



My family fled Fidel Castro's Cuba, where 'cancel culture' was deadly serious

First Amendment protections won't make a difference if we don't have a culture of free expression among young people.

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During my first week in college, a hallmate called me a slur for Spanish-speaking people. Because I learned English at an all-girls' Catholic school in Puerto Rico, I was not well-versed in racial slurs. In my culture, a nickname signals acceptance, like "Maverick" and "Goose" in "Top Gun." So, instead of being offended, I was pleased to have earned a "call sign" so quickly. I received the slur as a warm welcome.

Years later, as the young mother of three fair-skinned children, I wondered why fellow mothers at the neighborhood park seemed uncomfortable when I tried to join their discussions. I was finally enlightened when one asked to know which family I worked for. Later, at a friend's pool party (a friend who happened to be a member of Congress), a fellow guest handed me her children's towels, assuming I was staff.

My professional life has been peppered with similar incidents. Although I speak four languages and earned a master's degree from a prestigious university, more than a few colleagues have conflated speaking with an accent with speaking out of turn. Or worse. When I was appointed to represent the United States before an international body, a colleague actually asked me who I was sleeping with, adding that, surely, that's how I got appointed.

"Free" expression in Cuba

Since "cancel culture" is in vogue, many today would rally around my "right" to publicly shame my offenders. I choose to embrace my inner, irreverent Cubana instead and have dedicated my career to protecting the right to free expression that my family left Cuba in search of.

Some of our most significant achievements — the abolition of slavery, the fight for women's suffrage, the civil rights movement — were born of ideas perceived as offensive to much of the population at the time. Terrible violence accompanied these movements. However, our culture of free expression prevailed, we achieved consensus, and laws were changed. In short, we found effective ways to persuade and be persuaded.

The alternative is what Fidel Castro mapped out in 1961 when he bracketed "freedom for expression within the revolution." In a speech to intellectuals Castro proclaimed: "Within the revolution, everything goes; against the revolution, nothing."

Castro created the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), a network of neighborhood volunteers set up on each block. CDR's members earn societal privileges if they

rat out neighbors who are insufficiently revolutionary. Permission or a certificate of good standing from the local CDR is needed to move, buy certain goods or transfer a ration card. The committees also organize “shaming” rallies in front of the houses of those not conforming to the goals of the revolution.

Does this sound eerily familiar? If it does, you are paying attention.

America's red flags

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, for example, takes on a number of cases every year because educational institutions insist on punishing teachers, colleagues, and students who step outside of the boundaries of the university's measure of “good standing.” And it's not only on campus where Americans are feeling surveilled and censored by administrators and peers. In July, the CATO Institute released a survey in which 62% of Americans agreed that the current political climate prevents them from saying what they believe because others might find it offensive.

This cultural shift is so concerning that a group of intellectuals, including author JK Rowling, signed a letter published by Harper's Magazine in July, warning:

“The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.”

That echoes the concerns by one Black feminist who lamented in the The New York Times “the cannibalistic maw of the cancel culture” overseen by “self-appointed guardians of political purity.” Even former President Barack Obama told a crowd of activists last year: “This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically woke and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly. The world is messy. There are ambiguities.”

What was the response to the warning of America's first Black president and the author of the "Harry Potter" series? To cancel them too, by labeling them outdated, "finger-wagging" “Boomers” who "stubbornly reject progress and refuse to show compassion.”

Laws change with the culture

Sadly, a survey published by Politico revealed “cancel culture” is largely driven by younger people. Although 49% of voters overall said cancel culture had a somewhat or negative impact, 55% of voters aged 18-34 say they have actually taken part in “canceling” individuals and institutions for offensive views. Members of Generation Z were the most sympathetic to punishing people and institutions over views they considered offensive, followed closely by millennials.

If this trend continues, Castro-style laws will gradually follow. Co-author of "The Coddling of the American Mind," Greg Lukianoff, explains: “Free speech culture is more important than the First Amendment. It's more important because free speech culture is what gave us the First Amendment ... and it is what will decide if our current free speech protections will survive into the future.”

A few days after being called the racial slur, I found out it was not a cool nickname. I then walked down the hallway, knocked on my hallmate's door and explained how it felt. She was embarrassed, sharing she was the first in her family to go to college. I can't say we became close friends. But, instead of canceling each other, we talked.

The turmoil of 2020 is told in images of people facing off and shouting: Americans of every hue, masked, unmasked, armed, kneeling, standing, uniformed, and civilian. Indelible and provocative, each image is evidence of the need for conversation. And if we don't stand up to the on-going silencing, we will have no one to blame but ourselves for losing the right that has made this imperfect country of ours, a country where we are inclined to listen, willing to learn, and strive to improve.

Just as the solution to any ongoing civil rights struggle will never be found in violence, it won't be found in forced silence.