

Cancel Culture

re:articulate

Introduction

‘Cancel Culture’ is not a term developed within Cultural Studies. It is a political slogan pushed forward by those opposing what the term supposedly refers to. “One of their political weapons is ‘cancel culture’, (...) shaming dissenters and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees”, Donald Trump claimed on July 4, 2020, accusing his political opponents of foul play.¹ In this tactic of insinuating insinuations, ‘Cancel Culture’ is heir to the earlier notion of ‘Political Correctness’. Both terms have become catch-all phrases to stigmatize any attempt “to fight social discrimination by changing everyday speech and behavior, and to enforce such change through public pressure on individuals” by implying “that these measures are petty, rigid, humorless, intolerant, even totalitarian in impulse”.² Initially, the term ‘canceling’ gained prominence on Twitter, where proponents understood it as an “expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money”.³ The term ‘Cancel Culture’, however, suggests that such individual actions now amount to a systematic form of oppression, suppressing dissenting voices and behaviors. What began as a defensive reaction *against* discrimination, then, is now stylized as a concerted act of discrimination in itself. The tables have been turned: the accused have (apparently) become the victims.

In how far such a thing as a ‘Cancel Culture’ actually exists, in how far a variety of incidences add up to the formation of a structured pattern, however, is open to debate. In fact, it is not even clear what should fall under the category. To un-invite or de-platform someone from a talk or an exhibition because some members of the public object to the speaker’s or artist’s political positions? To call out a comedian for his sexist jokes and gross behavior on Twitter? To accuse a bestselling author, whose books continue to fly off the shelves, of transphobia? To put a disclaimer in front of some old Muppet Show episode? Despite such vagueness in

application, most of today's users of the term 'Cancel Culture' deliver an evaluation without caring much about constituting a coherent phenomenon; like 'Political Correctness' before it, the new term is "a judgment disguised as description".⁴ As such, 'Cancel Culture' is first of all a polemical term that seeks to frame events in a certain light, a spectre that creates a state of permanent agitation in which any deviation from the status quo may be positioned as a threat to free speech, open debate, or, as we will see, society itself.

So, what are we, as Cultural Studies practitioners, to do with 'Cancel Culture'? To seriously discuss a polemically employed phrase would risk accepting the terms of the polemicist. But to leave the term uninvestigated would leave the 'weaponization' of 'Cancel Culture' in the hands of (right-wing) 'Culture Warriors', firing randomly at attempts to counter discrimination, exploitation and oppression. Therefore, we will first situate the debate about 'Cancel Culture' in the context of wider struggles over cultural hegemony, demonstrating how these struggles played out in the field of popular culture and how education became a crucial battleground in these struggles. Finally, we want to ask whether 'Cancel Culture' not only continues earlier 'Culture Wars', but how it may also be an expression of broader shifts in the political realm.

Social Antagonism and Cultural Hegemony

Stuart Hall thought of culture as a continually contested terrain: he called it a "sort of constant battlefield".⁵ Why the martial imagery when talking about culture? Hall and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (UK) first developed their theoretical models for understanding the contingency and overdetermination of political struggles when facing the rise of Margaret Thatcher's authoritarian populism in Great Britain in the 1970s. Especially, they wondered how Thatcherism was able to win over voters from the working class who had traditionally leaned towards the Labour party. In order to explain this, they turned to, among other sources, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and his concept of (cultural) hegemony, understood as a form of power specific to bourgeois democracies. Imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime, Gramsci was faced with the task of accounting for the rise of fascism in crisis-ridden Italy – after all, Mussolini's accession to power (much like Hitler's) was partly supported by elections; only later did he declare himself dictator. Culture was one of the fields where he fought for leadership.

Central to their rise was the formation of a political consensus *across* different political fractions and *beyond* existing social antagonisms: “Dominant groups in society (...) maintain their dominance by securing the ‘spontaneous consent’ of subordinate groups”, Gramsci argued, “through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups”.⁶ According to his analysis, “a social group can, and indeed must, *already exercise ‘leadership’ before winning governmental power* (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power)”.⁷ And the fight for ‘leadership’, Hall and his colleagues concluded, takes place on the ‘battlefield’ of culture. It is here, where a shared sense of reality is constituted, where norms and values are consolidated, where a certain view of the world is formed. However, it is pivotal to note that any idea of a ‘national culture’ or a common national interest, any idea of a given morality and shared values has to be implemented *against* existing antagonisms:

Consensus is not the opposite – it is the complementary face of domination. It is what makes the rule of the few disappear into the consent of the many. It actually consists or is founded on the conjunctural mastery of class struggle. But this mastery is displaced, through the mediating form of ‘the consensus’, and reappears as the *disappearance* or pacification of all conflict.⁸

Gramsci’s analysis was based on a Marxian understanding of capitalist crisis. Capitalism is predicated on generalized commodity production and the exploitation of labor and nature by capital; this is a system that, according to Marx, is prone to crises. Especially in times of heightened economic crisis (which Gramsci’s 1930s witnessed as much as Hall’s 1970s and our post-2008 present), “incessant and persistent efforts” of “political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure” can be witnessed.⁹ In fact, struggles over cultural hegemony became one of the dominant political forms over the last fifty years, as the underlying reasons for crisis had not been successfully addressed by any of the ruling parties, neither in the US nor the UK – a bipartisan consensus on (neoliberal) economic imperatives seems to have only contributed to a deepening of the crisis. Instead of (re)aligning different sections of society according to their socio-economic positions (workers versus capitalists, for example), political alliances seem increasingly dominated

by what is (misleadingly) framed as ‘cultural issues’: attitudes towards immigrants, race and women, abortion and gun laws, religious and educational beliefs, etc.

Popular Culture: from PMRC to PC

Popular culture, with its double meaning of on the one hand being popular with a demographic majority and on other the other hand of being the voice of ‘the people’ excluded from a cultured elite, became a central site in the struggle over cultural hegemony. As Hall argued:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.¹⁰

Complaints about an apparent ‘Cancel Culture’ can be understood as a specific tactic within such struggles. As we will see, framing efforts to disrupt the dominant consensus as an instance of ‘Cancel Culture’ has found a specific “utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position”.¹¹

Dee Snider of heavy metal band Twisted Sister is a good example for a movement from counter to cancel culture. In early 2021, he alleged, like many others, that ‘Cancel Culture’ is akin to a new form of censorship; to Snider, it brought to mind the disputes around popular music and free speech that his band had become involved in during the mid-1980s.¹² As part of the ‘Filthy Fifteen’, a list published by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) that highlighted songs deemed objectionable because of their violent, sexual or drug-related content, Twisted Sister were at the forefront of the budding ‘Culture Wars’ that would soon come to dominate public discussion.

Founded in 1985, the PMRC sought to restrict children’s access to the supposedly offensive (and dangerous) music of such disparate artists as Prince and Judas Priest. Their efforts ultimately led to the introduction of Parental Advisory stickers, which in turn attracted the ire and ridicule of numerous artists across the musical landscape. In his 1989 recording “Freedom of Speech”, rapper Ice-T suggested that “the sticker on the record is what makes ’em sell gold”, thus calling into question the efficacy

of such measures.¹³ But not all artists were able to reap such benefits. Jello Biafra of punk band Dead Kennedys and owner of the Alternative Tentacles label was arrested because of controversial artwork included with his band's *Frankenchrist* album; the charge: "distributing harmful content to a minor".¹⁴ The resulting trial eventually cleared Biafra of all charges but brought Alternative Tentacles to bankruptcy.

While the PMRC claimed to support voluntary measures, not censorship, Biafra's case highlights the political power the initiative had accumulated. In the early 1980s, the United States had seen a "revival of politicized morality",¹⁵ and one of its main expressions became the battle over popular music. Supported by, amongst others, the National Parent Teacher Association, the PMRC's members cast themselves as concerned parents. Yet, by using their connections to high-ranking politicians on *both* sides of the political aisle, the organization quickly became, as musician John Denver put it, a "self-appointed watchdog of public morals".¹⁶ From today's perspective, it is especially noticeable how this culturally conservative initiative allowed appeals to 'free speech' to be trumped by a vague-but-effective reference to (American) 'family values' and similar concepts.

During the late 1980s, 'Political Correctness' (PC) entered public discourse. What had previously been "a kind of in-joke among American leftists"¹⁷ was now being used to complain about an apparent attack on 'free speech'. Initially, much of the discussion centered on higher education, but it quickly became an all-encompassing point of contention. Stuart Hall saw the rise of (anti-)PC discourses as further proof of a "culturing of politics", "an understanding that the political game is often won or lost on the terrain of these moral and cultural issues".¹⁸ As the PMRC's initiative demonstrates, dominant forces happily employed the lesson of a "culturing of politics", aiming to suppress all countercultural challenges to the post-war consensus in order to maintain their leadership. While the PMRC can be seen in the tradition of moral panics about unruly youth cultures, the critique of 'Political Correctness' adds zealous students to rowdy thugs. Now it is not only rappers and punks who are supposed to threaten the American way of life, but students and others who insist on the unfinished business of anti-racist and anti-sexist politics.

With 'Political Correctness' the new right had found an effective weapon

to repress opposition from the oppressed, and to admonish progressive advocates, while concealing their own efforts to set the parameters of public debate. Interestingly, this shift was supported by liberal media like the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, who played a vital role in introducing – and sustaining – popular engagement with the term. Dee Snider, the former object of the PMRC’s incriminations, now seems to follow this new framing when he says: “censorship still exists, but it’s gone from the right more to the left. We’re in this PC world where we have to be careful about what we say and who we offend”.¹⁹ Having reached an established position where his opinions find an echo on radio, on TV and in the press, Snider has obviously become more sensitive to being called out from unsolicited sources online. A similar behaviour can be observed among the aforementioned liberal media, whose position of dominance in the (bourgeois) public sphere is challenged by, among other things, social media users. Increasingly susceptible to public criticism, these outlets now also find use in PC’s successor ‘Cancel Culture’ – and its implied attack on free speech – to strengthen their own position in a shifting media landscape.

Social Media and the Rise of Jordan B. Peterson

The rise of heated debates around the term ‘Cancel Culture’, if not the phenomenon itself, is clearly bound to the emergence of what has come to be known as social media. Twitter, Facebook and others have the ability to evoke indignation and outrage more easily than other media. Hashtags such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter have allowed groups of people with little institutional backing to hold more prominent and powerful people accountable for what they do and say, enabling minoritized groups to ‘talk back’ to dominant discourses. In fact, ‘canceling’, like its precursor ‘calling out’, is part of a tradition of “Black discursive accountability praxes” that have reemerged in digital form on ‘Black Twitter’.²⁰ Today, you don’t have to be part of a high-ranking organization like the PMRC to make your complaints heard.

However, despite such bottom-up emancipatory potential, hashtags have clear limitations. The limited characters of a tweet ask for unequivocal positioning rather than nuanced discussion; comments are created through identification and opposition, and the technological set-up of Twitter, with its like and retweet system, rewards affective engagement; the economic imperative to prolong such engagement asks for perpetual dissent. It is in this context of heightened exposure and intensified

polarization, specifically, that “framing these unruly discourses as ‘cancel culture’ has found utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position”.²¹

Interestingly, the label of having been ‘canceled’ often has a similar effect as the old PMRC sticker had before: it is worn as a badge of honor, paradoxically highlighting that ‘being canceled’ means you have become more visible. Rather than being “culturally blocked from having a prominent public platform or career”, the accused often fare better than ever.²² Jordan B. Peterson is the living embodiment of that paradox, building his public career in great parts on the idea that people are trying to silence him. When he rose to internet fame by way of vocal opposition to the Canadian *Bill C-16* in 2017, he framed his fundamental opposition to transgender rights, feminism, multiculturalism, and ‘postmodern neo-Marxism’, exclusively in terms of ‘free speech’ (and ‘the right to offend’ the advocates of ‘Political Correctness’). Peterson found himself cheered on not only by some liberals and most conservatives, but also by far-right groups such as the Proud Boys. Given Peterson’s self-identification as a “classical British liberal”,²³ it seems crucial to remember the elitist and anti-democratic tendencies of many self-avowed ‘classical liberals’ such as Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, who defended some of the most violent atrocities and state interventions from the slave trade to fascist dictatorships (e.g. Mussolini and Pinochet) to create and protect the ‘freedom’ of markets and (wealthy) individuals.

Peterson is exemplary of framing progressive ideas about gender, race and similar issues, as dangerous interventions in the ‘natural course of things’. According to his best-selling self-help guide *12 Rules for Life* (2018), the life-and-death struggle of a lobster under water can be understood as a model of human behavior. As Harrison Fluss explains: “Following battle, the combatants experience a chemical effect: the superior lobster begins to secrete more serotonin, while the weaker, or inferior, lobster is deprived of these happy chemicals. Echoing (...) nineteenth-century social Darwinism, Peterson uses this example of lobster hierarchy to analyze human society”. Peterson thus reduces historically specific *social* antagonisms “to a natural and eternal struggle for existence that no political or economic revolution (or reform) could ameliorate”.²⁴ By this logic, that is by positing the given order and its power relations as both natural and eternal, any attempt at social emancipation can be framed as a misguided and dangerous degeneration – hence the book’s subtitle *An*

When targeted groups subject Peterson's position to criticism and protest against him, they are habitually accused of 'Cancel Culture', which Peterson has recently defined as a form of "feminine bullying".²⁵ The objects of Peterson's hurtful statements are now blamed for pointing it out. To argue against Peterson's position is framed as going against nature (and not as going against Peterson's simplistic interpretation of nature), and therefore as sowing division and hatred – ignoring that division and hatred were already there. Appeals to a natural given are harnessed to repress opposition, but they succeed only in generating more.

Education and CRT

Education has long been acclaimed and criticized in equal measures for its potential to intervene in the status quo and to instigate social transformation. Recently, it has once again become a central issue of political debate: "Education is at the forefront of voters' minds, because it matters. It matters what our kids learn in school, it matters what books are in our school libraries, it matters what kids believe about their country".²⁶ This is what Virginia Foxx, an ultra-conservative congresswoman, said after Republicans won the 2021 Virginia election, apparently by putting schools, and particularly the issue of Critical Race Theory (CRT), at the heart of their campaign. (CRT has become a polemical catch-all term for various race-related topics.) And it is not a local development either. Websites such as Schoolboardwatchlist.org agitate nation-wide against "radical and false ideologies (...) pushed in the classroom". Everything that could be loosely associated with reforms put forward by a liberal left, "such as Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, sexual/gender ideology, and more", is portrayed here as "anti-American, radical, hateful, immoral, and racist teachings".²⁷

Perspectives critical of the current state of race and gender politics are portrayed as threatening to 'cancel' traditional American culture. Especially, the idea of CRT has become a point of contention. As one conservative activist boasted: "Strung together, the phrase 'critical race theory' connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American".²⁸ What Peterson had framed as unnatural in terms of gender is now framed as un-American in terms of race, both naturalizing and Americanizing existing hierarchies. Anyone who questions the current state of gendered hierarchies and racial division on

the basis of their experience is consequently accused of being oppressive themselves. As Donald Trump's President's Advisory 1776 Commission claimed in January 2021 (just days after the violent attack on the Capitol): "This leads to a 'cancel culture' that punishes those who violate the terms of identity politics".²⁹

However, activities in the field of education are not as grass-root, parent-led as Republicans suggest. The libertarian appeal to freedom of choice, to the individual right of parents to choose what their children are taught, coalesces with the employment of the state to implement a certain morality via legislation. (And as recent events have made clear, Republican lawmakers might just as easily use the state to limit parental rights.) In the wake of Trump's executive order to ban federal contractors from conducting racial sensitivity training, "twenty-nine states have introduced bills limiting how teachers can talk about racism and history in the classroom; twelve states (...) have passed them into law".³⁰ At the same time as they produce such blatant acts of systematic censorship, however, opponents of CRT deny any structural reasons for racism and inequality, but instead relegate the problem to the persistence of unfortunate prejudices and negative role models, thereby seeking "to relocate the sources of racial disparities, out of the realm of material inequality and into the sphere of culture".³¹

The function of talk about 'Cancel Culture' in education becomes increasingly complex. On the one hand, reference to 'canceling' continues the work of 'Political Correctness' in stigmatizing opposition to an apparently natural, American order. On the other hand, however, the reference to 'culture' not only implies that this is really a dangerous pattern, but also works towards framing questions of race as merely a cultural matter (instead of one of material inequality). In the latter sense, reference to a 'Cancel Culture', and the CRT debate specifically, conceal something else that is at stake: the ongoing privatization of public education in the name of choice, the growing influence of Google, Amazon and other corporate institutions on school curricula, the streamlining of education towards producing 'hireable subjects'.³²

Conclusion

The diverse practices associated with 'Cancel Culture' – from criticizing to boycotting or silencing – have a long and varied tradition, as our examples of debates around 'censorship', 'free speech' and 'political

correctness' in popular culture, social media and education have shown. Though 'Cancel Culture' appears as a neologism and a current topic, it has to be seen as a continuation of the 'Culture Wars' that gained traction in the 1980s. In this sense, 'Cancel Culture' is a rearticulation of 'Political Correctness', demonizing progressive attempts to call out discriminatory speech and behavior as petty and totalitarian; the term's function is to quash any attempts to critique dominant social positions – while in fact using the same tactics all along: banning, boycotting, silencing. Here, 'Cancel Culture' is the social media hyped-up version of previous moral panics, part of a cultural hegemonic power struggle and an attempt to stifle all opposition by branding such opposition as 'mob rule'. While online 'canceling' can be seen as a "form of networked framing", this oppositional practice has been "effectively and tellingly counter-framed through application of the reductive and malignant label 'cancel culture'".³³ Rejecting demands to be held accountable has in turn become a feverous rallying point: the 2021 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) was advertised as "America Uncanceled".

However, 'Cancel Culture' also goes beyond earlier articulations such as 'Political Correctness' in that its belief in the centrality of cultural consensus and leadership seems to have faded. Rather than aiming at social transformation through cultural means (by correcting language, for example), current practices of 'canceling' often seem to concentrate on pointing out that racialized and gendered disparities still persist and that they continue to create economic inequalities, abject poverty and deep despair. The counter-move of designating these practices as part of a 'Cancel Culture' can then be seen as an attempt to make sure that opposition to power remains on the defensive and that it stops short of addressing questions of redistribution, reparations and restructuring – while dominant forces do just that: redistricting the electorate, reversing constitutional protection and redistributing wealth to the top. In fact, the opponents of an apparent 'Cancel Culture' seem to have little interest in cultural consensus and leadership, too. They seem to be content with a barrage of affect-loaden insinuations that emphasise and generate dissent and that keep supporters in a state of constant excitation and alert to threaten with violence. At the same time, changes to constitutional rights, the destruction of the environment and military interventions are executed without campaigning for leadership and consensus first.

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3. Meredith D. Clark, “DRAG THEM. A Brief Etymology of so-called ‘Cancel Culture’”, *Communication and the Public* 5:3-4 (2020), 88-92, here p. 88.
4. Morris, “Political Correctness”, p. 260.
5. Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”, in: *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel, London: 1981, 227-240, here p. 233.
6. Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: 1995, p. 165.
7. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. & trans. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: 1971, p. 57; *emphasis added*.
8. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke & Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London: 1978, p. 216; cf. Florian Cord, “Dirty, Messy Business. Stuart Hall, Politics and the Political”, *Coils of the Serpent* 3 (2018), 27-42, here p. 36.
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11. Clark, “DRAG THEM”, p. 90.
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20. Clark “DRAG THEM”, p. 91.
21. Clark “DRAG THEM”, p. 90.
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