of whiteness, schools and teachers cannot remain neutral. Neither the English school curriculum nor any European school curriculum can remain ‘traditional’ or teach versions of ‘English (or German) culture’. Schools need to find ways of explaining that while there has been some democratisation and sharing of global and local power, extreme bigotry and gross inequalities remain. Power will not remain exclusively ‘white’. New curriculum theories and practice are needed in the coming racial reframing of the world. Agnotology – a theory of ignorance – is one way to understand the persistence of old discredited theories and malevolent practices.

## References

- Akala (2018): *Natives. Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*. London: Two Roads.
- Archer, Margaret (1988): *Culture and Agency. The Place of Culture in Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Asbury, Kathryn/Plomin, Robert (2014): *G is for Genes. The Impact of Genetics on Education and Achievement*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

- Barnes, John (2022): *The Uncomfortable Truth about Racism*. London: Headline Publishing.
- Beck, Ulrich (1986/1992): *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (2021): *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report*. London: The Cabinet Office/Racial Disparities Unit. URL: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/980517/20210407\\_-\\_CRE\\_D\\_report\\_-\\_Large\\_Print.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/980517/20210407_-_CRE_D_report_-_Large_Print.pdf)
- Chantiluke, Roseanne/Kwoba, Brian/Nkopo, Athinangamso (Eds.) (2018): *Rhodes Must Fall. The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Crerar, Pippa (2023, 30<sup>th</sup> January): 'A Serious Failure'. Zahawi forced out over tax claims. *The Guardian*.
- Bhopal, Kalwant (2018): *White Privilege. The Myth of a Post-racial Society*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Crace, John (2021, 25<sup>th</sup> March): No lies too big for a PM who really believes reality is whatever he likes it to be. *The Guardian*.
- Dale, Daniel (2019, 31<sup>st</sup> December): A month by month look at Donald Trump's top lies of 2019. *CNN Politics*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/31/politics/fact-check-donald-trump-top-lies-of-2019-daniel-dale/index.html>
- Davies, Caroline/Summers, Hannah (2022, 1<sup>st</sup> December): 'Where are you from?' Royal aide resigns after questioning black guest at palace over origins. *The Guardian*.
- DEF – Department for Education (2010): *The Importance of Teaching*. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education by Command of Her Majesty, November 2010. London: HMSO.
- DES – Department of Education and Science (1977): *Education in School. A Consultative Document*. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales by Command of Her Majesty, July 1977. London: HMSO.
- DES – Department of Education and Science (1985): *The Swann Report: Education for All. Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups*. London: HMSO.
- Dorling, Danny/Tomlinson, Sally (2020): *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*. London: Biteback.
- Education Committee (British Parliament) (2022, 20th April), *Parliamentlive.tv* [video]. <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/2ab4f353-814c-4bac-ab12-4c63a1430224>
- Elkins, Caroline (2022): *Legacy of Violence. A History of the British Empire*. New York: Knopf.
- Furlong, John/Barton, Len/Miles, Sheila/Whiting, Caroline/Whitty, Geoff (2000): *Teacher Education in Transition. Re-forming Professionalism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gove, Michael (2005): *Celcius 7/7. How the West's Policy of Appeasement has Provoked More Fundamental Terror. And What Has to Be Done Now*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Gove, Michael (2013, 23<sup>rd</sup> March): I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers who are hell-bent on destroying our schools. *Mail Online*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-emies-promise-opposing-plans.html>
- Habermas, Jürgen (1974): *Theory and Practice* (J. Viertel, transl.). London: Heinemann.
- Hirsch, Eric Donald (2020): *How to Educate a Citizen. The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hughill, Barry (1987, 16<sup>th</sup> October): Dramatic steps that will carry Britain forward. *Times educational Supplement*.
- Lloyd, Trevor Owen (1984): *The British Empire 1558–1983. The Short Oxford History of the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Locke, John (1947): *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (Abridged & ed. by R. Wilburn.) London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd.
- Macpherson, Sir William (1999): *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny*. Advised by Tom Cook, the Right Reverend Dr John Sentamu, Dr Richard

- Stone. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty. London. URL: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/277111/4262.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf)
- Mangan, J.A. (1986). 'The Grit of our Forefathers': Invented Traditions, Propaganda and Imperialism. In: MacKenzie, John M. (Ed.): *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 113–139.
- McIntosh, Kimberly/Todd, Jason/Nandini, Das (2019): *Teaching Migration, Belonging, and Empire in Secondary School*. TIDE-Runnymede report. London: Runnymede. URL: [https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58c687f1108c7c/61bcc9eca927205637e401b8\\_TIDERunnymedeTeachingMigrationReport.pdf](https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58c687f1108c7c/61bcc9eca927205637e401b8_TIDERunnymedeTeachingMigrationReport.pdf)
- Modhin, Aamna/Storer, Rhi (2021, 29<sup>th</sup> January). Tributes to slave traders and colonialists removed across the UK. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/29/tributes-to-slave-traders-and-colonialists-removed-across-uk>
- Powell, John Enoch (1968, 20<sup>th</sup> April): Speech to the AGM of the West Midlands Conservative Political Centre. Birmingham.
- Proctor, Robert N./Schiebinger, Londa (Eds.) (2008): *Agnotology. The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford: University Press.
- Rawlinson, Kevin (2018, 8<sup>th</sup> March): Nottingham student reports racist chants in hall of residence. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/08/nottingham-student-reports-racist-chants-in-hall-of-residence>
- Rawnsley, Andrew (2022, 4<sup>th</sup> December): This winter of discontent will harden the feeling the Tories have broken Britain. *The Observer*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/04/winter-of-discontent-harden-feeling-tories-have-broken-britain>
- Reiss, Michael J./White, John (2013): *An Aims-Based Curriculum. The Significance of Human Flourishing for Schools*. London: IOE Press.
- Roberts, Robert (1971): *The Classic Slum. Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Roche, Helen (2022): *The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A History of the Napolas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sanghera, Sathnam (2021): *Empireland. How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain*. London: Viking.
- Sewell, Tony (1997): *Black Masculinities and Schooling: How Black Boys Survive Modern Schooling*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books Ltd.
- Smith, David J./Tomlinson, Sally (1989): *The School Effect: A Study of Multi Racial Comprehensives*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Stembridge, Jasper H. (1956): *The New World Wide Geographies. Second Series, Book One: North and South America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thatcher, Margaret (1993): *The Downing Street Years*. London: Harper Collins.
- Tomlinson, Sally (1981): *Educational Subnormality. A Study in Decision-Making*. London: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, Sally (Ed.) (1994): *Educational Reform and Its Consequences*. London: Rivers Oram Press.
- Tomlinson, Sally (2008): *Race and Education: Policy and Politics in Britain*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Tomlinson, Sally (2013): *Ignorant Yobs? Low Attainers in a Global Knowledge Economy*. London: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, Sally (2017): *A Sociology of Special and Inclusive Education. Exploring the Manufacture of Inability*. London: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, Sally (2019): *Education and Race from Empire to Brexit*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Tomlinson, Sally (2022): *Ignorance. The Five Giants. A New Beveridge Report*. Newcastle on Tyne: Agenda Press.
- Verkaik, Robert (2018): *Posh Boys. How the English Public Schools Ruin Britain*. London: One World.

*Contact:*

Prof. em. Ph.D. Sally Tomlinson  
University of Oxford  
s@stomlinson.net