



## Cancel Culture Is Just Maoism With Less Killing

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**Despite there being less spilled blood, cancel culture is eerily similar to Maoism.**

In July, soul singer Macy Gray appeared on Piers Morgan’s show “Uncensored” to explain why she believes having gender reassignment doesn’t actually change someone’s sex.

“Being a little girl is a whole epic book,” Gray [told](#) Morgan. “You can’t have that just because you want to be a woman.”

When the Uncensored host pointed out that celebrities such as J.K. Rowling had been “attacked and abused” for sharing such sentiments and acknowledged that she might experience similar backlash for this statement, Gray didn’t flinch.

“But it’s the truth,” the 54-year-old R&B singer replied.

Less than 72 hours later, amid the very public backlash Morgan had predicted, Gray was singing a different tune.

“Anyone who is in the LGBTQ community is a hero,” Gray told Today host Hoda Kotb. “I said some things that didn’t go over well, but my intention was never to hurt anybody. I feel bad that I did hurt some people, and I think it’s about education, conversation, and us getting to a place where we understand each other.”

She went on to explain, “I’ve learned a lot through this.”

Gray’s sudden and complete reversal on an issue most Americans take for granted — that men are men and women are women — may have surprised many of her fans, but it’s a familiar dance to those familiar with cancel culture.

Gray is hardly the first celebrity to publicly apologize to the LGBTQ community over intense public pressure. In the last few months, actor [Sam Elliott](#), [NASCAR](#), and performer [Bette Midler](#) are among those who’ve issued apologies for allegedly supporting “phobia” in one form or another.

Oftentimes, the pressure stems simply from failing to toe the line on trans ideology, but it can also come from violating other social justice dogmas. In 2020, NFL quarterback Drew Brees [stated](#) he could “never agree with anybody disrespecting the flag of the United States of America,” citing his grandfathers’ military service.

Less than 24 hours later, Brees issued an [apology](#) on Instagram. He soon followed up with another apology. Then his wife [apologized](#).

Whether one supports standing for the US flag or one's right to not stand for the flag is hardly the point here. Nor is it about whether one supports Lia Thomas, a biological male, from competing against female swimmers in athletic competitions.

What's alarming is that various shades of Maoist-style "[struggle sessions](#)," also known as denunciation rallies, are becoming increasingly common in America. These public spectacles, hallmarks of China's Cultural Revolution, were used to shame and humiliate "class enemies" who deviated from the political and ideological dogmas of the time.

There are some notable differences between cancel culture and Maoism, of course. For starters, China's Cultural Revolution was started by Mao himself, a dictator with the full power of the state behind him.

In Mao's Last Revolution, historians Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals explain how in 1966, Mao moved against Peng Zhen, a staunch revolutionary who had been a member of the Chinese Communist Party for four decades and at the time served as mayor of Beijing. The sum total of Zhen's sins was that he continued to support a play written by his vice-mayor even after a Mao-supported critique of the play alleged that it was heretical.

For the sin of supporting a play that Mao turned against, Peng Zhen was stripped from office and spent 12 years in internal [exile](#). There's a clear difference here from cancel culture — Mao himself was doing the "canceling." However, there's also an important similarity: a disproportionate response to an alleged sin.

[Proponents](#) of cancel culture claim that it's really just a "consequence culture" in which powerful people are held accountable for their sins. But this ignores the fact that now, as under Mao, people suffer disproportionate consequences for small ideological heresies.

Earlier this year, law professor Ilya Shapiro was hired by Georgetown Law School as Executive Director of the Center for the Constitution. When President Biden announced that he would only nominate a black woman to be the next Supreme Court justice, Shapiro tweeted dismay at this form of blatant affirmative action.

In spite of the fact that Shapiro was echoing a sentiment expressed by most Americans, as well as a [majority](#) of African- and Hispanic-Americans, Georgetown Law placed him on [administrative leave](#) and launched an investigation into his conduct which dragged on for months. The school ultimately didn't fire him on the technicality that he wasn't an employee when he wrote the Tweets but warned that similar tweets in the future could get him fired. Shapiro subsequently resigned after this episode rather than saying and spending his days at Georgetown walking on eggshells.

Destruction of people's livelihoods for deviations from leftist thought isn't uncommon. In 2020, a survey by the libertarian Cato Institute found that a full [43 percent](#) of liberals and [50 percent](#) of those who identified as "very liberal" supported firing a business executive if it turned out that that executive had donated money to Donald Trump's re-election campaign.

Maoism and cancel culture share another similarity: if you're accused of being insufficiently leftist, an apology will not necessarily save you.

With Mao's blessing, hundreds of thousands of Red Guards swept China in the late 1960s, causing chaos in their quest to purge the country of anyone who was insufficiently leftist. These young

men and women engaged in “struggle sessions” with their victims in which they denounced and beat the offending parties, sometimes for hours. Victims offered public, and often humiliating, “self-criticisms,” but these rarely satisfied the mob.

The case of David Weigel provides a contemporary parallel. Weigel is a Washington Post reporter who was [suspended](#) for a month without pay following the retweet of a sexist joke. He retweeted Cam Harless, who joked, “Every girl is bi. You just have to figure out if it’s polar or sexual.”

Importantly, Weigel quickly [apologized](#) and removed the retweet, saying he “did not mean to cause any harm.” Neither action saved him. Like the Cultural Revolution, cancel culture isn’t about encouraging people to be better; it’s about punishing dissent.

Mao’s Cultural Revolution was abetted by cowardice at every step of the way. Some of his followers—such as his wife, Jiang Qing, were true believers, but many other state leaders saw the Cultural Revolution for the circular firing squad that it was. People went along with it out of fear.

MacFarquhar and Schoenhals document how the leaders were “transfixed” by Mao, “like rabbits in front of a cobra.” Mao had a reputation for turning, suddenly and violently, on anyone who questioned him, and Chinese Communist Party leaders opted to go along with his insanity rather than risk his wrath.

Cancel culture, too, is abetted by cowardice. Professors denounce colleagues who run afoul of the online mob in open letters while praising those same colleagues in private. Companies fire employees on the [flimsiest of grounds](#) because the woke mob tells them to.

The difference is that in the United States, some people are taking a stand. Utah Valley University [hosted](#) a commencement talk by prominent Mormon family therapist Sister Wendy Nelson and allowed the speech to go forward even though activists on and off campus pressured the university to cancel it. The University of Chicago’s free speech policy [is serving as a model](#) for other universities.

When one campus or organization stands up to the cancel culture mob, it makes a difference. Zachary Green of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a pro-free-speech advocacy organization, [notes](#) that “once a school takes a strong stand against censorship and for free speech, it may deter attempts to persuade that school to disinvite speakers.” We are social animals, and [courage is contagious](#).

The Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years, so it’s tempting to think that its bloodless parallel in the U.S. will have to get worse before it gets better. But we have a crucial advantage over Maoist China in that we are a free society. That means that where this trend goes — and how long it lasts — will ultimately be up to us, but it will require people like Macy Gray and Drew Brees to stand up for their convictions instead of caving before the online mobs.