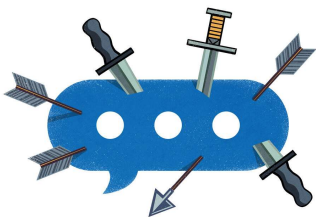


Opinion

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Is our cancel culture killing free speech?

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(Jennifer Luxton / The Seattle Times)

By [Victor Menaldo](#)

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Once upon a time, folks who considered themselves left of center believed in and practiced free speech and freedom of conscience. They saw these things not only as a fundamental right that transcends politics, but also as an effective tool to advance progressive objectives and social justice. They went so far as to fight to allow skinhead gangs to voice their delusions and hate in the public square. They did so not because they agreed with them but because they viewed skinheads' right to speak and protest — and that of all miscreants, gadflies, cranks and rabble-rousers, no matter how despicable their beliefs — as integral to the American experiment and way of life. Indeed, as integral to liberalism itself or, at least, as sunlight doing its job as the best disinfectant. In short, what previous generations of liberals understood is that allowing others to say something is not the same thing as endorsing what they say.

Is this a true American story or a fairy tale?

The truth is, it's hard to know. This may be a glorified view of a golden age of free speech and freedom of conscience that may never have existed. Perhaps this is a romanticized view of baby boomers and their hippie culture and values. Maybe it is easy to dismiss what they fought for — sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and free speech? — with the epithet “OK boomer” because some of these things were wrongheaded? Could it be the only thing this generation deserves credit for is helping end the Vietnam War?

Indeed, maybe those who pine for the heyday of free speech and fulsome expression are on the wrong side of history. Throughout our strange and turbulent story as a species, there have always been taboos against saying, even thinking, certain things and fully expressing ourselves. We live in societies, and societies sometimes worship sacred cows. They therefore enshrine norms to protect their cherished icons — including policing conformity, silencing, shunning and even permanently ostracizing contrarians, dissenters and oddballs. Think of Socrates, Jesus, Galileo and Hester Prynne, of “Scarlet Letter” fame. We can now add comedians [Kevin Hart](#) (canceled by the left) and [Kathy Griffin](#) (canceled by the right) and even some [lowly professors to the list](#) (canceled by both sides). Indeed, the right notoriously called for the firing of “heterodox” professors during the McCarthy era, a threat that became very real with the purging at the University of Washington by President Raymond Allen of three tenured professors [accused of harboring communist sympathies](#).

Yet even if free speech was never an ideal that liberals truly lionized, there is mounting evidence that some progressives don’t even recognize it as a legitimate right. There have been concerted campaigns by political activists, intellectuals and the Twitterati to silence — and, worse, harass, intimidate and destroy — people who say things that are wrong, unscientific, bigoted, hateful, or that are simply insensitive or give aid and comfort to President Donald Trump and Republicans in general.

Recent victims of these efforts include a motley crew of scientists, pundits and writers, some of them self-described liberals. They include respected epidemiologists, such as [John Ioannidis](#), who dared to question the consensus around the COVID-19 lockdown approach to containing the virus — but did not necessarily deny basic facts about the pandemic, even if some of his initial predictions proved wrong. Public intellectuals also are on the list. Consider [Steven Pinker](#), who has been accused by his critics — fellow colleagues, no less! — of “moving in the proximity of scientific racism” and “supporting [centrist] New York Times columnist David Brooks” (two unrelated accusations) when he actually argued that we should not censor or ignore controversial or even wrong work by scientists and thinkers that he, in fact, *disagrees with*.

Incidentally, Pinker has also made a strident, albeit old-fashioned and instrumental, defense of liberalism that has been denounced by [fellow academics](#), despite the fact that he produced reams of evidence supporting the idea that, for all of our problems, we have made vast progress over the past few decades due to the widespread embrace of science, good government and the spread of (regulated) markets throughout the world.

Of course, the list also includes journalists, such as (now former) [New York Times columnist Bari Weiss](#), who voiced what have become unpopular opinions within her newsroom and accused her colleagues of harassment and censorship. James Bennet, that newspaper's former opinion editor, also comes to mind: Bennett resigned over the backlash he received from the Twitterverse and his colleagues for publishing U.S. Sen. Tom Cotton's [Op-Ed](#) calling for federal troops to contain the rioting and looting that took place during the June protests against police brutality and racial injustice.

I hasten to emphasize that this is not simply a problem on the left, as the right's version of political correctness, rooted in conspiracy theories, gaslighting, scapegoating and fear mongering, also threatens free speech. Yet, complaints by [journalists at the Wall Street Journal](#) about inadequate fact-checking by the opinion editors is nothing if not ironic: The newspaper clearly states that there is a distinction between [its Op-Eds and regular reporting](#), and that they are driven by values such as free markets and free speech.

While it may be true that things that have been said and written by some of the recently censored [journalists](#), [politicians](#), [athletes](#), [celebrities](#) and [ordinary Americans](#) are fundamentally, even objectively, retrograde and incorrigible, and while it may also be true that those doing the censoring have noble intentions, it is not true that attempting to stifle speech is a good idea. It's always certainly a bad idea.

Indeed, it is a grievous mistake. The things that folks on the left claim to fight for require free speech and freedom of conscience. They always have. They always will. This is for several reasons.

Becoming our best selves is the key to bettering ourselves. This means being free to make mistakes and learn from them. It means the freedom to speak our mind and freedom to give people the benefit of the doubt.

But let's forget about individuals for a moment and consider what is best for society. Science and progress require openness, curiosity, skepticism, and the articulation and testing of strange, unconventional hypotheses. That means entertaining heterodox ideas in the first place, which means fighting the urge to preemptorily dismiss them when they strike us as odd or threatening.

Both science and liberalism also require intellectual humility. Nobody knows the solution to every problem, and getting to the right answer requires that we create an environment that is conducive to admitting our mistakes and changing our mind. But

this requires that we first respect a process by which individuals can reach the wrong conclusions for themselves and correct their mistakes. That means the ability to engage in thought, reflection and judgment autonomously — again, without coercion.

The key to advancing liberalism is not latching onto a set of predetermined means but identifying and fighting for the right ends. We are flawed humans and will almost certainly choose the wrong or incomplete means at times. An ecosystem of open debate and constructive listening and criticism is the key to together discovering the best means to advance objectives such as equality, progress and justice.

There are myriad perverse consequences that emerge when we try to stifle thought and speech. These things that we don't like to hear about? If we don't try to solve the fundamental problem behind the speech that we dislike and work only to mitigate the symptom — by censoring it — we drive the problem somewhere else. Out of sight, out of mind and into the gutter: Untoward ideas silenced by polite society inevitably go underground. They don't disappear simply because we don't like them and censor them. Worse, silencing these ideas might mean stifling knowledge about their very existence. That helps make bad ideas fester, spread and mutate before they can be countered with facts, logic and evidence.

What promoting unfettered thought and speech does is allow us to weaken the viruses of bad, untested and morally bankrupt ideas before they infect all of society. It smokes them out and allows us to interrogate them. Free speech, it turns out, is the best vaccine against the speech we don't like.

The simple fact of the matter is that censoring speech is a recipe for illiberalism and regression. That is, and always has been, the reactionary way. Perhaps today's left wants to make common cause with those who throughout history have used social and political means to eliminate people perceived in their day as heretics. If so, why not just admit it? Alternatively, the left could revitalize its historical commitment to free and open debate.

Victor Menaldo is an avowed liberal and professor of political science at the University of Washington and, along with James Long (political science) and Rachel Heath (economics), one of the organizers of the Political Economy Forum at the UW.

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