

There's No Such Thing as Cancel Culture

Locusts and Wild Honey

"I've been canceled!" laments the millionaire in their sixth TV interview (tenth if you count podcast episodes) since tweeting a racial slur as "a joke." "What about free speech!" they yell freely in front of the camera(s) and microphone(s) meant just for them.

I mean *really*: how "canceled" can someone be if they still have ready access to both physical and digital town squares? How "canceled" is someone who can even get paid to spew their bullshit from the rooftops? J.K. Rowling is still a millionaire and highly successful author. Dave Chapelle is *still* a millionaire and world famous comedian. The examples go on.

"This generation is too soft! They cancel everybody!"

Is this generation really softer or do marginalized people just have a more public voice? These are, after all, the first few decades in all of human history that almost everybody has the ability to publish their ideas. Eat your heart out, Gutenberg! It's not that people weren't bothered by blackface in the 19th century. It's that societies legally, politically, and culturally dominated by white people could just ignore the voices of protest.

I mean Frederick Douglas was trying to "cancel" 4th of July as racist and hypocritical back in 1852! Think of all the opinions like this held by people who didn't have a platform to speak from, had no pen and paper, or, if they did, were deprived of the education that would allow them to use it.

Sure, in the present era people can *sometimes* go a bit overboard with this newfound power. Maybe don't dig up dirt on your high school bully and post it everywhere. Maybe don't record and post the vaguely sexist stuff your grandpa says at family Christmas.¹ But these are something else entirely than the extremely political use of the term "cancel culture" to discuss situations involving public figures or even just people doing things very much *in* public and *involving* the public.

And certainly we need to shift from just calling people out to, when appropriate, calling people in. But this is all a fairly reasonable overcompensation in response to this incredible expansion in freedom of expression via the Internet. And what is social media and other essentially public forums of the Internet without consequences? Well, apparently it's a 500% increase in the use of the N-word. Thanks, Elon Musk!

"But wait! Are you saying cancel culture isn't real or that it's a good part of human progress?"
I'm saying the whole idea of it is meaningless.

¹ Though, if it's safe, do confront him.

People often compare cancel culture to George Orwell's novel *1984* (usually having never actually read it), but let's take a genuine look at what Orwell might've said about this modern "phenomenon" (a word he hates):

Frankly, I think Orwell goes overboard in his identification of "meaningless words" to include anything beyond the most plain and atomistic description (though perhaps this is my defensiveness as someone who utilizes tons of Marxist jargon), but he is certainly correct that many of the terms used today "are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly ever expected to do so by the reader."

One such word is "cancel culture;" as it does not denote any actual thing but rather takes the sum of people being called out for racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.² as indicative of a grand conspiracy to silence anyone who steps out of line (essentially "Cultural Marxism"). It's not a conspiracy, my friend. It's the usual "marketplace of ideas" writ large and your ideas/jokes/bigotry are not only open to criticism but have consequences. They always have and always will.

So unless I missed a memo stating that's longer the case, "cancel culture" remains the Patrick Bateman of political boogiemens: there is an idea of a cancel culture, but there is not a real cancel culture. **It simply. Does not. Exist.**

² No doubt some right-winger will say that these terms are "meaningless words" despite extensive research and scholarship of the subjects pointing to very real legal, political, and cultural patterns of oppression and violence.

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