



Corporate Power and the Gramophone Mind

The Republican Party should shed the theology of market worship that blinds us.

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For years, significant numbers on the Right have been rolling their eyes and dismissing claims about the growing censorship culture in corporate America. It's all anecdotal, they say. It's just the free market at work. If you don't like that your bank cuts off customers for their worldview, move to another bank. Or build your own Google. And really, just stop. You're being hysterical. It's embarrassing.

But woke capital—corporate power bent on enforcing a political narrative against its user base—is real, and it's growing. It is no longer just a series of anecdotes; it is becoming a disturbing and powerful reality.

Meet the Censors

This past week, the email service Mailchimp banned the Northern Virginia Tea Party from its platform. The group's crime? They were trying to use the platform to organize a recount rally in support of President Trump. The email service claimed the group violated its policies on misinformation, and banned them, along with several other conservative organizations. (*American Greatness* dropped Mailchimp several weeks earlier.) The hosting site WordPress announced it would deplatform the long-running blog, *Conservative Treehouse*, not because of any violation, but because of “incompatibility” between the “site's content and our terms.”

The *Columbia Journalism Review* has fired the first shot at *Substack*, the hosting and email site for independent journalists, for perpetuating racism by being too white and too male. That so-called racist content is coming from marquee writers like Andrew Sullivan, who was driven from *New York* magazine, and Glenn Greenwald, who left the publication he founded, the *Intercept*, both over the respective publications' preference for woke narrative over hard fact.

Over on the popular video game website, *Paper Rock Shotgun*, a contributing writer was banned from publishing his weekly column ever again. His crime was a comment—not even a column—suggesting that sentiments like “should trans women be allowed to compete in female sports” are worthy of debate, rather than unquestioning acceptance. His point was not even to claim the practice was wrong, just that it was debatable. But for that sin, he is gone. Banished.

Abigail Shrier, the author of *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, was banned, and then un-banned, by both Amazon and Target for a thoroughly researched book on a similar topic. Shrier, who has stated she has no problem with adults choosing transgender surgery, wrote a book about the spate of transgender surgeries among teenage girls, suggesting it might be a social, not a medical, phenomenon.

For that, her book was temporarily banned, an action that some in the American Civil Liberties Union—once the reliable stalwart of free thought, expression, and practice in America—unwaveringly supported.

Amazon recently banned books contradicting the popular narrative about COVID-19 and a documentary from Shelby Steele, an African American writer, on the death of Michael Brown, before reversing themselves after popular outcry. The platform will not let many mainstream conservative organizations use its philanthropic arm, Amazon Smile, to raise money, but does happily turn over its services to Planned Parenthood.

Bank of America will no longer lend money to certain gun manufacturers. Citibank will not process some gun sales by their own customers. Wells Fargo, JP Morgan Chase, and U.S. Bank will no longer provide services to the private prison industry in protest of President Trump's immigration policies. These same federally insured banks and a handful of others now refuse to provide depository services to federal contractors who do work for Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. Payment and funding sites like Paypal, GoFundMe, and Patreon recently banned users they deemed “alt-right,” even when those users did not self-identify as such.

In perhaps the clearest example of what will happen to those who cross the threshold of America's constantly broadening corporate sensibilities, Laura Loomer, a controversial provocateur and internet personality, is banned from Twitter, Periscope, Facebook, Instagram, Medium, GoFundMe, Venmo, MGM Resorts, PayPal, Lyft, Uber, Uber Eats, Chase Bank, and even the t-shirt company, TeeSpring, for various violations regarding the companies' terms of service related to “hate speech,” conspiracy theories, and “misinformation.”

Loomer, herself, is hardly a threat. She has no political power. She is not a member of an organization with any political or cultural power. In fact, she lost by 20 percentage points in a run for Congress this year in Florida. Her only cultural power, in truth, comes from the fact that these companies feel they must acknowledge and loudly condemn her.

The treatment of Loomer has always been an outlier given the provocative nature of her views. But as corporate America becomes more woke, what constitutes extreme, offensive, or harmful has been expanded to include conventionally held cultural beliefs.

Mainstream traditional religious views are bigoted, senators expressing points of view regarding violence in the streets is equated to physical harm, and suggesting that sex and gender might have a biological—not psychological—basis makes you transphobic.

In a very real sense, Loomer's example is becoming less an outlier than a portent of things to come.

Down the Slippery Slope to Self-Censorship and Social Credit

The broader effects of these actions are clear: some slopes are very slippery. It is no longer the extreme provocateurs being subject to bans. Those with conservative, or even right-of-center, viewpoints will now be shunned from the existing mechanisms of polite society. And for many of these corporations, influenced as they are by a middle management thoroughly indoctrinated in critical race theory by America's best universities, that is the ultimate goal.

“So what?” say some right-of-center commentators in D.C.. We can just build our own infrastructures, power bases, and corporations. While this is true in theory, it ignores just how

tall of a requirement this really is, and how long it would take to build what essentially is a separate society. It also fails to acknowledge the irreparable damage this type of corporate shaming does to the manner in which individuals learn to engage with society at large.

George Orwell is famous for the allegorical commentary on government censorship in his books *1984* and *Animal Farm*. What is less well-known is how much he worried about the insidious nature of self-censorship: the social pressure to avoid saying what was unpopular, a regime enforced by the very institutions of society itself.

In an essay titled “Freedom of the Press,” meant to be the introduction to *Animal Farm*, Orwell takes aim at the broad perils of groupthink, the intolerance of dissent, and highbrow moral absolutism enforced socially and commercially:

The chief danger to freedom of thought and speech at this moment is not the direct interference of . . . any official body. If publishers and editors exert themselves to keep certain topics out of print, it is not because they are frightened of prosecution but because they are frightened of public opinion. In this country intellectual cowardice is the worst enemy a writer or journalist has to face . . . The sinister fact about literary censorship in England is that it is largely voluntary.

He goes on,

Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban . . . the same kind of veiled censorship also operates in books and periodicals, as well as in plays, films, and radio. At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question. It is not exactly forbidden to say this, that or the other, but it is “not done” to say it . . . Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the highbrow periodicals.

Orwell, prescient as ever, was writing in 1945 but could have been writing about the woke totalitarians of 2020.

If one loves democracy, the argument runs, one must crush its enemies by no matter what means. And who are its enemies? It always appears that they are not only those who attack it openly and consciously, but those who “objectively” endanger it by spreading mistaken doctrines. In other words, defending democracy involves destroying all independence of thought.

Self-censorship, the type that causes individuals to pause before expressing their own opinions, is antithetical to a free society. Yet in many ways we are already there. A July poll from the Cato Institute found that nearly two-thirds of Americans say the current political climate “prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.”

But it isn’t just politics. The woke narrative is being enforced by a cartel of corporate power, the mainstream press, and Big Tech companies who supersede all of it by literally controlling the flow of information to billions of users in a partisan direction. It is a corporately executed groupthink, from which there are fewer and fewer alternatives, and whose punishment is meted out with unprecedented social severity.

In China, they call this a “social credit system”—where individuals are ranked and scored based on what they say and do, and rewarded or denied access to society based on their score. In America, we are enacting elements of such a system here. The problem is, instead of calling it what it is—totalitarian social control meted out at the corporate level—we are still calling it free enterprise.

The Right Needs An Answer to Woke Corporate Power

For decades, the controlling narrative on the Right has been that business is good. And, of course, it is. Business—particularly small business—drives the economy that makes daily life in America possible.

But while business is a good that results from capitalism and our free market system, it is not *the* good. It is not virtuous in and of itself. It can do good, but it can also do bad. And the Right has no answer to this collusion of corporate and media power directed against free thought in a free society—one that endangers our very way of life.

But it’s time we start casting about for one. It is becoming quite clear that, as my friend Josh Hammer has put it, “big business is not our friend.” Yet conventional Republican policies treat it like it is. We happily hand out corporate tax subsidies at every opportunity, and mortgage the country to make it easier for the biggest corporations to stay afloat, even when they topple the economy. We are skeptical of antitrust enforcement of any kind, preferring to let industry power centers grow, unchecked.

Perhaps it is time to be more reflective, instead of ideologically reflexive, about empowering the companies that hate us. There is a reason these massive corporations act without fear of upsetting half the country. It’s because they know, politically, there will be no fallout from the GOP. It’s why they can act as though there will never be a Republican in charge, and cozy up to Democrats, the only party who will actually use political power against them.

Republicans should remain faithful both to capitalism and the free market that has made this country an enviable powerhouse. But we should shed the theology of market worship that blinds us to concentrated and collusive power being used in ways that are antithetical to both a free society and to the individual liberty upon which that society is built.

In concluding his essay on self-censorship and corporately enforced groupthink, Orwell presaged the toppling descent that awaits societies who fail to confront the censorious powers at work: “...if you encourage totalitarian methods, the time may come when they will be used against you instead of for you.”

That time has arrived. Our nation, built on a consensus of respect for individual liberty, free expression, independent thought, and freedom to worship, awaits its defenders.