

A Principled Case for Silencing Your Enemies?



by Theodore Dalrymple

If brevity is the soul of wit, it is certainly no guarantee of it. This book, with its intriguing title that promises counterintuitive reasoning that might challenge the reader, manages to combine brevity with repetition and tediousness.

Apart from being very badly written, its fundamental defect is that the author never defines his terms. He appears to think that all protest, all opposition, all disagreement, even all choice, is a manifestation of cancel culture. If I choose coffee rather than tea as my morning drink, I have, in his view, “cancelled” tea. Those who expected from the title an

attempted justification for the prevention or prohibition of the expression of certain ideas will be disappointed.

I will give one example of the author's misunderstanding of the nature of so-called cancel culture:

A successful case of cancel culture occurred ... in the 1920s, when the Antidefamation League organized a boycott and sued automobile mogul Henry Ford for libel after he published several anti-Semitic articles in The Dearborn Independent. ... The lawsuit, along with many Jewish Americans and their Christian allies calling on people to stop purchasing cars from the company, forced Ford to shut down the polarizing publication in 1927.

Libel actions are attempts, which may be justified or not, to correct or counteract slurs perceived by the litigant as damaging and untruthful; while arguing for boycotts is perfectly legitimate, provided that violence is not used against those who decline to participate. In a market economy, they are a permissible resort, successful or not.

By cancel culture we generally mean the forcible attempt to prevent certain views from being expressed in any circumstances. All people and all organizations have the right to invite, and not to invite, whomever they choose; failing to invite someone is not a manifestation of cancel culture, any more than the failure of a newspaper to print an article is *ipso facto* an example of censorship. No one expects a philatelist to address a convention of pig farmers.

However, forcibly preventing someone from expressing his views when invited to do so by others is a manifestation of cancel culture. I once witnessed a typical example when a controversial journalist was scheduled to present a book that she had written to a literary festival. A small mob of Antifa demonstrators prevented her from doing so, with the police telling her that they could not guarantee her safety (not that

they made much effort to do so). The audience which had come to hear her was physically trapped inside the building. I suspect that had the writer not desisted, violence would have been done to her and possibly to others—though, as with any counterfactual, I cannot prove it. At any rate, she was successfully prevented from speaking.

This, surely, was a central case of cancel culture, and it was an attempt to justify such action that one might have expected in a book of this title. The author's mind, however, is too scattergun in nature for him to be able to justify anything. His book is a mood statement rather than an exercise in argumentation.

Like all social phenomena, cancel culture has marginal and central cases. For example, there is the asymmetric war that is increasingly carried on between bands of monomaniacs and the rest of society. For monomaniacs, their cause is all-important, even the meaning of their lives; for everyone else, it is just one thing among many others to which they must give their attention. They do not care about the matter deeply enough to risk the insults and anathema that the monomaniacs are prepared to pour down on them if they utter their objections or even scepticism. This is all the more damaging when the monomaniacs insist upon evident absurdities.

Shortly before the Covid epidemic, for example, I was contacted by the Irish state television and asked whether I would be willing to appear and say something contrary to the developing orthodoxy about transsexualism. The television could find many eminent doctors and professors who disagreed with that orthodoxy, but not a single one who was willing to voice his disagreement in public: they all thought that the price for them would be too high.

This is a manifestation and consequence of an unpleasant and damaging form of social pressure, but while it is cognate to cancel culture, is not identical to it. It has what

Wittgenstein would no doubt have called a family resemblance; and it is this kind of behaviour that Owens defends, at least when it is in pursuit of an end of which he approves. For him, the end justifies the means, and the end is beyond discussion.

He says that people should make the proper distinctions, but he makes distinctions as a bull makes distinctions in a china shop; he accuses conservatives of falsely dividing the world into two, but this is precisely what he does himself. There are for him the powerful and the ordinary people; there are the rich and the poor; the privileged and the oppressed; the whites and everyone else, united by their non-whiteness; the conservatives and progressives. The theory of intersectionality means for him that the world is essentially divided into the white rich powerful privileged conservatives and coloured poor powerless oppressed progressives. These are the crude dichotomies of someone burning with resentment, a resentment that is to his mind what a fog is to the atmosphere.

Owens is also attracted to bad ideas like a fly to ordure. One of his first arguments is that cancel culture has always been with us and as a corollary, presumably, that it is nothing to worry about. Disregarding the historical truth of the first assertion (I think it false), it is like arguing that, since murder has always been with us, it is nothing to worry about.

He believes in something called "cultural appropriation," at least when it can fuel his resentment. For example, he discusses the case of a man called Justin Timberlake, of whom I have heard of but whom I would not recognise if I either saw or heard him (I do not keep abreast of modern popular culture, the life of man, as Macaulay pointed out in his review of Dr. Nares' biography of Lord Burleigh, being but threescore year and ten). "Timberlake," Owens writes, "has a long history of appropriating the musical styles and aesthetics of Black artists. ... Timberlake and his 'blue-eyed soul' benefited from a racist system that prioritized white artists who perform R&B

over Black artists who invented the genre.”

This is very curious. What would he say if someone were to argue that, as he was descended from pre-literate people, he should therefore not be writing books, least of all in English? Who would object that Leontine Price should not have sung in opera because opera was a European genre?

Owens makes no distinction between freedom and democracy (in the sense of rule by majority). This was a distinction that the Founding Fathers understood very well, for the latter is perfectly compatible with the most ruthless suppression of freedom. Nor does it ever seem to cross his mind that a million people taking to Twitter does not necessarily represent majority opinion or anything like it. The loudest are not necessarily the most numerous, nor are they necessarily the best. They may, indeed, be among the worst.

There does seem to be a rising tide of intolerance in Western society, not just on the left. One has only to read the commentary by readers on some conservative websites to realise what gutter minds many people have, at least when they take to the keyboard. It is an interesting question whether they had such minds before they had the means of expressing them, or whether the means encouraged them to go into the gutter; but this is a question that our author does not ask.

Instead, he is in favour of hounding and humiliating people on social media and driving them from the public sphere. This, he thinks, is a legitimate manifestation of people power. For him, four legs good, two legs bad. He does not concern himself much, or at all, with questions of justice. People he dislikes, such as Justices Thomas and Kavanaugh, are guilty because they were accused, and therefore unworthy of their positions. He uses the word “alleged” in the sense of “convicted.”

For him, it is not events that are cancelled, but people, some

of whom he calls “problematic.” For anyone without his cloth ear for nuance, this is surely rather sinister. One is tempted to adapt Heine’s famous dictum about the burning of books: where people are cancelled, they will soon be annihilated.

Opening the book at random to test my hypothesis that there is something bad on every page, I find the following: “Brett Kavanaugh needed to be canceled.” Even if Brett Kavanaugh were a monster, he would need no such thing: to confuse need with requirement is an invitation to, if not a manifestation of, totalitarian thinking.

The passage continues, quoting an activist with approval:

That cancellation by the people, in stark contrast to a system that upheld him—an alleged rapist—as the pinnacle of morality, proves just how immoral the U.S. government is.

It would be possible to write an entire essay, even a book, on the errors, intellectual confusions, and possible motivations behind this brief passage.

No book is completely without value, though it may not have the value that the author ascribes to it. This book is valuable as a window on the soul of those who allow resentment to dominate reason. This is a permanent, but dangerous, temptation of mankind.

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