



How to Get Back to Open Debates and Free Speech

The Canceling of the American Mind. Cancel Culture Undermines Trust and Threatens Us All – But There Is a Solution. Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott; Simon & Schuster, New York; 2023; ISBN 9781668019146; pp. 443; \$ 29.99 (hardcover)

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The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress.

—Sir Karl Raimund Popper

We live in a world that is divided in many ways, including the political and ideological. Unfortunately, US society is also grimly divided across many fault lines and is experiencing trying times. Though the division seemingly started recently, the seeds were planted a long time ago, if not at the very beginning of our society. Yet, we have been able to talk, compromise at times, speak out freely, and accept our fellow citizens, despite our disagreements, not a long time ago. However, the elements of a free society have been seriously threatened and undermined during the last few years with attacks on free speech, the bedrock of a free society. People have been losing their perspective on freedom and free speech and stopped realizing that there is no more important and precious element of free society than free speech. People do not want to discuss or debate issues to understand, clarify, or progress ideas and concerns. They just want to “win” and suppress or “cancel” their opponents.

Two of those concerned with the attacks on free speech, Greg Lukianoff, the 47-year-old president of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and an accomplished author, and Rikki Schlott, a 22-year-old journalist, put together a book with an apt title, *The Canceling of the American Mind*. Partnering individuals from different generations (e.g., Lukianoff is Generation X and Schlott is Gen Z) was a smart move to be able to provide different views of the topic in the focus of their book. The book consists of

three parts: Part 1, “What Is Cancel Culture?” (with four chapters and two case studies interspersed among them); Part 2, “How Cancel Culture Works” (five chapters, six case studies); and Part 3, “What to Do About It” (five chapters, three case studies). It also has two appendices, “Common Questions About Cancel Culture” and “FIRE 2022 College Free Speech Rankings,” and extensive notes.

In their introduction to the book, the authors remind us that “there has never been and *will* never be a perfect golden age of free speech. But that doesn’t mean we can’t strive for one” (p. 5). They also note that “over the last several decades, many of the institutions tasked with teaching us how to argue productively have failed in their duties—most notably, American higher education” (p. 5). In addition, an epochal technological shift, the creation of social media, shook the foundation of US society and made everything worse: “Social media breeds...personal attacks, dismissive clichés” and “an ever-growing body of taboos abound in virtual discourse” (p. 5). Other media has contributed to this too. “These destructive methods of argumentation caught on like wildfire for a simple reason: they help people assert moral superiority and ‘win’ arguments by simply shutting down the other side” (p. 6).

The four chapters of Part 1 present a number of examples of what cancel culture does to free speech. Chapter 1, aptly called “The Gaslighting of the American Mind,” provides a brief history of cancel culture and its definition/criteria (p. 30), which include “punitiveness,” “deplatforming,” “organization,” “secondary boycotts,” “moral grandstanding,” and “truthiness” (“Are the things being said about you inaccurate?”). The authors note that the campaigns to get people fired, disinformed, deplatformed, or otherwise punished have led to the climate of fear and conformity. They also note that the First Amendment free speech protection “applies only to governmental and public spheres, while

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Cancel Culture undoubtedly extends into the private sphere” (p. 31). Chapter 1 also describes two ways of attacking in cancel culture: the arduous process of engagement and persuasion and attacking one’s opponent on an *ad hominem*, personal level.

Chapter 2 starts with a quote by comedian Bill Maher; here is part of it: “...We want to beat our chests and vanquish the other side. Compromise seems like a dead concept” (p. 33). This chapter continues with the history of cancel culture development, from the free speech movement to the anti-free speech movement and beyond. The authors remind us that the First Amendment was not created to protect the interest of the rich and powerful but is “primarily needed to protect minority views, unpopular opinions, and the expression of those who clash with the ruling elite” (p. 35). The authors present a very interesting view, that part of the ruling elite is higher education and academia. They note that the market size of the US higher education industry was approximately \$1 trillion in 2021 and that it is one of the wealthiest and most influential institutions in the world. Academic institutions are not the underdogs to be protected, and “Academia’s free speech skepticism is part of a long history of powerful people undercutting the First Amendment” (p. 35).

Chapter 2 also reminds the reader of the importance of the First Amendment in the fight for civil rights, citing the “civil rights icon” John Lewis, who said, “Without freedom of speech the civil rights movement would’ve been a bird without wings” (p. 36). Interesting also is the notion that on campuses, “if you can label an idea as conservative, you are no longer obligated to take it seriously” (p. 37).

Chapter 3 mentions the following sad fact and ends with a note that Americans are increasingly distrustful of academia:

According to a 2022 FIRE survey...more than 80 percent [of students] said they have self-censored their beliefs. Eighty-one percent said that they feel pressure to avoid discussing controversial topics in their classes. And almost two-thirds of students are worried about damaging their reputation because someone misunderstands something they have said or done. (p. 61)

A poignant quote by the singer Taylor Swift starts the case study between chapters 3 and 4: “When you say someone is canceled, it’s not a TV show. It’s a human being. You’re sending mass amounts of messaging to this person to either shut up, disappear, or it could also be perceived as, ‘Kill yourself’” (p. 63).

The chapters and case studies in Part 2 focus on the various ways Cancel Culture works. Chapter 5 notes that no matter which side of the spectrum debates on social media, the goal is often to “keep arguing until the other side gives up” (p. 93). The authors list tactics used in debates such as “defending against criticism of your side by bringing up the other side’s alleged wrongdoing” (p.

94); “misrepresenting the opposition’s perspective” (p. 94); minimizing by “claiming that a problem doesn’t exist or is too small-scale to worry about” (p. 95); “conflating two arguments—a reasonable one...and an unreasonable one” (p. 96); “underdogging” (p. 97), claiming that your argument is more valid because you are an underdog; accusation of an opponent’s “bad faith” (p. 98); projecting hypocrisy on your opponent (p. 99); responding to an idea one does not like by saying “that’s offensive” (p. 100); “digging through someone’s past comments to find speech that hasn’t aged well” (p. 100); and “fabricating information to bolster a weak argument” (p. 101).

Chapter 6 discusses identity markers of people that could (but should not) be weaponized and used to dismiss the speaker, such as whether the speaker is conservative; what the speaker’s race, sex, and sexual orientation are; whether the speaker is trans or cis; and whether the speaker can be accused of being phobic or guilty by association (pp. 116–125). Chapter 7 focuses on a troubling national trend: “the legislation of censorship coming from the political right” (p. 141) and conservative legislative threats to higher education and book banning (this chapter is followed by a case study titled “Campus Cancel Culture from the Right”).

Chapter 8 cites David French (a US commentator) who suggested that the “in-group moderates represent a far more immediate threat to any radical enterprise than out-group opponents” (p. 166), as they may sway constituents. The chapter also warns about violence proposed by various parties and ends with another quote by French:

Reform has to come from within. Right has to reform Right, and Left has to reform Left. And that means that the in-group moderates have to find their voices. They have to confront the scorn and threats and respectfully but firmly make their dissent known. Cancel Culture feeds on its own victories. It is drained by its defeats. There is no better way to end intimidation than by refusing to be intimidated. (p. 175)

The last chapter of Part 2 deals with “Social Media, Polarization, and Radicalization.” The case studies included before and after Chapter 9 are very interesting and especially important for readers from various fields, namely, psychotherapy (pp. 177–187) and science and medicine (pp. 193–207). The case study of psychotherapy notes that some therapists “would interrupt the session to ‘correct’ and ‘educate’ the client [patient], even if it had nothing to do with the therapy” (p. 177) and basically lecture the patient about the patient’s “privilege based on... race or gender” (p. 177). They change the approach to therapy, which is no longer about the patient’s problem but the patient as the problem now. This case is a very sad and discouraging reading. The case study on medicine and science discusses, among other things, the danger of ideology infiltrating science.

Part 3 of this book provides some help with how to deal with the situation we are all in and how to get out of it. Chapter 10 provides advice on how to raise “kids who are not cancelers.” The authors recommend keeping children off social media as long as possible; avoiding overly involved, anxious parenting; and not depriving children of freedom and autonomy (nothing that children “are inherently anti-fragile” [p. 215]). Thus, the authors recommend reviving the “golden rule,” reminding children to “Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you” (p. 220), and encouraging free, unstructured time (and developing children’s problem-solving skills and internal locus of control); emphasizing friendships; teaching children about differences; and practicing “what you preach” (p. 228).

Chapter 11 brings recommendations on keeping one’s corporation out of the culture war. The authors suggest that corporate leaders should ask themselves whether their team(s) have a diversity of viewpoints, a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, varying political opinions, and different educational paths. They also state that employers should be sure that they and the Human Relations team are on the same page and that large meetings to “talk back” are usually not productive and necessary, while one-to-one or small-group talks may prevent “a campus-style virtue-escalating cascade” (p. 251). Employers should not turn to social media to better understand office culture but, rather, rely on anonymous surveys. One should not rush to take any action but slow down and think issues through.

Chapter 12 discusses fixing the K-12 educational system and attempting to inculcate democratic virtues by starting to see children as unique, intellectually independent individuals and by fostering anti-fragility and emotional wellbeing. Teachers should also avoid the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy and the use of trigger warnings and err on the side of forgiveness and redemption rather than punishment of children. Chapter 13 deals with reforming higher education. It recommends adopting an official, written recommitment to free speech, teaching students about free speech and academic freedom in orientation, abandoning speech codes and bias-responding teams, surveying students and faculty about the state of free speech on campus, and defending students

and faculty from cancellation early and often. They also recommend banning political litmus tests and that administrators abstain from taking political stances, installing an academic freedom ombudsman, and cutting down bureaucracy. They advocate for employers to stop requiring college degrees (e.g., President Biden suggested that 90% of new jobs not require a college degree [p. 288]).

The last chapter of the book reminds the reader that “censoring is humankind’s natural inclination” (p. 300), and according to the First Amendment, “we cannot ban speech simply because it’s offensive” (p. 301). It emphasizes that “freedom of speech is essential to autonomy, to artistic expression, to self-government, to holding power accountable” (p. 306). It is “the antidote to authoritarianism” (p. 307). The authors argue that “the news media...stop acting like ideological intermediaries” (p. 305) and “Americans must resume arguing, acting, and thinking like adults” (p. 305). The case studies of Part 3 are also very interesting (on the areas of publishing [p. 233], comedy [p. 255], and higher education [p. 269]).

This volume is definitely interesting food for thought for all educators. While I was reading it, one day I asked a small group of residents whether we have free speech in the USA. They looked at me and said quietly that they did not think so. That reaffirmed my personal view that we have a serious problem, which we need to do something about. This book may help us understand the seriousness of the problem, the views of the “other” side, and what we need to address and do to get back to free speech, to the ability to discuss freely and to respect our opponent, and to use arguments to progress ideas and not just defeat the opponent.

Declarations

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