Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Rethinking History
The Journal of Theory and Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrhi20

‘The point is, history sells’. Martin Davies’s political critique of history and heritage

Claire Norton & Mark Donnelly

To cite this article: Claire Norton & Mark Donnelly (19 Dec 2024): ‘The point is, history sells’. Martin Davies’s political critique of history and heritage, Rethinking History, DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2024.2437874

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2024.2437874

Published online: 19 Dec 2024.

RETHINKING HISTORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2024.2437874

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'The point is, history sells'. Martin Davies's political critique of history and heritage

Claire Norton[a] and Mark Donnelly[b]

[a]Independent Scholar, UK; [b]School of Liberal and Creative Arts, St Mary's University, Twickenham, London, UK

ABSTRACT

In this article, we aim to work in the *political* direction that Martin Davies's critique of history-focused-behaviour has opened up. More specifically, we apply Davies's thinking to a discussion of recent UK governments' heritage policies and preferred types of heritage discourse. After an initial overview of how heritage is instrumentalised for political and financial purposes in the present, we move on to discuss two case studies of heritage work in operation. The first of these looks at one of London's most recent regeneration schemes in King's Cross. This redevelopment provides a good illustration of how heritage professionals, property developers and the urban regeneration industry can work together in ways that summon history as a resource for overriding the mechanisms of democratic accountability. The second study looks at how the politics of heritage relate to the legacies of British involvement in slavery and the slave trade, mainly focusing on the recent controversy about the statue of Robert Milligan at Canary Wharf, plus the more high-profile pulling down of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol in 2020. As these cases suggest, instrumental and coercive rhetoric about the apparent public value of history intensified under the pressures of financial crisis, Brexit and the disruptions of the pandemic. Davies's observation that history performs a socially affirmative function that must identify itself with prevailing social and political practice describes the current situation well.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 28 September 2023; Accepted 29 November 2024

KEYWORDS Heritage; slavery; colonialism; commemoration; urban regeneration; London; nostalgia

Introduction

The new 'thought style' that Martin Davies developed for the historics project was his defence against the conceptual path dependencies of

CONTACT Mark Donnelly mark.donnelly@stmarys.ac.uk School of Liberal and Creative Arts, St Mary's University, Waldegrave Road, Twickenham, London TW1 4SX, UK

academic disciplinary conventions. His reading strategy of 'systematic eclecticism' included a preference for texts by Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno, Horkheimer, Steiner and Bateman, to name a few. But none of them is treated as a master thinker. Instead, Davies emphasises the necessity (always) to think for oneself (Davies 2006, 250–251; Leskanich 2018, 560). We therefore intend to use his writings in the spirit that he advocated. In a dialogue with Alexandre Leskanich, Davies explained how readers who accepted his premise that the historics project represented a new cognitive stance in the human sciences could take his ideas and explore their implications further. The purpose of such projects, he stated, 'would not be the study of history but analysis of how historical data is used to promote commercial, ideological and cultural interests; how its presence in commerce, culture and politics makes it a powerful instrument of mental conformity; how it now thereby forfeits whatever cognitive value it might have had' (Leskanich 2018, 579). Having regularly discussed Martin's ideas in our own writing and teaching, we are glad to have the chance to acknowledge our debts to him in this collection. But rather than use the whole of this article to engage with one or more of his major texts as a contribution to philosophy of history, we aim instead to continue to work in the *political* direction that Davies opened up.

Davies is of course a powerful ally for anyone whose work involves critiquing history for what it does – politically, socially – and for how it works. But his determination to follow the full implications of his arguments also makes him an occasionally troubling and agonistic ally. Sceptical accounts of the functions of history usually point towards some possibility for reconstituting history as a mode of thought or discursive form – think of Nietzsche's critical history, Benjamin's historical materialism, Foucault's genealogies or White's 'liberation historiography' (as Herman Paul labels it). Davies has no interest in any such reinvention. Nothing within the field of the 'historical' is exempt from his dismantling of the concept of history. No 'alternative', 'radical', 'experimental' or 'disobedient' ways of doing history are left undamaged as a consolation for those who recognise the force of his arguments but whose preference is to seek to refashion historical practices rather than stop relying on them as a way of making sense of things in the world. The problem as Davies sees it is that history functions as the dominant concept for understanding all phenomena, the 'category of all other categories' of thought, the supposedly 'natural' way of explaining 'how things got to be the way they are, given the way they were' (Davies 2015,

116–117). This is why he regards all forms of 'history-focused behaviour' as equally damaging. In a historicised world in which everything is reduced to order by the administrative gaze of the historian-function, in which history claims for itself the role of 'ultimate knowledge management-system' (Davies 2010, 147), it follows that history must be implicated in the worst characteristics of our current socio-economic formations. Davies is therefore done with history. As he puts it: 'In a historicized world characterized by war, genocide and the threat of nuclear annihilation, let alone the degradation of the environment, history in its very prevalence must be complicit in what is wrong with it. I mean: could it be any worse without history?' (Leskanich 2018, 571).

Davies's objections to history, then, are principally existential and political rather than epistemological and methodological. In *Historics* (2006), he positioned himself against historians like David Cannadine who saw history as a much-needed route out of present-centred temporal parochialism – a reminder that there was a 'then' as well as a 'now'. In Davies's terms, there is no temporal experience beyond the 'existential situatedness of the real life of real people' (Davies 2006, 107). And there is nothing 'parochial' about people's situatedness, particularly among those who suffer from exploitation, marginalisation and oppression. History, complains Davies, seeks to supplant human experience as the basis of authentic existence with the coercive command that identity must be seen as something that is constituted historically (Davies 2010, 15, 169). Purporting to tell people who they are and even how they should be, history deprives them of genuine self-knowledge based on their experience of the world. 'It also insists that present experience never amounts to adequate reality, since it must await validation by a later, deferred historical perspective' (Davies 2006, 248). This coercive function of historical thinking lies behind Davies's political critique of history, which starts out from the proposition that history and capitalism are mutually dependent. In his analysis, history is capitalism in its ideal form, as well as an always-available instrument of neo-liberal ideology. He characterises it in these terms because, unlike most resources, there is an inexhaustible supply of it from which to extract value. Capitalism's constant search for novelty and innovation ensures that it continually creates the past from whatever has been left behind after the arrival of the 'latest thing'. Better still for capitalism, it can commodify either side of the very past-present divide which its own restless dynamic produces. By continually displacing present versions of anything (not just products) with new models and upgrades, capitalism monetises both the must-have latest thing and

whatever it has just replaced, which is eventually marketed back to us for its value as nostalgia or heritage. In so doing, capitalism and history combine to produce the illusion of a circuit in which there is no way of accessing anything truly 'outside': a historicised world in which 'the latest thing' is never more than a remake of the 'same old thing', reproduced in its own self-image, a parody of itself (Davies 2010, 18). The corollary of this is that there is no alternative to how the world is now. Moreover, the heterogeneity that makes history inexhaustible because it is capable of incorporating anything and everything also leaves it incapable of making distinctions of value (Davies 2006, 28–32). Lacking this capacity, history defaults to using economics as the one system of value that is understood everywhere. 'The point is', as Davies observes, 'history sells' (225).

History sells

In *Imprisoned by History*, Davies used the UK heritage sector as one way of exemplifying how history-focused behaviour continually aligns with the state's social and economic priorities. Specifically, he analysed the then Labour government's (1997–2010) rhetoric about the 'heritage dividend' and 'economic regeneration' as a way of supporting his assertion that history enforces and promotes capitalism (2010, 20–30). Admittedly, his treatment of how heritage practices intersect with political-economic networks and ideology was cursory. But in fairness to Davies, the focus of his critique ranged far beyond the assumptions and functions of heritage alone, which explains why heritage-studies scholars in the main do not engage with his critique.[1] Nonetheless, even within more nuanced accounts of the entanglement of the heritage sector with top-down hegemonic projects, some commonality with Davies's approach can be found (see, for example, Schramm 2015; Smith 2006; Watson and Rosario González-Rodríguez 2015). But whereas a writer such as Katharina Schramm views heritage practices as being continually criss-crossed by shifting dynamics of power/knowledge, with no fixed positions of dominance and marginality ever established, Davies takes a more absolute position on how power relations in the field operate. By focusing on the asymmetries of control inherent in the UK heritage sector, he shows how political interests exert discursive dominance over a key process for meaning making about the past. They can do this because the most distinctive feature of history is its lack of distinctiveness. History, says Davies, is 'the most abstract of abstractions . . . it simply labels a socially pervasive practice' (2015, 10). He described the historian's social function

in similar terms, claiming that 'its field of operation is indefinite, its jurisdiction unbounded, its scope comprehensive, its stance transcendental. At any time, it can refer to anything' (2015, 9). But far from history's lack of cognitive boundaries bringing it into disrepute as a serious intellectual activity, in practice the opposite has happened. History's 'non-special distinctiveness' has ensured more receptivity for its products, more authority for its practitioners and more persuasiveness for a type of knowledge that is already socially recognised. More problematic still, argues Davies, history's lack of distinctiveness – the fact that it can refer to *anything* – makes it particularly adaptable to the passing needs of political, commercial and media power (2015, 10).

In the remainder of this article, we aim to apply Davies's thinking to a discussion of recent UK governments' heritage policies and preferred types of heritage discourse. Because we are working within what we take to be the main lines of Davies's thought, our approach necessarily mirrors his own polemical style. In other circumstances, we would give more space to an analysis of how heritage practitioners and scholars do engage critically with concepts such as nationalism, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, neoliberalism, rights, democracy, truth and reconciliation (see, for example, Burchardt 2023, 124–133; Giblin 2015, 313–328; Lafrenz Samuels and Daehnke 2023; Macdonald 2013). We would similarly explore how organisations like Brixton's Black Cultural Archives and the Museum of Transology (housed in London's Bishopsgate Institute at the time of writing) see the political value of working *within* the heritage sector, rather than keep it at a distance because they regard it as a zone of social exclusion. However, in a volume whose purpose is to pay tribute to Davies's ideas and influence, we believe that it is fitting to work within the territory that he mapped out and labelled with the term *historics*. Therefore, after an initial overview of how heritage is often instrumentalised for political and financial purposes, we move on to discuss two case studies of heritage work in operation that exemplify parts of Davies's critique. The first of these looks at one of London's most recent (and expensive) regeneration schemes in King's Cross. This redevelopment provides a good illustration of how heritage professionals, property developers and the urban regeneration industry can work together in ways that summon history as a resource for overriding the mechanisms of democratic accountability. The second study looks at how the politics of heritage relate to the legacies of British involvement in slavery and the slave trade, mainly focusing on the recent controversy about the statue of Robert Milligan at Canary Wharf, plus the more high-

profile pulling down of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol in 2020. As these cases suggest, instrumental and coercive rhetoric about the apparent public value of history intensified under the pressures of the financial crisis, Brexit and the disruptions of the pandemic. Davies's observation that history performs a socially affirmative function that 'must identify itself with prevailing social and political practice' (Davies 2010, 141) describes the current situation well.

Heritage and urban regeneration

Davies once disparagingly described museum staff as a collective of 'motley policy and strategy directors, marketing directors, public relations officers, curators, academic experts, information technicians and resource managers' (2010, 27). Recent disagreements between the UK Conservative Party and the heritage sector might be seen as a delayed rebuttal of such remarks and Davies's accompanying charge that heritage professionals always comply with the expectations of political hegemony. In 2020, when museums and other heritage organisations signalled that they were prepared to deal critically with the legacies of slavery and imperialism in their work, senior government ministers (and their print and social media allies) denounced them for pursuing a so-called woke agenda. However, rather than see the war of words between the two sides as proof that the heritage sector was prepared to resist dominant political authority, we might equally cite it as an exception that proves the rule. Asking critical questions about the country's involvement in slavery and empire was a welcome and necessary move. But it has to be weighed against the long involvement of heritage organisations in constructing what Paul Gilroy called a 'metaphysics of Britishness' that has worked to legitimise racist practices. Also, senior Conservatives such as Oliver Dowden had obvious strategic political motivations for stoking a 'culture war' around a populist theme (defending a 'glorious' and nationalist version of English history) that played well with the party's then support base. But by picking a fight with the heritage sector over relatively innocuous matters such as commissioning research reports and rewriting information displays for the public, ministers like Dowden showed just how accustomed they had become to the sector's total compliance.

Only a few years prior to Dowden's interventions, Michael Ellis (who at the time was UK minister for arts, heritage and tourism) summed up what the government had come to expect from the heritage sector.

Referencing the 2017 Heritage Statement as the most recent iteration of official thinking, Ellis explained how the document was created to link Government's vision for heritage to our wider agendas and strategies. From industry to the environment; from regeneration to conservation and from investment in placemaking to investment in skills, the statement is one of ambition for, and confidence in Britain. One that will help create a global, outward looking Britain (Ellis 2018). Given that Ellis was speaking to mark 'Heritage Day', one might explain away his remarks as an example of the kind of boilerplate that ministers are expected to deliver in such circumstances. However, reading the 2017 Heritage Statement that Ellis referenced suggests that his rhetoric about investment, skills, regeneration and heritage's role in developing a 'global' Britain was in fact taken seriously inside government. Indeed, the document was constructed on the premise that the heritage sector could deliver significant 'economic and social impact' in return for state support.[2] Just as Martin Davies had found in the early 2000s, nostalgia was refunctioned ideologically by the state as an instrument of socio-economic integration. The 2017 statement defined the 'value' of heritage in the following terms:

> In 2016, heritage is estimated to have generated a Gross Value Added (GVA) of £987 million. Data published recently by Historic England indicates that heritage creates direct and indirect employment for around 278,000 people in England. Previous research commissioned by English Heritage in 2010 found that £1 of public sector investment in heritage-led regeneration generates £1.60 in additional economic activity over a 10-year period – a 60% return on investment. (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2017, 7)

Continuing the theme, the statement identified heritage as an economic driver for the tourism sector and a key reason why people visited the UK – citing research which suggested that half of all holiday visits to the UK included a visit to a castle or a historic house. This instrumental value of heritage was underscored by the findings of Historic England, who calculated that in 2015, 'domestic and international heritage-related visits generated £16.4 billion in expenditure in England, contributing £2 billion to the Exchequer in tax revenue' (2017, 7). All of this was used to underwrite official claims about how the UK was a 'world leader' in heritage, coupled with the expressed hope that after Brexit 'we want to see the heritage sector maximising its potential as a key component of the UK's place in the world' (2017, 25). In a good illustration of how heritage repurposed the past as a consumer experience, an example was given of

how state funding had helped to develop an app that reinforced the branding of England as a site of 'deep history'. The app – which was mainly targeted at US tourists – harnessed 'augmented reality' to 'bring [thirteen] Historic Cities to life', using simulations of historic figures as narrators (2017, 27).

As well as helping the tourism sector, heritage was also expected to be a source of employability training and skills development in the contemporary post-industrial economy. This was the main aim of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Skills for the Future programme, which offered workplace training opportunities for the under-25s. But the irony of such programmes was already anticipated by Davies in 2010. As he noted, the same neoliberal ideology that had led to the closures of UK factories, workshops and mills – and the jobs that went with them – now sought to extract value out of them as sites of industrial nostalgia. But whereas these sites had previously provided workers with relatively well-paid and stable jobs in manufacturing and production (in many if not all cases), as heritage venues they rely on a mix of unpaid volunteers and precariously employed staff. No criticism is intended here of the workforce that now run heritage sites, often on mediocre pay (or no pay at all) and under insecure conditions of employment. But we do share Davies's view that heritage as a field regularly affirms prevailing political and economic circumstances rather than produce meaningful critique of them. This, after all, is the price that the sector pays for state support. Between 1994 and 2017, the Heritage Lottery Fund invested more than £7.7 billion in some 42,000 projects across the UK (2017, 11). What else does the state expect to receive in return for such levels of investment?

Perhaps most important of all in economic terms, the state regards heritage as a key feature of major urban regeneration projects. The most important national heritage agency in the UK takes the same view. Historic England (which before 2015 was known as English Heritage) has long been a champion of heritage's partnerships with major commercial developers. In 2008, it published a 'Top Twenty' list of 'exemplary' conservation-led development projects. The preface to this explained how 'Historic places have to be understood as [social and economic] assets if the benefits that can be gained from new investment are to be realized' (English 2008, 4). Some of the 20 projects that made the list were primarily cultural and educational sites. But others were commercial, including the large-scale development of the former railway lands of King's Cross in London (ranked #20 in the list).[3] The main developer for this project since 2001 has been Argent LLP. The company

describes their work at King's Cross as 'the largest mixed-use development in single ownership to be developed in central London for over 150 years'.[4] This is borne out by the construction costs of the redevelopment, which stood at £3 billion by the time that the project was reviewed by Regeneris Consulting in 2017.[5] The site itself covers 27 ha, and it comprises homes,[6] offices, schools, shops, restaurants, bars and cultural venues. Its centerpieces are the UK headquarters for Google and Facebook, the repurposed Granary Warehouse as a new location for the University of the Arts London (Central St Martin's) and Thomas Heatherwick's renovation and fusion of two buildings in Coal Drops Yard. Argent describes their specialism as developing places 'that respect their history and context',[7] and as such they emphasise how, as part of the King's Cross project, they restored and gave new uses to more than 20 'historic buildings and structures'.

Argent's commitment to maintaining King's Cross's built heritage made strong commercial sense. The repurposed old structures became the 'basic building blocks of the scheme', providing a distinctive setting for the many luxury retail and dining spaces that populate the site (Bishop and Williams 2016, 198). As Christoph Lindner observed in relation to the current vogue for Brutalist architecture and ruins, the presence of old buildings in formerly run-down areas allows privileged visitors such as tourists and consumers the chance to enjoy an aesthetic encounter with the edginess and crunchiness of the 'authentic' (Lindner 2019). The problem with this of course is that entrepreneurial and social agendas rarely coexist comfortably, and one of the effects of Argent's exploitation of 'history and context' for profit was to reduce the available space for building new housing (Bishop and Williams 2016, 108). In this respect, the role of English Heritage in overseeing plans for dealing with the site's historic buildings was useful for Argent. More housing was badly needed in the London Borough of Camden (which had jurisdiction over most of the redevelopment site). But house building offered Argent far less value than retail or office development. They therefore had reason to be grateful to English Heritage, whose mission was about preserving historic properties rather than dealing with the social intricacies of neighbourhood change. According to one detailed review of the King's Cross project, English Heritage had a good, pragmatic relationship with the developers at every stage, and their support was crucial for Argent's realization of its plans (61, 69, 199). From the developer's perspective, it was much more profitable for them to cite their commitment to

heritage as proof of corporate social responsibility than it was to build large numbers of homes, particularly homes that would be classified as 'affordable'. It should be noted here that Argent had devoted sizeable amounts of time and resources to consulting many different community groups about their development plans. And their efforts in doing so were often appreciated. But equally the feeling lingered among various community groups that consultation meetings were ultimately mechanisms for controlling dissent and managing discussion of redevelopment within a consumerist framework, in which the developer controlled the choices that were offered to people and shut down attempts to question fundamental aspects of their plans (Imrie 2009, 106–9). Argent understood that building social housing would be the biggest drain on the project's potential value, and no amount of community consultation was able to persuade them to build more of it. When plans for King's Cross were discussed in the early stages, community groups and the local MP pressed for a commitment to building 3000–4000 new homes. Camden Council's Housing Strategy set a target of 2000 units for the site. Helped by the fact that more than 8 ha of the land were unavailable for housing because of the presence of historic buildings (almost one-third of the site), Argent was able to negotiate a commitment to this lower figure (Bishop and Williams 2016, 108, 114). More important for them still, in the continuing wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the number of 'affordable' homes that they had to provide was reduced from 750 to 637 in 2015 (Wainwright 2018).[8]

The scaling back of Argent's commitment to affordable housing added to criticisms about the gentrification of King's Cross. In fact, as critics pointed out, the effects of gentrification were felt beyond the site of the redevelopment itself because a key consequence of filling King's Cross with high-end office space and up-market accommodation was to increase housing rental costs in adjacent areas (Adelfio, Hamiduddin, and Miedema 2021, 187–8). Part of Argent's strategy for countering such criticisms of the King's Cross redevelopment has been to dominate the discursive space within which the project is evaluated and understood. As Ross and Nguyen argue, this includes the developer controlling what is said about the relationships between past and present in the site:

> Argent maintains to a large extent control over the communicative dimensions of King's Cross, in terms of the information, graphics and screens in public areas

> around the site as well as how King's Cross is portrayed within the media, via well-staffed publicity and marketing teams who maintain Twitter feeds, prepare press releases and underwrite documentaries. Advertisements printed along the hoarding along King's Boulevard to attract new business to the area paint a particularly (sic) editorial perspective about King's Cross's past. (Ross and Nguyen 2016, 85)

Indeed, one of the most striking features of the current site is the repeated invocation of heritage-as-commons across its physical and virtual spaces. The intention it seems is to recode the new development by deliberately positioning it in relation to memories of its various pasts. This has nothing to do with 'hauntings' of a site by a past that refuses to pass nor with melancholic yearnings for lost time. Instead, it is more akin to what Sharon Macdonald called 'historical theming' (2013, 4), with Argent's creative teams using headings such as 'Then and Now' and 'Past, Present & Future' to create a sense of time-depth. So, for example, Argent has installed a Visitor Centre on the fringes of Granary Square that narrates the past of the historic buildings that were preserved as part of the redevelopment. In Coal Drops Yard, a series of permanent signs emplots the changes of the site from an unloading point for coal deliveries, through to a place for glass bottle manufacturing in the 1870s (by Bagley, Wild and Company) and then in the 1990s the venue for *Bagley's*, which became one of London's biggest nightclubs. And in the virtual space, visitors can scan a QR code to access a slick online 'Art and Culture Tour' of King's Cross past and present.[9] Such are the methods by which Argent uses heritage to 'wash' its makeover of an old industrial site into a place which one resident described as, 'OK if you want a £2000 handbag' (Rowlinson 2020). The function of heritage here is to signal fidelity to the past, to show that the developers understood the 'history and context' in which they worked. The political effect of these methods reaffirms why Davies was so critical of heritage practices. They illustrate how heritage can be used by big capital[10] to discursively reposition a site from what it is empirically (a privately owned space of exclusive housing, luxury consumption and high-status work) into how its owners wish it to be seen (an imaginary commons, one whose openness to all is presented as a consequence of the history that it can be seen to share with anyone). In much the same way that the 2017 Heritage Statement claimed that: 'Our heritage is all around us . . . .It speaks to us of who we are and where we have come from, of how we came to be the people and the nation we are today' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2017, 4), so

Argent uses heritage at King's Cross to claim that the site is for everyone, because anyone can claim affinity with its 'historical' past.

Heritage, nostalgia and capitalism

The UK government's insistence – quoted above – that 'heritage is all around us . . . .It speaks to us of who we are and where we have come from' explains in part their reaction to the 'statues controversy' in summer 2020. The main cause that sparked a series of heated exchanges in the public sphere was the case of Edward Colston, who was a 17th century slaver, merchant and local Tory MP for Bristol. Much of his vast wealth was acquired through his involvement and investment in companies that profited from the trafficking of enslaved people.[11] Although much public attention focused on the fate of his statue in June 2020, Colston's commemorative legacy was in fact more multi-faceted than the singular form of a bronze representation. From the 1680s onwards, he had bequeathed substantial amounts of his wealth to churches, schools and almshouses primarily in Bristol and London. A number of these institutions were managed by The Society of Merchant Venturers (SMV) of which he was a member, including an almshouse on St Michael's Hill, and two schools.[12] The connections between the construction of Colston's legacy in collective memory and the SMV are more complicated than their management of a number of charitable trusts, however. They were instrumental in the yearly public ceremonies held in churches, schools and by societies commemorating Colston. For example, Colston Girls' School (managed by the SMV) held an annual commemoration ceremony on 4th November every year where students would wear bronze chrysanthemums, Colston's favourite flower, and read passages from his will. Local churches were also closely involved in eulogising Colston: on November 10th after the SMV Charter Day service was held at Bristol Cathedral, Colston buns would be handed out to school children and a thanksgiving service, attended by members of a number of Colton societies, was held at St Stephens church on Colston's birthday (14th November).[13]

While the above practices originated in the immediate years after Colston's death, many of the instances of public architectural commemoration were built in the second half of the 19th century, more than 150 years after his death: for example, Colston Tower and Colston Hall; statues of Colston on the exterior of the Bristol Guildhall and the city-centre memorial statue; and stained glass windows dedicated to Colston

in Bristol Cathedral and St Mary Redcliffe.[14] This renewed interest in commemorating Colston coincides with a considerable expansion in late 19th century British colonial power and economic exploitation of the territories it occupied. Memorialising Colston in this way presents him as someone who while acquiring their wealth through the brutal exploitation of others has sufficiently 'redeemed' himself through philanthropy, thus providing an interesting parallel to late 19th century British imperialism and its justifying narrative emphasising the imperial 'civilising mission'.

The active participation of the clergy, educational establishments, civic societies, historians and heritage practices in perpetuating the widespread commemoration, and defence, of Colston until the catalytic tearing down of his statue in June 2020, illustrates the power that forms of past talk have in our society and how they are deployed to reinforce dominant narratives despite the prevalence of countervailing evidence and substantial public opposition. There was considerable local opposition to the various forms of Colston memorialisation throughout the 20th century.[15] In the 1920s and 1930s, following the publication of Wilkins' critical biography of Colston and his participation in the exploitation of enslaved people, there were a number of editorials and letters in local newspapers critical of Colston and the public eulogising of him. In the second half of the 20th and the first part of the 21st centuries, there were numerous protests at his public veneration ranging from art interventions, to protesters picketing church holding services commemorating Colston, and the boycotting of the Colston Hall by audiences and performers.[16]

There are clear parallels between Edward Colston's case in Bristol and that of Robert Milligan in London. In 1997, a statue of Milligan was taken from storage, where it had been kept since 1943, and re-erected on the West India Quay by the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) as part of the regeneration of Isle of Dogs/West India Docks as Canary Wharf.[17] The decision to re-erect a statue of a slaver in the heart of the regenerated Docklands manifests the continuation of an 'invisible empire' that deploys a historical mercantile discourse that foregrounds British trade and profits while demonstrating a discriminatory amnesia about the violence of the British colonial project.[18] History is used in the regeneration of the West India Docks to both celebrate past commercial power and anticipate future commercial success. In so doing, it mobilises 'specific white historical memories at the same time as silencing the historical connections that link the docks with colonial violence' (Wemyss 2016, 26).

Robert Milligan was a slave trader, and he owned 526 slaves and two sugar plantations. He was instrumental in the construction of the West India Docks at the turn of the nineteenth century and was also chairman of the West India Dock Company.[19] The docks were built to facilitate a more efficient unloading of vessels supporting the Atlantic trading system which was built upon the forced labour of trafficked and enslaved Africans. The statue provides no contextulisation of the close involvement with the slave trade of either Milligan or the West India Docks. The inscription simply celebrates him for his 'genius, perseverance and Guardian Care' in the 'design, accomplishment and regulation' of the docks.[20] The foregrounding of a narrative of benign British mercantile success and naval power together with a silencing of the violence inherent in this acquisition of wealth is reinforced by the reliefs around the base of the plinth which depict Britannia, a female figure of Commerce bringing prosperity to Britain, a horn of plenty and a sailing ship.[21]

The same year that the statue of Milligan was re-erected, the Museum of Docklands Project received a large grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the London Development Corporation to establish a museum in a warehouse originally built to service the West India sugar trade (Wemyss 2016, 41).[22] When the museum opened in 2003, the dominant focus was on the mercantile and economic history of the docks from Roman times to the present, creating a link to the regeneration of the docks as a 21st century centre of venture capitalism. Not only was explicit connection to the role of enslaved people in producing the wealth of the British Empire obfuscated, but the prominent slavers and people traffickers behind the establishment of the West India Docks were celebrated: the statue of Robert Milligan featured on the front of the publicity brochure for the museum and a portrait of George Hibbert was displayed in the gallery on the development of the docks noting that despite being a slave owner he was also a 'liberal patron of the Arts' (Wemyss 2016, 42).

Four years later with the opening of a new permanent museum gallery *London, Sugar and Slavery*, a shift occurred in the dominant discourses surrounding the museum history of the docks with a focus in the gallery on the brutal reality of the intersection of the West India Docks, the exploitation of enslaved African peoples and the connection this had to British mercantile success. The gallery more directly addresses the exploitation behind the economic success and made the 'Invisible Empire visible' in its display of objects, personal accounts and interpretation. For example, the portrait of Hibbert was displayed alongside a 'reconstructed' portrait of Robert Wedderburn, the son of

a plantation owner and enslaved African woman, who advocated for the revolution of the poor in Europe and the enslaved in the West Indies. Yet the caption alongside the portrait of Hibbert still silences the brutality and injustice of the British exploitation of enslaved people. It states that '[i]n the Parliamentary debate on abolition, Hibbert argued that a greater number of acts of cruelty occurred each week in London than Jamaica. In 1834, his family received £31,120 compensation for 1,618 slaves (Wemyss 2016, 44). A more direct statement that wanted to clearly challenge the discourse that slavery was somehow part of wider practices of past brutality now behind us, and one that explicitly draws attention to how economic inequality was perpetuated in the process of abolition might instead state that '[i]n the Parliamentary debate on abolition, Hibbert incorrectly argued that a greater number of acts of cruelty occurred each week in London than in Jamaica. In 1834, his family received £31,120 compensation for 1,618 slaves, yet no enslaved people received any compensation'.[23]

In a similar manner, for the opening of the new gallery, the museum covered the statue of Milligan outside of the entrance with a black shroud and rope. Unfortunately, after this brief performative intervention, the shroud was removed, and the plaque continued to extol the achievements of the slaver. It was only on 9 June 2020, following anti-racist protests, the removal of the Colston statue in Bristol, and protestors covering the Milligan statue with a shroud and placards that the Museum of London Docklands issued a statement stating that they recognised 'that the monument is part of the ongoing problematic regime of white-washing history' and advocated 'for the statue of Robert Milligan to be removed on the grounds of its historical links to colonial violence and exploitation'.[24] On the same day as the museum issued its statement, the local authority working with the museum and with the landowner Canal and River Trust removed the statue. Although the Museum was rather late in publicly expressing its discomfort with the statue of Milligan, there had been calls to contextualise it earlier. In 2016, artist Victoria Burgher staged an artistic intervention drawing attention directly to the vast profits made from the use of enslaved and exploited labour in sugar production in her works *Milligan Must Fall* and *King Sugar*. Her pound signs made from sugar, placed on the statue and hung from the chains on the edge of the docks challenge the erasure of the histories of violence, exploitation and oppression that underpin the wealth of the British Empire and the UK today. They also emphasise the way in which memorials function as a form of history-wash silencing

narratives of exploitation and violence in favour of those celebrating philanthropy, commercial entrepreneurship and mercantile exceptionalism.[25] This celebration of colonial empire as past national glory and erasure of the violence of empire is evident not only in the re-erection of the statue but also in the street names in the regenerated Canary Wharf: Cabot Square, Milligan Street, Columbus Courtyard.[26]

The statue is not the only historical architectural feature to be employed in the regenerated Canary Wharf. In 2000, as part of the 200-year anniversary celebrations of the original founding of the West India Docks, a stone replica of the original main gate to the docks, colloquially known as Hibbert Ship Gate, was built by Canary Wharf Group PLC.[27] The unveiling of the replica was part of broader anniversary celebrations that included a historical exhibition, souvenir programme and fun day (Wemyss 2016, 30). The souvenir programme explained the motivation behind the installation of the replica gate because it stands as an 'important symbol of the Island's mercantile past'. It added that '[a]t a time of rapid change it is right to reflect, with pride, on that past' (Wemyss 2016, 31). The replica arch, as with the original, is topped with a model of the 'Hibbert' ship from the fleet of the slave owner Robert Hibbert, who alongside Milligan was instrumental in the building of the West India Docks.

The information panel alongside the replica emphasises the contribution that the docklands and presumably, therefore Hibbert, brought to the economic development of Great Britain. Although it notes that Hibbert was 'linked to the slave trade and indeed owned a number of slaves in the West Indies', it attempts to mitigate the violence inherent in British colonial trade at the time by excusing it as common behaviour among merchants and by arguing that the slave trade was banned in the UK in 1791 – before the establishment of the West India Docks.[28] This latter claim is not accurate. Britain had been the largest dealer of enslaved people in the world, and British trade in enslaved people peaked towards the end of the 18th century. Indeed, during the decade leading up to the establishment of the West India Docks by Hibbert and Milligan, around 1,340 slave voyages began from British ports and forcibly took nearly 400,000 Africans to the Americas.[29] Moreover, while the Slave Trade Act of 1807 made the trade in enslaved people illegal, it did not outlaw slavery itself which continued across the British Empire until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 technically abolished it within the British Empire. Despite this, the enslavement of people continued under the name of 'apprenticeship' until 1843 in the empire when the last

'exceptions' detailed in the act were ended. The information panel states that 'the replica in no way represents support for slavery' but the fact that a replica triumphal arch and a previously warehoused statue, both commemorating merchant slavers, were erected as part of the regeneration process points to at the very least a 'discriminatory amnesia about Empire' (Wemyss 2016, 26).[30] The heritage signage does not make the link between the docks and the slave economy explicit, and the violence of empire is elided through omission and euphemistic references to British planters, the West India trade and plantation goods. In so doing, the mercantile past is celebrated as contributing to the public good and the economic success of the nation.

Conclusions

Our aim in this paper was to show that Martin Davies's critique of history's affirmative functions retains its currency. In the discussion of recent UK governments' heritage agenda, we sought to update Davies's arguments about how heritage practices intersect with political-economic networks and ideology. Indeed, throughout the article, we worked with Davies's critique of how heritage performs '"an important patriotic duty" by "presenting to the nation and to the state an image of itself"' (Davies 2010, 141).31 As he so eloquently argued, 'the postmodern economy, by reinforcing historicized reality, reinforces capitalism itself [. . .] a historicized world doesn't just convert historical-cultural values into socio-economic values; rather it defines socio-economic values *themselves* as historical-cultural values [. . .] and assimilates them to the political values of neo-liberal society' (2010, 25). Crucially, in the discussion of Colston and Milligan, we emphasised that it was via the silencing of the role played by enslaved labour in building this commercial success that the 'differential exchange value' with regard to human lives in the 'market place of death' is revealed. Specifically, it foregrounds the unequal valuation placed on a human life and the violence that exists at the heart of liberalism (Asad 2007, 59).[32] Moreover, these heritage practices and monuments act '[a]s a socio-economic catalyst [. . . that] keeps history-focused behaviour aligned with economic priorities' – in this case, an emphasis on the importance of trade to the economic well-being and success of the nation, no matter the human cost (Davies 2010, 21–22). Such a narration of the past not only accustoms us to the presence of exploitation, coercion and violence as an integral part of capitalism, but it presents it as inevitable and thus anaesthetises us to social injustice

(Davies 2010, 30). Glossing over the horrors of the 18th and 19th century slave trade makes it easier to disregard the 'differential value in a human life' inherent in 21st century capitalist modern day slavery practices and worker exploitation. The public silence surrounding the realities of slavery and the wealth obtained through the Atlantic trade anaesthetises us to ongoing asymmetries of global violence in which neo-liberal capitalist democracies, either through the direct or indirect military involvement of the state, or through the actions of corporations continue to exploit workers in the global south to protect capitalism. It also works to deflect attention from deaths resulting from pollution, climate change, starvation, conflict and the dislocation of people fleeing war or extreme poverty inherited from the violence and exploitation of colonialism. In so doing, it effectively counters resistance to the economic exploitation of people by neo-liberal democracies. The inability of heritage and public histories to clearly address the connection between British colonial trading practices, and the wealth that it brought both individuals and the nation demonstrates the current limits of representation within the discourse of institutionalised history in the UK.

Notes

1. See, for example, the essays in Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (eds). 2015. *The Palgrave handbook of contemporary heritage research*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, none of whom cite Davies.
2. The UK Government is responsible for heritage in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, heritage policy and support for the sector are matters for the devolved administrations. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, *The Heritage Statement 2017*, 6.
3. The King's Cross development's ranking at the bottom of the list reflects the fact that the project was still largely at the consultation stage in 2008.
4. https://www.argentllp.co.uk/london. Accessed 4 November 2021.
5. 'The Economic and Social Story of King's Cross: A Final Report by Regeneris Consulting', Argent LLP, November 2017.
6. In the first block of homes that was completed in 2013, a one-bedroom property cost £535,000. In 2019 the same apartment was sold for £655,000. In the redeveloped Gasholders' site, apartment prices in 2020 ranged from £745,000 to £7.75 million. *Financial Times*, 13 March 2020.
7. https://www.argentllp.co.uk/places. Accessed 4 November 2021.
8. Boris Johnson's 'London Plan' when he was Mayor of London in 2013 redefined 'affordable rent' to mean up to 80% of market rate (Minton 2017, 33).
9. See imagineear.com/webapp/kingscross.
10. The phrase is taken from Anna Minton, *Big Capital: Who is London For?* London: Penguin 2017.

11. Colston was the manager and deputy governor of both the Royal African Company, which had a monopoly in the English trade in enslaved Africans at the time, and the South Seas Company, both of which played key roles in trafficking enslaved Africans.
12. The Society of Merchant Venturers (SMV) originated in a 13th century guild of Bristol merchants, and in the 16th century they received their first royal charter granting a limited monopoly of maritime trade, including collecting duty and taxes on imports and exports from Bristol. Members of the SMV were involved in the colonisation of the Americas and invested in the Atlantic slave trade. https://www.merchantventurers.com/who-we-are/history/. Accessed 21 June 2022.
13. https://counteringcolston.wordpress.com/commemoration-events/. Accessed 21 June 2022.
14. Following the anti-racist protests of 2020 Colston Tower and Colston Hall were finally, after decades of activism calling for their renaming, renamed as Beacon Tower and Bristol Beacon.
15. Bristol Radical History Group has detailed the various protests against the commemoration of Colston on their webpage 'Colston: a century of dissent and protest' https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/edward-colston-a-century-of-dissent-and-protest/. Accessed 21 June 2022.
16. For examples of art interventions see Carol Drake 'Commemoration Day' part of the 1992 *Trophies of Empire* exhibition (Bristol, Arnolfini, 1992): http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display_item.php?id=398&table=artefacts. and Bristol Radical History Group 'Colston: a century of dissent and protest' https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/edward-colston-a-century-of-dissent-and-protest/. Accessed 21 June 2022. See also the anonymous work that appeared in front of the city centre statue of Colston on Anti-slavery Day 18th October 2018. It consisted of small figures arranged as if being forcibly transported on a slaving ship (similar to the Brooks slaving ship) with a border of small plaques listing the jobs which modern day enslaved people are often forced to do, https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/100-human-figures-placed-front-2122990. Accessed 21 June 2022. *Massive Attack* boycotted Colston Hall from the end of the 20th century. Various protests and calls for a name change when were made when during the redevelopment of the Hall and again in 2007 when it was the venue for bicentenary celebrations of the abolition of British trade in enslaved peoples. For documentation of protests against church services and other public commemorative events celebrating Colston see https://counteringcolston.wordpress.com/commemoration-events/. Accessed 21 June 2022.
17. The statue was originally installed in 1813 inside the Hibbert Gate, but was moved to West India Quay's central pier in 1875. When the pier was demolished in 1943 the statue was placed in storage. https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/statue-18th-century-slaver-robert-milligan-in-east-london-to-be-removed-as-soon-as-possible-a4464341.html. Accessed 13 June 2022.

18. The term 'invisible empire' is from Georgie Wemyss *The Invisible Empire: white discourse, tolerance and belonging* (London: Routledge, 2016) first published by Ashgate in 2009.
19. The West India docks played a key role in the transportation of slaves and the importation of cargo from plantations in the West Indies.
20. https://victorianweb.org/sculpture/westmacottr/11.html.
21. The silencing of the invisible empire of brutality around the Milligan's statue is evident in the National Archives online archived Museum of London, *London, Sugar and Slavery* website description of the Robert Milligan statue, where he is described as a West India merchant, Chairman of the West India docks". The only oblique reference to his connection to slavery is that he was 'the son of [a] plantation owning family in the Caribbean'. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20140204112910/http://archive.museumoflondon.org.uk/LSS/Map/Enslavement/People/21.htm. Accessed 21 June 2022.
22. Wemyss also notes that the LDDC also transferred ownership of the warehouse to the Museum on a 999 year rent-free lease.
23. Text in bold are our suggestions.
24. https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/news-room/press-releases/robert-milligan-statue-statement. Accessed 21 June 2022.
25. http://www.victoriaburgher.com/2016/10/7/milligan-must-fall-2016-cast-sugar-22x10x2cm-1. and http://www.victoriaburgher.com/2016/10/7/king-sugar-2016-cast-sugar-22x10x2cm. Accessed 21 June 2022. Academics such as Kristy Warren and Katie Donington have also drawn attention to what it means for public spaces to uncritically commemorate the British slave economy. Kristy Warren 'Who are monuments for? Considering slavery legacies in London's public statues' (3 July 2020) https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/who-are-monuments-for.. Accessed 21 June 2022. In contrast, Lubaina Himid 'What are monuments for? Possible landmarks on the urban map: Paris and London' (2011) depicts a counter/factual history of both cities if visible commemorations, memorials and monuments had have been erected to celebrate and memorialise the people of the Black Diaspora and their contribution. http://clok.uclan.ac.uk/5086/1/What%20are%20monuments%20for%20_.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2022.
26. See also the comments by Wemyss, *The Invisible Empire*, 30, as to how the architectural styles and Roman references do something similar.
27. https://canarywharf.com/artwork/leo-stevenson-the-hibbert-gate/.; https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-hibbert-gate-312258. Accessed 21 June 2022.
28. The Main Gate panel in the exhibition that accompanied the opening of the replica gate also notes that Hibbert owned slaves but comments that 'this practice was seen to be, mistakenly, perfectly acceptable' before noting that '[w]e now realise that slavery is an unjustifiable evil'.
29. https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/how-did-slave-trade-end-britain. Accessed 13 June 2022.
30. There is also an ornamental stone plaque on the side of the museum commemorating Hibbert and Milligan and the 'co-operation of the Corporate Body of the City of London' as well as the 'concurring hands of the Right Honourable Lord of

Loughborough, Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain [and] the Right Honourable William Pitt First Lord Commissioner of his Majesty's Treasury and Chancellor of his Majesty's Exchequer'.

31. Here Davies is quoting J.G. Droysen, *Historik* [1857–1882] Textausgabe von Peter Leyh (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: frommann-holzboog 1977), 235.
32. Here Asad is referencing Richard Tuck. 1999. *The Rights of War and Peace: political thought and international order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: OUP).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Claire Norton is interested in how public history, heritage and museology is used to imagine, legitimise and contest identities, political spaces and institutional practices. She is the co-author with Mark Donnelly of Liberating Histories and Doing History. She has also written books on Ottoman manuscript culture and Muslim-Christian cultural transfer and interaction in the early modern Mediterranean world. She is currently writing about art as a form of past talk and how it has been used in anti-colonial strategies of resistance and as a means of discussing the ethical issues arising from migration.

Mark Donnelly is an Associate Professor in history, public history and liberal arts at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London. He has written numerous essays on history theory as well as co-authoring two books with Claire Norton: Doing History (2020) and Liberating Histories (2019). He has written widely about politics and culture in Sixties Britain, and he is currently editing a volume of essays on gender and the1960s.

References

Adelfio, M., I. Hamiduddin, and E. Miedema. 2021. "London's King's Cross Redevelopment: A Compact, Resource Efficient and 'Liveable' Global City Model for an Era of Climate Emergency?" *Urban Research & Practice* 14 (2): 180–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2019.1710860.

Asad, T. 2007. *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bishop, P., and L. Williams. 2016. *Planning, Politics and City-Making: A Case Study of King's Cross*. London: RIBA Publishing.

Burchardt, M. 2023. "Counterhegemonic Heritage and Diversity in Berlin's *House of One*: Designing Abraham's Legacy." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe*, edited by T. Weir and L. Wijnia, 124–133. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Davies, M. L. 2006. *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Davies, M. L. 2010. *Imprisoned by History: Aspects of a Historicized Life*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Davies, M. L. 2015. *How History Works: The Reconstitution of a Human Science*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. 2017. *The Heritage Statement 2017*. London: DCMS.
Ellis, M. 2018. "Keynote Speech at the 2018 heritage Day." Accessed April 18, 2022. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-ellis-speech-at-heritage-day-2018.
English, Heritage. 2008. *Constructive Conservation in Practice*. London: English Heritage.
Giblin, J. 2015. "Critical Approaches to Post-Colonial (Post-Conflict) Heritage." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, edited by E. Waterton and S. Watson, 313–328. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
Imrie, R. 2009. "'An Exemplar for a Sustainable World city': Progressive Urban Change and the Redevelopment of King's Cross." In *Regenerating London: Governance, Sustainability and Community in a Global City*, edited by R. Imrie; L. Lees, and M. Raco, 93–111. Abingdon: Routledge.
Lafrenz Samuels, K., and J. D. Daehnke, eds. 2023. *Heritage and Democracy: Crisis, Critique and Collaboration*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
Leskanich, A. 2018. "In history's Wake: A Dialogue with Martin L. Davies." *Rethinking History* 22 (4): 558–580. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2018.1507879.
Lindner, C. 2019. "Brutalism, Ruins and the Urban Imaginary of Gentrification." In *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries*, edited by C. Lindner and M. Meissner, 275–287. London: Routledge.
Macdonald, S. 2013. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Minton, A. 2017. *Big Capital: Who is London For?* London: Penguin.
Ross, R., and C. Nguyen. 2016. "Authoring the Neighbourhood in Wikipedia." In *Engaged Urbanism: Cities and Methodologies*, edited by B. Campkin and G. Duijzings, 83–86. London: I.B. Tauris.
Rowlinson, L. 2020. "King's Cross: From London Backwater to Regeneration Feat." *The Financial Times*. Accessed May 10, 2022.
Schramm, K. 2015. "Heritage, Power and Ideology." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, edited by E. Waterton and S. Watson, 442–457. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
Smith, L. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
Wainwright, O. 2018. "The £3bn Rebirth of King's Cross: Dictator Chic and Pie-In-The-Sky Penthouses." *The Guardian* (9). Accessed May 10, 2022.
Watson, S., and M. Rosario González-Rodríguez. 2015. "Heritage Economies: The Past Meets the Future in the Mall." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, edited by E. Waterton and S. Watson, 458–477. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
Wemyss, G. 2016. *The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and Belonging*. London: Routledge.