

POLITICS AND THE END OF PRIVATE LIVES



We are becoming like China as **Daniel Greenfield** [writes](#):

Cancel culture, like most of our contemporary cultural revolution, began in China.

In the aughts, rural Chinese migrated to massive mega-cities whose impossible population densities were matched by the growing interconnection of the internet. While three quarters of China's population is now on the internet, in 2006 it grew by a quarter to encompass only 10%.

In these cramped quarters, physical and social, there was no room for the individual.

The Chinese internet, unlike its American counterpart, was always centered around social media which is one reason why TikTok is eating Facebook, Twitter and YouTube's lunches. It was also always mobile. Chinese commuters on public transportation tapped in their grievances against neighbors, friends, family and random strangers. And mobs formed to take sides.

What we call cancel culture, the Chinese called “internet hunting” by “morality mobs” who were enforcing a street-level Confucianism in Maoist fashion by destroying the lives of the offenders.

It took Americans another decade to catch up to China. Cancel culture is more overtly ideological than internet hunting, but they are the common phenomenon of leftist mass societies where people inhabit anonymous collectives, displaced by technology and the collapse of definable communities, they form ad hoc groups to enforce social codes and burn witches.

Communist societies pursue collectivization to eliminate personal spaces. The Soviet Union pushed its peasants into collective farms and its urban residents into communal apartments to root out the very idea of the personal. Early Soviet apartments had no kitchens and the planners initially intended to have everyone eat in public kitchens and use their homes for sleeping.

The social web is much more stifling than any Soviet communal apartment. A family might have been stuck with one bedroom, but at least they had a door that they could close. The internet has taken down all the doors. Making the private public is a core leftist program. The old hackers claimed that “information wants to be free”. Information is less free than it ever was, but people’s lives have become public property. The ‘free’ public services of Google, Facebook and others offer convenience in exchange for information. Family life and political participation leave a trail. Disputes spill out into their ugliness into social media. From the media to social media, everyone is invited to judge the private lives that have become public commodities.

It took Americans longer to collectivize the personal than it did the Chinese. And we did it in a typically individualistic fashion. To paraphrase Sinclair Lewis, when collectivism came to America, it did so by flying emojis offering character

creators, personalized algorithm suggestions and relevant ads. Americans became the same under the guise of expressing their differences. That sameness refracted through the illusion of collectivist mass cultural expression is not at all coincidentally at the heart of identity politics setups like the LGBTQ movement.

Cancel culture politicized the personal. But for it to work, we had to give up our private lives.

In a collectivist society, everyone is either a model citizen or a problem. Individualism is an offense against the system. That is what the Chinese, whose version of the 'Ugly Duckling' has the swan dying because of his differences, innately understood. It was what China's morality mobs and internet hunters foreshadowed to Americans eagerly signing up for Facebook.

When people make their personal lives public, they hand them over to the Left

Defeating cancel culture requires restoring private lives. Soviet citizens in the grip of Communist terror understood that they could survive, not only physically but morally, by creating spaces where the state and its enforcers could not reach. At the end of the film 'Brazil', the protagonist, being tortured by the state, escapes into his imagination. Such is the power of inner lives.

Engaging with cancel culture on its own terms feeds the beast. Like every totalitarian system, cancel culture is nourished by consuming the lives of others. And those lives must be accessible. The more we live our lives in public view, the more of us it consumes and the more we normalize the idea that life is a collectivist enterprise to be pored over by others for their entertainment. What began with reality television has culminated in professional influencers whose existence is a facsimile of reality and whose gravitational pull warps our

sense of reality.

Private lives are not just a stylistic choice. The American Revolution was fought over, among other matters, because the colonists refused to be feudal peasants who were expected to open their doors and quarter British soldiers in their homes at the demand of a king. Contemporary Americans assume that they are obligated to let officers of the state, not only the police but a long list of inspectors and authority figures into their homes, and have made their homes and lives into just another node on the internet for everyone to pass through when they please.

Inhabiting public lives has not made us any happier. Statistics show a sharp increase in depression and suicide rates for teens beginning with the popularization of the smartphone. Critics and experts point to the devastating impact of phones on public happiness, yet fail to boil it down succinctly to what adults understand, but teens never had a chance to experience.

Like the child stars and teen musicians of another era, a generation has come of age and another is coming of age without any sense of what living a private life is even like. The personal is naturally public. Life feels only lived if someone else is watching. Without audiences, life appears unreal, and yet with the eternal audience of social media, it is truly unreal. To be public is to give up the self. Teenagers, who have the greatest need for privacy and the least ability to maintain its boundaries, are the greatest victims of the violation of private lives.

Cancel culture is only the most visible manifestation of that, along with elevated depression and suicide rates, and a general anhedonia, an inability to be happy, because happiness on any level other than the animalistic is impossible without a private self. Teenage girls are the most dependent on social networks for their sense of worth and are the most likely to

lose their sense of who they are to them. Transgender mutilation is a massive phenomenon among teenage girls for the same reason that body dysmorphic disorders tend to hit them harder. When you lose your mental sense of self, hurting your body becomes a desperate effort to exercise control.

Politics did not cause us to dive so far down a technological rabbit hole that we left western civilization behind and found feudalism waiting on the other side of the singularity, but the destruction of individuality opened the Overton window for totalitarian movements. By trading the private for the public, we erased the lines between the personal and the political. A revived leftist movement under the flag of wokeness made politicizing the personal into its mission statement. Giving up our wealth, our homes and our children to it was nothing. The true sacrifice was to give up our morality, our reasoning and our souls to the madness of the trending topic.

We ceased to think and we became receptacles for mass messaging in a way that no people, not even during the worst days of the twentieth century, had ever become. We no longer thought, we echoed, and we stopped acting and reacted, and let the postmodern dancing sickness that had once infected medieval millenarians take us on a crazy jig down the street.

The best defenses against public madness are private lives, against mass culture, the pursuit of individual creativity, and against mindlessness, thinking for ourselves. We are on the cusp of a world in which culture will be mass produced by AI, tailored by algorithms and primed to persuade us of anything as long as it has enough information about us to form a profile.

In the face of that inconceivable collectivism, we can become ourselves or lose ourselves.

Private lives, and their vital tools, thoughtfulness, modesty, integrity, religiosity, reason, humility and common sense, are

the anti-virus software against a virus of a scale we can neither imagine nor survive intact as reasoning civilized beings. They are the barriers, the doors we can close on a system that needs us to give up everything we have in order to rule over us.

This is not monasticism: it's individualism. We do not need to retreat from fighting or making a difference. But what we must do is fight without losing the selves that we are fighting for.

What, in the final analysis, are we fighting for? More than a single election, we are fighting for a world in which we are the kings and queens of our homes, where our children are safe from the predators who have become emboldened in the age of identity politics, where we do not have to account for choices to the oversight of the state and where we are free to think and believe.

We are fighting not just for a nation, but for the right to our private lives once again.

In a totalitarian state, the private is public because the people are the property of the state whereas in a free society, the public is private because the state belongs to the people.

America was founded as a free society and has become a totalitarian state. Its monolithic institutions, state, corporate, academic, nonprofit, claim the right to control everything about their subjects from birth to death, a thousand forms and agenda items put the personal at the disposition of the public. A new revolution will make the personal, private once again. It is a revolution that can begin with us when we do not answer a question, fill in a form, turn over data or share our lives or scrutinize the lives of others who are not our family or our friends.

The act of living private lives carries with it a moral power

that can transform a culture..

Even in the most totalitarian societies, people can draw lines between the public and the private. Acts of quiet defiance serve to restore norms and limit the power of the state. There are many walls worth building. One of them is the wall between the private and the public, the personal and the political, between our homes and the system, and between ourselves and the state.