

Uncanceling Ourselves



WHEN I AGREED recently to appear on the *Sacred Tension* podcast, I assumed that the host, Stephen Bradford Long, was inured to controversy. After all, he is a leading spokesman for the Satanic Temple, which is pretty much what it sounds like: a religious group that venerates Satan as a symbol of freethinking dissent from an authoritarian god. Also, he is openly gay. Also, he has a cancellation-proof day job managing his family's grocery store. Given all that, I was unsure what to expect on his program, except that he would be fearless.

I was wrong.

"As a content creator, I live in terror," he told me. "I live in absolute fear that any time I hit publish on a podcast or an article, it will absolutely ruin my life for a month, or longer." Politically progressive himself, he yearns for dialogues that transgress progressive dogmas. "I've been doing this podcast for five years," he said. "I'm getting so tired of having the same type of conversation over and over again.

I want to talk to people like Jordan Peterson and Helen Joyce and Jesse Singal. People who are genuinely interesting and compelling, whom I may have some strong disagreements with, or not. But I live in a lot of fear of my fellow LGBT people, and that's pretty distressing." He added, "There are situations where I just lie because I don't want to be hurt. And I just hate that."

Hiding your true self, pretending to be someone you're not, living in fear of being shamed and ostracized, and disliking yourself for that: I think I understand how Stephen Long feels. I am a generation older, an American homosexual born in 1960. I lied, covered up, and evaded for my first 25 years. I policed myself more ruthlessly than any outside parent or policeman could have done. (If that sounds overly dramatic, have a look at my memoir of those years, *Denial: My 25 Years Without a Soul*.) I am not saying that Stephen is as tortured or repressed as I was. Just that, in his fear and self-reproach, I recognize the territory.

Stephen had been canceled, not online but in his own mind. For him and for us, there is a pathway to freedom, and it begins with understanding how canceling empowers a kind of Stasi in our skulls.

Yes, canceling is a thing. No, it's not criticism.

In 2020, I joined a group of writers and thinkers in signing a public letter that decried "intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty." In other words, *cancel culture*. The letter received fierce rebuttals, mostly focused on two substantive points. First, so-called canceling amounts to a handful of incidents and is being blown out of proportion. In fact—this is the second argument—if canceling is anything, it's a talking point being used by cultural elites and political right-wingers to stigmatize legitimate criticism of themselves.

Is cancel culture overhyped, a culture-war bugaboo? If only. Polling evidence finds that discourse in America is broadly chilled.

Polls on the subject are numerous, and their findings are consistent. In March 2022, the *New York Times* published a poll finding that a majority of Americans (55 percent) held their tongue over the past year for fear of retaliation or harsh criticism. A 2020 poll by the Cato Institute found that 62 percent say that the political climate prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive. Most other polls agree, including surveys of college students, 65 percent of whom told a Knight Foundation poll in 2021 that “the climate at their school or on their campus prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find it offensive”—an increase from 54 percent as recently as 2016. The chilling of expression has risen across the ideological spectrum. According to the Cato poll, the share of Americans who are afraid to share opinions grew by seven percentage points among liberals, moderates, and conservatives—to a majority of all three groups—in only three years (2017 to 2020).

If people were merely flinching from ordinary criticism, one might call on them to thicken their skin. But what many people fear is not being criticized but being canned. In the 2020 Cato survey, a third of Americans—again across the political spectrum—said they worry about missing out on career opportunities or losing their job if their political opinions become known. The fear is not unreasonable; almost a quarter of respondents supported firing an executive who donates to Joe Biden, and almost a third would fire an executive who donates to Donald Trump. Almost half (44 percent) of people under 30 would fire executives who donate to Trump! A particularly striking finding is that the percentage of people saying they don’t feel free to speak their mind is at least three times greater than in 1954, the height of the McCarthy era. No wonder that in 2022, 84 percent surveyed by the *New York Times* said it is a “very serious” (40 percent) or “somewhat serious” problem that Americans don’t speak freely.

To the objection that this chilling is an unwarranted reaction to an imaginary menace, the answer is again that the facts disagree.

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not as part of the critical public discourse.
Think of it, rather, as cognitive warfare.

Beginning with the firings of the public-relations executive Justine Sacco in 2013 and the Mozilla CEO Brandon Eich in 2014, after both were targeted by online mobs, cases have been legion. There are no comprehensive databases (nor would one be easy to create, given definitional difficulties), but examples of canceled speakers, shows, and jobs abound. One online compiler, Philip K. Fry, lists hundreds of examples ranging from the minor (a hearing-aid specialist who was fired after criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement) to the mighty (comedian Dave Chapelle’s canceled concerts). There are people you have probably heard of, like James Damore, famously fired by Google, but many more you probably haven’t, like Emmanuel Cafferty, a San Diego utility worker who was fired when a Twitter mob accused him (falsely) of flashing a white-supremacist hand gesture. There was the Portland, Oregon, coffee-roasting company that shut down after the owner’s wife objected to #MeToo excesses; the Denver chain of yoga studios that closed down after being accused of “tokenism” in its promotional materials; the Palestinian-American-owned restaurant and catering business in Minneapolis that came under attack for racist tweets the owner’s daughter had published eight years earlier as a troubled 14-year-old (to save the company, her father fired her). A San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curator lost his job after a petition campaign denounced his use of the term “reverse discrimination” (“violent language”); a choral composer was dropped by his publisher for condemning arson in the George Floyd protests; a political analyst was fired after accurately summarizing research

(by an African-American scholar) finding that violent protests can be politically counterproductive. Not imaginary stuff.

Is cancel culture, then, merely criticism that elites and right-wingers would prefer not to hear? Indeed, is the charge of canceling itself a form of canceling? Is it an effort to muzzle “marginalized people [who] have, for the first time, had unfettered access to talk back to institutions that for far too long were the gatekeepers defining acceptable discourse,” as Erin B. Logan wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*? Again, no. As I argue in my book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, canceling is the opposite of criticism. Criticism targets *ideas* for elimination, avoiding ad hominem attacks; canceling targets *individuals* for elimination, seeking to destroy the reputations and livelihoods of those it attacks. Criticism seeks to frame and contest ideas fairly and in context; cancel campaigns exaggerate, mischaracterize, decontextualize, and outright lie about their targets’ claims and character. (In fact, it’s common for cancelers to boast of not even reading whatever it is they want suppressed.) The goal of criticism is to enable learning by expanding the territory of contestable ideas; the goal of canceling is to impose conformity by shrinking the realm of contestability. Criticism seeks to identify and correct errors; canceling seeks to punish and destroy the errant.

Above all, criticism uses rational inquiry to free the mind from its cognitive limitations; canceling exploits cognitive vulnerabilities to enforce orthodoxy. The best way to think about canceling is not as part of the critical public discourse. Think of it, rather, as cognitive warfare.

You’re being manipulated

Since 2015, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) has documented 770 cases in which academics were targeted with demands for firing or other punishment as a result of engaging in constitutionally protected forms of speech. Almost 60 percent of the incidents resulted in sanctions including investigation,

suspension, or (in a fourth of cases) termination or resignation. Skeptics have objected that in a country with 1.5 million full- and part-time college faculty, 770 is a small number, proving, if anything, that the alleged problem is trivial. FIRE and its allies retort that colleges are supposed to be our most robust defenders of intellectual freedom and that the punishment of controversial speech has escalated rapidly (since 2015, according to FIRE, the number of annual sanction attempts has more than quintupled). Both are valid rejoinders. Even so, the more meaningful response is that 770 attacks, shrewdly deployed, are more than enough to produce the widespread chilling that we objectively see.

Cognitive warfare manipulates the information environment to play tricks with our minds. It seeks to deceive, disorient, divide, and ultimately demoralize a target population, thus paving the way for the manipulators to impose their will. Cognitive warfare has been part of the state propaganda arsenal since time immemorial, but it can be used by non-state actors, too. It is certainly nothing new: In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his masterwork *Democracy in America*, warned that the use of ostracism and ignominy to enforce viewpoint conformity was the greatest danger to American liberty.

Tocqueville, however, worried about the tyranny of majority opinion. A peculiarity of cognitive warfare is that it can be, and often is, exploited against majorities by numerical *minorities*. This is what modern cancelers do so well.

The progressive, college-educated Left that does the bulk of today’s cultural canceling is not a numerically large or ideologically representative group. According to opinion research by More in Common, “progressive activists” account for only 8 percent of the U.S. population. These ideologues are not only unrepresentative of the population: They are unrepresentative of the Left. “The strongest support for progressive illiberalism comes from the far-left fifth of America’s political spectrum, with moderate leftists much more opposed,” writes Eric Kaufmann, a University

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of London political scientist who studies Woke activism in the U.S. and the U.K.

How, one should wonder, has such a small and unrepresentative group managed to chill almost two-thirds of Americans and dominate so much of the discourse in universities, online, and in a growing number of newsrooms and corporate headquarters? The answer is: by hacking our hardwired consensus-seeking software.

We all like to think of our opinions and perceptions as our own, and of others' influence as being something we can reliably resist. On both counts, we are wrong. Going back many decades, research in social and cognitive psychology finds that we humans are tuned to harmonize our views and even our perceptions with those of our peers and tribes. In one classic experiment in the 1930s, people's perception of how far a dot moved on a screen was influenced by what others reported seeing. In a famous experiment in the 1950s, when experimental subjects were asked which of three lines was the same length as a fourth, the subjects of the experiment often denied the plain evidence of their own eyes when a group of actors chose the obviously wrong answer. Experiments confirm that fans of rival sports teams see the same plays in different ways, something we all know from everyday life.

The implication is that you can manipulate what people say, believe, and even see by manipulating the apparent consensus in their environment. One way to do this is by inhibiting dissent; another is for a small group to project its views loudly and aggressively. Cancelers do both. Activists form online mobs demanding that dissenters be fired; they launch burdensome investigations; they run online campaigns to besmirch reputations; they threaten that anyone who defends a targeted person will herself be targeted. "On campus, the angrier the voices, the more amplified they are," one undergraduate explained in a newsletter from the William F. Buckley, Jr., Program at Yale. "It might not be necessarily that the whole campus is pro-censorship or trying to create this self-destructive environment of an echo chamber, but the people who do speak are very publicized on campus; so there's a feeling that it's a completely hostile environment for anyone who doesn't conform to this one distinct set of values."

Once this dynamic sets in, it can become what social scientists call a *spiral of silence*, a self-reinforcing loop. I don't speak out because I feel outnumbered and isolated; because I don't speak out, others feel outnumbered and isolated. The spiral has two effects. The direct effect is simply to intimidate and chill the heterodox, even if they are in the majority. The subtler, more insidious indirect effect is to spoof our consensus-seeking antennae by making a fringe opinion seem prevalent and thus plausible or even true. In much the same way that manipulated consensus can lead us to insist that obviously unequal lines are the same length, it can lead us to insist that humans are not sexually dimorphic, or that vaccines are more dangerous than Covid, or that Donald Trump won the 2020 election in a landslide, or that the earth is flat, or an infinity of other manifest untruths. By spoofing consensus, small numbers of extremists hack our cognitive software to amplify their influence and credibility.

Cancelers have another cognitive weapon in their arsenal: unpredictability. It may seem odd that the level of chilling today

is higher than in the McCarthy era. But recall that, in those days, anti-Communists could be fairly certain of being safe from losing a job or being blacklisted. By contrast, cancelers deliberately keep the boundaries unclear. You never know what comment, jest, hypothesis, or even pronoun can trip you up—and you never will know. As a progressive graduate student told me: “The terms seem to change by the week and it’s completely exhausting. People don’t want to say anything because everyone’s so goddamn scared of offending someone.”

In this way, we become the police of our own minds, frightened, neurotic, demoralized. Ultimately, canceling allows minorities to dominate majorities by conscripting us to cancel ourselves.

Breaking the spiral

Canceling manipulates us by manipulating our social and cognitive environment. Disempowering it requires making ourselves and our environments less manipulable. Fortunately, there are many ways to do that.

One way is to take away or blunt cancelers’ weapons. Social-media platforms might reduce the use and abuse of anonymity, sock puppets, and bots that make it easy to launch viral smear campaigns. They could also make their algorithms more transparent and pro-social, tipping them away from eyeball-attracting outrage. Employers could be discouraged, legally or socially or both, from firing employees who exercise their First Amendment speech rights outside the workplace in ways that don’t directly affect their jobs. (This is not a big stretch; some states already bar employers from firing people because of their non-work-related political activities.) Universities could adopt the Chicago free-speech principles and, to give the principles teeth, create campus offices to assess and investigate free-speech violations. (The U.K. has done this, and Oklahoma’s legislature has established a free-speech committee for its public universities.) Orientation programs for matriculating

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students could include education on the First Amendment and academic freedom, as universities such as Purdue and the University of South Florida are doing, and for which FIRE has created useful materials. Universities and employers could encourage that disagreements be aired face-to-face instead of on social media or in anonymous bias reports. (Yale’s law school recently shut down an internal bulletin-board system that had become what one observer called a “cesspool.”)

I could give dozens more particular suggestions (and do in *The Constitution of Knowledge*), and you can think of some of your own, suited to whatever institution and culture you’re part of. What is most important is understanding that spirals of silence are not as strong as they seem. They can seem unbreakable, pervasive, inescapable; but just a handful of “reality anchors,” people who are unwilling to be silenced, can alter the dynamic when consensus has been spoofed. In the famous experiment I mentioned earlier, where actors give an obviously wrong answer and subjects conform, the introduction of a single actor—just one—who expresses the right answer gives the experimental subject confidence to voice her true belief. As the Princeton University professor Robert George has said, to change a campus culture requires a handful

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of brave, savvy, dedicated dissenters, not hundreds. Once people look around and see that they have been fooled, false consensus crumbles and manipulators lose their hold. Each of us can anchor reality by speaking out and by demanding that others be heard, too. Each of us, somewhere in our lives, can break a spiral of silence by defending dissent. That goes especially for minorities.

Canceling is not minorities' friend

In 1957, after being fired from his government job for being homosexual, a Harvard-trained astronomer named Frank Kameny organized a handful of homosexuals to form the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. They began speaking out against a mighty edifice of discrimination by the government (which criminalized homosexuals), by the psychiatric establishment (which pathologized them), and by civil society (which persecuted them). They had no money, no voters, no public support; courts, Congress, and the media dismissed them with laughter and disgust. But they did have their voices and their arguments. Kameny, who had the mind of a scientist and the voice of a foghorn, punctured every anti-gay argument in sight. Were homosexuals security risks? Only because criminalization made them blackmail targets. Were they mentally ill? Research going back to the early Fifties proved otherwise. Were they unfit for the rights of citizenship? The Declaration of Independence said otherwise.

Kameny and his ostensibly sad, sick, and radical gang of

perverts faced hopeless odds, or so it seemed. Yet in 1973, the psychiatric establishment removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. (Kameny called this the greatest mass cure ever.) Two years later, the federal government dropped its ban on employing homosexuals. Twenty years after that, the gay-marriage movement took its first steps.

That campaign, too, seemed hopeless. Yet only two decades later, under federal law, I became husband to a man. I am often asked why the gay-rights revolution happened so quickly. The answer is multifaceted, but the core of the story is as simple as this: A canceled minority refused to accept its cancellation and broke an ancient spiral of silence. People like Frank Kameny in his generation and Andrew Sullivan in mine were the reality anchors who made it possible.

I don't think it is coincidental that Frank Kameny was a Jew. Or that so many other civil rights advocates have been Jews. Victims for centuries of pogroms, propaganda, and every other form of physical and psychological warfare, Jews have learned that the most embattled minority is always the dissident and that our place is at her side. We have learned that spirals of silence are no friend of minority rights.

From my own intersectionalist perspective as a member of three of history's most canceled classes—atheist, homosexual, and Jew—I can say that nothing breaks my heart more than the rising consensus among social justice advocates that free speech is their enemy. “Free speech, a right many freedom movements have fought for, has recently become a tool appropriated by hegemonic institutions,” a group of Claremont University students said in a letter to the university president in 2017. At Williams College, a group called the Coalition against Racist Education Now declared in 2018, “We insist on recognizing the positioning of ‘free speech’ for what it has become: moral ammunition for a conservative backlash to increasing diversity.” In 2017, a group of Middlebury College students published a manifesto contending that “retreating to the moral

absolutes of free inquiry cannot and will not insulate our community from the perils of injustice....We mustn't be required to 'hear both sides' when one side seeks to undermine the core values of a free, democratic society."

Of course, the students were right; freedom allows bigots to speak. Hosea Williams, a lieutenant of Martin Luther King, was fully aware of that when, on national TV in the 1970s, he called for freedom of speech for the KKK. John Lewis, the civil rights legend, was aware of it when he said, "Without freedom of speech and the right to dissent, the civil rights movement would have been a bird without wings." Frederick Douglass, the former slave, was aware of it when he said, "To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker." But they were also aware that the problem with hateful and ignorant speech is not the speech but the hate and ignorance, and that robust freedom of expression, combined with the discipline of fact, is the *only* proven remedy. As Douglass said: "Slavery cannot tolerate free speech. Five years of its exercise would banish the auction block and break every chain in the South."

Will the tide turn against cancel culture? I suspect it has begun to turn already, but I'm not sure. I do know this, though: Cancellers have armored themselves by claiming to speak for the weak and marginalized. Members of historically oppressed minority groups — people such as Jews, homosexuals, atheists, and, come to think of it, Satanists — need to pierce that armor by reminding ourselves and everyone around us that socially coerced conformity is not our friend. We have a special obligation to speak out against canceling. Often, if we do, we'll find the consequences less scary than expected.

A few weeks after my appearance on his podcast, as I was working on this article, I received an email from Stephen Long. "I've been surprised by the positive response to the episode and the enthusiasm at the prospect of interviewing more controversial guests," said the Satanist. Emboldened, he was writing with a follow-up question: "Do

you have any suggestions for other potential guests? I'm currently scouting for more interview guests, and I'd like to invite thoughtful people from a broader swath of worldviews."

I sent him a list. *