



Cancel Culture

Does social justice have a place in academia?



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About this whitepaper

We often work with criteria that are an extension of what we call our identity, and this way create an ‘identity bubble’ which clashes with people that do not fit into this bubble. We have blind spots, things we cannot see or understand. However, we need this missing context to understand responses to situations such as cancelling. What do we do when cancelling happens based on emotions? And can we cancel people on moral grounds? Where is the line here, and who decides on that line?

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of our virtual round table meeting. Several articles were written as an inspiration for the round table discussion. We would like to acknowledge the authors of these articles, the round table report, and the introduction to this whitepaper: R. Anthony Buck, Muhammad Faisal Khalil, Nadine Kanbier, and Matthias Smalbrugge.

Introduction

Written by Matthias Smalbrugge





Canceling, the word once concerned appointments, lectures, meetings. You cancelled a thing, meaning you skipped an appointment or a meeting. Once it was skipped you had some time off and were free to do whatever you wanted with this newly acquired spare time. Those were the times cancelling still concerned matters. You cancelled 'it'. Now, however, we cancel persons, opinions, views and convictions. And as opinions are voiced by people, this all comes down to cancelling persons.

Why? Because they represent views others consider to be harmful, discriminating and offensive. People are cancelled because their ideas do not match the fundamentals of social justice, hence they cannot be allowed to participate in the public debate. Their views are at odds with the essential criteria we should apply when it comes to a public debate. They are held accountable for a lack of social justice, which, unfortunately, they refuse to acknowledge. Now, by cancelling these persons and their opinions, there is at least this moment of freedom. Those who defend a certain form of social justice, feel released from oppressing dynamics.

Freedom, social justice, accountability, these are the terms that come to mind when we speak about cancel culture. But also terms such as identity policy, intolerance, power struggle, undemocratic. People have been cancelled who in former times would have suffered a defeat in a debate. People have been cancelled because their view was less politically correct than was thought acceptable. Now, this is something that in

particular in academia is highly problematic. Academia sees itself as the place where different opinions must lead to an open debate, where diversity is the key concept of every social and intellectual exchange. But suddenly, it is confronted with the idea that all this is nothing more than ignoring the immense lack of social justice inside its own walls. Suddenly it is confronted with the thesis that all these academic debates are hiding places of a power struggle. Admittedly, people are silenced. But they are silenced by those who for long, long times have been silenced themselves. People, therefore, who demand to be heard. Now.

Though it may seem jumping to conclusions, one of the things we can already argue for is that this whole debate on cancelling makes it clear that academia has definitely become part of the societal frictions and fractures. The divisions our society is struggling with have entered academia and it is far from evident that we can bridge these fractures inside academia. Yet, this round table is meant to discuss openly the different aspects of the cancel culture. Indeed, it is not only about the right to speak out. It is also about the paradox that if you hold someone accountable for a lack of social justice, the element of accountability precisely demands you are willing to engage in a dialogue. Being held accountable is listening and answering. Holding someone accountable implies speaking and listening. To end with, all this for the sake of getting released from structures harming freedom and equality.

Cancel culture in academia

Report written by Nadine Kanbier



Canceling. We used to cancel things, but nowadays we cancel persons, opinions, views and convictions. We do this because they represent views we consider to be harmful, discriminating, or offensive. Examples can be found everywhere: J.K. Rowling was cancelled after several anti-trans comments and Ellen DeGeneres was cancelled after allegations that she fostered a toxic workplace culture. Examples in show business are in abundance, but what role does cancel culture play in academia? Up to what extent can academia participate in these societal debates?

A time of polarisation

The younger generation is growing up in a time of polarisation. They are called upon to have an opinion on all kinds of cultural topics, also in relation to their personal identity. This seeps through to the attitudes they have at university. The younger generation expects the university to participate in these discussions. In the current landscape of academia, attitudes have changed, the pressure to adapt has risen and questions are being raised about the background of the teacher. The question is: is knowledge neutral? Is it independent of the teacher? Or are one's background and position always of influence to an extent?

A quest for truthfulness

According to Max Weber, a scientist is someone who searches for the truth, in the hope that it will become obsolete. Instead of claiming to have found the truth, one can claim they are trying to get as close as possible to it. Scientifically speaking, one cannot expect to tell the truth and be completely independent or objective, but one can expect the argumentation to be truthful. Following this line of reasoning, one can say that truthfulness is dependent on the positionality of the teacher. Judging truthfulness based on positionality gives a sense of controllability.

Teacher's positionality

This controllability based on positionality might have reached the moment that it is overshoot. If a university solely consists of white men over the age of fifty, there is undeniably a blindness to certain questions. However, one can argue that a teacher is standing in front of the classroom because of the knowledge advantage they have, and not because of their positionality.

The role of social media

Young people in their identity formation phase are stimulated to look for things that make them unique. Instead of searching for what connects them with others,

they are concerned with creating their own unique identity, being proud of it, and spreading it. In this niche, people are looking for confirmations and opponents. This radical identity politics movement is caused by multiple factors, one of which is social media. Algorithms on social media can further stimulate the growing polarisation and can cause algorithmic confinement. We are in the digital revolution, which has positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, we have created a global community of learners. On the negative side, opinions and ideas intertwine because of the real-time availability of information. Social media undermines what the university is all about: generating knowledge. There is a difference between an idea, an opinion, and knowledge. It is important that we learn that there are different opinions. We should talk about it, rather than quickly judge, which often happens on social media.

Identity politics

One can argue that cancel culture is a form of identity politics that got out of hand. There is a distinction between inclusive identity politics and exclusive identity politics. Being focused on being equal from differences is an example of inclusive identity politics, while being focused on excluding the other is an example of exclusive identity politics.

To exclude exclusion movements, it is important that universities create protected and safe environments. The university must speak out that there is freedom of speech

as well as academic freedom. People can think what they want, people can research what they want.

No ivory tower

The university has become more allied with society, which can be seen as a good thing. The days of the ivory tower are left behind. However, this has resulted in the university being the boiling point of society. Is it still possible to do research? It is understandable that society wants to see what the university is doing, because they are financing these activities. At the same time, research takes time and results cannot be known a priori.

In saying what you think, thinking is central

Because of the new social position, academics run the risk of giving their opinion about a social phenomenon that will be listened to. It is the task of the academic and the university to make clear how to judge a situation. Gather knowledge, analyse, argue, and only then draw conclusions and judgements.

The university should be organised in such a way that it is a place where students and staff discover and learn that an academic insight is different from an opinion. Freedom of speech is different from saying what you think. *In saying what you think, thinking is central.* We must do this in an environment in which social relationships are safe, regardless of your positionality. At

the same time, there is no safe space when it comes to opinions and insights. You should feel as safe as possible in the social environment, as unsafe as possible in the intellectual environment. You can only learn if you are taken out of that comfort zone.

Moving along

What is the best strategy to handle the current environment? First of all: talk, talk, and talk. We have to start the conversation and listen as much as possible. Second, we need to (dare to) set a standard. Third, look around. What are the terms you can find in common? Find an ally in a certain group. Seek a strategy where you can sit next to the conflict. Fourth, admit, move along, and change your opinion. Moving along is part of culture.

Furthermore, a quest for truthfulness should adhere to the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. This code states when looking for the truth, five principles must be followed: honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility.

Audiatur et altera pars

One thing we can learn from cancel culture is that we need to listen to the stories of those who are not heard. If those who are not heard are not represented, there is little chance that they will ever be heard. History has been written by the victors, but now the time has come to listen to the other side as well. *Audiatur et altera pars.*



Appendix



Cancel culture: An introduction

Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil





Cancel culture is a specific way of behaving towards someone who may have said or done something that was considered offensive. In its most familiar form, it presents itself in the form of a group of people, often on social media, excluding someone from social or professional life.¹ At its core, cancel culture's act of exclusion is concerned with accountability²: to hold someone accountable for a wrongdoing.

The brief history of cancel culture

As a mainstream phenomenon, cancel culture is relatively new. The act and the term to 'cancel' has its roots in social justice movements in the United States, specifically the civil rights boycotts of the 1950s and '60s.³ Cancellation then was an attempt by minority civil rights activists to reject figures or works that spread harmful ideas.⁴ The key effort was to ignore the public status of a figure or work while drawing attention to its harm.

This form of accountability was immensely attractive, arguably prescient and popularly possible, when social justice movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo needed to overturn the dominant narrative about publicly accepted figures or extant social systems. These social systems or figures had failed marginalised people and communities, either on the basis of race or gender, but had evaded accountability. Cancel culture made this accountability possible, by delivering collective demands for consequences.

It can be argued that during this time, a key shift occurred in identity politics of minorities that were historically failed by society. The need to have their positive identity respected, on the basis of race or gender for example, led minority groups to form a new, negative, identity based specifically on the exclusion of the wrongdoers. This negative identity gave minority individuals as well as groups a perceived onus to deal with the wrongs of the majority by excluding them.

A second wave?

Mainstream cancel culture, as a collective tool of accountability, was initially used by social justice movements left-of-centre. As it spent more time in the mainstream, however, cancel culture diversified across other ideological positions or identities as well. Now, it has become a popular ideological tactic of both the far-left and the far-right. Some believe this is in fact the 'second wave' of the cancel culture, in which cancel culture has shifted from precepts of accountability to entrenchments of culture and politics.⁵ A key arena where this second wave has played itself out is on the question of free speech.

LSE Professor Shakuntala Banaji, co-author of the forthcoming book 'Social Media and Hate', argues that far-right individuals and organisations have punished forms of identity and self-expression through a range of hateful and dehumanising practices on and offline.⁶

Notably, she explains, the right have politicised and weaponised 'free speech'. By using "the idea that a self-indulgent, censorious band of woke liberals and left-wingers ... were interfering with the rights of true patriots,"⁷ the right is barring scholars and students of colour or other minorities from expressing their academic work freely, or by shaming activists, journalists, and scholars for their calls for justice on issues such as Palestinians or Muslims.

Culture writer and novelist Kat Rosenfield on the other speaks of "a militant faction on the Left,"⁸ which has imposed a radical set of sensibilities on influential public institutions, including the academy. Rosenfield effectively makes an inverted case to Banaji's. Similar to Heather Mac Donald's case 'The Diversity Delusion',⁹ she speaks of how identity politics led by "Left-wing authoritarianism"¹⁰ has overrun open-minded inquiry and expression in the academy. There is a "sudden appearance of preferred pronouns in bios and email signatures; the obsession with diversity, representation, and racial or sexual identity in popular culture."¹¹ She claims that the academy is hit hard by cancel culture because most academics are overwhelmingly Left leaning.

A key way cancel culture has become increasingly prevalent across all kinds of ideological positions is its increasing ability to perform within the binary rubric of right-versus-wrong. The concern is not whether we can hold one another accountable, but to assess and act – judge – towards someone from a position of disagreement. Cancel culture has, therefore, become a

double-edged sword. Cambridge University cognitive neuroscientist Rocco Chiou explains that while cancel culture can positively hold someone accountable for their misbehaviour and raises awareness about injustice, it can also become ‘vigilantism’¹² in the digital space as well as the physical world: “a way of judging and rejecting anyone who holds a different socio-political viewpoint.”¹³ Cancel culture, therefore, is now creating the very problem it once fought and still does fight: bigotry. By creating new forms of ‘moral righteousness’, it is increasingly allowing people to believe it is morally justifiable to denounce someone who they believe to be “morally inferior and deserves the criticism.”¹⁴

Cancel culture in Europe

As alluded to by Banaji, Rosenfield, and Mac Donald, the forms and consequences of ‘moral righteousness’ created by cancel culture are harmful to academic practice. It can, as many academics have publicly warned, lead to intellectual prohibitions that harm the academic freedom deemed necessary to the creation of knowledge.

European universities in many ways have borne the brunt of this harmful variant of cancel culture. In France, for example, ‘de-platforming’ of speakers and speech has become increasingly prevalent. Public intellectuals and political leaders such as Alain Finkielkraut and former French President François Hollande respectively were recently prevented from speaking at French universities, in Finkielkraut’s case at the Sciences Po¹⁵ and in Hollande’s case at the University of Lille.¹⁶ These,

and other de-platforming events, stand at odds with the French rally cry of “it’s forbidden to forbid,”¹⁷ and have raised alarms about the national spirit of academic debate in France, once described by philosopher Michel Onfray as “Rabelaisian freedom, Voltairean critical sense and Cartesian reasoning.”¹⁸

The French critic Pascal Bruckner is not surprised at what is happening in France. He argues that cancel culture is part of the transactional relationship between the United States and France. Much of what emerged as cancel culture in Europe is the result of influential works of French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. “We’ve invented this, and now it’s coming back,” he says.¹⁹

The ease with which cancel culture has entered the European academy may also be because of Europe’s “traditional Christian repertoire and heritage.”²⁰ French political scientist Olivier Roy indeed argues this. Cancel culture, Roy explains, “insists on repentance to allow forgiveness, but not forgetfulness.”²¹ It invokes Christian ideas of “repentance and atonement, confession of sins and the fact that the original sin is transmitted from generation to generation, and can be washed out only if individuals take the responsibility of the guilt on their own shoulders.”²² This is arguably analogous to the typical process of cancellation, which unfolds from the public identification of a wrongdoing by a person to the admission by and punishment of the person believed to be responsible for the wrongdoing.

It can be argued, then, that cancel culture is part of a larger - or underlying - process where religion is

increasingly becoming a secular tool or reappearing in secular forms. To be sure, while European society may not use categorical makers of traditional religiosity in many settings any longer, the influence of Christianity on their identity reveals a “liminal religiosity” where religion has a “fuzzy” existence in everyday life.²³ The influence of this liminal religiosity, for example, helps explain not only cancel culture then, but more systemic processes of exclusion such as the bans on Muslim clothing, practice, and symbols in countries like France and Switzerland.

Is defining cancel culture enough?

The unfolding of cancel culture in Europe, and its history and development in the United States, raise the question of whether cancel culture’s concern with accountability is upheld by how it is essentially performed. Who defines what is offensive or wrong? What is the difference between something offensive and something that other people do not agree with? What kind of exclusion is justified for a specific offence? Does any group of people have the right to exclude someone? Are forums of exclusion, such as social media or universities, the right places to assess and exclude someone? Should persons who have offended not have the opportunity to privately learn from their mistakes? Despite its commitment to accountability, its collective act to exclude an individual leaves many other concerns unanswered.



Cancel culture at the academy

Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil



Cancel culture is conventionally traced as far back as the civil rights boycotts of the 1950s and '60s, when activists used it to reject figures or works that spread harmful ideas.¹ The basic act of rejection itself can be traced even further back into what research in the academy essentially is: academics use reject ideas in order to increase knowledge. But it can be argued that the existing cancel culture at the academy has little to do with advancing either social justice or knowledge. The fate of many 'cancelled' academic figures or their works across Europe and North America reveals that the academy has been a stage for censoring or suppressing certain ideas to protect certain established interests.

Not allowed to teach

In 2007, author and political scientist Norman Finkelstein was denied tenure at DePaul University. Finkelstein was not denied tenure because of any shortcomings in scholarship or teaching. DePaul University described him as a "prolific scholar and outstanding teacher."² Finkelstein was arguably removed for calling out Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz's 'The Case for Israel' as a fraudulent work. Finkelstein convincingly showed³ the book plagiarised Joan Peters' discredited 1984 'From Time Immemorial' claim that "Palestine was virtually empty on the eve of Zionist colonization, and that Palestinians are in fact foreigners who surreptitiously entered Palestine after

the Zionists."⁴ Despite being voted overwhelmingly by his peers for tenure, Finkelstein was denied it at the last minute by the DePaul administration out of pressure from a campaign led by Dershowitz against Finkelstein's tenure.

Many were shocked by this late reversal. Raul Hilberg, widely recognised as the founder of Holocaust studies, himself exclaimed at the time: "I have a sinking feeling about the damage this will do to academic freedom."⁵ Finkelstein's widely cancelled career has led him to finally confront cancel culture directly in a forthcoming book, 'Cancel Culture, Academic Freedom, and Me'. Ironically, when he recently tried to publish an excerpt from his manuscript, multiple 'progressive'⁶ publications rejected it. Finkelstein called these publishers out for their "suppression of rational discussion."⁷ His lament uncannily recalls Conrad Russell's Millian statement on academic freedom: "The silencing of an opponent sounds alarmingly like an admission that we cannot answer him."⁸

Stop ideas from reaching us

Finkelstein's 2007 'cancellation' dates well before the mainstream appearance of cancel culture in 2015 as a tool of social justice movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.⁹ In other words, cancel culture at the academy – taken here to be the rejection of academic figures or works to protect established interests – existed long before 'cancel culture' became a notable

tactic of contemporary discourse. Academics of the left, such as Ilan Pappé at the University of Haifa for his pro-Palestine stance,¹⁰ and Germaine Greer at Cardiff University for her feminist critique of gender identity, faced cancellation.¹¹ So did academics of the right, such as Nigel Biggar at the University of Oxford for his support of colonialism and imperialism,¹² and Alan Sked at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) for his Brexit politics.¹³

Across these examples, the issue of silencing academics and their ideas emerges as a key problem for the academy. While cancel culture is not an essential characteristic of the academy, these examples indicate that academics are very likely to get cancelled. It is perhaps because they, and the principle of academic freedom, are most vulnerable to acts of censorship or exclusion, or what John Stuart Mill called the "despotism of custom." Birkbeck professor Eric Kaufman, and author of 'Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities Problems' explains that the "combination of political discrimination and intimidation restricts academic freedom and contributes to a steady narrowing of academic horizons."¹⁴ The challenge, then, is how academics and academic freedom can both be safeguarded.

Another challenge is that if cancel culture in the academy persists, it will harm the ability of academics to reject or accept ideas on the basis of knowledge itself. Cancel culture, it can be argued, represents an



attack on the academic's freedom to create or teach knowledge itself. This has led Canadian author, former politician, and current rector and president of Central European University Michael Ignatieff to emphasise free-speech liberalism against cancel culture. In a recent talk at the University of Oxford,¹⁵ he argued that the moral value of freedom of speech should be protected from the competing moral concerns (or criteria) of cancel culture, whatever these may be. Only then, he claimed, will we be able to have the basic academic freedom to create knowledge. In other words, how can we freely assess ideas to increase our knowledge if ideas are stopped from even reaching us in the first place?

Beating cancel culture in the academy

So how can we continue to freely assess ideas? Dr. Michael Spence, the president and provost of University College London (UCL), recently announced that we must learn how to disagree in order to 'beat' cancel culture. He warned that society has forgotten how to debate. If universities, he argued much like Ignatieff, want to promote free speech on campus, they need to discuss controversial topics. "Part of what we have a responsibility at universities to do is to model and to teach students how to disagree well across really

sometimes quite profound barriers of disagreement,"¹⁶ he said. In other words, the solution would be for society to relearn how to debate. Earlier in 2021, the UK government announced a raft of new laws, including the introduction of fines and 'Free Speech Champions', to defend free speech at universities and stop the rise of silencing and censoring of both academics and students on campus.¹⁷

But the question is: how far can freedom of speech go? Should we introduce moral criteria at some point, as was attempted in the 1950s and '60s, to stop the spread of harmful ideas? Finkelstein's controversial case that Holocaust denial should be taught in university, and preferably by a Holocaust denier, puts free-speech principles to test. When teaching John Stuart Mill's 'On Liberty', Finkelstein used to test Mill's strictures against three hypothetical scenarios, one of which was:

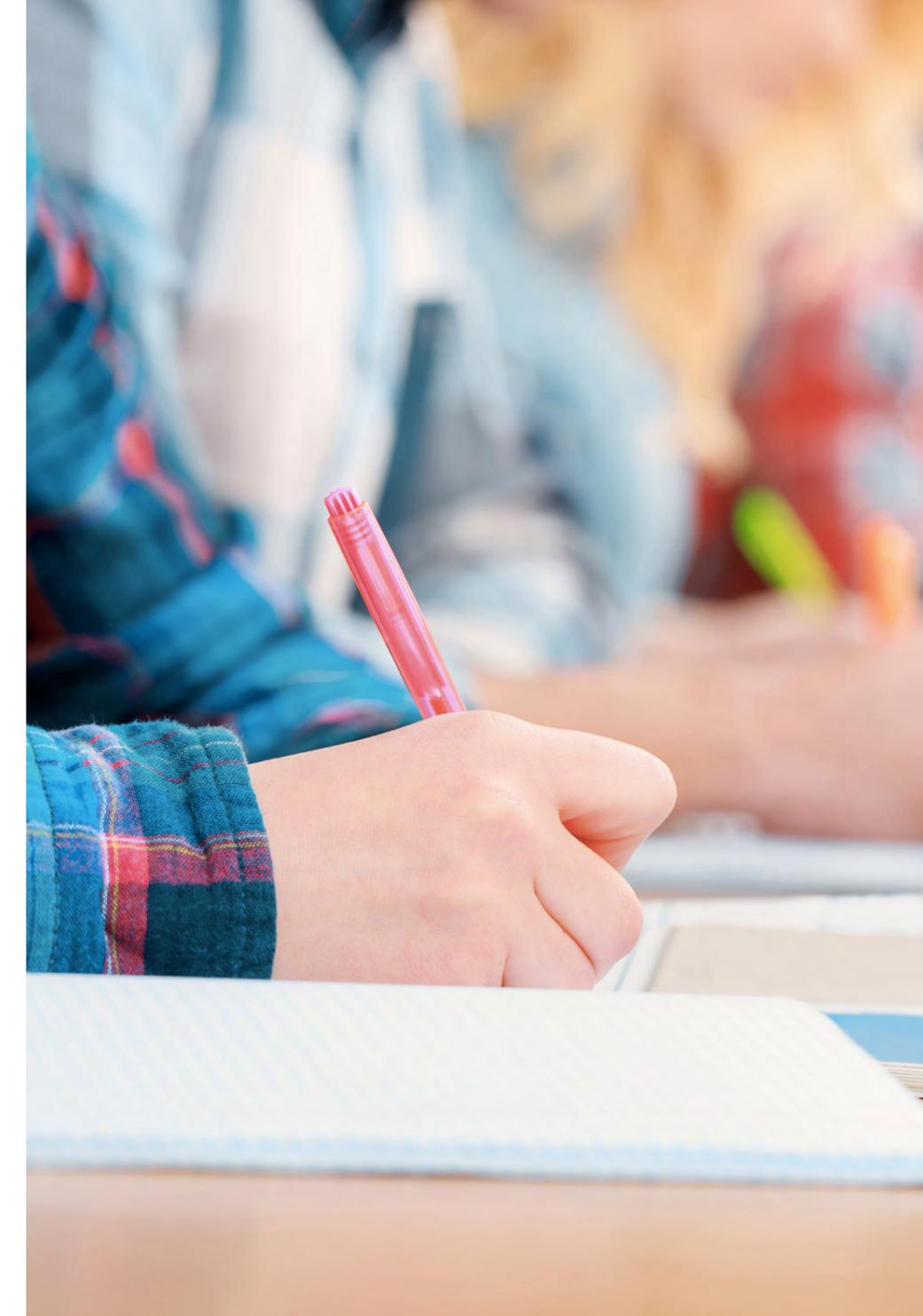
"A professor in our history department wants to devote one class of his introductory course on Modern Europe to the proposition that the Nazi holocaust never happened. It is a required lecture course, in which the professor doesn't field student questions. Should he be permitted to teach this class?"¹⁸

In his forthcoming book, 'Cancel Culture, Academic Freedom, and Me', Finkelstein is set to revive this case. Finkelstein defends the scenario as follows:

"It can hardly be deemed a breach of balance if a single professor devotes a single class of a single course to disputing the incessantly articulated consensus wisdom. Once having squared away these predictable objections, the real work began. What's the point of such a class if I know for certain that the Nazi holocaust happened? But you can't be certain of your conviction until and unless you've heard out and answered any and all objections to it."¹⁹

Speech, boundaries, and the academy

Finkelstein's Millian appeal for freedom of speech in the academy arguably obscures the fact that what's being debated is not anyone's *general* right to speech, but rather their right to air that speech in *specific* platforms like the academy in order to avoid harm. In other words, the debate about the place of cancel culture in the academy is not about the principle of free speech, but, as journalist Zack Beauchamp argues, about "the much grayer question of how we draw its boundaries."²⁰ What kinds of speech or speakers should be morally out of bounds at the academy? And are sanctions,



like public shaming or collective sanctioning (e.g. firing), morally justified responses to violations of these boundaries? The answers to these questions perhaps lie as much outside the academy, within the larger public, as much as inside the academy. If there is a cancel culture in the academy, it has been, as was speculated earlier, based on established interests that set the boundaries that can or cannot be violated.

While Mill may well agree with Finkelstein, virtually everyone else will disagree with him. No Holocaust denier would be given a class in a single course to help us better arrive at the truth. Finkelstein, however, believes this is a misleading interpretation of what is at stake: "It would make a mockery of truth and academic freedom (it is said) if a university granted Holocaust deniers a platform. But, to begin with, it's not obvious what exactly is being denied."²¹ The main problem, it can therefore be argued, is not simply determining what is right or wrong, but creating a common ground that would allow society to accept what is right and wrong. For that to happen, we would need to recognise and navigate our fragmented moral universe as a start.



Crying wolf: A parable for cancel cultures

Written by R. Anthony Buck



Not so long ago, a cute shepherd boy was on guard against wolves. Left alone in the fields and bored, he had an idea.

“What if I shouted that there was a wolf? They would come running. That would be so funny and I wouldn’t be so bored, or alone.”

So he shouted,

“Wolf! There’s a wolf! Help!”

Immediately, the alarm trumpets rang in the town. People armed with spears and bows sprinted to reach the boy in time. When they arrived, the people were relieved that the boy and sheep were safe. Then, the boy suddenly burst out laughing mischievously. The townspeople were angry and told the boy not to joke about wolves or scream for help without any danger. As they left, the boy was already addicted to feeling the power to make everyone come running.

The boy found their warnings made him want to try again. So he did, almost daily. Each time the village ran to save him and sheep only to find no wolves. Soon, the numbers who ran from the village diminished. Eventually, not even the boy’s family came running. Everyone had learned the boy’s cry of “Wolf!” meant nothing and was only a ploy for his amusement.

One day wolves appeared, for they were a real danger that had long troubled the village. The shepherd boy cried desperately,

“Wolf! There’s a wolf! Help!”

No one came. The wolves killed and ate him and several sheep. It was not until people saw the sheep scattered that anyone even went out to check on the boy and the sheep. They found what was left of him and some of their sheep. And there was great grief in the whole village.¹

It may not be obvious yet, but the actions of the boy and the townspeople in this parable uncover how moral and intellectual criteria for knowledge are intertwined and expressed in cancel cultures.

At the intersection of moral and intellectual criteria for knowledge

Can you separate the knowledge from the conveyor of the knowledge? That is, can you separate the tweet from the tweeter? On the one hand, yes, the tweet has an internal set of conceptual relations if read on its own, plucked at random from the Twitterverse. On the other hand, no, the tweet only means what it means when those conceptual relations are set in the wider set of relations of the discourse and of the wider world.

The story of the boy who cried wolf is a very common parable told to children, the moral of which is that you should not lie because while it has some short-term benefits, it often has long-term costs. You can have a bit of fun by getting all the townspeople to run out to save you and the sheep from the wolf even when there is no wolf. However, if you do that too much, what your cry

of “Wolf!” means to the townspeople will no longer be “Wolf!” but “(There’s no) Wolf!” Thus, the story is not just teaching about lying, but about how morality and criteria for knowledge are inseparable.

The townspeople have two ‘intellectual’ criteria for knowledge of the wolf: the cry of “Wolf!” and there being a wolf. But they also have a moral criterion for knowledge: whether the cry of wolf comes from someone deemed worth listening to. If not, then it goes unheeded regardless of whether or not there is a wolf, because the intellectual criteria are entangled with the moral criteria. The boy, therefore, also makes moral and intellectual determinations. He values the amusement of activity and power over the value of truth. But he also does not take seriously that moral and intellectual criteria are intertwined. He does not see the moral or intellectual value of his own actions. The boy was cancelled, but he also cancelled himself.

The townspeople cancelled him on the basis of moral and intellectual criteria: moral, because he was untrustworthy and selfish, and intellectual, because while wolves were a known possibility, the probability of “wolf” meaning “wolf” was dramatically reduced. But here we see how inseparable the set of criteria are for knowledge. This is partially because knowledge is always the product of persons, and partially because all knowledge is put to use by persons. Therefore, moral and intellectual criteria are forced to overlap.

In the university, there is a desire to find ‘intellectual’ criteria for knowledge but ‘moral’ criteria for people. Presumably, the hope is that there can be a ‘rational’ or





‘technical’ set of evaluative judgements that will enable any group of people to rule whether the content of knowledge offered by a person - even an evil person - is worth hearing. Meanwhile, there is also the desire that there can be a set of ethical evaluative judgements directed at the people offering knowledge to determine whether they are worth listening to. In this way, the university has two sets of competing cancel cultures: one cancelling on the basis of ‘intellectual’ criteria and another cancelling on ‘moral’ criteria. But these cancel cultures pose two potentially insurmountable problems.

Problem #1: Can you have truth or morality if all you care about is power?

First, Pierre Bourdieu, a 20th-century French sociologist who specialised in the legitimation of knowledge in the academy, long noted that usually what gets labelled as ‘intellectual’ criteria for knowledge are not actually epistemic in nature,² rather they are political in nature. The same is true, he would argue, for much of what gets labelled as ‘moral’. Bourdieu writes, “But, under the cover of saying what something truly is - what it is in truth - one always risks saying what it must be in order to be truly what it is, and by the same blow, sliding from the positive to the normative, from ‘what is’ to ‘what ought-to-be’.”³

Thus, the legitimation of knowledge or a person in a society, even when constraining our focus to the academic field in society, is always the site of what he calls ‘doxic contest’, or ‘symbolic violence’.^{4,5} That is, stronger agents

in a field want to impose a set of legitimations on the field as a whole, while weaker agents seek to resist this by expanding the set of legitimations or seeking to impose their own set over against those who are currently dominant in that field, so that the dominated agents reverse places with the dominant.

Consequently, there is a reflexivity necessary to interfacing with criteria for knowledge, whether intellectual or moral. We must ask ourselves: Do I/we want to impose A or B set of legitimations to maintain or gain power? And will these legitimations come at the cost of others? Will these legitimations come at the cost of knowledge itself?

It is not that questions of true/false or moral/immoral are irrelevant, but Bourdieu is cautioning that often criteria not relevant to either intellectual or moral quality are projected and imposed as intellectual and moral criteria, when in fact these legitimations and delegitimizations function merely to reinforce or introduce political, ideological, or social stratifications. That is, obsessing about power and seeking to gain power often distort ‘intellectual’ and ‘moral’ criteria.

Moreover, all ‘intellectual’ criteria ultimately are underpinned by moral evaluations as much as the ‘moral’ criteria are. Ultimately, even the assumption that true knowledge over false knowledge is better is a moral evaluation. Likewise, the assumption that moral or immoral persons can be known as such is an ‘intellectual’ evaluation. Thus, these intellectual/moral categories are themselves pliable and overlapping, making the possibility of viable criteria for knowledge more difficult.

But their pliability also means that they are not just

interrelated but that they are easily converted from intellectual or moral criteria - whatever those might mean - into criteria for power. So that what makes something ‘intellectual’ is that it supports the intellectual viewpoint(s) of the group in question, and what makes something ‘moral’ is that it supports the moral expectations of the group in question.

This is the inbuilt danger of any cancel culture: whether someone is being cancelled because of a perceived lack of ‘intellectual’ value or of ‘moral’ value. In the university, some academics worry about ‘moral’ values cancelling ‘intellectual’ producers or products, while others worry about ‘intellectual’ values cancelling ‘moral’ producers or products. Yet, this conflict in part exists because there is an awareness on both sides that neither category necessarily equates to what its label claims for itself. Ethnicities can remember and see afresh that their ethnic background can be used as an ‘intellectual’ basis to cancel them, while some virologists can remember and see afresh that ‘moral’ concerns can be used as a basis to cancel them.

In sum, all this forces us to consider: are ‘moral’ and ‘intellectual’ criteria even possible? Are all criteria a kind of cancel culture, a culture that cancels some values in favour of others? This only leaves an irony: cancelling cancel culture is a cancel culture while cancel culture wants to cancel those who would cancel cancel culture.

Problem #2: Intellectual and moral criteria at odds

Second, even if we set aside the sociological quandaries and complications seeking to impose a set of 'intellectual' or 'moral' criteria to academic production and the academic producers, the goals of the criteria are averse to - if not incompatible with - each other, despite the fact that they cannot be fully separated from one another. 'Intellectual' criteria seek to legitimise and delegitimise the value of academic production regardless of the 'moral' quality of whoever produced it, while 'moral' criteria seek to legitimise and delegitimise academic producers based on their actions regardless of the 'intellectual' value of what they produce.

The cancel culture of the moral criteria ultimately applies the 'moral' evaluation of producers even to their act of production by virtue of the 'moral' value of their production. That is, the 'intellectual' value of a production is the 'moral' value of its producer. Meanwhile, the cancel culture of the 'intellectual' criteria ultimately applies an intellectual value to producers through their productions as well. Both ultimately want to talk not only of the products but their producers, though from different ends. The intellectual want to talk about the producer in terms of their production, but the moral want to talk about the production in light of its producer.

This opposition forces uncomfortable questions: How immoral do you have to be before the intellectual value of your production is irrelevant? (Obviously, this has extensions to other fields or criteria sets

within the domain of cultural production, e.g. artistic value, technological value, etc.) Alternatively, how unintellectual do you have to be before the moral value of the producer is irrelevant? If Hilter had also been a physics genius surpassing the insights of Einstein and all today's physicists by leaps and bounds, would we feel comfortable using the physics notes he left behind after committing suicide? Alternatively, if Mother Teresa liked to muse about physics in her journal, would we feel comfortable using the error-filled physics notes left behind to develop a new type of nuclear fission reactor?

Does it change based on the perceived value of what is produced as well as the producer? If Hilter instead developed only moderately insightful theories on physics, would we feel more or less comfortable using or dismissing them? The same goes for Mother Teresa. If her physics ideas happen to be groundbreaking, would we feel more or less comfortable imitating her moral character?

Does the process of production change the calculus? If Hilter developed his own ideas about physics by ruthlessly experimenting on people, would the value of the intellectual product change? Likewise, if Mother Teresa developed her ideas about physics from caring for the poor? Conversely, does the moral value of a person's life change if it develops without an intellectual basis? Does the immoral value of a person's life change if it develops on an intellectual basis?

These questions get messy. In practice, you can only know the intellectual value of something if you consider it, like the townspeople in the parable, but the moral value often determines whose ideas are worth considering, as the boy who cried wolf discovered.

Likewise, examining the moral value of someone requires some intellectual criteria for the examination. This says nothing about the multitude of social and political reasons one might be motivated to find in favour of one set of values or another that have nothing to do with either form of cultural values. For this reason, trying to assess and potentially cancel anything on the basis of either only moral or only intellectual criteria is impossible, because somewhere in both processes the other version of the cancel culture involves itself.

But at the same time, both are seeking completely different goals. Both in their own way can be viewed as utilitarian: intellectual value = what is useful for intellectual production, moral value = what is useful for moral production (if a human life could be said to be a production). The problem is that both are easily converted to political goals with personal or group-specific benefits, though theoretically both categories should be of value to everyone. Both sets of criteria are seeking better worlds, though different parts of a better world: more truth, more morality. So, paradoxically intellectual and moral criteria are compatible with each other because of their incompatibility, but only when they are placed in a relation of complementarity rather than isolation.



Can we cancel cancel cultures?

Embracing the paradoxical complementarity of ‘intellectual’ and ‘moral’ criteria rejects any ‘intellectual’ or ‘moral’ criteria that are disguised grabs at power for a select few. If you make any set of criteria about power, you are more likely to lose even what you are looking to find, whether it be ‘intellectual’ or ‘moral’ values. Jesus said, “Whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword”⁶ and little is different with symbolic forms of violence: whoever lives by and for cancelling others will find themselves cancelled. As in the parable above, the end of the boy who cried wolf is not simply a dead boy and devoured sheep, or even a city who prioritised truth or morality, but a village filled with grief.

You may still be wondering: Who are we talking about? Who in society are those trying to impose intellectual criteria? Who are those trying to impose moral criteria? Or artistic criteria, etc.? You may be hoping that one group will be identified as one side or another, depending on which criteria you prefer for whatever reason. However, it is left ambiguous for three reasons.

- 1) They are not separable criteria, every group uses both intellectual and moral criteria, to say nothing of others that could be named. That is, reducing the conversation to this opposition is fundamentally problematic. We are all both groups.
- 2) Identification is difficult and temporary. Cancel cultures will appear everywhere with all kinds of permutations, changing dramatically in even brief

spans of time. Labelling any group the boy, village, or wolf could end up looking like crying wolf two years hence.

- 3) Asking ‘who is who’ often subtly imposes the power dynamics problematised above. The present author is not interested in having this discussion itself weaponised or falling prey to the critique made here.

Rather, we should be asking what *am I* or *is my group* valuing and why? Focusing on identifying any group sneaks in the us-them framework that makes truth and justice even less likely as outcomes. We have to start with a *we* that *includes* the *them*. What can we-them learn together? What can *we-them* contribute together? How can *we-them* be empowered together? How can *we-them* pursue truth and justice together? We can assume a stance of teachability and participation, rather than dismissiveness and us-them isolation.

If the university and society can become a place that seeks to listen and learn, if it seeks truth and justice, if it seeks to empower rather than depower, then perhaps it will not have to live by the swords of symbolic violence. Perhaps cancel cultures can be cancelled altogether, not by imposing criteria labelled ‘intellectual’ or ‘moral’, not by ‘power’ or ‘politics’, but by becoming a place where truth and justice do not compete, but complement each other.

Only two questions remain: 1) how might the university or society need to change to bring moral and intellectual values together without transforming them into grabs for power? And 2) will we choose to keep crying wolf?



Mechanics and logics of cancel culture

Written by R. Anthony Buck



How do cancel cultures work? What is the logic behind them? Why is it that sometimes any one person, individual, or institution can wield what some believe - rightly or wrongly - is outsized power? There will not be space here to look at every kind of cancel culture, nor at every possible interpretation of cancel cultures. But there is space to look at the underlying mechanics and logics of cancel cultures involved in two major forms of them: *institutional* and *technological* cancel cultures.

Mechanics of cancel cultures

What we have to understand about cancel cultures is that not only are their esteemed values not identical, but that their mechanics of operation are not identical. Moreover, their mechanics are not identical because the kinds of power that they have access to are not identical.

Pierre Bourdieu, eminent sociologist of the academy, exposes this insight through *Homo Academicus*.¹ This work analysed the student riots of May 1968 in France, which soon spread beyond the university to French society, culminating in widespread labour strikes and riots, complete with violent police crackdowns.^{2 3 4 5} Bourdieu explores this event and the way the universities and academics navigated it, and the types of power and influence present in the university system that in part contributed to it.

He notes that there are basically two types of power directly relevant to academics - institutional and intellectual - which depending on the academic was more or less concentrated. Institutionally, some

academics had access to power in the university by virtue of their position in the university's administration and their ability to institute obligations on students and other academics.⁶ For example, the chair of the department who controls the curriculum and funding, the committee who determines tenure, etc.

Other academics had access to power not because of their position within the university's hierarchy, but by virtue of their reputation within the wider cultural landscape. Often, this reputation was on the basis of the supposed intellectual value of their academic productions, but this sometimes also shaded into their popularity or dispopularity in the wider cultural environment.⁷ For example, the professor who gets interviewed by the *Economist* or who publishes editorials or popular level works.

It is important to remember that it is rare for any one person or group to have access to only institutional or intellectual power. But it is also important to see that what Bourdieu here calls 'intellectual' power operates on the basis of reputation, which is another reason why any 'intellectual' criteria will be unstable, just as 'moral' criteria, since they both can be co-opted by the cultural milieu both inside and outside of the university.

Moreover, the categories Bourdieu provides can serve as templates to understand 'intellectual' and 'moral' cancel cultures. In the present world, what Bourdieu labelled 'institutional' or 'academic' power, often today would be the group seeking to institute 'intellectual' criteria. However, many seeking 'intellectual' criteria would also come from within the academic world, but with a different centring of their reputational value.

Similarly, the categories Bourdieu names 'intellectual' easily overlap with groups today who are seeking 'moral' criteria. Both groups operate on the basis of public reputations and the agreement with the 'intellectual' and 'moral' dogmas of the day. This is not to say that these dogmas may or may not be intrinsically true or just, only that the mechanics of enforcement require allegiance to a particularised point of view. Of course, many seeking 'moral' criteria are themselves entrenched within institutional structures and seek to shape the institution towards that moral vision. Yet, the power that gives the greatest weight comes from beyond the localised context of a given university, concerns over reputational alignment with 'moral' and 'intellectual' values.

How do institutional cancel cultures actually cancel? Often through institutional power granting them control over and influence on the happenings, procedures, and decisions of the university, as well as institutional innovation: e.g. restructuring, curriculum change, admissions policies, examination standards, etc. You might say they operate on a hierarchically legitimated cancellation. Best-case scenario, institutional cancelling can protect truth and justice from those attempting to institutionalise lies and injustice.

However, those with less institutional power must rely on outside reputational power, which can be multiplied by media technologies. Reputational power operates on the shame-honour dynamics of 'moral' values in the wider public sphere. Deploying and recruiting reputational power has become easier with technological innovations, such as mass and social media. Since the power comes from outside in the public, social media technologies





make it easier and faster to publicly shame or honour institutions and individuals that cohere with a set of moral values. Different societies and moral cancel cultures within a society will obviously employ these same technologies to effect a shame-honour dynamic in their favour. Therefore, this can be termed reputationally legitimated cancellation. Best-case scenario, reputational cancelling can hold people, groups, and institutions publicly accountable for institutionalising lies and injustice. This is sometimes especially necessary because the institutionalised structure of power cannot be held accountable from within.

Logics of cancel cultures

Cancel cultures depend on slightly different logics and ethics to undergird and direct their activities.^{8 9} These logics are embedded within the different forms of access to the types of power available, but they must also have some kind of conceptual justification. Thus, these logics also have a sort of base paradigm for inclusion or exclusion. For this reason, each may have different protected and non-protected classes. Moreover, these logics must display some level of internal cohesion, which makes it possible for someone inside or outside the group to appeal to the base paradigm as worthy of being extended or retreated.

In May 1968's student riots, that coherence meant the labour unions joined the students by striking and participating in the demonstrations. The students could not exclude the workers and maintain their ideological

coherence, but also they had no interest in excluding them, since the workers greatly outnumbered the students and provided greater public legitimacy and public fallout against the universities in their favour.^{10 11 12 13} Meanwhile, Bourdieu points out that within the institution of the university, those with the most to gain from keeping the status quo were the most likely to side against the students and the workers and provide justification within their ideological confines.¹⁴

Today, as then, while different cancel cultures assume diverging conceptual logics to base and determine their cancellations upon, both employ the same mechanics of cancelling, and in so doing, assume the same core logic of cancelling. But often, 'intellectual' and 'moral' cancel cultures do see the conceptual coherence of the other, and, more importantly, see the true value of truth and justice that one or the other is emphasising.

How can we seek truth and justice without turning them into labels for different kinds of grapes for power? There are no easy answers. But now that we have understood how cancel cultures work - at least provisionally - and can see more clearly the dangers of an eternal struggle for power disguised as 'intellectual' or 'moral' value, we can begin remaking the university into the centre of truth and justice we all want it to be. We do not have the power to cancel any one cancel culture. Yet, by rejecting disguised fights over power - whether using the institutional structures or in Twitter's hashtag - and embracing humility, reflexivity, and an equal commitment to truth and justice we might have the power to cancel cancel cultures altogether.

Developing dynamic intersectionality

There are no easy answers. Nevertheless, we might be able to construct a way forward by working the mechanics and logics of cancel cultures together in a way that subverts somewhat the idolatry of power they often inadvertently celebrate. In other words, we might be able to find a way to cancel cancel cultures from within cancel cultures.

All particular logics of cancel cultures use the same mechanics described earlier: institutional and reputational cancelling. Sometimes there is a hegemonic cancel culture operating under a particular logic that controls both institutional and reputational cancelling at a societal level. Other times one cancel culture maintains access to only institutional or reputational cancelling, while in others multiple cancel cultures have access to both forms.

Cancel cultures in their various forms have an interest in targeting individuals, groups, or even wider segments of society with their cancelling, or similarly with affiliation, usually loosely based on their preferred underlying logic. These social collectives assume that the distinguishing features of these social groupings exist as a basis upon which a cancelling can be enacted. This is the meta-logic of cancel cultures. Importantly, though all cancel cultures operate by the same meta-logic, the conceptual logics of cancel cultures can differ widely. Moreover, there is a multiplicity of cancel cultures at play in any society at a given time, though the exact number varies with the society and over time. Moreover, these diverse cancel

culture logics may work for or against each other collaboratively in different ways.

To describe and begin to reform just this kind of situation in the US legal system, in 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in a field-defining paper.^{15 16} Crenshaw’s point is that when it comes to the types of cancelling logics operative in a given situation, the outcomes are not as simple as picking one of the cancelling logics and placing it as primary. Moreover, the logics of cancelling can intersect to exponentially impact the person or group involved. Crenshaw explains, “Some people look to intersectionality as a grand theory of everything, but that’s not my intention. If someone is trying to think about how to explain to the courts why they should not dismiss a case made by black women, just because the employer did hire blacks who were men and women who were white, well, that’s what the tool was designed to do.”¹⁷ This concept of intersectionality is incredibly helpful as a tool, but it also has limits, because it was developed to counteract a specific set of institutionalised cancel cultures. Thus, unfortunately, it is often understood and used as if intersectionality involves static societies. But cancel cultures and how we understand how they operate changes even in the course of a year.^{18 19 20} Nevertheless, it does provide some help to cancelling cancel cultures. We just need to make it more dynamic.

Dynamic intersectionality builds upon Crenshaw’s intersectionality by emphasising that the particular boundaries and oppositions of various cancel

cultures are constantly evolving. Today’s oppressed can become tomorrow’s oppressor, and the reverse. Just ask Cleopatra. Moreover, they are not just evolving in time, but in different institutions and geographies. Someone from a working-class background could run the sociology department with an iron fist. There it is not your class background that causes you to suffer, but whether you agree with her pet theory on educational outcomes. But that same sociology professor could find herself cancelled the following day simply for being a woman as the Taliban take control of Afghanistan. The danger with static misunderstandings of intersectionality is assuming that who has the power to cancel and on what basis a person can be cancelled will remain constant, in time, space, or institution.

Dynamic intersectionality requires that we take a posture of constant reflexivity and humility, intellectual curiosity, and moral courage. How? First, we set aside the obsession with getting power but without ignoring how the mechanics of cancelling are presently functioning in the specific social system in view for all the people involved. This means not only truly seeking to see things from another’s perspective, but taking the proactive step to get their perspective. This means ongoing dialogue and reflection also about the logic upon which respective cancel cultures operate, as well as how different people, groups, and societies see the world. This can build epistemic inclusivity by exposing and reducing blind spots while developing a passion for the collaborative pursuit of truth.

Second, dynamic intersectionality seeks moral fecundity. What does this mean? It means understanding the moral frameworks of others from the inside first, and then seeking to put them in relation to one’s own moral system. We must constantly interrogate whether a claimed moral value is truly about what is right and good or whether it is about power or prestige. It means using the dynamic intersectional analysis to see who is being cancelled for what reasons and how. Again, it cannot be done by any cancel culture alone, but must include a we-them perspective and collaboration. Above all, it must include the moral courage to seek justice for all, even if it costs us, but especially we must seek it for those who have the least capacity to seek justice for themselves, both in institutions and in wider society.

Dynamic intersectionality is a solution to cancel cultures. Yet, it can be corrupted by grabs for power and influence disguised as ‘intellectual’ and ‘moral’ values. It still presents difficulties when sets of moral and intellectual values are simply incompatible and incomprehensible. However, these are minimised the more dynamically intersectional it becomes in its epistemic inclusivity and moral fecundity. But when it is successful, there is at least the chance that it cancels cancel cultures and the idolatry of power often hiding in them. In their place we might build a world of collaborative and cooperative seeking for and establishing of truth and justice.



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Crying wolf: A parable for cancel cultures

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