

# Jews and Cancel Culture



IT MAY NOT BE obvious why SAPIR should devote an issue to the theme of cancellation. Doesn't the phenomenon already get more than enough attention elsewhere? Isn't this a problem for liberal democracy in general, rather than for Jews in particular?

The essays in this volume aim to convince you otherwise. Cancel culture is a cancer at the heart of liberal society—and Jews, of all people, cannot safely be indifferent to the health of liberalism. Cancel culture also rests on a set of attitudes and practices that, whether from Left or Right, are uniquely anathema to Jewish culture, teachings, and habits of mind. Even statehood: Is it really such an accident that the enemies of free thought are so often the same people who want to cancel the Jewish state?

Let's examine these points in their turn.

What exactly do we mean by “cancel culture”? It's obviously not a matter of being fired for cause. Harvey Weinstein wasn't a victim of cancel culture: He's someone whose serial abuses were moral, professional, legal, and criminal. Nor is it cancel culture simply when private companies, universities, or other institutions discipline employees or students for violating long-established and widely agreed standards of professional and personal conduct. When actress Roseanne Barr tweeted in 2018 that Valerie Jarrett, the former Obama-administration aide, was the baby of the “Muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes,” ABC had a legitimate reputational interest in giving her the boot.

A better way to understand cancel culture is to break it down into five component parts: an action, a method, a capitulation, a mentality, and a culture.

The *action* is cancellation. But cancellation doesn't simply mean losing a job, a book contract, a TV show, a speaking gig, and so on. It's more like erasure. A canceled person will lose not only his job but also his career. He will lose not only his career but also his reputation. He will lose not only his reputation but also many of the people he once considered friends. He will lose not only his friends but also, in some cases, his will to live. David Bucci was a 50-year-old professor at Dartmouth and a married father of three when he became entangled in allegations that, as a department head, he had looked the other way at a campus culture of sexual harassment. Though he was never accused of personal misconduct, the school's failure to declare his innocence sent him into a spiral. He committed suicide in October 2019.

The *method* is usually the social-pressure campaign—with the aim to not only destroy the intended target but advertise the destruction far and wide as a means of intimidation. Person X is deemed a malefactor for a statement or action that an exceptionally vocal minority of people consider immoral or that causes “harm” and makes people “feel unsafe.” Sometimes these campaigns begin with an accusation that turns into a workplace whisper campaign;

at other times with a social-media post that quickly gains wide attention and descends on the designated target like a Himalayan avalanche. Employers, allergic to public controversy, seek to make the problem go away as quickly as possible, usually by extracting an apology from the targeted employee. That apology, often given under acute emotional distress, is seen as an admission of guilt. Termination swiftly follows.

*Capitulation* is an underappreciated but integral aspect of cancel culture. After David Sabatini, a renowned cancer biologist, was pushed out of his job at MIT on account of a non-disclosed consensual relationship with a younger colleague that went sour, friends of his who thought the charges against him were nonsense sought to bring him to New York University. When word got out of his potential hire, it led to public protests, to which the NYU administration, including university president Andrew Hamilton, promptly caved. Sabatini, once touted as a future Nobel laureate, is now unhirable in American academia. Cancel culture flourishes because coward culture allows it.

Then there is *mentality*. The best term I know of for practitioners of cancel culture is “cry-bullies.” It captures the combination of self-pity and vindictiveness (the former providing limitless justification for the latter) that explains so much of the way cancel culture operates: the disdain for due process; the unlimited deference shown to the accuser; the indifference to the possibility of innocence or, at least, mitigating factors; the reputation-smearing; the foreclosure of any possibility of second chances or redemption; the demand for complete professional and personal excommunication. There’s a reason, as Lionel Shriver notes, why today’s cancel culture reminds people of Mao’s Cultural Revolution or Robespierre’s Terror (minus, for now, the bloodshed). Only those fully convinced of their utter righteousness can be so completely pitiless.

Finally, *culture*. Cancellation is awful, but it befalls relatively few. The broader impact is on a wider circle of people who fear that they, too, can be canceled at a moment’s notice for saying or doing

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the wrong thing. It’s what leads to increasingly widespread habits of self-censorship, speaking in euphemisms, professing views one doesn’t really hold, pulling intellectual punches, or restricting candid conversations to a close circle of like-minded and trusted friends. It is why more than 60 percent of Americans admitted in 2020 that they have views they are afraid to share in public, and another 32 percent fear that their job prospects could be harmed by speaking their mind. It’s also why young undergraduates such as Olivia Eve Gross, a third-year student at the University of Chicago who is publishing her debut essay in this issue, thinks twice before raising her hand in class.

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It’s easy to see why this culture is such a threat to liberal democracy. It is a tyranny of the minority over the majority. It violates

ordinary expectations of fair dealing. It represents an aggressive intrusion of political ideology into workplaces that were once mostly free from it. It seeks to proscribe not just certain types of behavior, but entire categories of thought. It requires public endorsement of a controversial set of ideas as the price that must be paid to gain admission, employment, promotion, and social respectability. Past observers of tyrannical societies—Václav Havel comes to mind—would be familiar with the system: Ordinary people pay obeisance to political slogans in which they don't particularly believe just to be left alone.

A rejoinder to the argument that cancel culture is a threat to democracy is that none of these objections touch directly on our political and legal systems per se. Private institutions can, for the most part, set their own rules; people who don't like them, or who run afoul of them, are free to go elsewhere. The canceled still get to vote. Their professional lapses don't usually lead to jail time. They can find jobs elsewhere, even if they are lesser ones, which may be a pity for them but is no different from the fate of millions of other unfortunates whose career aspirations don't pan out.

In fact, there are many laws governing workplace environments, and at least some people facing cancellation have had their legal rights violated. But the larger problem with the rejoinder is that it misses the fact that politics is downstream from culture. Our schools, campuses, offices, and civic associations are the places where we are socialized for democratic life. Are we collaborative fellow students or colleagues—or suspicious ones? Do we accept viewpoint diversity—or do we demand conformity? Do we foster environments where people feel safe to express themselves freely and fully—or where it's wiser to remain silent? Should we respond with curiosity to arguments with which we disagree—or with contempt?

These are not small questions. Democracy is not an automatic watch that starts ticking at the first flick of the wrist. It's the soul in the machine that keeps the wheels turning.

For generations, Americans understood that a free country could function well only by producing citizens fit for freedom. It's why the public-school system was initially conceived with civic education chiefly in mind. It's why private universities, even when not bound by it, sought to adhere to the letter and spirit of the First Amendment in order to encourage open inquiry and an atmosphere of intellectual challenge. Outside of schools, Americans have (with obvious and notable exceptions) broadly understood the value of a wide latitude of opinion, of the dissenting voice, of give-and-take, of listening to the other side.

“The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right,” Judge Learned Hand said in his memorable 1944 address. “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias.” It is the spirit of the generation that won World War II—and then raised the countries it had vanquished to become thriving democracies themselves.

Cancel culture is the enemy of this spirit. Nations that forget how to think critically—that develop intellectual climates dominated by groupthink, censoriousness, self-silencing, and the broad acceptance of politically correct lies—inevitably fail to evolve constructively.



This is obviously bad news for Americans. It should be beyond obvious why it's bad news for Jews, the world's most canceled people.

It's not just that Jews are heavily represented in professions and institutions where cancel culture has tightened its grip: academia and teaching, publishing and journalism, the tech and entertainment industries. If you are reading this essay, chances are that you or someone close to you has felt the pall, or worse, that cancel culture casts over so much of professional life.

There is also the fact that Jewish culture, as I've noted before,

“has a rich history of impishness, irreverence, skepticism, activism, and dissent.” There are theological roots for this: We are the people whose founding father argued with God over Sodom and Gomorrah. There are historical roots: To be a people in exile, by its nature, is to be a nation of nonconformists. There are ethical roots: Atonement, forgiveness, and personal redemption are central to our value system. And there are ideological roots: Jews have historically been drawn to liberalism (in the broad sense of the word) because liberalism is the only concept of a political order in which differences of belief, religious or secular, are seen as an asset to a state’s overall dynamism and health, rather than as a liability.

There’s more. Jews prize irony and humor. Cancel culture is grimly literalist. Jews value argument for the sake of heaven. Cancel culture treats argument as heresy. Jews are interested in characters who are complex amalgams of good and bad. Cancel culture paints the story of humanity as one of faultless victims and irredeemable oppressors. Jews are drawn to liberalism because we excel when rights are equal and liberty universal. Cancel culture, inherently illiberal, substitutes equity for equality, and “safety” for freedom. Jews typically look for the good in people. Cancel culture is on a continual hunt for the bad—and will find it in an unfortunate word choice, a joke that fails to land, a friend with incorrect views, and so on.

Also notable, as mentioned before, is how closely cancel culture aligns with the anti-Israel caucus. Cancel culture is characterized by a form of vindictive aggrievement that has also typified Palestinian politics for decades. It shares other characteristics, too: the insistence on dictating terminology; the victim/oppressor binary; the refusal to countenance disagreement; the absence of introspection; the effort to eradicate its opponent. And envy. Jewish successes, whether in North America, Europe, or the Middle East, have always had a way of provoking fury among those whose animating impulse is resentment in the face of someone else’s achievements. In this sense, cancel culture, though not intrinsically antisemitic, is prone to employing antisemitic tropes (for example, with its focus on the

alleged “power” of the people being canceled), mimicking antisemitic patterns (relentless demonization based on wildly inflated accusations), and sometimes descending into antisemitism itself (the repeated cancellation of Israeli academics who refuse to take a public anti-Zionist pledge).

I should pause to note that there is a segment of the American Jewish community that not only accepts cancel culture as a defensible, even necessary, feature of American life, but also participates in it in the name of cleansing the broader culture. At times this is the cancel culture of the Right (the subject of David French’s essay); at others, the cancel culture of the Left. This is nothing new. As Ruth Wisse observes in her masterly discussion of Isaac Babel’s short story “My First Goose,” Jews have often participated in political movements whose pitiless means were supposed to be justified by their lofty aims. In the long run, as Babel bitterly learned, such participation rarely goes well. We may be good at many things, but we make for lousy cultural commissars.



None of this is to say that cancel culture is the only or even the main threat to Jewish security and thriving in America. But it’s absurd to suggest that simply because there are many threats, or because some of them emanate from the Right, Jews can afford to relax about this one. Cancel culture is the McCarthyism of our day, and it is shredding the fabric of liberalism, as both a political ideal and a daily practice, in ways that degrade American life and the Jewish experience within it. We need to fight it accordingly.

A few steps worth taking:

1. Jewish teaching on cancellation must be widely disseminated and understood in synagogues, day schools, and Jewish organizations. We are a people of argument, not excommunication. (Our most notorious venture with the latter, against Baruch Spinoza, was not exactly our finest moment.) We are also a people who

believe in providing avenues of repentance, not walling them off. Rabbi David Wolpe offers the theological and cultural groundwork for this teaching in his seminal essay.

2. We need to be outspoken in defending the basic rights of those facing cancellation, and compassionate to those who have been canceled. During my own close encounters with cancel culture, I was struck by the number of prominent people with large social-media followings who commiserated with me privately about the insanity of it all. But it was only a brave few who were willing to do so in public. In this issue, former Princeton professor Joshua T. Katz describes his own experience of discovering who his true friends were—or, more often, weren't—during his two-year cancellation ordeal. Jews should strive to be the true friends.

3. Many instances of cancellation involve he-said/she-said cases where the truth isn't easy to ascertain. We owe sensitivity, attentiveness, and respect to alleged victims—but not unbounded deference. We also owe the alleged wrongdoer a presumption of innocence that goes well beyond the pro forma nod to legalities. There have been too many cases of false, exaggerated, or seriously questionable accusations that have wrecked or ruined people's lives. As Jews, we should always stand against the politics, and culture, of personal destruction.

4. To oppose cancel culture, we should practice what we preach. As Samantha Harris wisely notes in her essay, that means putting up with expressions of opinion that most of us abhor: BDS petitions; anti-Zionist campus groups; speakers many of us believe lean too far to the left, or to the right. In my own speaking career, I have twice been disinvited, and both times the cancellations came from the political Right. The people who rescinded those invitations have forfeited their moral right to complain about left-wing cancel culture.

5. We have to step back from the zero-tolerance mentality that underlines cancel culture. Life is a long series of missed cues, missteps, miscommunications, misjudgments, misgivings, and dumb mistakes. There can be no learning from any of these if

the default penalty for error is public shaming and professional ruin. It behooves Jews, both in our everyday and professional lives, to learn again that we can correct without harming, admonish without firing, and discipline without humiliating those who err. Jewish organizations can lead the way, with a pledge to encourage viewpoint diversity in their organizations, respect due process for those accused of wrongdoing, and refuse to bend to the demands of social-media mobs or whisper campaigns.

6. "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." The line is from Jefferson, not Jacob, Judah, or Jeremiah. But it ought to serve as a standard for every American Jew who believes that we honor our country and our traditions best through open and vigorous conversation and argument, not speech codes and safe spaces.



Will any of this be enough to break the grip of cancel culture? Maybe not: The world has been moving in a broadly illiberal direction now for over a decade, and cancel culture is both a symptom and a cause of that trend. Then, too, as former University of Chicago president Robert Zimmer once observed, a taste for censorship and cancellation comes easier than an appreciation for freedom of expression, tolerance of objectionable views, self-scrutiny, and a forgiving spirit. Fighting cancel culture means educating people to know the value of not only their own freedom but also the freedom of others. That, too, is difficult to acquire in this civically coarse and combative age.

But none of that relieves us of the responsibility of holding up the banner of old-fashioned liberalism and even older-fashioned Judaism and Jewishness. If not us, who? \*

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