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CRITICAL SUBJECTS

Five Critical Essays on EDI

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will explore the general discussions affecting, *inter alia*, design, architecture, culture and politics. The ideological premise of the journal is to facilitate a critical engagement with ideas, and to interrogate established topics objectively. Taking a leaf out of EP Thompson's review of *New Society*, the 1960s cultural review magazine, we aim to offer 'hospitality to a dissenting view (as) evidence that the closure of our democratic traditions is not yet complete.' Our purpose is to re-open civic debate.

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will introduce a theme for each issue and recruit five writers to comment freely and openly on the subjects to generate space for a conversation and further enquiry. The conclusion of each journal will not necessarily mean a resolution. Indeed, it is intended that there will be five robust views on display and that their interventions will be a spark to further discussion.

FIVE CRITICAL ESSAYS will be an agora where genuine interpretations are proposed and where arguments that will hopefully advance the understanding of the subject are confidently proposed. We aim to provide a nuanced perspective on a variety of issues, whether exploring ethical dilemmas, interrogating contemporary arguments or challenging well-established orthodoxies.

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Five Critical Essays
on Equality Diversity
Inclusion

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Foreword

Austin Williams

This booklet is a critique of the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) doctrine as found in architecture, education, as well as the arts, culture and in legal frameworks. Each of those words, ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ individually convey valid ambitions in their own right, but sadly the ideological pursuit of these grouped objectives – wrapped up in the dogmatic ‘EDI’ credo – results in the polar opposite of what those words mean in everyday usage.

Reclaiming the true meaning of ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ is one way of approaching this, as a few of our authors suggest here, but this Foreword argues that we should not even indulge the blanket concept of EDI at all. There is no positive EDI. Reclaiming the fundamental values of human agency, progress, development, growth, freedom, reason and liberty is what I would call a meaningful task for today. We can add to that list the ambition to reclaim the values of equality, universality, and merit. But pretending that EDI has even a hint of positive worth is mistaken, especially in the way that these ideas manifest themselves today.

The EDI world is an Alice in Wonderland inversion of reality. It is a place where many unions that make up the umbrella of the Trade Union movement, for example – those institutions that we think of as representing workers’ interests – are actively reporting members to their employers and asking for them to be reprimanded. Those who don’t comply with its mandatory ‘EDI awareness and training for all staff’ are deemed to be guilty of serious disciplinary offence, often reported anonymously, and with little right of reply. Unions now work hand-in-glove with employers to discipline errant staff!

The Free Speech Union reports that across all companies in the UK, 65 percent of employees have had to carry out some kind of diversity training and 12 percent say that they ‘have witnessed staff being fired’

for challenging EDI policies.¹ This doesn't mean that those who criticise EDI are racist, sexist, transphobic reactionaries, but it simply means that they don't like being told what to recite. We see the consequences of these speech codes in the suppression of discussion about the racial background of some grooming gangs, on the Wuhan origins of Covid, on the dangers of trans athletes in sport, on the discriminatory reality of affirmative action, etc. Enquiry proscribed, we are told, to avoid causing offence.

Just as the government's shadowy Behavioural Insights Team has spent decades devising mechanisms to ensure that we make 'correct choices' regardless of our real beliefs and intentionality, so EDI rules mandate that we cancel 'controversial' topics to avoid upsetting community relations. In other words, that we lie to ourselves and to others for a quiet life. Of course, not wanting to have discriminatory conduct in the workplace is understandable, until we read of the innumerable cases of discrimination by employers of staff who merely hold contrary opinions. Maya Forstater, whose perfectly legal gender-critical views were illegally persecuted by her employers in an attempt by them to appear 'inclusive' of trans people. Her case aside, the threat of losing your job due to non-compliance with EDI policies is often enough to keep everyone's head down. In fact, the EDI industry has become a juggernaut that permits or denies conversation, opinion, and debate on a whim.

Architects, many of whom see themselves as social engineers valiantly fighting to build a better world, are often at the forefront of EDI intolerance. The Royal Institute of British Architects even uses an example of 'undermining my professionalism',² i.e. stating a critical opinion, as an example of an EDI microaggression, by so doing, rendering the authority of the architect unassailable. Indeed, the various aspects of EDI rely on the language of victimisation being so powerful that the more you criticise, the more you are deemed to be insensitive to the other person's 'alternative truths'. Announcing your 'lived experience' through the prism of EDI is supposed to be a guaranteed ace in the hole to silence opposition. This way madness lies.

For architects (and lawyers, as Sarah Phillimore points out in her chapter) EDI training is mandatory. In this way, incorrect, impermissible, offensive opinions can not only get you sacked, but they can also mean that you won't qualify in the first place. Not only that, but the ARB expects all architects to 'advocate for equality, diversity and inclusion' so keeping your head down is no excuse anymore. You must proselytize the faith.

This is an insidious industry that is undermining common sense and inverting reason. Controversial and offensive opinions are deemed to exist

merely on the word of the offended, not the intent of the speaker. You can even be offended on someone else's behalf. As Pauline Hadaway suggests in her essay, in the arts, the critical opinions necessary for creativity to flourish are being snuffed out by a creeping culture of conformism³ and fear of cancellation. Books are regularly banned, works of art shelved, performance closed down with blasé regularity; and all in the name of equality, diversity and inclusion. The perverse reality is that, under EDI, 'equality' equals denial of access, 'diversity' represents only one permissible opinion, and 'inclusion' is at the expense of excluding dissenters.

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Why now?

This publication is being finalised as Trump's executive orders seek to erase the base of the EDI industry in America, with titles like 'eliminating affirmative action' or 'restoring merit-based opportunity'. Indeed, there is a large collection of recent articles by influential black US commentators, people like Coleman Hughes writing of 'The End of DEI'⁴ (as the EDI acronym presents itself in America), John McWhorter and Glenn Loury discussing 'The Day DEI Died',⁵ and Erec Smith speaking of how DEI initiatives are being 'rolled back or eliminated' in many universities.⁶ Major companies like Meta and Amazon are removing EDI initiatives (following the Supreme Court's overturning of affirmative action in the US) and JPMorgan Chase, General Motors, and Pepsi, amongst others, are removing references to EDI from their annual reports.⁷ So why is this booklet necessary at a time when many people think that EDI is dead in the water?

Firstly, the reports of the death of EDI have been somewhat exaggerated. For example, in universities across America, departments are busily removing EDI nameplates and replacing them with more benign titles to avoid legal sanction. Even though they are in hiding, their influence continues. New Jersey's Rutgers University has renamed its EDI department 'the Division Of Inclusive Excellence, Community And Belonging' while Michigan State University has an 'Office of Culture, Access and Belonging.' Their impediment to academic freedom is not diminished, just renamed. That said, the whirlwind of Trumpian edicts has unquestionably shaken things up and loosened EDI's grip on institutions.

However, the demise of EDI in America is less well reflected in Europe. The University sector in the UK spends a colossal £28 million per year on salaries for EDI staff alone⁸ while faculty, modules and entire courses are

being slashed for lack of funding.⁹ Laying off teaching staff is an ironic conclusion of policies of inclusion (and, of course, there is no direct link between these separately budgeted accounts). But as universities' administrative bureaucracy grows it is remarkably coincidental that the teaching faculty is shrinking.¹⁰

In February 2025, we witnessed the shocked response of Europe's leaders to DOGE's cull of unaccountable third sector influencers. Of course, its scattergun impact has a potential to throw the baby out with the bathwater and many federal workers who monitor civil rights and discrimination might not be the EDI zealots that Musk has been led to believe. But it was J.D.Vance's so-called 'brutal ideological assault' that really brought home the idea that America was serious, and maybe we should be too.¹¹ Ironically, Vance was calling for a defence of Europe's historic democratic values not a rejection of them. His admonition of European censorship legislation – which has often been mandated under the guise of critical social justice and similar EDI initiatives – shocked the very people who most benefit from the EDI industry.¹²

At the time of writing, the general response to his speech from established organisations has been stunned silence. A more measured response came from journalist, Matthew Syed who defended the principle of freedom of thought while acknowledging that 'all the towering virtues of the West – are under attack from a pincer movement of left and right.'¹³ He puts a plague on both their houses while recognising that there is a need to oppose censorship but equally to advocate for greater freedoms. Fundamentally, we need to reopen dialogue in our universities and offices, we have to welcome critical discussion, and we have to insist on democratic principles. Maybe this has to be done against the will of self-appointed gatekeepers. Either way, it is about time that we reclaimed some of those towering virtues of the west. Read on.

Austin Williams series editor, *Five Critical Essays*

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The rise and rise of university bureaucracy

Abhishek Saha

In his 2002 book *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker wrote, ‘Equality is not the empirical claim that all groups of humans are interchangeable; it is the moral principle that individuals should not be judged or constrained by the average properties of their group.’ This statement captures the essence of a liberal¹ understanding of equality, emphasising the importance of treating each person as a unique individual rather than as a representative of their race, sex or other group identity.

In its various guises, EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) is deeply embedded in most institutions, and we can trace its origin, in part, to a liberal perspective on equality and associated principles of non-discrimination, individual merit, and neutral rules. Over recent decades, however, such frameworks have expanded in scope and evolved in ways that increasingly diverge from these foundational ideals.

In this essay, I survey the historical development of EDI in the UK, with a particular focus on the university setting. I examine how contemporary EDI frameworks may hinder the pursuit of truth and knowledge and then explore a path towards more balanced approaches.

Although the acronym ‘EDI’ only emerged around 2009,² the roots of equality and diversity efforts in the UK extend back to post-war anti-discrimination laws. Early milestones included the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968, mirroring international developments such as the US Civil Rights Act of 1964. These laws focused on direct discrimination. A pivotal moment came with the 1971 US Supreme Court ruling in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, which interpreted the Civil Rights Act as prohibiting practices with disparate impacts, even in the absence of discriminatory intent – a principle that soon influenced UK law. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 and the Race Relations Act of 1976 incorporated the idea of

indirect discrimination, reflecting the *Griggs* precedent. This shift gradually reframed equality practices, with outcome disparities increasingly viewed as evidence of unequal opportunity.

Subsequent legislation broadened these principles. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 required public authorities to conduct equality impact assessments and incentivised them to set diversity targets. These efforts culminated in the Equality Act 2010, which consolidated and strengthened protections against direct and indirect discrimination, and introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty, requiring public authorities to give ‘due regard’ to certain equality considerations in their everyday operations. The resulting legal framework provided the essential scaffolding for today’s sprawling EDI bureaucracies.

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Performative moralism

Universities, both reflecting and influencing societal shifts, began embedding equality and diversity into their structures around the turn of the millennium. A key milestone was the 2005 launch of the Athena SWAN Charter to promote gender equality in STEMM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine), requiring data collection and policy submissions for awards. Stonewall introduced the Corporate Equality Index (later the Workplace Equality Index) the same year, ranking employers on lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights. In 2011, Athena SWAN silver awards became mandatory for departments seeking National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) funding. The Race Equality Charter emerged in 2014 to improve minority ethnic representation, and in 2015, Athena SWAN expanded to include all disciplines and staff. These initiatives significantly accelerated EDI efforts in higher education.

Theories of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and intersectionality provided an intellectual basis for later iterations of EDI policy. Frantz Fanon’s critiques of colonial structures and Derrick A. Bell’s rejection of neutral remedies, alongside postmodernist ideas from thinkers like Foucault and Derrida influenced critical race theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw – whose framework of intersectionality highlighted overlapping systems of discrimination. Over time, these theories coalesced into a broader EDI ideology often termed the ‘identity synthesis’³ or ‘critical social justice’ (and known colloquially as ‘wokeism’). Reification of identity-based power systems, prioritisation of subjective ‘lived experience’ over

objective truth, performative moralism, and intersectionality became its hallmarks.

Political scientist, Yascha Mounk describes how the identity synthesis became mainstream, permeating key institutions in the US, UK, and Canada between 2010 and 2020, propelled by social media, economic forces, and broader societal changes. Popular works such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* and Ibram X. Kendi's writings on anti-racism further entrenched these ideas within growing EDI bureaucracies. By 2020, almost every university had built an extensive EDI infrastructure, including dedicated committees, departments, and policies at all levels.

The expansion of EDI bureaucracies in universities parallels broader shifts in academia, including the marketisation of higher education. As institutions compete for students and funding, they increasingly emphasise metrics and branding over academic rigour. Edward Skidelsky highlights how the commodification of education has reshaped institutional priorities, with EDI often positioned as a strategy to enhance reputation and attract a diverse student body.⁴ These economic incentives have made EDI bureaucracies self-reinforcing within bloated administrative structures.

EDI practices over the past decade have also been shaped by a cultural shift towards 'safetyism', where safety (including emotional safety) has become a sacred value. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that overprotection and social media have contributed to this psychological trend among young people. Universities have increasingly pursued an offence-less discourse, adopting practices such as trigger warnings, safe spaces, and microaggression training.⁵

In sum, the rise of EDI has been shaped by a combination of legal, intellectual, economic, and cultural factors. While various authors have highlighted the influence of one or another of these elements, they are best understood as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. A 2024 report revealed that approximately 10,000 UK public sector jobs are dedicated to EDI – nearly double that of any other country.⁶ In a recent essay, Hannah Barnes explains how the burgeoning EDI industry has fostered a climate of intolerance dominated by identity politics and powerful HR departments.⁷ Academics like Alice Sullivan and Judith Suissa have argued that contemporary EDI initiatives in higher education establish a hierarchy of rights and occasionally conflict with equality law.⁸ Most troublingly, EDI increasingly threatens the *telos* of academia: the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

The epistemic funnel

Author, Jonathan Rauch introduced the concept of an *epistemic funnel* to explain the collective process of knowledge creation. At its wide end, the funnel must admit a broad range of ideas and propositions, including highly unorthodox ones. However, only those that withstand scrutiny by the ‘reality-based’ community – a decentralised network governed by two core rules identified by Rauch: the fallibilist rule, which acknowledges the provisional nature of knowledge, and the empirical rule, which demands evidence-based validation – emerge from the narrow end.⁹ This is the essence of liberal epistemology.

In universities, the wide end of the funnel is safeguarded by *academic freedom*, enabling scholars to propose controversial claims without fear of losing their jobs or privileges. These propositions are then subjected to ‘organised scepticism’ by the reality-based network, ensuring that the funnel’s output is guided by *merit* – a central pillar of liberal epistemology. Importantly, this process also requires *intellectual diversity* within the academic community to foster vigorous scrutiny, challenge entrenched doctrines, and correct biases. Academic freedom, merit, and intellectual diversity form the foundation of the pursuit of truth and knowledge. Yet, these principles are increasingly undermined by EDI doctrines and practices.

Many universities now require academic job or promotion applicants to demonstrate their commitment to EDI values.¹⁰ Such mandates promote compelled speech, restrict intellectual diversity, chill academic freedom, and are likely unlawful.¹¹ Ideologically-charged EDI training courses exacerbate the damage – often misstating the law, forcing staff to endorse contested viewpoints, and employing scientifically dubious tools such as the Implicit Association Test.¹²

The movement to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ has gained momentum,¹³ even in the natural sciences and mathematics. This trend conflicts with truth-seeking epistemology and infringes on lecturers’ academic freedom to teach based on their professional judgment. Academics challenging EDI orthodoxies on topics such as race, sex and gender often face no-platforming, intimidation, and harassment – with little institutional support.

In some cases, EDI policies are directly weaponised to punish dissenting scholars. In February 2024, Cambridge philosopher, Nathan Cofnas published an essay premised on the idea that different races and sexes have different innate distributions of psychological traits. While many

experts privately share this view,¹⁴ students and staff campaigned to have Cofnas fired. In April, Emmanuel College, Cambridge terminated its association with Cofnas, reportedly because his essay could be construed as ‘a rejection of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion... policies’.¹⁵

Even the epistemic funnel of science has been corroded by EDI ideology, with journals enforcing gender and racial quotas on editors, authors, reviewers, and cited works.¹⁶ Funding bodies have started tying research grants to EDI commitments and anti-racism training.^{17,18} Yet history offers an unambiguous lesson: the politicisation of science spawns technological decline and erodes public trust.

In 2022, the journal *Nature Human Behaviour* published new guidance empowering editors to censor valid research that could be considered ‘harmful’ to socially constructed human groups or ‘reasonably be perceived to undermine’ their dignity. In a sharp critique of this guidance, Rauch observed: ‘From the Church’s attempt to suppress heliocentrism to modern efforts by the federal government to stymie research on gun violence and the health benefits of cannabis, authorities have consistently cited social harms as grounds to suppress research, and they have consistently been wrong.’¹⁹

A recent paper by 39 academics, led by behavioural scientist, Cory Clark identified widespread ‘soft censorship’ in science, where fellow scientists act as the primary censors. Surveys revealed this censorship to be motivated by avoidance of perceived ‘harm’ to social groups, though it is often disguised as legitimate scientific criticism – enabled by subjective publishing criteria.²⁰ Another study by Clark et al. surveyed 470 leading psychology professors on ‘taboo’ conclusions contradicting EDI narratives. While experts were highly divided in private, those more confident in the truth of these taboo conclusions were likelier to self-censor in public, fearing career repercussions and social sanctions.²¹

Censorship distorts the scientific record, creating an illusion of consensus on contested topics. As evolutionary biologist Steve Stewart-Williams warns, it blunts our ability to understand the world, and in turn, to make it a better place.²²

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Back to basics

To restore academic freedom, merit, and intellectual diversity, EDI must return to its liberal roots.²³ This requires rejecting the assumption

– contradicted by ample evidence – that disparate outcomes for human groups necessarily imply discrimination. This article of faith has led EDI administrators to escalate their measures whenever disparities persist, often at the expense of core academic values.

Many contemporary EDI initiatives lack empirical support. One widely embraced approach is the motivational theory of role models, and yet a meta-analysis found that enthusiasm for this approach ‘continues to run ahead of the research.’ Efforts to improve gender balance in STEM often assume sexist hiring, but five of six ‘matched CV’ experiments on tenure-track recruitment have instead found a preference for women.²⁴ Additionally, a recent study found that common EDI practices, such as exposure to anti-racist material, may actually increase bigotry and hostility.²⁵

EDI interventions should be evidence-based and proportional, focusing on actual challenges people face rather than artificial targets for group outcomes.²⁶ Hiring, admissions, promotions, and research funding must be merit-based and free from ideological tests. Universities should remain neutral on contentious public debates, to avoid unwarranted pressure on academics to conform. Free speech and academic freedom must be safeguarded through robust policies and legal protections. Equality law should be reformed to raise the threshold for indirect discrimination and eliminate the public sector equality duty.

Yet even if these reforms could be enacted through top-down directives, lasting change requires deeper cultural shifts. Social networks centred on free inquiry and viewpoint diversity are therefore vital. We need to build anti-fragility in young people – and in ourselves – so that we can disagree productively.

Above all, individuals must act. At the University of Washington, a single faculty member’s email campaign defeated a proposal requiring EDI statements for promotions.²⁷ Academics must be courageous, reject self-censorship,²⁸ and remain true to their intellectual convictions. By reimagining EDI and reclaiming its liberal roots, we can foster genuine inclusion and equality while preserving universities as bastions of knowledge, inquiry, and intellectual freedom.

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Architecture?

What's the point?

Adam N. Mayer

The American Institute of Architects' (AIA) claims that: 'As part of a global community, AIA is building a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion to build a better future for everyone. We're moving justice and equity decisively from aspiration to action.'

The AIA is the premier professional organization for architects in the United States, boasting over 100,000 members. Its mission is to advocate for the architectural profession and highlight the significance of exceptional design at national, state, and local levels. However, in recent years, the AIA and the architecture profession have strayed from their core mission, becoming increasingly fixated on what can best be described as a religious zeal for projecting virtue.

In this shift, the emphasis has transitioned from promoting exceptional design and securing additional projects for architects, to prioritizing 'equity, diversity, and inclusion' in its advocacy efforts. This pivot toward EDI initiatives is not an isolated phenomenon within the architecture profession; rather, it reflects a broader response to a wave of fervour that permeated nearly all mainstream American institutions following the civil unrest of 2020.

The AIA is not alone in this deviation. Since 2020, EDI considerations have overwhelmingly dominated academic discourse in American architecture schools, yielding to the pressures of outspoken 'woke' advocates within the field. For instance, Harvard Graduate School of Design's recent lecture series features events celebrating '*International Womxn's Day*' and '*Designing for Abolition*.' Moreover, last year, the Harvard GSD Student Forum passed a resolution calling for the university to divest from 'institutions and organizations that provide material assistance or support for the ongoing occupation of Palestine.'

It is perhaps not surprising that the architecture profession is prone to what some call ‘progressive politics’ or what other observers might call ‘do-gooder syndrome’. This field attracts individuals who genuinely aspire to positively impact the world through design. Before the rise of EDI there were other political initiatives to take our mind off actually designing stuff. Back then, architects’ primary focus was on combatting climate change through sustainable building practices. While prioritizing energy efficiency, human comfort, and resilience against natural disasters are essential, striving for sustainability has often overshadowed fundamental aspects, such as creating aesthetically pleasing buildings.

How did architecture evolve to be perceived as a vehicle for social justice advocacy? What has become of the Vitruvian principles of strength, utility, and beauty? A closer examination reveals that the growing emphasis on critical social justice within the field of architecture is a natural progression emerging from the disillusionment that followed Modernism.

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Deconstructing narratives

While Modernism sought to establish architecture’s dominance by showcasing the technological advancements of the 20th century, its disregard for historical context in favor of a *tabula rasa* approach appears, in hindsight, to have been a significant oversight. Whether we recognize it or not, we are all part of a historical continuum. The repercussions of failed states arising from revolutionary zeal, particularly in Communist movements, serve as a poignant reminder of the perils associated with abandoning historical narratives.

Post-modernism sought to re-establish a connection with history, but it often approached this endeavor with a sense of cynicism. The playful references to Classical architecture could be charming at times, yet they frequently came across as contrived. Deconstructivism intensified the ongoing identity crisis in architecture by deliberately disrupting the coherence of building elements and embracing a sense of disorder. Architect Peter Eisenman, a leading practitioner of Deconstructivism, noted, ‘The architecture we remember is that which never consoles or comforts us.’

Another key figure in the movement, Bernard Tschumi, took this perspective even further, dismissing the non-architect public by stating that ‘they will almost always stand behind the traditionalists. In the public eye, architecture is about comfort, shelter, about bricks and mortar.’ Since

when has architecture not been about comfort, shelter, bricks, and mortar? These elements are fundamental.

What connection does Deconstructivism, which rose to prominence in architectural academia during the 1980s, have with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the profession today? The answer lies in the intellectual framework followed by Deconstructivist architects like Eisenman and Tschumi, heavily influenced by French postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard.

As the book, *Cynical Theories* explains, ‘these ‘critical theorists’ rejected the ‘Enlightenment values that emphasized beliefs in objective knowledge, universal truth, science as a means of obtaining objective understanding, the power of reason, the potential for straightforward communication through language, a universal human nature, and individualism.’ The authors, Lindsay and Pluckrose further discuss how this rejection of Enlightenment principles evolved into what they term ‘Social Justice scholarship’:

‘In Social Justice scholarship, we continually read that patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, ableism, and fatphobia are literally structuring society and infecting everything.’

So, in essence, by ‘deconstructing’ Enlightenment values, the critical theorists opened the door for social justice activists to hijack Western institutions. For the architecture profession, this hard pivot toward insular nihilism profoundly damaged the prestige and relevance it once held in public consciousness. This is deeply ironic, given that the architectural academics of the post-modern era leveraged their writing and research to try and elevate architecture as a distinguished and esteemed discipline. In reality, it had the opposite effect, alienating the public with esoteric jargon and illegible buildings.

Although Modern Architecture never quite lived up to its lofty ideals, the cynicism that followed further detached the profession from its essential functions. After Postmodernism fell out of fashion, the Western architectural historical canon was again relegated to the sidelines. As we approached the turn of the Millennium, mainstream architectural discourse became dominated by the ‘Bilbao Effect’, referring to the surge in tourism experienced by the Basque region’s largest city after the opening of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in 1997.

For a moment, this made architecture sexy again in the public eye as dazzling sculptural buildings caught the attention of civic leaders

worldwide who desired a similar magical impact on their post-industrial, derelict economies. Hebert Muschamp, the New York Times Architecture Critic from 1992 – 2004, was the leading advocate and promoter for what became known as ‘Starchitecture’ (he once referred to the Guggenheim Bilbao as ‘the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe’). In addition to Gehry, he championed rising global celebrity architects like Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Jean Nouvel, and others who designed buildings with pizzazz: buildings that looked striking in aerial photos.

While this was excellent public relations for architecture, an underlying perceived vacuousness made many in the profession (especially in academic circles) crave more substance and meaning. However, instead of returning to architecture’s foundational roots, the profession strayed even further from the art of building.

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The Architect as Activist

While celebrity architecture dominated mainstream design discourse, critical theory transitioned from an academic thought experiment into practical application. This evolution first manifested in architecture as an increasing awareness of sustainability or ‘green design’. Although environmental activism had been present since the ‘60s and ‘70s, it was not until the early 2000s that a predominant view emerged, acknowledging the construction industry as a primary contributor to ‘global warming’ (variously referred to as ‘climate change’) due to carbon emissions generated both during construction and throughout the lifecycle of buildings.

Concerns about global climate change provided architects a perfect opportunity to reframe the profession as heroic and environmentally conscious. Emerging green building rating systems such as LEED and BREEAM established frameworks enabling architects and builders to demonstrate to investors and the public that their designs not only minimized environmental harm but also contributed positively to addressing the issue. Sustainability also gave rise to a novel industry niche within the building professions dedicated to monitoring, tracking, and analyzing green building objectives.

Sustainability is now widely embraced within the profession and is integral to most mainstream architectural practices. To be sure, the green building movement has introduced many genuinely beneficial principles to the profession: designing spaces for human health and

comfort, enhancing energy and water efficiency, and acknowledging adaptive reuse as an exciting creative challenge. Nonetheless, underpinning the green building movement is a pervasive and often unspoken sense of guilt regarding the perceived conflict between human construction activities and environmental sustainability.

This sentiment suggests that any form of resource consumption, energy expenditure, or embodied carbon utilization constitutes a fundamental transgression against ecological integrity. Concerns about resource scarcity have led to the implementation of stringent land-use regulations and burdensome building codes. Such a scarcity mindset often stifles architectural creativity and is contrary to celebrating the human spirit.

Sustainability has become associated with what is known as ‘Environmental, Social, and Governance’ (ESG) – a corporate investing principle that prioritizes what it says on the tin. While sustainability is reflected in the ‘E’ component, it is the ‘S’ where EDI has thrived. With the rise of EDI, it is no longer enough to design environmentally-sustainable projects – they must also have a social impact.

Unfortunately, ‘social impact’ is considerably more nebulous and challenging to quantify than sustainability goals (which are primarily based on building science). In the context of the architecture profession, ‘social impact’ is often less a reflection of actual architecture and more connected to peripheral factors such as building type (is it something socially beneficial like subsidized housing?), site location (is it situated in an underserved community?), and the client (is it a government agency or a non-profit?). This consideration can also extend to the architects themselves (are they from an ‘underrepresented group’?).

By focusing solely on EDI and ‘social impact,’ architecture gives up its authority to social justice activists, who take on the roles of judge, jury, and executioner in deciding whether a project (and its architect) merit recognition. As a result, undertaking development work for for-profit developers is seen as tainted, and collaborating with clients in certain developing countries is regarded as suspect. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, EDI undermines the architect’s role as an authority in building design.

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Architecture: That’s the Point

When asked about their favorite kind of architecture, most people tend to mention classic European cities like Florence, Paris, or Vienna. Although

they may struggle to articulate exactly what makes these places so appealing, they have an instinctual sense that these cities are unique—truly works of art. Many Americans often reflect upon returning home from their European holiday, asking themselves, ‘Why don’t we build like that anymore?’ Architects will often roll their eyes at this question and then proceed to launch into detailed explanations about the evolution of building techniques and the economic realities of 21st-century construction.

Nevertheless, the question remains pertinent: It doesn’t matter how diverse the workforce or how egalitarian the hiring practices, if architects are unable to design beautiful buildings that inspire and uplift the human spirit, what is the true purpose of our profession? It is essential that we shift our focus away from social trends and recommit to the foundational values of our field.

American architects may have some help from the top in this matter. On the first day of the new White House Administration, President Trump signed the ‘Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture’ executive order, which aims to promote the use of ‘traditional and classical’ architecture for civic buildings. Specifically, the order states that ‘Federal public buildings should be visually identifiable as civic buildings and respect regional, traditional, and classical architectural heritage to uplift and beautify public spaces.’ Sounds reasonable. Coincidentally, the order overlapped with another executive order ending all EDI programs across the Federal Government, deeming them wasteful and discriminatory.

The AIA unsurprisingly came out against President Trump’s executive order, stating that it is ‘extremely concerned about any revisions that remove control from local communities or mandate official federal design preferences that hinder design freedom.’ Yet this statement directly contradicts the executive order’s language, which explicitly says that public buildings should respect regional, traditional, and classical architectural heritage.

The effects of the executive order remain to be seen. Nevertheless, rather than hastily condemning it, the AIA and the architecture profession should take into account the motivations behind the President’s decision to issue it, along with its considerable popularity among the American public. It may be that the best route for architecture to reclaim its relevance lies not in navel-gazing introspection or superficial displays of Critical Social Justice, but in rediscovering its traditional and classical foundations.

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Evasive, discriminatory impositions

Sarah Phillimore

The ‘**global diversity and inclusion market**’ was estimated to reach \$23.4 billion by 2030.¹ Happily this prediction is now unlikely to be met following the election of President Trump in January 2025 and his immediate and unambiguous declarations to remove such policies and frameworks from the US Government. But this figure remains testament to the previous widespread commitment to ‘diversity, equality and inclusion’ as the tools with which we would build a fair and just society. And in the UK at least, there remains considerable support for the acronym we know as ‘EDI’.

What has become sadly apparent is that once noble motivations to reduce discrimination are now nothing more than performative box-ticking to support a world view informed by post-modernism and Queer Theory, which has led to the ‘exclusion’ of those who do not agree. My dislike of ‘EDI’ is built on three pillars.

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Corroding the rule of law

First and invariably, any person or group who wants to impose it, has in mind only their own subjective determination of what the words mean. ‘Equality’ is substituted by some as ‘equity’ – a shift from attempting to ensure equality of opportunity to equality of *outcomes*. How this is to be achieved is unknown and never explained, but the words become dangerous when ‘EDI’ is then put in harness to support a subjective view.

A clear and worrying example of this can be found in the cross examination of Professor Marcia Wilson, the Dean of EDI at the Open University, who was questioned about the unlawful discrimination and harassment

permitted by the Open University against Professor Phoenix and her ‘gender critical’ colleagues.² Professor Wilson asserted that the hostile reaction to Professor Phoenix was allowed under ‘academic freedom’, but did not know where to draw the line in this case, and was not prepared to even try. The Tribunal was understandably unimpressed. Her version of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ meant that those with the ‘wrong’ type of diverse views needed be excluded as forcefully as possible. The law and the fundamental rights of others be damned.

This is a direct attack on the rule of law, and there are other examples. Professor Steven Vaughn, for instance, is blasé in his blog, Lawyer Watch:³

‘Imagine a client comes to a lawyer based in England & Wales and asks for their help with the permitting of new coal-fired powered plants in a country where such development is legal and encouraged. Given the lawyer knows, or should know, about how climate harms globally impact women and people of colour much worse than other groups (plus the inter-generational impacts on young people, and the impacts on those with a disability, etc etc), are they encouraging equality, diversity, and inclusion when they give life to their client’s instructions?’

I had to read that twice to let it sink in. Professor Vaughan is saying that a lawyer should promote their own subjective notion of EDI, rather than identify and protect those rights at law created by a democratically-elected Parliament.

The second reason is that there is no evidence that this focus on ‘EDI’ has had any positive benefit. Rather the reverse is true. The report of the Inclusion at Work Panel in 2024, appointed by the then Business and Trade Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, Kemi Badenoch MP, found that

‘many employers want to “do the right thing” but are implementing EDI initiatives without an evidence base, and many don’t know the impact these initiatives are having or whether they represent value for money. In a growing number of cases, particularly relating to positive discrimination and protected beliefs, the report finds that EDI interventions are proving to be counterproductive or even unlawful.’⁴

In the UK, there has been a string of legal actions taken by women who believe that sex is real, and that it matters. One recent victory in 2025 was that of civil servant Eleanor Frances. In 2022, she raised concerns

about the lawfulness of various workplace policies about gender identity and single sex spaces. Her concerns were dismissed, and she resigned in 2023, claiming discrimination and victimisation. She offered to settle her claim for £1 provided that the guidance was reconsidered, but the civil service preferred to fight on. In January 2025, The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) eventually settled the employment-tribunal claim, for £116,749.⁵ The departments committed to return to impartiality and to develop a new policy in relation to the protected characteristic of gender reassignment.⁶

This determined and persistent appetite for expensive legal humiliation suggests that commitment to ‘EDI’ is worryingly baked into the system.

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Rage, rage

The third reason, and the one which inspires in me the most rage, is that ‘EDI’ is designed to promote subjective performative posturing as the end in itself. You can enjoy moral superiority and show what a good person and effective ally you are to various communities with very little effort – a badge here, a lanyard there, sprinkle with a few pious social media postings and complaints about colleagues who step out of line.

But to ensure meaningful equality and diversity for those with immutable characteristics, often greater effort is required, and money needs to be spent. For example, to allow disabled people any chance to live meaningfully in the world, we need equipment, and we need access. This costs money and thought. In a world where the rights of one conflict with those of others, and where resources are definitely finite, there needs to be care as to how we approach the allocation of our time, attention and money.

On any metric the numbers of disabled people considerably outweigh the members of the LGBTQAI+ community. Despite this numerical advantage, I have never seen the kind of publicly-funded support for disabled people that is routinely offered to sexuality or transgender identity. I have never seen a flag at any train station or any public building ‘celebrating’ disabled people, any marches or any public official wearing a lanyard in disabled colours. I have never seen a corporation change its logo for Disability Pride Month. But I have read frequent horrific accounts from disabled people about the hostile environments which they continually have to face. Wheelchair-bound, ex-Paralympian, Dame Tanni

Grey-Thompson has spoken of the time she had to drag herself off a train because there was no staff members to help her.⁷ When I have spoken up about this kind of discrimination, I have not merely been laughed at on social media or accused of lying. I have been reported to the police and to my regulator. The Bar Standards Board.

If we carry on down this road, we risk much more than mere exasperation about performative box ticking. Efforts to silence particular views are contrary to ‘inclusion’ or ‘diversity’ and have a chilling and corrosive impact on society. As the Khan Review noted in March 2024:

‘Evidence gathered by this Review reveals a widespread phenomenon of extreme forms of harassment leading individuals into silence, self-censoring, or abandoning their democratic rights. The Reviewer calls this freedom-restricting harassment (FRH), defined as when people experience or witness threatening, intimidatory or abusive harassment online and/or offline which is intended to make people or institutions censor or self-censor out of fear. This may or may not be part of a persistent pattern of behaviour.’⁸

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End compelled speech

There are some encouraging signs that the stranglehold of ‘EDI’ is weakening in the UK. In January 2025, the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries abandoned plans to force its 32,000 members to ‘encourage diversity, equity and inclusion’ in all aspects of their professional and personal lives. The Bar Standards Board (BSB) which regulates barristers consulted in September 2024 on a new ‘core duty’ that proposed that we all ‘must act in a way that advances equality, diversity and inclusion, which expands on the current Core Duty not to discriminate unlawfully. This will apply to all barristers when practising or otherwise providing legal services.

This thankfully met with an adverse reaction from the profession. It is purely coincidental, of course, that two of the four barristers that advised the BSB on its ‘EDI’ stance come from the Chambers found to have unlawfully discriminated against black lesbian barrister Allison Bailey in 2022.⁹

So, are we out of the woods yet? Possibly it is too soon to say but the signs are encouraging. Hopefully, the less time and money wasted on performance, the better able we will be to focus on what needs to be done to prevent unlawful discrimination and truly value diversity, not merely of skin colour or sexuality but of thought and expression – the life blood

of any healthy society. And in the event that my regulator imposes on me a positive obligation to ‘advance’ EDI, I shall refuse and will await my disciplinary tribunal.

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It's all a façade

Zhanet Mishineva

How often do we stroll through the streets of a new city, marvelling at the architectural beauty of bygone eras – be it Classical, Baroque, Gothic or Victorian – and wonder why such exquisite craftsmanship is rarely seen today?

One might say that it is because contemporary architecture is bogged down in regulations, codes and rules that didn't exist 100 years ago. Architects today focus a huge proportion of their time on meeting targets rather than dedicating themselves to the artistry of design. However, these distractions seem not to be enough. Now, we also have EDI.

During the late 16th century and early 17th century, skilled masters founded academies, positioning themselves as peers to university professors. They embraced humanist principles, which characterised a profession such as architecture as a blend of practical skill, theoretical knowledge, and artistic proficiency, all aimed at serving social, civic, and moral purposes. Renaissance humanism emphasised the dignity and potential of the individual, which in some ways hinted at a more universal appreciation of human capacity.

It is obvious that many individuals, from peasants to merchants were not economically equal to the Medicis, for instance, and reliance on the church and elite patronage was a way of survival for many. But on a social and political level, ideas flowed in from everywhere. The Renaissance masters – artists, thinkers, and writers like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and others – did not conceive of diversity and inclusion as we understand them today but naturally engaged in cultural exchange and contact with diverse nations and cultures for trade and commerce. People studied ancient Greek, Roman, and Islamic texts. Commerce brought a 'plurality of ties and interdependencies'¹. It was just the way it was, without labelling it as 'Diversity'. This exposure to different ideas and

artistic traditions shows us their appreciation for intellectual diversity, no matter where its origin.

The ideas of universal equality, diversity, and inclusion – central to modern philosophy and notions of human progress – only began to take form in later periods, influenced by the Enlightenment, the ‘Age of Reason’, and subsequent social movements. The Enlightenment critically questioned entrenched systems of exclusion and hierarchy and argued for radical notions of toleration and equal rights. Enlightenment thinkers emphasised education as a tool for human improvement, promoting the idea that inclusion in learning was vital for societal progress.

In her book, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, Professor Lynn Hunt explores the origins and evolution of human rights, arguing that they emerged from 18th-century cultural and intellectual changes. She examines how novels, the Enlightenment, and political revolutions, shaped modern concepts of human dignity and empathy, contending that human rights were not self-evident but had to be imagined and socially constructed. She highlights the role of literacy, legal developments, and shifting attitudes toward torture and cruelty in fostering universal rights. Through these new social constructs, the foundations for meaningful equality, diversity of thought, and inclusivity were laid. For a world of more fairness, representation, and belonging in all aspects of work and community life. Where did it go wrong?

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Present day

Fast forward 200 years. Nowadays, EDI initiatives infer that these noble intentions have been retained: to create environments where people of all backgrounds feel valued, respected, and empowered. What’s not to like? However, as critics such as Helen Pluckrose, Jonathan Haidt and Zadie Smith argue, implementing these initiatives often inadvertently fosters division, fragility, and a prioritisation of identity over merit, creating dependence rather than empowerment. These unintended consequences highlight the complexity of navigating social justice within institutional contexts.

In her writing², Helen Pluckrose critiques the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary social justice movements. She contends that certain EDI initiatives, influenced by ideological prejudices, may foster division rather than inclusion. She argues that initiatives based on critical

theory often emphasise power dynamics and systemic oppression to such an extent that they frame all human interactions through the lens of privilege and marginalisation. This framing can encourage individuals to identify primarily with their group identities – be it race, gender, or sexuality rather than their shared humanity. For instance, mandatory diversity training programmes that focus excessively on unconscious bias or privilege can unintentionally alienate participants, creating an ‘us versus them’ dynamic. Rather than fostering mutual understanding, these programs reinforce stereotypes and promote resentment.

Renowned author, Zadie Smith, has engaged critically with the impact of identity politics on artistic freedom and intellectual discourse. In her essays, such as those collected in *Feel Free*, Smith reflects on the tension between the pursuit of social justice and the preservation of artistic and intellectual freedom.

Smith cautions against the reductionist tendencies of some Critical Social Justice advocates, arguing that when art and discourse are evaluated primarily through the lens of identity, they risk becoming constrained by ideological expectations. For instance, artists may feel pressured to create work that aligns with specific political agendas or to represent their identity in ways deemed ‘authentic’ by external standards. This, Smith contends, can stifle creativity and reduce the richness of artistic expression. It can manifest itself in initiatives that prioritise representation without addressing deeper structural issues or fostering genuine dialogue.

While there is a heady debate raging in some creative circles, in architecture it seems that there is hardly any opportunity for criticism at all. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Architects Registration Board (ARB) have implemented a wide-ranging online collection of EDI initiatives to foster, they say, ‘a more inclusive and representative architecture profession.’^{3,4}

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Missing the point

The results? Grand statements with little impact, such as the *Creating Opportunity and Enabling Success* strategy that the RIBA launched in 2019.⁵ It outlines seven action areas to foster a more diverse and inclusive architecture profession, however, what has actually happened is that more performative actions, consultants and training packages – i.e. branding and panel discussions – have proliferated rather than

anything to solve systemic issues like pay gaps, hiring biases, or workplace discrimination.

What is more, such poorly designed initiatives can sometimes feel disconnected from the core mission of the profession. As a result, architects are often overly focused on creating an idealised ‘perfect’ system where ‘everyone is welcome’ through complex diversity strategies instead of implementing real practical change. Indeed, an overemphasis on EDI regularly diverts time and resources from other priorities like consideration for one’s existing staff, or the office’s financial sustainability, for example.

Undoubtedly, practices should focus on realisable improvement goals rather than superficial ‘tick-box’ exercises. They should directly involve underrepresented communities and aim for continuous improvement rather than perfection. The prevalent challenges for the profession are the barriers to entry, costs, retention issues, and a lack of diversity in leadership positions, indicating that more proactive measures and accountability are necessary to achieve meaningful progress in addressing systemic inequality.

In creative professions such as architecture, hiring individuals without the necessary skills solely to meet EDI targets raises questions about the tangible benefits for a company. It also questions their competence and business nous. Whereas this kind of positive discrimination may occasionally happen in architectural education and the university sector, it is fortunately rare in private practice. So instead of approaching EDI as a mere compliance exercise, it is crucial to examine the systemic factors that have contributed to certain groups lacking access to the education, training, networking opportunities, and career advancement required for these roles, creating cycles of disadvantage. Addressing these root causes would lead to more relevant and sustainable outcomes, benefiting both businesses and the broader society.

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Token tokenism

The bias inherent in EDI is meant to be a corrective to the long-standing institutional discrimination and historical inequalities in areas like education, employment, and legal systems. These issues are, of course, evident in architectural education so the question remains: how can the profession become more inclusive when the educational pipeline remains so exclusive? Most accredited architecture programs are housed in expensive

universities with high tuition fees, disproportionately affecting students from lower-income backgrounds, many of whom are people of colour. Furthermore, the traditional studio culture – demanding long hours with little financial compensation – creates additional barriers for students who cannot afford to work unpaid internships. Is this conscious exclusion, unconscious bias, a fact of life, a social injustice... or are the long hours, poor remuneration and uncertain prospects for an architect something that ordinary working class or minority ethnic people no longer aspire to?

President of the RIBA (2024-2025), Muyiwa Oki, claims that EDI efforts can become tokenistic when institutions prioritise diversity metrics (gender, ethnicity, disability, etc) over genuine cultural or systemic change. When the focus is on outputs instead of the underlying processes, the result is short-term gains without any cultural transformation. Equality is overlooked, while presuming to address systemic barriers that prevent underrepresented groups from succeeding. In addition, when EDI is perceived as forced or hollow it generates resentment among individuals who feel excluded or disadvantaged by these initiatives, which in turn only polarises the profession further, and hinders collaboration.

A more concrete example of performative diversity is found in architectural hiring practices. Some firms highlight diversity in promotional materials while continuing to hire from the same talent pools. Individuals from underrepresented groups may feel their presence is valued solely to meet quotas rather than for their professional achievements; while firms focus on achieving numerical diversity benchmarks rather than addressing structural barriers. Without changes in recruitment strategies, wage structures, and workplace culture, EDI initiatives risk being – at best – little more than a public relations exercise.

Consider the case of the RIBA's public commitments to diversity. In 2020, following global discussions on racial justice, it pledged to improve racial equality in architecture. In practice, equality by diktat is a logical contradiction. Diversity and inclusion efforts should focus on creating environments where individuals feel valued for who they are, rather than being singled out for their differences. Many people from underrepresented backgrounds express a desire to be treated equitably without undue emphasis on their identity markers. True inclusion is achieved not by highlighting distinctions but by fostering respect. Real communities cultivate a sense of belonging that goes beyond the labels.

To that end, we should prioritise substance over symbolism and allow tolerance, openness and free enquiry into everyday practices – naturally – rather than presenting equality and diversity as a set of training modules

that staff have to endure. The relevance of egalitarianism, critical thinking and open debate should be welcomed in a creative profession and offices should see that as a part of their mission; to create more enlightened staff. Architectural practitioners should model inclusive behaviours and demonstrate how genuine equality and diversity of opinions improve their impact, particularly in such an innovative design profession, as well as improving knowledge and social engagement.

For EDI initiatives to be effective, the acronym must be reclaimed from the current fractious usage to mean ensuring fair access to opportunities while allowing individuals to succeed on their own merits. Architectural institutions and practices can achieve this balance by removing structural barriers through blind recruitment, mentorship, and equal professional development – an approach that fosters diversity without reinforcing tokenism. Without genuine systemic transformation, EDI remains an empty promise, failing the very people it claims to support.

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Manipulating the Arts

Pauline Hadaway

In its 10-year strategy *Great Art and Culture for Everyone* (2010), Arts Council England (ACE) identified ‘promoting a diverse workforce through its funded organisations and strategic programmes’ as a key priority. It would achieve its goal of building ‘fairer entry and progression routes... as well as more diverse leadership and governance’ by raising awareness of exclusionary practices and targeting resources toward historically under-represented groups. By proactively challenging structural and systemic barriers to inclusion, ACE looked forward to a publicly-funded arts sector that would eventually mirror the cultural diversity of wider society – ensuring that ‘everyone, whatever their background, wherever they live, whoever they are’ might enjoy a fulfilling creative and cultural life. Beyond widening equality of opportunity and participation, ACE’s Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policy was also intended to enrich the quality of art by drawing on the widest possible pool of talent.

ACE defines Diversity in terms of recognising, respecting and valuing differences between different identities, principally defined according to the protected categories of race, disability, sex, and sexual orientation in the Equality Act. It sees Equality as a fundamental element of a fair society in which everyone gets the best possible chance to succeed in life. As part of its *Let’s Create* delivery plan, ACE requires organisations applying for regular funding to identify groups that are underrepresented in their own work and set ‘ambitious targets’ to diversify their governance, leadership, workforce, programming and audiences. ACE has been publishing data gathered from client organisations and individual artists since 2016-17. Eight years on, the findings raise more questions than answers.

In its annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Reports, ACE tracks progress towards its objectives across different levels in the workforce,

audience demographics, and success rates for targeted funds, benchmarked against national census data. Having extended its priorities in response to the levelling-up agenda, ACE subsequently included data on the geographical distribution of resources and on socio-economic status. Leaving aside the lack of early data relating to socio-economic status and the problem that overly broad identity categories such as ‘Black, Asian and ethnically diverse’ obscure disparities within sub-groups, the latest reports (summarising data from the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 funding rounds) paint a picture of uneven progress.

For example, while artists and organisations self-identifying as Black, Asian and ethnically diverse have experienced modest gains as recipients of targeted funding streams, their overall presence in the workforce still falls short of their representation in the wider population. Similarly, despite a slight increase in the proportion of women in senior leadership and governance roles, disabled people remain significantly under-represented across the whole sector. While acknowledging these disparities, ACE concludes that yet more target setting, and enhanced monitoring mechanisms will be necessary to achieve EDI goals. However, it does not consider the possibility that EDI policies may be ineffective or indeed whether they might be reinforcing structural inequalities in the arts.

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Poor representation

The introduction of socioeconomic monitoring in 2021, albeit on a voluntary basis, has found that people from affluent middle-class backgrounds outnumber those from less affluent or disadvantaged backgrounds in the arts and creative industries workforce by roughly 3:1. Although striking, these findings underscore the well-known and well-documented reality that education and class background significantly influence one’s ability to secure employment, and even more so to ascend to leadership positions, in Britain’s arts and creative industries.

Socioeconomic disadvantage clearly compounds existing barriers for the Black people, disabled people, and women currently under-represented in cultural industries’ occupations. Yet the status quo continues to favour those with the right networks, cultural capital, and access to resources, *regardless of* ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation. While the arts remain an elite profession, policies aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion among different identity groups act in the interests of the

economically privileged. The sector may achieve greater diversity, but it will never become a more equal place while the underlying social and economic structures that favour elite groups and exclude the disadvantaged remain unchallenged.

The problem of developing arts funding and policy regimes that focus on material needs rather than cultural recognition must be considered against the backdrop of broader shifts in British politics since the 1970s.

Established in 1946, the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) was originally dedicated to building a greater appreciation of the arts, raising standards, and making art accessible to the widest possible public. These liberal, universalist and egalitarian ideals reflected the optimism of post-war Britain, with its vision for reconstruction, full employment and fair distribution of economic benefits, guided through government intervention within a national democratic framework. Britain's social democratic order relied upon the political will of governments to intervene in the operations of the market and correct its inherent inequalities. This seeming fusion of interests between private profit and public good – the quintessence of the social democratic order – splintered apart in the shock of the 1973 oil crisis. After the crash came the realisation that the material needs and expectations of millions of citizens would now be subject to the impersonal authority of global economic markets. This was the new economic order in which the ground was laid for the technocratic forms of governance that came to characterise the neo-liberal era.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, major public institutions were *re-structured* and *streamlined* in the name of economic efficiency, while government subjected public services to quasi-market disciplines. While submitting to ever greater financial scrutiny, ACGB and its flagship institutions remained committed to the arms' length principle of keeping political interests at one remove from the internal operations of the sector. This changed in 1992 with the establishment of the Department for National Heritage, a Cabinet-level body that signalled a new era of direct government involvement. Within three years, the Secretary of State was making it clear that government expected a say in how taxpayers' money was spent, including decisions about the future shape of the nation's cultural landscape.

Instrumentalising the arts

As the economic Right called for greater financial accountability, critics on the cultural Left were challenging ACGB's authority to classify specific activities and objects as *Art* without regard to their social value or benefits. Claiming to speak on behalf of socially excluded groups and cultural identities, radical arts movements labelled the *so-called arms'* length principle as elitist and irrelevant. For them, defending art as a discrete sphere of human activity was nothing more than the privileging of patrician taste through the exercise of social power. Under pressure from Left and Right, the ACGB adapted to the political priorities of accountability and relevance. Twenty-five years ago, Sir Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England observed of the post-war era that 'our mission' was to grow 'few, but roses':

'we have come a long way since then (and) we hope to prepare the ground for a blossoming of creativity across the country – and to acknowledge that the surest way to fill the future with every variety of flower is to recognise that we can all be gardeners.'

The election of New Labour in 1997 brought a renewed determination to bring the arts and cultural sector under government oversight, shifting the focus from art's intrinsic value to its 'impact'. These policy shifts were accompanied by the new discourses of accountability, relevance, diversity and inclusion.

Recognizing the arts as a vehicle for fostering new forms of citizenship rooted in cultural identity rather than class, New Labour pledged to 'make exclusivity a thing of the past.' To this end, the new Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) introduced an instrumental and technocratic policy regime designed to harness 'culture and creativity' as means of uniting people and promoting societal participation. The new strategy was articulated in policy language that celebrated the unique moral qualities of culture and creativity, while insisting that their external benefits be measured against rigorous social and economic criteria. In 1998, when the DCMS announced a £290 million boost to the sector, it warned its arts partners: 'This is not something for nothing; we want to see measurable outcomes for the investment being made.'

Beyond merely instrumentalizing the arts, policies of inclusion, relevance and diversity redefined the relationship between the state and formerly arms-length cultural bodies. By embedding social and moral values within a technocratic framework of rules and targets, governments

and their partners in the arts sector have institutionalised managerial – and illiberal – tendencies into the very fabric of arts funding and cultural policy.

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Out of touch

Comprehensive data on the cost of promoting EDI regimes is not easily accessible, although a recent survey of the UK Civil Service points towards an expansion of public expenditure on explicit EDI functions, including the supply of workplace training by external consultants. The survey shows that the UK employs almost twice as many EDI workers, in proportion to other European countries. Reduced to cost-cutting, the case against EDI becomes little more than a value for money exercise.

Whatever the cost to dwindling supplies of time and money, a much stronger argument suggests that the submission to external political agendas has given rise to a homogeneous culture that is fuelling an ‘identity crisis’ among British arts institutions, who are losing touch with audiences and losing direction.

Business-style management practices that emphasise financial accountability and efficiency are deeply embedded in arts administration, with EDI policies forming an integral part of a paradigm that prioritises targeted, measurable, and government-approved outcomes over artistic production. Sadly, there is no simple return to the older models of resource distribution based on universalist principles. Indeed, inequality has been growing for decades in Britain’s low tax, low wage economy as austerity and rising house prices concentrate ever more wealth and privilege among those who already own significant assets.

In the 2016 Brexit referendum, millions of working-class voters took the opportunity to challenge the dismal consensus that market discipline must prevail over democratic demands, whether for greater equality or for protection from economic and social precarity. Britain’s arts leadership were taken aback and responded negatively to working-class hopes to improve their economic conditions and to push their political discontentment to the fore. While remote from the everyday economic hardships and precarity faced by millions of their fellow citizens, the leadership of public institutions like ACE are slowly coming to terms with the growing backlash against so-called ‘woke’ policies that appear to privilege the already privileged.

However, economic inequality is now so thoroughly baked into British cultural life that equal access to the arts cannot be achieved through a populist ‘war on woke’, any more than through the technocratic tinkering of EDI. The ability to accept that change is happening is a significant first step. There are signs that political and cultural ‘progressives’ are finally coming to terms with the inescapable reality that populist fury is mainly fuelled by alienation and economic exclusion rather than ignorance and intolerance.¹³

However, there is a danger that our cultural leadership will simply adapt to the political preoccupations of its new paymasters, perhaps by adding ‘white working class’ to the identity checklist, or stitching red, white and blue into the rainbow patchwork of flags. What is needed is a radical challenge to the politics of difference and division and the reclamation of art from the toolkit of managerial governance to its rightful place in the public square.

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Afterword: Time of Reckoning

Patrik Schumacher

This collection of essays offers a timely critical engagement with an ideology and ideological practice – EDI – that has in recent years been increasingly interfering with the functioning of institutions like universities, schools, public administrations, and businesses. Our discipline – architecture – has also been infiltrated by this ideological current, affecting the functioning of schools of architecture, the RIBA, various industry awards, Biennales and, last but not least, architectural firms.

The growth of woke ideology was a steady trend for many years but was much accelerated since the death of George Floyd in May 2020 at the hands of a white police officer and the global wave of BLM protests that followed. In response EDI efforts were ramped up in the US, Britain, and everywhere else in the Western world and an industry of EDI consultancy firms sprang up, almost overnight, to promote and cater for this demand. This trigger event by itself should make us pause and reflect: why should an arrest-turned-murder in Minneapolis have such a major impact on the culture of architectural schools, professional associations, exhibition events, and the corporate culture of architectural firms, in Britain or elsewhere? This does not make rational sense and indicates that we are confronted with a moral panic and ideological fad, rather than a sensible, necessary reform process.

The backlash against this woke wave came soon enough, and with the election of Trump for a second time (aided, to some extent, by the criticism of woke ideology) the onward march of EDI seems to be in reverse; a good moment to take stock and debate the merits and demerits of EDI.

The essays in this volume make an informed and thoughtful contribution. They all see EDI as net negative, as an unproductive interference in the functioning of institutions. This is also the conclusion of two books

I would like to recommend here, both coming from authors with left leanings, and both with a respectful approach towards the ideology they in the end, conclude must be rejected: Yascha Mounk's *The Identity Trap*, and *Social (In)Justice* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay. As they both point out, it is important not to let the current backlash against the intolerant excesses of wokeness – however justified that backlash might seem – to overshoot into reciprocal violence and an equal-and-opposite intolerance.

The problem with EDI cannot simply be reduced to recent post-George Floyd excesses: it is far more fundamental. The problem lies with society's conceptual deviations from liberalism. Before I go into some of these deviations, I also want to suggest that woke ideology is fuelled by an enthusiasm for the opportunities for activism that it affords. The radicalisation of Social Justice warriors and their frequent excesses is often the outcome of a dynamic whereby the gradual elimination of injustices naturally leads to the search for new injustices, as it were 'new markets' to keep the activist 'industry' going. I have long noticed this paradox exemplified in the issue of racism. Racism has all but disappeared in Britain, especially compared to 30 to 40 years ago, and yet its demise correlates with an intensification of *anti*-racism. One of the most fundamental fallacies of contemporary anti-racism is in its search for persistent group differences – whether wealth gaps or discrepancies in occupational representation – as evidence of prejudice and discrimination. Thomas Sowell has been making compelling (extensively research-backed) arguments against this fallacy for many decades.

As hinted above, EDI agendas contain momentous deviations from liberalism's foundational principles. This is significant because these principles are the foundations upon which the prosperity and freedom of our market-based liberal democracies have been built and, in my view, continues to depend on. Here's is my list of the most momentous deviations resulting from the EDI agenda:

A focus on Group Identity over Individual Rights:

Traditional liberalism prioritizes individual rights, freedoms, and agency, emphasizing equality under the law. EDI frameworks, by contrast, often focus on collective identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality), treating individuals primarily as members of groups rather than autonomous agents. This shift undermines the liberal ideal of universal principles applied equally to all.

Equality of Outcome vs. Equality of Opportunity:

Liberalism advocates for equal opportunities for all, while expecting individuals to succeed differentially based on their abilities and effort. EDI agendas often prioritize equity – understood as ‘equality of outcome’¹ across all demographic groups – by using measures like quotas, preferential policies, or reparative practices. This approach clashes with liberal values by disregarding merit-based systems and individual choice.

Restriction of Free Speech and Open Debate:

Liberalism values free speech, open debate, and the contestation of ideas as essential to progress. However, some woke and EDI frameworks promote restrictions on speech that are deemed harmful, offensive, or contrary to EDI advocates’ ideological aims. This can lead to censorship and self-censorship, cancel culture, and the suppression of dissenting views, which undermine liberal principles of intellectual freedom.

Moralizing Debate and Intolerance for Dissent:

Liberalism traditionally endorses toleration of differing views. Woke ideology, however, is over-moralizing; labelling dissent as oppressive or malicious. This creates an ‘us v them’ dynamic that stifles productive dialogue and alienates those who might otherwise support inclusion.

Expansion of State Power:

Liberalism has traditionally been wary of overreach by the state, advocating for limited government to protect individual freedoms. Many EDI initiatives require the expansion of bureaucratic structures and regulatory frameworks to enforce compliance, which can raise concerns about over-centralization and state coercion.

Erosion of Universalism:

Liberalism’s universalist ethos – that truth is objective and rights and freedoms belong to all, regardless of identity – is weakened by woke frameworks, which advocate relativistic notions of subjective truths as well as differential treatment of groups based on historical injustices. These risk creating new forms of inequality and resentment, which undermines social cohesion.

Victimhood Narratives:

EDI frameworks often emphasize historical grievances and systemic oppression, creating a culture where victimhood can confer moral authority. This approach generates ‘moral hazard’ in that it can discourage personal responsibility and foster dependency rather than empowerment.

To conclude, from a liberal perspective, the deviations that woke ideology and EDI agendas have made from traditional liberalism arise primarily from their focus on group identities, equity-based frameworks, excessive moralizing, relativism, and the tendency to promote the illiberal expansion of coercive institutional powers and state powers. While these movements aim to address historical and structural inequities, their methods often conflict with liberal values like individualism, meritocracy, free expression, and universal rights. A liberal critique suggests that a balance must be struck to ensure inclusivity and justice without compromising these foundational principles upon which our continued prosperity and freedom depend.

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