

CANCEL CULTURE: WHAT IS THE REAL DEBATE?

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The shrillest voices against cancel culture usually come from on high, the famous and those in power.

In the US particularly, the arguments around cancel culture have amplified across campuses and the media. Donald Trump has castigated it as totalitarian, and Barack Obama bemoaned its effects. This reached a fever pitch last October when the Trump–Pence electoral campaign ran a message warning voters that “Joe and Kamala will cancel you”. Some on the American left have also weighed in heavily against cancel culture, arguing that it alienates working-class voters and is one of the reasons so many voted for Trump.

One of the myths about cancel culture is that it exists only on the left. The British home secretary Priti Patel recently blocked Cambridge professor and writer on empire Priyamvada Gopal from delivering a lecture to her department about colonial history and current immigration policy. Gopal has attacked Patel for having anti-Black attitudes. The “war on woke” in British universities, and in the BBC, has become a rallying call for the conservative right. Boris Johnson’s new culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, wants to take on the “left-wing snowflakes” who are “killing comedy, tearing down historic statues, removing books from universities, dumbing down panto, removing Christ from Christmas and suppressing free speech.”¹

In Ireland, the debate around cancel culture has been less strident than in the US or the UK. Nevertheless, mainstream media, like the Irish Times, see it as “poisonous and frightening”. Social media itself is the one to blame: “A nuance-free zone without a shred of perspective,” a space occupied by people who “don’t

want to hear thought-out, multifaceted arguments”.² The Irish Independent is no less categorical in its criticism. Larissa Nolan describes cancel culture as “gleefully weaponised for revenge or gain” and “harshly unforgiving,” with the punishment meted out “far worse than the crime.” She slams cancel culture—in a somewhat selective view of recent Irish history—as an unprecedented abuse of power, as mindless as medieval witch hunts, and as a form of vigilantism which has gotten wildly out of control.³

Cancel culture usually carries a negative connotation. Like its predecessor, political correctness, it is one of those terms used most by those who do not like it, and has become a shorthand for everything that conservatives dislike.

Different power dynamics

However, exactly what is meant by cancel culture is itself a challenging issue. The question of where these debates play out matters for activists who are grappling with the question. For instance, the July 2020 “Letter on Open Justice and Debate” published in *Harper* was ostensibly a takedown of the trend in the media towards “ideological conformity” and a warning against the censoring effects of cancel culture on popular debate. However, it was signed by over 150 notable celebrities and published on the pages of a widely read, established magazine. Though the raising of the question is not, in itself, a problem, one could ask where exactly the threat of censorship arose in this case. Furthermore, the weaponisation of so-called cancel culture by those in positions of power is disturbing. When Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, opines on cancel culture at a congressional hearing, he is addressing the criticisms levelled at him online for his corporations’ eye-watering abuse of workers globally. Bezos’ wealth and power effectively shield him from the repercussions of *any* of his actions, which extend to far worse than expressing himself online.

However, the question of what happens when these debates play out on a smaller scale is more problematic. On an interpersonal level, the phenomenon of cancelling can be extremely harmful, particularly among activist groups. This is based

largely on the fact that people who come to social movements, by virtue of being human beings with lived experiences in the world, have both harmed and been harmed. However, there is a tendency in this debate to equate all forms of power and harm. There is a significant difference between the harm caused on a daily basis by Jeff Bezos not only to his workers but also to the planet, or by Harvey Weinstein bullying and sexually assaulting women out of the film industry, and the actions and words of workers coming to social movements. This question was raised by Sarah Schulman in her 2016 work “Conflict is Not Abuse”, wherein she distinguished between “power struggles” and “power over”, whether in an open letter in a prominent magazine or a Twitter thread.⁴ For example, the control exerted by figures like Bezos and Weinstein may be identified with the latter, and debate in activist circles with the former. Though a useful starting point for an examination of how cancelling actually plays out, this framing fails to acknowledge the complexity of power dynamics themselves and the real consequences which struggles can have. The all too familiar phenomenon of “call-outs”, long threads of tweets enumerating the harm supposedly done by individuals, has real-life effects. Usually they are directed at people entirely without the type of power held by the Bezoses and Weinstains of the world. The prevalence of these threads has blurred the important boundaries between instances of violence or racist and sexist statements, poorly worded comments, and statements that one may just disagree with. The conflation of such issues in online spheres is dangerous.

The accompanying laser focus on the semantics of these issues detaches them from their material and socioeconomic sources entirely. The need to be “right” in these debates, and to be seen to support the “right side”, makes relating our debates to broader social issues impossible. Furthermore, though often stemming from a genuine desire to address sexual violence, these debates are ultimately ineffective for addressing harm in a meaningful sense. When one is cancelled, what next? One does not have to minimise the consequences of sexual assault to also believe that the total ostracisation of individuals from a broader social life runs counter to imagining a more equal, liberatory world. The categorisation of people as “good” or “bad” negates their potential for change and discounts the possibility that they have been

misjudged. Moreover, the act of cancelling an individual can provide a cathartic expression of retribution without actually addressing the root causes of the harm: by “taking down” supposedly bad persons online, people can feel they have won a victory against sexism, racism, homophobia, and oppression. However, these are often pyrrhic victories as they leave in place the status quo that keeps us all selling away the majority of our lives to survive while a small number grow rich.

We can simultaneously denounce the real harm caused by individuals in their everyday lives while searching for a restorative approach to justice. Abolitionist writers have, for decades, been dealing with the question of how we resolve harm without resorting to carceral and punitive measures. This discussion has been rejuvenated by last year’s wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the globe, though it remains a live issue. This article takes into account the varying interpretations of cancel culture in the hopes of opening further debates among Irish activists on the topic and generating a renewed commitment to imagining a more equal world.

Free speech?

The Economist had a recent front cover emblazoned “The Threat from the Illiberal Left” in front of an image of a lectern punctured with arrows. The article argued that democracy is under threat from cancel culture unless society stands up to the “illiberal mob” and defends the right to free speech.⁵

The catchcry of “free speech” is commonly used against cancel culture, particularly from the political mainstream and the conservative right. It is often a cover for wider political objectives. In relation to the defence of free speech by racists, Gavan Titley points out that claiming that you have been silenced deflects away from the real social issues involved. A secondary debate about the right to free speech is used to reframe opposition to racism—not racism itself—as the repressive orthodoxy. The same mechanism is at work in the mainstream response to cancel culture. What is at stake is not the legal right to speak but what is being said and whether its being said in public negatively affects how people are treated. Free speech provides a shield which brooks no opposition: a sheltering meme for all Twitter storms.⁶

Obsession about cancel culture conveniently leaves out much stronger forms of power. Julian Assange's decade-long imprisonment simply for having exposed the US and Britain's war crimes and corruption, topped now by the US government's determination to get Assange back to the US, is proof enough how liberal democracies are ready to crush free speech when they need to. Likewise, Facebook employee Frances Haugen, who has courageously revealed the lengths to which Facebook goes to put profits over people, knows in her heart that little will change given Zuckerberg's iron grip over the tech giant.

Capitalist institutions cancel people all the time. For example, Ireland's "independent" national talk radio stations Newstalk and Today FM, both owned by billionaire Denis O'Brien, still maintain a blanket ban on any *Irish Times* journalist appearing on their programmes. This, incidentally, followed Fintan O'Toole calling out Newstalk's sexism for sacking Sarah McInerney, a move which left the station with exclusively male presenters. Just recently, Bristol University sacked one of its professors of sociology, David Miller, a left-wing activist who opposes Israel's oppression of Palestinians. University management claimed that Miller was not fulfilling "a duty of care to his students," a dishonest manoeuvre to carry through a trumped-up charge of anti-Semitism and use this as a basis for dismissal. Behind this lurks the powerful influence of the Zionist state and its allies, which has already remorselessly been at work in the British Labour party to stamp out those on the left who support freedom for Palestine. States and their police forces have much more power than identity politics; they can literally take people out, as they did George Floyd or George Nkencho.

Liberalism

Those who claim that cancel culture brings basic freedoms under attack are articulating the well-worn liberal view of freedom, which has always been fundamentally hypocritical. History has ample examples. In the US, many self-proclaimed liberals, such as Vice President Calhoun or President Washington, were slaveholders. The British liberal philosopher Locke was a shareholder in the slave-trading Royal African Company. The Irish philosopher Edmund Burke's liberal vision "found its embodiment" in the slave owners of the Antebellum South. The two self-declared liberal states either side

of the Atlantic, as Domenico Losurdo points out, instigated practical genocide of both the Irish and then the Native Americans.⁷

Capitalism's "spirit of liberty" has always been highly selective, more important for markets than for people, and the ruling class are always its gatekeeper. Liberty was conceived in ruling ideology very differently to "indiscriminate freedom" which would free slaves and servile hands.⁸ The liberal call to, above all, defend freedom of speech in a perceived omnipresent cancel culture contains a similar disdain for popular movements from below.

Gender-critical feminists

A strand of feminism follows the logic of liberalism. These feminists have been some of the most vocal in their opposition to cancel culture. They, too, insist on the absolute right to freedom of speech, ignoring whose rights get trampled on in the meantime. Radical anti-capitalist writer Holly Lewis characterises this section of the feminist movement as white and middle class and as having "a strange obsession with protecting the sanctity of lesbian sex from gender queer, femme and trans people" frequently denouncing "queer and trans affirmative third wave feminists as collaborators."⁹

Certainly, this would seem to be the case with Kathleen Stock, a lecturer at the University of Sussex who has recently written a transphobic book. Her stance triggered a campaign of opposition on the campus which students, the university's LGBT society, and the local lecturers' union branch all supported. The students' campaign called for her to be sacked. University management were quick to support Stock claiming that she was being targeted for exercising her academic freedom and that staff "have an untrammelled right to say and believe what they think." The Tory government are supporters of Stock too; they gave her an OBE earlier this year. Sadly, some on the left are on her side as well.¹⁰

The issue itself could not be clearer. Stock, while insisting that she is not transphobic, claims categorically that "primary sex characteristics" mean that a man who was born male, who may or may not now have male genitalia, cannot self-identify as a woman. If they do, she arrogantly insists, "they are

immersed in a fiction.”¹¹ For Stock it is all about biological sex; socially constructed gender is irrelevant. Stock’s writings and comments negatively impact most trans people because they reinforce the discrimination that they daily experience.

Furthermore, in a world where we see all sorts of backlashes against women’s reproductive and political rights, Judith Butler makes the point that it really makes no sense for so-called gender-critical feminists to line up alongside neo-conservatives in targeting trans and non-binary people.¹² Stock, like other transphobic campaigners, would like to see the LGBT movement split from the socially constructed gender view. Yet not one LGBT community organisation in Britain, nor one media outlet, nor one trade union group has done this. Support for trans rights continues to grow, especially among younger people, increasingly radicalised over other social issues such as low pay and racism. As Colin Wilson remarks, “We work alongside trans people and won’t throw our friends under a bus.”¹³

Tactics

Campaign tactics in this area are more complex and carry political lessons for us all everywhere. In the Stock case, although the local UCU union branch supported the protest, they did not support calls for her sacking. Nor did many socialists or trade unionists. A transphobic feminist, for all the outrage she causes, is different from an open Nazi, who anti-fascists would seek to have removed. More importantly, calling for her to be sacked channels the power of a mass protest into the hands of university management, which gives management a freer hand to silence left wingers, as the Miller case at Bristol University shows.¹⁴

At a deeper level, focussing on shaming and punishing the offender tends towards a moralistic form of activism. Kathleen Stock is not the problem in isolation; rather the problem is how her arguments buttress existing oppression. Individuals are far less of a block to freedom than a society which shelters and encourages transphobic and other oppressions.

Governments manage the institutions, the schools, and some national TV and radio stations, and these channels help to cement these divisive ideologies. How many Black or openly gay or trans presenters are

there on the national television? How many schools remain under the stultifying Catholic rule book and deliver education in single-sex schools with little or no religion-free sex education? How many national institutions have people from ethnic minorities? In higher education, as a recent Irish higher education report showed, staff from ethnic minorities are far more likely to be underpaid and temporary. Full-time staff are overwhelmingly white, but their student bodies are much more diverse.¹⁵ It is these racist and sexist distortions that perpetuate oppression and discrimination across society. When you add to this the fact that corporations hush up sexual harassment and make mega-profits out of the commodification of people’s bodies, it’s obvious that oppression is institutional and structural.

Calling for the removal of transphobic lecturers from their jobs also raises the question of the relationship between individuals and society. Is individuals’ behaviour the main problem? Indeed, is it possible for individuals to maintain fully oppression-free attitudes and behaviour in a society so steeped in them? We are bamboozled every day of the week with stereotypes—the binarism of sex, women as objects, heteronormative family models—and this reinforces oppression and marginalisation as well as creating constant pressures on us all. Some have the means to escape the worst aspects of these, but for the vast majority there are serious obstacles, material and social, to breaking out of the gender and race cages created by society.

Social not individual

Understanding of the social construction and contradictions of oppression means that focussing on individual moralism has no place in the mass and diverse movements we need to build. While rapists, abusers, transphobes, and racists must be opposed, our opposition must not focus mainly on individual retribution. Abolitionist feminists in the US reject institutional punishment in the prison system as it exists today because the prison-industrial complex in

capitalism disproportionately targets Black and working-class people.

Nor does the idea that individuals can be “trained” out of oppressive attitudes or behaviour solve the problem. Often promoted by HR departments to show that they are ticking the “equality at work” box, diversity or consent training treats racism and sexism in the way that neoliberal capitalism treats everything—as a question of individual attitude and behaviour rather than as the outcome of class conflict and structural inequality.

Like some of the excesses of political correctness in the 1980s, in which language became everything, some aspects of cancel culture can be overly formalistic and pick on the wrong targets. *Jacobin* writer and author Ben Burgis quotes one such case: the radical author Barbara Ehrenreich, one of the co-chairs of the Democratic Socialists of America, who happened to tweet a couple of years back about the fact that one cultural aspect of American decline is the increasing popularity of stars on TV who do not speak English and the more widespread use of subtitles rather than dubbing into English. Her throwaway tweet expressed this ironically by saying that only when people returned to learning English would she no longer believe that America was in decline. The reaction to this was a massive pile-on across social media, “outing” her as an Anglocentric linguistic imperialist, and claiming that her tweet was racist. Targeting Ehrenreich was wrong, as she has consistently opposed US imperialism and racism, and it showed the political folly of this type of moralistic literalism.¹⁶

Moralist subculture?

Ben Burgis's argument against cancel culture is that it's a mistake for leftists to participate in moralistic cancelling and to retreat into “a fringe subculture.” He is right to say that socialists and radicals want to create an environment that feels welcoming to millions of people who want to change the world. He goes on to argue that neoliberal social atomisation, for-profit social media platforms that incentivise our worst impulses, and a sense of powerlessness have fed into a moralist fringe subculture which puts its energies into getting people fired or de-platformed for doing or saying bad things. His claim is that this creates the

milieu of a surveillance culture which infects the entire political spectrum.

We can critique the issues with the online milieu of activists without losing sight of where real power lies. Burgis's critique also ignores the fact that soon after he wrote these words, hundreds and thousands of people across the world—many from the age group which he categorises as socially atomised and powerless—mobilised collectively in huge numbers first in support of Black Lives Matter and then for the rights of Palestinians.

Some aspects of cancel culture, when it is collective and on the streets, can be immensely powerful and can force a new understandings of power relations in capitalist society. We saw aspects of this in the #MeToo movement as women everywhere began to speak out about the abuse they had suffered from sexual harassment and rape by powerful men. It broke the silence, validated the rights of survivors of abuse, and created a new political consciousness.

Equally, tearing down the statues of those whose wealth was built on human destruction has transformed people's view of history. Southern Ireland, over half a century ago, experienced the popular euphoria of seeing statues of British imperialists removed or blown up, and there are accounts of the joyous historical reckoning it engendered.¹⁷ Likewise, in summer 2020, just after the Black Lives Matter protests, the crowd in Bristol who dragged down the bronze effigy of slave trader Edward Colston and dumped it into the harbour were of all races, and some were the descendants of the enslaved black and brown Bristolians whose ancestors were chained to the decks of Colston's ships. This was indeed a collective manifestation of the rewriting of history by people themselves, signifying, at the same stroke, that things could never go back to how they were.¹⁸

This collective approach fundamentally undermines what it means to cancel. When we engage in creative, democratic struggles, we are not cancelling the systems we seek to tear down. This is too limiting a perspective and leads us into the trap of fixating on individuals. It also erases the question of which stage these debates are played out on; the power of corporations and billionaire capitalists is easily equated with a “bad” person at work. Transformative

movements must, as has been argued, include people who are still wading through the muck of ages. Our struggles must hold space for open, honest debate if we are to avoid making ourselves irrelevant and confining ourselves to the subcultural margins. These discussions can genuinely engage and bring in alienated individuals with their understanding of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. This is inherently different from the blanket of free speech privileges demanded by powerful institutions. When you are preaching from the pulpit, there is no speaking back.

It is also different because it requires the left to engage, hands on, in the difficult work of bringing together the millions of alienated workers that make up our world. The realities of living under capitalism warp not only how we relate to those around us but also how we relate to ourselves. When directed towards the people we meet in our everyday lives, cancelling precludes the possibility of learning or truly resolving harm.

Oppression and exploitation

The political frustrations of the present period, and particularly in a low level of generalised working-class struggles, has led some purportedly on the left to bemoan an emphasis on fighting oppression. We have already mentioned some in the US who tend in this direction, but this is not uncommon across the left elsewhere. Sahra Wagenknecht, a leading member of, and formerly an MP for, the left-wing party Die Linke, has written a book in which she berates the “self-righteous” lifestyle politics to be found on the left and argues that Die Linke needs to get back to working-class issues. She has already made her anti-immigrant and racist views known, claiming that it is immigrant workers who have lowered the standard of living for working-class (by which she understands white) Germans. She also sees the climate movement Fridays for Futures as pitted against workers. She is dismissive of the Black Lives Matter activists tearing down slavers statues, apparently because these actions do “nothing to escape the modern slavery of bullshit jobs and humility.”¹⁹ Though acknowledgement of the moral grandstanding which can play out in social movements remains up for greater discussion, it is politically wrong to separate these politics from working-class issues.

What such ideas miss is that even in a low period of class struggle—even during lockdowns—vibrant movements around Black Lives Matter and climate change can bring people together and show that social change can happen. We have seen the political impact that big movements around oppression, from Repeal to Violence against Women, can have. These are not somehow secondary to real class consciousness; they can feed into it, especially as increasingly these activists are part of the working class. Yes, the tactics of these movements—their being open and inclusive, not getting hung up on language, finding ways to involve organised workers—all need to be debated. But we should be forging deeper links between them and working-class struggles, not setting them up as two political projects apart.

Therefore, it is perhaps high time we cancelled cancelling on its own in favour of building revolutionary, inclusionary movements based on solidarity. These struggles cannot ignore the problems and pasts that people bring to them; rather, they should seek to engage these complexities with clear eyes and a view towards a total transformation of the world we live in. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote in the turbulent years which followed the First World War, “Unrelenting revolutionary activity coupled with boundless humanity—that alone is the real life giving force of socialism. A world must be overturned, but every tear that has flowed and might have been wiped away is an indictment; and a man hurrying to perform a great deed who steps on even a worm out of unfeeling carelessness commits a crime.”²⁰ The oppressive and material aspects of class are inseparable. Recognition of this, politically and organisationally, is vital to strengthening our power to challenge the system that perpetuates both.

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- ¹ Jamie Grierson, “Snowflakes and posh boys: Nadine Dorries winding path to Cabinet,” *The Guardian*, 17 Sept, 2021.
- ² Tanya Sweeney, *The Irish Times*, July 11, 2020.
- ³ Larissa Nolan, *Irish Independent*, Oct 1, 2021.
- ⁴ Sarah Schulman, *Conflict is Not Abuse*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016.
- ⁵ *The Economist*, Sept 4, 2021.
- ⁶ Gavan Titley, *Is Free Speech Racist? (Debating Race)*, Polity, 2020, Kindle edition: Loc. 293.
- ⁷ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A counter-history*, Verso, 2014, p24, 75.
- ⁸ Losurdo, as above, p338.
- ⁹ Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory and Marxism at the Intersection*, Zed Books, p95.
- ¹⁰ *Morning Star* newspaper of the of the former Communist Party, and the left-wing website *Counterfire* also support Stock.
- ¹¹ Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why reality matters for feminism*, Fleet, 2021, p127.
- ¹² Judith Butler, “Why is the idea of ‘gender’ provoking backlash the world over?”, *The Guardian*, 23 Oct, 2011.
- ¹³ We are grateful to Colin Wilson for sharing with Marnie his social media posts on the Stock affair, especially as his very eloquent posts in defence of the Sussex trans supportive campaigners were sometimes quickly taken down.
- ¹⁴ “Bosses cite ‘academic freedom as calls to sack trans critical lecturer rise,” *Socialist Worker*, 11 Oct, 2021.
- ¹⁵ HEA report, *Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector*, HEA, available online at: <https://hea.ie/2021/10/18/first-ever-race-equality-survey-shows-opportunities-exist-for-higher-education-institutions-to-lead-on-tackling-discrimination/>
- ¹⁶ Ben Burgis, *Cancelling Comedians while the World Burns: A critique of the contemporary left*, Zero Books, 2019, pp72–4. See also Ben Burgis, “We can’t cancel ourselves into a better world,” *Jacobin*, 16 May, 2021.
- ¹⁷ Donal Fallon, “Dispelling the myths about the bombing of Nelson’s Pillar,” *The Journal.ie*, 22 Dec, 2016.
- ¹⁸ David Olusoga, “The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue is not an attack on history. It is history,” *The Guardian*, 20 June, 2020.
- ¹⁹ See an in-depth critique by Phil Butland of Wagenknecht’s move to the right, available online from: <https://www.theleftberlin.com/the-choice-is-not-between-social-movements-and-workers-rights-we-need-both>
- ²⁰ Quoted in Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in action*, Haymarket Books, 2010, p189.