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What People Fear Most About ‘Cancel Culture’

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“Cancel culture” is a phenomenon with almost no defenders. Instead there are people who lament and assail it, and people who deny it exists. It “isn’t real,” it’s “a patchwork monster invented to scare children,” it’s “a spooky campfire story.”

In case you missed the point, New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow put it in capital letters: “Once more: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS CANCEL CULTURE.” His work of persuasion not quite done, he offered an alternative explanation: “The rich and powerful are just upset that the masses can now organize their dissent.”

What this school of thought has going for it is the fuzziness of the concept of “cancel culture.” The same was true of its predecessor “political correctness,” which was also denied to exist rather than defended. The line between criticism and intolerance, like the line between sensitivity and oversensitivity, is subjective.

That’s why a recent survey about self-censorship is so clarifying. It shows that a very large number of Americans — one might call them “masses,” borrowing from Blow — are thinking twice before speaking their minds about politics; that the number of the fearful is rising; and that the fear rises as one moves right on the political spectrum.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, asked people whether “the political climate these days prevents me from saying things I believe because others might find them offensive.” In 2017, 58% agreed; in 2020, 62% did.

Conservatives were most likely to agree, but moderates agreed too (64-36%). “Strong liberals” were the only group that had a majority in disagreement, and even 42% of them agreed. This sentiment is not confined to the rich and the privileged.

It’s not just an aversion to criticism, either. Cato also asked, “Are you worried about losing your job or missing out on job opportunities if your political opinions became known?” A third of employed respondents said yes — including 22% of blacks and 38% of Latinos.

They don’t seem to be reacting to a hardening of taboos against comments that nearly everyone sees as bigoted. They’re not registering increasing concern for “simple politeness.”

They’re not Boomers who can’t handle social media, the dismissal former President Barack Obama bizarrely received when he criticized left-wing purity enforcers. Cato found that 18-29-year-olds were the most worried about job repercussions from their opinions.

The findings are more consistent with what the critics of cancel culture are saying. The line of unacceptability is constantly, rapidly and unpredictably shifting; sanctions for crossing it are applied arbitrarily but sometimes harshly.

Another set of surveys has asked Americans if they feel less free to speak their minds than they used to. Over the last few years, the percentage who say they feel less free has been much higher than it was in past decades.

To deny a rising climate of intolerance in the face of such findings requires believing that the campfire story has been accepted by tens of millions of Americans of varying races and political views. You would have to maintain that all of these people are wrong, and not about some technical point or some abstract matter far removed from their daily experiences. but about their own experiences.

Or you could acknowledge that the campfire story is real. We are becoming less tolerant of differing opinions, less inclined to judge them with open minds or at least charity.

It may not be the most urgent problem in the world. One commentator on cancel culture has sagely observed that Covid-19 is worse. But that it is a problem is becoming increasingly hard to deny. And we may find that our efforts to solve all kinds of problems do not benefit from fear of candid discussion.

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