



Taibbi, Harper's and the Intellectual Dark Web

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July 24, 2020

Just a day before the Harper's Open Letter appeared on July 7th, Osita Nwanevu wrote an article for The New Republic on "[The Willful Blindness of Reactionary Liberalism](#)" that made Matt Taibbi sound as if his name would show up there the next day. Indeed, in a convivial Rolling Stone podcast that Taibbi and his partner Katie Halper did with Thomas Chatterton Williams, the godfather of the letter regretted that he didn't have Taibbi's email address otherwise he would have been invited.

Nwanevu's article addressed the widespread assault on identity politics that makes it sound like the greatest threat to American democracy is diversity training seminars by Robin Diangelo, the author of "White Fragility." Indeed, Matt Taibbi described the philosophy behind her book as positively "[Hitlerian](#)."

This furor over "cancel culture" or what used to be called "political correctness" is not exactly new. I saw it as early as 1991 when Nat Hentoff was [on the warpath](#) against efforts to reduce racism at universities and the media, just as is happening today:

For 2 1/2 years, I have been interviewing students and professors across the country for a book I'm writing on assaults by orthodoxies — right and left — on freedom of expression. Many specific incidents of political correctness — with names — have been printed in this column from those interviews.

One very bright young man at Brown, for example, told me he finally gave up offering his questions on affirmative action — like "What has it done for poor blacks?" — in class. He got tired of being called a racist, in and out of the room.

Just in case you hadn't noticed, Donald Trump's campaign was filled with tirades against "political correctness." And after "cancel culture" became a ubiquitous buzzword, Trump made sure to take a stand against it. If you can spot any difference between the Harper's letter and his speech at Mount Rushmore, I'd be amazed:

One of their political weapons is "Cancel Culture" — driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees. This is the very definition of totalitarianism, and it is completely alien to our culture and our values, and it has absolutely no place in the United States of America.

Taibbi and Halper asked Williams to define canceling. He replied that there are two aspects, both often rooted in Twitter aggressions. The first might result in someone being fired from a job

because they were politically incorrect, although it seems that JK Rowling needn't worry. Williams assured his hosts that he wrote the letter to protect those who were not so nearly as famous and powerful. While everybody should take a stand against people losing a job for their political beliefs, it struck Katie Halper as odd that Williams would have included Cary Nelson. Nelson campaigned for the firing of Steven Salaita in one of the most notorious cancellations of the past ten years. Williams begged off on that choice, saying that he knew nothing about Nelson beforehand. He trusted the judgment of his cohorts. Sure, why look too deeply into inconsistencies when a noble defense of free speech took priority.

More problematic was Williams's notion that canceling can put someone outside of polite, liberal society. By stigmatizing someone like Bari Weiss through repeated tweets, she ends up as a modern-day Hester Prynne with a scarlet letter. Taibbi was furious with how "woke" N.Y. Times reporters mounted a vendetta against her. It left the editorial page impoverished with its readers "ending up with a picture of the world that's incomplete." Does Taibbi mourn the loss of her racist attacks on Palestinians and their supporters in the BDS movement? His silence during the exchange between Halper and Williams on Cary Nelson does make you wonder.

The overarching question is whether stigmatizing someone isn't just part of the battleground of ideas. When Max Blumenthal mysteriously began defending Basher al-Assad after attending an RT gala in Moscow, there were many tweets that "canceled" him, even leading to bookstores disinviting him from a reading. At the time, Blumenthal's allies called this McCarthyism though neither the government nor the corporate elite had any interest in his book tour one way or the other. Blumenthal spoke for most of the left at the time, meriting red carpet treatment on the Taibbi and Halper podcast. If you have the slightest familiarity with left politics, you'll realize that "canceling" has been around since the early 1900s. As long as it occurs only in heated polemics rather than firing squads, I'd argue that it is essential.

Taibbi continued with his publicity campaign against the cancel culture. His next stop was a podcast with Bret Weinstein, an ex-professor at Evergreen State College in Washington and a victim of cancel culture, at least in his own eyes. In 2017, Weinstein, who was teaching biology there, clashed with minority students and faculty over a yearly "day of remembrance," when they would stay off campus to highlight their contributions to the college. That year, the minority asked white students and professors to take part in a role reversal. They would remain off campus to discuss racism and the minorities would attend class on campus. Weinstein wrote an open letter denouncing this change as "an act of oppression" since it made a virtual demand for whites to stay away.

In the opening moments of their conversation, Taibbi repented for not making a big stink over Weinstein's ostracism and eventual resignation from Evergreen over student protests. Suing the school for \$3.8 million in damage, Weinstein walked away with only a half-million.

One wonders if Taibbi looked into the case against Weinstein made by three Evergreen professors that year on Huffington Post titled "[Another Side of The Evergreen State College Story](#)". One of them was Zoltan Grossman, who has written dozens of articles for CounterPunch over the years. The three make an essential point:

In order for a propaganda campaign to succeed, it needs a Big Lie. At Evergreen, the Big Lie is that Evergreen's Day of Absence demonstrated "reverse racism" as whites "were forced to leave campus because of the color of their skin." It is stunning to us how often this "alternative fact"

has been repeated until it has become unchallenged truth. The truth is that the Day of Absence has long been an accepted — and voluntary — practice at Evergreen. On the Day of Absence, people of color who chose to do so generally attended an off-campus event, while whites who chose to participate stayed on campus to attend lectures, workshops and discussions about how race and racism shape social structures and everyday life.

Once they got past the Evergreen business, Weinstein and Taibbi settled into a litany of how bad things have gotten in the U.S. because of uppity anti-racist students dragging the country down. They struck me as two middle-aged men ready to write a book titled “The Decline of the U.S.” after the fashion of Oswald Spengler. They probably could make good money writing such a book since there is always a market for screeds against political correctness, identity politics, and that sort of thing. Usually written by conservatives like Allan Bloom (“The Closing of the American Mind”), they also have their liberal counterparts like Todd Gitlin, who wrote “The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars” in 1996.

Gitlin, who signed the Harper’s letter, described himself in the book as sympathetic to blacks but was distressed by their retreat into what he felt were self-absorbed, symbolic politics, according to a N.Y. Times review. He wrote that “few political campaigns are launched against the impoverishment of the cities” and that “The diversity rhetoric of identity politics short-circuits the necessary discussion of what ought to be done about all the dying out there.” He had come to the same conclusions as Adolph Reed Jr., who also got the red-carpet treatment from Taibbi and Halper.

Weinstein gushed over Taibbi’s long record of courageous journalism as if writing take-downs of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump risked a jail term. Yes, Taibbi is entertaining, but how far can you go stating the obvious, even if scabrously. I’d prefer a little less scabrousness and a lot more economic analysis. That’s one of the reasons I stopped reading Taibbi after the good old “vampire squid” days ended.

What stopped me in my tracks during the interview was Taibbi calling for an all-out crusade against a culture that was inimical to freedom, enlightenment values and the core ideas of our “American experiment.” Listening to this, I began to wonder if Taibbi wrote Trump’s Mount Rushmore speech rather than Stephen Miller.

We had to protect this great experiment against men like Lenin, whose greatest fault, according to Taibbi, was a lack of a sense of humor. In one of his Sovietologist tomes, Adam Ulam dwelt at length about this flaw, something that helped Taibbi steer clear of anything smacking of Bolshevism. Unlike Lenin, Taibbi has a great sense of humor. Politics, not so much.

Taibbi compared BLM type activists to Lenin’s little clan of super-motivated Bolsheviks who were never going to go anywhere because they were tiny. They came across as nuts to the Russians, including the more sensible socialists in Russia who saw things like Bernie Sanders rather than the ruthless and joke-averse V.I. Lenin. The Bolsheviks were victorious in 1917, only because “they had a way of thinking difficult to counter in an institutional setting.” Really? I always thought it had to do with hunger and a war that had cost the lives of over two million soldiers. But what do I know? I’ve never read Adam Ulam.

Weinstein then raised the stakes on the kind of danger cancel culture presented. Yes, it could lead to Bolshevism, but other even worse scenarios could unfold. The people writing nasty

tweets about JK Rowling or Bari Weiss could be the incubators for the same sort of genocides Nazi Germany, Rwanda and Cambodia suffered. Like the fearless anti-fascists of Weimar Germany, Matt Taibbi and Thomas Chatterton are the only men capable of stopping mobs ready to beat up Jews. Bari Weiss must thank her lucky stars that she has such courageous defenders of enlightenment values on her side.

After spending what seemed like an eternity listening to Taibbi and Weinstein telling each other how great they were, I decided to learn a bit more about Weinstein. It turns out that he is a member in good standing of the Intellectual Dark Web, a term that Bret Weinstein's brother Eric coined. Eric Weinstein is the managing director of Peter Thiel's private equity firm. You might remember Thiel for his vendetta against the Gawker website that outed him as gay. Writing for the Cato Institute, Thiel blamed welfare and women getting the vote for making "capitalist democracy" into an oxymoron. He is also the author of "The Diversity Myth", a book that blames political correctness and multiculturalism for the decline of higher education.

Eric and Bret Weinstein are prime movers in the Intellectual Dark Web, whose ideas appear in Quillette. This I.D.W. outlet once asked the question why Jordan Peterson did not make it to a list of the world's top fifty intellectuals. No one else did, of course. Unsurprisingly, Quillette has embraced the Harper's Open Letter, claiming that it stands in the tradition of John Stuart Mill. Mill is famous for invoking "the marketplace of ideas," a concept that is distinctly at odds with A.J. Liebling's insight that freedom of the press belongs to those who own one. Given the roost Harper's signatories enjoy at prestigious magazines and newspapers, one can understand why they are so willing to give free advice. Let others start their own periodicals like Ariana Huffington. No money? No problem. Just use social media even if it pisses off liberals.

The Intellectual Dark Web got a big boost when Bari Weiss wrote an op-ed piece hyping a development that dovetailed with her agenda. She wrote:

Here are some things that you will hear when you sit down to dinner with the vanguard of the Intellectual Dark Web: There are fundamental biological differences between men and women. Free speech is under siege. Identity politics is a toxic ideology that is tearing American society apart. And we're in a dangerous place if these ideas are considered "dark."

She quoted Eric Weinstein: "You have to understand that the I.D.W. emerged as a response to a world where perfectly reasonable intellectuals were being regularly mislabeled by activists, institutions and mainstream journalists with every career-ending epithet from 'Islamophobe' to 'Nazi.'" This claim, of course, is made by Taibbi and the Harper's Open Letter.

Weiss also pays tribute to Joe Rogan, whose podcasts reach millions. If you have the patience to sit through the Taibbi-Weinstein lovefest, you'll note that Weinstein considers Rogan and Taibbi as two of the most fearless and capable defenders of the great American "experiment." Taibbi felt flattered by this salute. Maybe he wasn't aware of the controversy Rogan was embroiled in about a month ago. A video surfaced with him laughing at a friend's story about coercing a woman into giving him oral sex. The Independent quoted an exchange from Rogan's podcast:

Recalling a woman performing oral sex on him in the Comedy Store in California, Diaz says: "You think I'm fucking kidding? Yeah, you've got to suck my dick to get up to [venue] the Belly Room. I'll make a call for you. That's the fucking gateway into Hollywood, everybody knows that."

Rogan then asks: “How many girls did you have do that?” To which Diaz replies: “20.” Rogan bursts out laughing and claps his hands.

I imagine that Taibbi got a big laugh out of this since it reminded him of his days at the eXile, a Russian English-language magazine that put out the same kind of garbage regularly. It had graphic descriptions of women being raped and humiliated, something Taibbi would later describe as only fictional and satirical.

What wasn't fictional was Taibbi's nasty attacks on female correspondents in Moscow who had gotten on his and his pal Mark Ames's wrong side. The Washington Post reported on their antics, including Taibbi's disgusting reference to Kathy Lally, the author of the article “The two expat bros who terrorized women correspondents in Moscow.” If there was anything satirical about this, I for one couldn't see it:

When I wrote an article about advertisements that used sex to sell cigarettes — new for Russia — Taibbi addressed my Baltimore Sun editors in his eXile column: “Lally's article is pathological, illogical, inaccurate, makes no point, and is insulting and hypocritical besides. . . . Lally's gaffes may be comic, the wild meanderings of an aging woman nearing derangement.” Once, the eXile declared me the winner of its “Gnarliest Elephantine Ass on a Journalist With No Ethics Award.” Another time, it published a cartoon showing me in bed with my editor.

In a conversation he had with Reason Magazine's Nick Gillespie, this kind of misogyny came up. Taibbi naturally regretted having said things like this even though you get the feeling that he remains nostalgic for the time when political correctness wasn't such a hamper to the funny stuff that Lenin would never have published in Iskra.

Back in the mid-2000s, I used to catch Taibbi on the Don Imus show when the local Pacifica station became too ponderous. They got along famously, especially when Taibbi opened up on some lying politician. Imus, like Taibbi, was a notorious bad boy and much less worried about offending people. After all, that's what shock jocks do. In 2007, Imus resigned after referring to the mostly Black Rutgers women's basketball team as a bunch of nappy-headed whores. That's a victim of cancel culture, no? If it were up to Taibbi and the Intellectual Dark Web, restrictions on speech would be relaxed even if it made Black people hurt. This is what the culture clash is all about in the long run. Oppressed people have the right to challenge and overcome the racism that has haunted the U.S. since 1619, even if it pisses off powerful liberals.