

What is Cancel Culture? Myths about Cancel Culture. Why Cancel Culture is a Mistake

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What is Cancel Culture?

- May begin with well-intentioned attempt to improve society by chastising ideas that are offensive or racist or that question certain values & policies.
- In the best case, pushback of this sort is an element of free speech & liberalism: a retort to something that somebody else has said. It might stimulate a conversation & even induce folks to change their mind freely, in light of new facts/new way of thinking about things.
- However, may also include attempts to impose orthodoxy & discourage dissent or ideas some folks simply don't like—inconvenient conclusions.
- May also include gaslighting: purposely distorting what somebody has said to sound worse than it is or imply something not explicitly stated.
- Disproportional/punitive punishments: humiliation, firings, de-platforming.
- Might chill folks from having certain thoughts & deter the pursuit of truth.
- Big change from sticks & stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me—the right lies with the speaker—to idea that listener has right not to be offended or hear something she does not like. This implies speaker has to anticipate words' potential harms.

Myths about Cancel Culture

1) That it's only the Left that does it – but the Right does it too:

- Purging @ University of Washington of 3 tenured professors accused of harboring communist sympathies.
- Univ. of Colorado Prof. Ward Churchill after he compared 9-11 victims to Nazis
- Comedian Kathy Griffin posed in 2017 with mock-severed head of Trump.
- Editor Hemal Jhaveri fired from USA Today for tweet that assumed mass shootings in Boulder were at hands of a white man.

2) That it's new. It is quite old & precedes the Internet Age:

- Socrates, Jesus, Galileo & homophobes who tried to cancel the Bee Gees during the 70s Disco Era.

3) Has nothing to do with 1st Amendment & is perfectly legal: employers who can fire whoever they want & tech platforms can censor whoever they want.

Why Cancel Culture is a Mistake

- The basis of our prosperity, democracy & civic vitality is liberalism, which is based on a culture of free expression & free flow of ideas, even if they're wrong.
- The welfare, if not lives, of billions depends on open access societies.
- The questioning of authority/tradition is behind the Enlightenment & scientific & industrial revolutions, which depended on lowering access to information & rewarded experimentation.
- Key to advancing social justice not latching onto set of predetermined means but identifying & fighting for right ends. Ecosystem of open debate & criticism helps discover best means to advance objectives such as equality, progress & justice.
- Help smoke out & challenge bad ideas. If bad ideas are censored or repressed, they find another way of surfacing & then it's too late: we won't be able to use facts, logic & evidence to arrest them.
- Allow people to change their mind on their own, without coercion & based on persuasion—that's a firmer ground for advancing worthy ends.

It's the relatively powerless, not the powerful, who need free speech. The powerful have resources & connections. Don't need protest & dissent as tool to advance their interests.

Minorities & poor people need ability to speak out & organize to fight oppression:

- No freedom (of speech or assembly) to oppose slavery in the pre-Civil War South or Southwest.
- No freedom of expression or assembly for African Americans during the Jim Crow era.
- No freedom of expression & assembly for Native Americans on the frontier during western expansion.
- No freedom of expression & assembly for Mexican-Americans when Texas Rangers massacred them in Porvenir, Texas.
- No tolerance for anti-interventionist views in 1917-18, in the run up to WWI.
- No tolerance for free speech during 1950s. This led to firing of “heterodox” professors during McCarthy era, including purging @ UW by President Raymond Allen of three tenured professors accused of harboring Communist sympathies.
- No tolerance for anti-war views during the early years of the Vietnam conflict.