

{ *A Tippling* PHILOSOPHER }

“Cancel Culture”: Choose Your Narrative

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I have been thinking even more on cancel culture and what it means for society. I wrote the extensive piece ‘Is “Cancel Culture” Butchering the Centre?’ in which I presented some of the topical literature from both sides of the argument. I want to build on the conclusion that I included in the piece.

As I said, in these sorts of fights, the hard-right are unaffected and continue doing what they do, the hard-left are the ones supposedly getting all hot under the collar, all the while the centre is being jostled this way and that in being asked to side with one or the other.

This is shouting about a minor issue and making it sound way worse than it is and either explicitly ignoring or allowing ignoring of the far worse threats from the right. What is worse, having a woke culture, or society run by bigots like Ben Shapiro and, well, Trump? This is shouting about often minor issues (as in, not as commonplace or pervasive as they are claimed to be) and making it sound way worse than it is and either explicitly ignoring or allowing ignoring of the far worse threats from the right.

And what is most ironic is that the conservatives, whose name gives it away (they seek to conserve that which is or was in spite of “progress”) would be the ones who would arguably strip back or deny rights in a modern, progressive framework. It is the left who have secured those rights, through suffragette, civil rights and other such movements. Whilst there may be commentators from all sides of the political spectrum weighing in on this one, I always think it is interesting when players like Jordan Peterson and Douglas Murray are involved in such debates. These are, in my opinion, gateway thinkers. In the same way (and I’m not interested in the truth of the reference) there are gateway drugs that can supposedly lead you on to harder drugs, these such commentators are gateway thinkers who can lead the adherent on to a more disturbing hard-right destination. Their highbrow intellectualism can provide cover for more nefarious intentions.

The question is, whose narrative do you want to buy?

Herding cats

On the one hand, we have a herd of cats on the hard left, going this way and that, all the while lacking in cohesion and a unifying project. The “hard left” might shout loudly on Twitter, but they are hardly equivalent to the Soviet-era Communist Party. And this is where we start understanding narratives. The right *will* paint people who argue for trans rights and universal healthcare so often as “Communists” as if the USSR were interested in human rights and Amnesty International, interested in the fair treatment of prisoners, interested in opening gender-free restrooms, and so on.

Because the “hard left” is generally the younger generations shouting about the moral zeitgeist, the change in trend toward moral equity that the conservatives of the world want to defend

against. This isn't particularly about Marxist redistribution of income (which itself wasn't what people think it was), despite what the right will tell you (they probably need to read more Marx). "Defunding the police" was actually "take excess funding away from the police and place it in social welfare programs to do work that the police themselves were complaining about doing anyway".

It's narratives, again.

The problem is, the left struggle to adequately define and market their narrative because, well, they don't have a mouthpiece. The mainstream media either sit squarely in the centre (let's face it, MSNBC aren't exactly progressive – see the criticisms it engenders from the progressive left) or squarely on the right, which is funded by the Murdoch family and other vested interests.

Vested interests underwriting the right

Vested interests... This is what really differentiates the two positions and the two narrative families: the money.

Where the left is a herd of cats, the right is a machine, well oiled with the money of marketing and narrative building of vested interests. The Koch Brothers, The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the NRA, Richard Mellon Scaife, John M. Olin, the DeVos and Coors families, the Cato Institute, the George C Marshall Institute, the Reason Foundation, the Manhattan Institute and Americans for Prosperity, PragerU... The list goes on and on for the right. The left has its bogeyman of George Soros. They try to include Bill Gates now because trying to stop malaria and pandemics is apparently lefty-liberal nonsense.

The money differential between the advocates of these pushers of narratives is monumental. That's partly because the right is so cohesive and all of their projects are intertwined.

Climate change, gun rights, the desire for Christianity to be centre stage and privileged, small government, small taxes, low regulation, so on and so forth. All of these sit snugly under the umbrella of "free market" advocates. An organisation that is advocating one of these often becomes an advocate of another. The synthesis of these ideas gives an interlocking strength to the framework. That said, it's a form of libertarianism that conveniently forgets its liberal ideology when concerning the movement of people (qua immigration) and socio-moral issues such as what you do in your bedroom. It's that inclusion of the power of Christianity that drives this contradiction, arguably.

When you have Ben Shapiro (as just one minor example) rat-a-tat attacking cancel culture and the left and then see his very smart business connections (who interesting that when he mentions getting a job on his videos, he uses "get a job in fracking" as his example!), **how he breaks Facebook rules** to **work closely with the Daily Wire** and other organisations to present a unified message that floods the media channels, **how he uses bots** and so on and so forth. The fact is, whilst he may be breaking the rules to do so, he is pumping his message out there in a far more cohesive and unified way than his adversaries. The right is just better at doing this because they have the money and the conspiratorial experience, know-how and desire.

Just look at the hits and shares and subscribers the right-wing mouthpieces have. And look how they all work together to create a full-frontal assault. It's similar to the fact that everybody knows

that, traditionally, the Republicans have been far better at marketing themselves and their vision than the Democrats. They win even though there are fewer Republican voters in the electorate.

Perhaps the left, in their greater moralising, just don't want to conspire to break the rules. Dark money just isn't their thing. They'd rather spend the money on frontline services straight away. That said, fear has a lot to do with it. Fear sells, both in financial term and in terms of selling a narrative.

This is from a British point of view, **but it's spot-on:**

The right assumes that the left succeeds because it has achieved greater coordination, cohesion, and loyalty than the right. This is quite incorrect, but it makes sense for rightists because they experience victory in everyday life as a consequence of greater cohesion, coordination, and loyalty. Rightist are usually people who are successful in everyday life. They assume that what makes a person or organisation successful in everyday life also applies to politics. The right is composed of people who are responsible, cohesive, loyal, and coordinated. The upshot of this behaviour is a hierarchy justified by the success that greater adherence to these qualities guarantees. These are the values, in other words, of the sort of people who are good at sports.

Consequently, rightists assume that one reason that they must be losing a political battle – aside from overall strategy – is that their team is working less effectively than the opposing team. The corrective action is simple: increase their team's unity, and try to disrupt the enemy's unity. This, in part, is why the right complains about a lack of unity: it is merely an optimal tactic to make sure that unity never drops below a certain level and, perhaps, to win arguments within the movement. The idea is to shame your own side into greater coherence by comparing their performance to the better team (“Come on, lads! Get it together!” [And look how committed *I* am]).

But this is not the full story.

The right's view that the left is more unified than the right is based on a misconception as to how the left functions.

A brief count of leftist political parties in Britain, using Wikipedia, reveals over 40 political parties – excluding internal groups within the Labour Party. The range of these parties includes substantial Trotskyist groups, tiny British Maoist groups with a handful of members, the mighty Labour Party, anarchists, activists for transsexual rights, and old-time Marxist-Leninists. By contrast, there are probably, at most, 10 rightist political parties. It is immediately obvious which side of the political divide has greater unity and cohesiveness: it is the political right.

Indeed, the Medium article goes on to conclude about the use of social media on the left and right in light of censorship. What is interesting in the present environment is that the Republican Party has been taken over by Trump and Trump cultists and that unity they always had is not so obvious now.

As I have mentioned many times before, there is a tendency for the right to be single-issue voters who are happy to vote for the party that satisfies them on that one (or few) issues and then forgive the party practically everything else they do that will often disadvantage them otherwise. A white working-class single-parent family might vote GOP on anti-abortion but they end up

forgiving the GOP for screwing them over in terms of welfare, education, healthcare and so on. The Democrats used to be unified by the unions, but they have fallen from grace.

Where the right is anti-government, the left is anti-authority, and that might be a useful distinction.

Cancel culture as a narrative peddled by the right

Thom Hartmann so eloquently detailed how Hitler utilised industry and the media to disseminate his message and create bogeymen of the leftists in ‘**The media is busy creating a left-wing “threat” to balance out the awful racist right-wing hordes who threaten civil society**’. In the same way he saw Antifa being treated by the media and the White House, we can see “cancel culturists” of the left demonised to fit in with the narrative that the right wants to perpetuate.

As I concluded in my previous piece:

And so I see the whole thing as misplaced worry. I think it is overestimated exactly how many places in the world are even susceptible to such left-wing academia, and how often this *really* is happening on our campuses and elsewhere.

The world has swung hugely to the right. Now, that’s not to say there isn’t a trend towards this cancel culture in some way....

This is shouting about a minor issue and making it sound way worse than it is and either explicitly ignoring or allowing ignoring of the far worse threats from the right.

As one commenter (Anthrotheist) said on that post:

The final thought I have is that maybe people who are protesting this so-called cancel culture just don’t understand how far things have moved in such a short span of time. Bizarrely, it seems like the people who are protesting against racist, sexist, or homophobic/transphobic ideas are actually at this point *being conservative*. The tide has shifted, public opinion has changed, and now the conservatives of the new cultural norms are defending their way of life against regressive traditionalists that want to tear it all down and replace it with a re-imaging of the intolerant and oppressive (and surprisingly recent) past. Remember that nearly everything that we accept today, and that conservatives would fight to preserve, was at one time a liberal idea. Freedom. Democracy. Anti-slavery. Women’s suffrage. Same sex marriage, LGBTQ rights; they’re just the self-evident “right way to be” for future generations. Maybe some young people are just ahead of the curve, and many in the older generations just can’t (or won’t) see it.

Whilst the left’s identity politics manifests itself in a collection of very disparate groups and identities fighting amongst themselves, the right has a different situation (**The Right’s Identity Politics Is More Dangerous Than the Left’s** – ironically from reason.com, the Reason Foundation free-market think tank mouthpiece):

Majoritarian identity politics does not suffer from the same inner contradictions, on the other hand. The right does not need to pull together multiple unwieldy tribes with disparate interests to advance its ends. It has enough numbers in one tribe with overlapping identities of race and religion to launch a coherent and credible populist ethno-nationalism, as Trump’s has shown. If tribal politics becomes the game in America, the right’s mono-tribalism is much more powerful and dangerous than the left’s multi-tribalism.

Princeton University's Jan-Werner Mueller has brilliantly **pointed out** that this sort of populism isn't so much against elites as it is against pluralism. A populist demagogue can claim to represent "the people" but not mean *all* the people, only the "real people" who back him. He makes it morally acceptable to exclude the others from the state's protection and patronage. Trump, Muller notes, has made many Americans see themselves as part of a white identity movement. Christian whites are the in-group. And who are members of the out-group? Hispanics, Muslims, portions of the media that don't cheerlead for him, and immigrants—not just undocumented ones but even legal ones from "shithole" countries.

The question is, was this a convenient narrative that feeds into other ideas that the right peddles about the left or was it a genuinely devised plan from its outset? Possibly something of both. These ideas often morph into usable mechanisms. It's like the idea that religion is the opiate of the masses: religion wasn't devised in order to take advantage of the masses, but it became a useful tool to be able to put to use for people in power.

Here, the cancel culture may well be believed by many to be a threat because they like the idea that the left is a threat. And it may then be a vehicle that they can use to attack the left and tell the centre that, look, this left is worthy of being wary of. They are a threat. Pandering to their demands is tantamount to curtailing your ability to speak freely. It will be like totalitarian USSR at its worst and you will probably end up in a gulag. After all, gulags are one short step away from gender-free restrooms...

Narratives.

My opinion is that those narratives devised by the right are insidious and are based on conspiratorial, propagandistic claims, couched in fear-mongering ways. The left, often idealistic, concentrates on individual issues and will be based largely in the here and now, railing against policies and infractions on liberties and equalities, arguing (without the backing of huge funded interests) for policy-changes like universal healthcare.

Vested interests. Who is funding the arguments and literature against healthcare, against climate change.

Follow the money. On the right, those vested interests are always self-serving. And they are always, fundamentally, about making more money for those advocating them *at source*. Yes, your white working-class American in Bible Belt America won't benefit from ignoring climate change, from fossil fuel subsidisation, so on and so forth; not in the long term, at any rate. One would hope that what is best for America should be best for the whole world and vice versa; and what is best for Americans is best for all Americans. See "On Defending Billionaires" and "**Young Tories' Night of Shame, the NHS and Rawls' Veil of Ignorance**" for how I think the "Veil of Ignorance" helps to create a roadmap for policy-making.

Well, what narrative do you buy?

Here's what I have said for some time when I have debated identity politics (broadly the same argument) and cancel culture. This is not the big, big problem you think it is; it is not as pervasive in our institutions and elsewhere as is claimed. If you think identity and conformity to ideas is an issue for the left, I dare you to go and hang out on Breitbart and Daily Mail comment forums for a week or so and see which is the biggest threat to liberal (in all senses of the word) society! And they aren't even the worst.

As I said in my last piece:

There will always be bumps on the road on the journey to progress. There may be mistakes [where people are genuinely cancelled for poor reason]. But beware the people who shout about those mistakes so loudly and claim (by hasty generalisation) that they are representative of a decay in (liberty) liberal society. They are usually not the (liberty) liberals you think they are. Most people shouting about freedom of speech will somewhere along the line want to take your bodily autonomy away, or dictate who you sleep with, or disbar you on account of the colour of your skin.

Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing.

Don't let these smoke and mirrors scare you off from the project to make this world a better and more equitable place for all, or provide an illusion for society so we fall down the hidden trap door into a dark cellar of intolerance that might take years to reason and vote our way out of.

Worst case scenario: what would the country look like if a few radical feminists or critical theory advocates were running it, compared to if Ben Shapiro, Rush Limbaugh and an unfettered Trump were and continued to? Obviously, what I am saying here is an appeal to the centre. If you are far-right and are wondering what would be better, I guess you would want some kind of fascistic leadership anyway. More fool you. But most reasonable people are actually profiteering off the work of labour unions and civil rights movements over the last few centuries, of the more progress we have made. That work is not yet done and we should not rest on our laurels.

We will still need to argue over certain things – the hard left will be wrong in the same way it might be right. Our ability to openly discuss things should allow us to navigate these problems. But to blithely complain that we are having our freedom of speech shuttered when Parler and Gad exist, where FOX News continues to sound off. There are lines that need to be drawn and we will argue over them. That's life; that's philosophy. But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, don't rush to a conclusion that is most certainly **a moral panic**. Be skeptical about what narrative you are being sold. Who benefits and how? If Trump or any politician is advocating some policy, who benefits and how? Is this narrative being perpetuated part of a larger narrative? If so, what is the larger framework and who is pushing it? What do they get out of that narrative?

And this is why I think I will always be left of centre, because all of those narratives on the right have sources that are so completely self-serving, so nefarious, so dangerous in intention that I can never bring myself to think the proponents are really looking to enact them to make the world a better place, that they are thinking of others, perhaps even the out-group.

As I have often said, Jesus (whether he existed or not) had it right (and I'm an out-and-out atheist): The Good Samaritan. Universal morality that considers your out-group as much as your in-group is truly selfless and morally virtuous. Perhaps the Christian right should take at least this leaf out of their own book and hold it closer to their hearts. And then the rest of the right could follow suit.

Beware the narrative. Beware being sold down the river: someone else will be profiting.