

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
HELMS SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

The Origin, Development, and Consequences of Cancel Culture in American Society

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by

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The phenomenon of cancel culture as a movement has become more influential as the American culture awareness grows regarding the owing respect and honor to one another. Cancel culture in today's American society plays an important role, that is why it is important to see the origin of it, and its development from the sixties to now. Generally, cancel culture has been characterized for their perseverance on justice but with results in hate, resentment, and vengeance in American society. Thus, one would say that the origin and development of the movement cancel culture, despite its intentions of social justice, has provoked more negative consequences than positive ones.

The idea of cancel culture codifies as a hindrance to civic discourse, in the way that it "cultivates the mob mentality" and demands a "100% consensus"¹ In part, cancel culture can be linked to what is perverse or taboo in a society. However, cancel culture goes further than recognizing the supposed taboo words or actions in the way it also places pressure to withdraw the taboo words or actions.² Clearly cancel culture evolves around the idea of bringing justice for an offensive word, or action taken by any public figure. And, in a major part of the cases, it is displayed on the familiar pattern: A celebrity or other public figure does or says something offensive. Therefore, a public backlash, often fueled by politically progressive social media, ensues. Then come the calls to cancel the person — that is, to effectively end their career or revoke their cultural cachet, whether through boycotts of their work or disciplinary action from an employer.³ In other words, the person or group who is calling to cancel someone else is acting in the place of the jury with the motivation of the due responsibility of respect and honor that each person ought one another.

The idea of cancel culture hides behind its duty and desire to fight inequity and injustice, so it is important to look back to the Presidents that were very much involved at that time with these concepts. The idea to fight inequality, injustice, and discrimination has become more popular over the years, in fact, during John F. Kennedy the idea of the "New Frontier" a package of laws and reforms that sought to eliminate injustice and inequality in the United States was displayed.⁴ And later, after President Kennedy's assassination, the "Great Society" plan for the United States by President Lyndon B. Johnson was characterized by his development of programs that give poverty and racial injustice no place. And, even before Johnson came to presidency, he urged Congress to "enact a civil rights law so that we can move forward to eliminate every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based on race or color."⁵ Thus,

¹ Jeannie C. Parker Beard, "Click Bait, Cancel Culture, and the Rhetoric of Civic Discourse." Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. Last modified 2020.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gaintlit/2020/2020/19>.

² Allison Budaj, "Tug of War: Social Media, Cancel Culture, and Diversity for Girls and The 100." KOME : an international journal of pure communication inquiry. Online first (2021).

³ The Vox. "Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture. Accessed February 2nd, 2021.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>

⁴ Editors, History.com. "The 1960s History." History.com. A&E Television Networks, May 25, 2010.
<https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/1960s-history>.

⁵ Deak Nabers, "Past Using James Baldwin and Civil Rights Law in the 1960s." Yale journal of criticism. 18, no. 2 (2005): 221–242.

there has been a transition on the focus on the president's agenda since the sixties empathizing on the relevance of social justice. The civil rights Act was pushed by President Johnson inspired by his vision prohibiting discrimination against minorities like women and African Americans.

In consequence, law and suits were imposed to states to promote equality, respect, and inclusion. However, the laws and regulations against discrimination against racism were not enough for some of the neighborhoods where discrimination was still present. So, movements like the Black power emerged as a reaction to lagging, uneven progress toward equality and as a challenge to the assimilationist theme of the Civil Rights movement.⁶ In fact, by the early years of the 1970s, just how much progress has been achieved by Blacks was the subject of bitter debate. Political analysts Ben Wattenberg and Richard Scammon proclaimed that by 1973 the majority of Blacks were middle class⁷. In 1975, another neo-conservative social scientist, Nathan Glazer, joined in pronouncing integration a success, not only in terms of measures of economic progress but of school integration and political power⁸. The positive feedback of the great improvements with the Civil Rights Act produced a response in chorus of denials, supported by counterstatistics, from black leaders and scholars and a few pessimistic white liberals⁹. Therefore, movements like the Black Power decided to create their own criteria in justice and inclusion, because it was simply not enough for them. However, it is important to clarify that cancel culture not only focuses on the made of justice against racial discrimination but any time of taboo against minorities. Throughout the years, American society has emphasized on the so called social justice, and most of the definition and representatives for this cause come from the left-wing and progressist on the government. They would defined Social justice as a fight against systemic oppression by the dominant over the oppressed employs coalition-building and seeks changes in basic societal structures.¹⁰

Cancel culture is very influenced by the left progressivist and their ideas and much of their ideas come from a man named Herbert Marcuse who was influenced by Marxist ideologies. So, the ideologies and beliefs of cancel culture finds their roots back in Herbert Marcuse that remained a relatively obscure figure until 1967, the year of the Summer of Love in San Francisco, the counter-culture, the student movement, and protest against the war in Vietnam.¹¹ All of these events had one thing in common and that was the rejection and refusal of the

⁶ Lewis M Killian, "Black Power and White Reactions: The Revitalization of Race-Thinking in the United States." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 454 (1981): 42-54. Accessed February 11, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1044244>.

⁷ Ben J Wattenberg, *The Real America: a Surprising Examination of the State of the Union*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1974.

⁸ Elinor G Barber, "Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy." *Political Science Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (1976): 517. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2148945>.

⁹ Lewis M Killian, "Black Power and White Reactions: The Revitalization of Race-Thinking in the United States." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 454 (1981): 42-54. Accessed February 11, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1044244>.

¹⁰ Lori Molinari, "What Does the Left Mean by Social Justice?" The Heritage Foundation. Last modified March 17, 2017. <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/report/what-does-the-left-mean-social-justice>.

¹¹ Malcolm Miles, "Society as a Work of Art." In *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation*, 86-105. London: Pluto Press, 2012. Accessed March 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctt183gzmn.8.

established values that had influenced American society until then. Interestingly enough, from the mid-1960s, as David Farber notes, ‘whites middle-class youths restocked the medicine chest with marijuana and LSD.’¹² Indeed American society was being exposed to a great challenging new perspective on life, allowances, and authority in which a hope raised in the name of “liberation” among other things. By 1967, Marcuse had become a key figure for the student movement and the New Left, he become an contributor on his radical thought and student unrest far from the conservative university system in the US. And during that time Marcuse realized the power that the media has over society, because after Marcuse defended one of his colleges, he received death threats via media. In consequence, Marcuse recalled in his work *Soviet Marxism* that in 1967 he actually began to acquire the mystical aura of familiarity that the media have the power to create¹³. What is call the new left started to grow without a formal leader but just a regrouping of intellectuals and radical students mobilizing against the war in Vietnam and the dominance of the Right in North America.¹⁴ In comparison to the traditional left, the New Left would describe themselves as pluralist, engaging with emergent cultural forms and social movements while concern with issues of gender, race, sexuality, the environment, and peace.¹⁵ Marcuse identified himself as a Libertarian socialist, and he always refer to his belief as a political stand that does not seize power, but diffuse it in an open, transparent formation¹⁶.

The New Left citing the C. Wright Mills Letter to the New Left describes how the new radicalism grounded in a new conditions was initiated:

Unlike the Old Left, which had organized around the economic issues of the Depression and anti-fascism.. the New Left would confront newer discontents like powerlessness, moral disaffection, the purposelessness of middle-class life- the issues of an affluent society.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the goal of the New Left initiated in the sixties represents a lot of similarities that one can see in today’s American culture. In fact, it is certain that since then the New Left has become an advocate of radicalism and the liberation of the voiceless. The historian Doug Rossinow sees liberation as the idea which united the New Left: ‘when young political radicals said “the revolution is about our lives,” they fused their desire for individual empowerment with the dissent cultural politics.’¹⁸ As mentioned before, Marcuse embodied the yearning to indoctrinate students at his lectures first in Frankfurt school and later in other schools in San Francisco¹⁹ to follow his radical ideologies that were characterized by their message that they wanted the world and they wanted it now.

Previously mentioned, Herbert Marcuse was a philosopher and professor, and he worked in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. In the school, he asserted that Western civilization,

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A critical analysis*: Harmondsworth, Prnguin, 1971. P. 108 (first published, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Malcolm Miles, "Society as a Work of Art." In *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation*, 86-105. London: Pluto Press, 2012. Accessed March 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctt183gzmn.8.

¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A critical analysis*: Harmondsworth, Prnguin, 1971. P. 108 (first published, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 88

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 29

¹⁸ Vicent Geoghegan, *Reason and Eros: The Social Theory of Herbert Marcuse*, London, Pluto, 1981, p. 28.

¹⁹ Malcolm Miles, "Society as a Work of Art." In *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation*, 86-105. London: Pluto Press, 2012. Accessed March 18, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctt183gzmn.8.

despite its alleged tendency towards even more effective forms of domination, contains an objective potential for radical social and libidinal change²⁰ So, Marcuse with many of his works attracted the engagement and inspiration from variety of groups on the Left. However, the concept of reconciliation and problem-solving according to Herbert reaches an utopia that is simply not practical at all. Because, in Marcuse's concept of utopia involved its objectively possible realization in a non-repressive civilization. In consequence, civilization becomes predicated upon the ongoing self-imposition of repressive taboos amongst essentially guilty people.²¹ In contrast to the freedom of speech that people have undermining the very democracy that Americans seek to create with discussion practices in adult education. Also, Marcuse commented many times in how the market system should work everywhere in the world. While not oblivious to the ability of the marketplace to co-opt whatever subversive energies there may be, Marcuse's strategy for reconciling the reality principle and the pleasure principle, the demands of objective reality that call for renunciation and the desire for immediate gratification, consists in making two correlated sets of distinctions: between the so-called performance-principle and the reality principle; and between surplus repression and basic repression.²² Thus, even in the economic market terms Marcuse's established strategies sought a immediate result basis that oversaw the reality in which things can be done without denying the people their space to think and develop ideas and opinions.

In American society today, cancel culture is being privileged with the power and responsibility to become the judge for every decision that public figures make but specially whatever or whoever goes against what the left progressit believe. For instance, Amazon on February of 2021 cancelled the evangelical book on the transgender issue of Ryan T. Anderson. Despite of Anderson's book *When Harry Became Sally* success as it hit No. 1 on two of Amazon's bestseller lists before it was even released, one can no longer order his book on Amazon.²³ Regardless of the left's horror for Anderson's viewpoint, "When *Harry Became Sally* stood the test of time on Amazon's website for three years. But it only made sense that it would be canceled by one of the Big Tech oligarchs in 2021. To what Anderson responded "It's not about how you say it, it's not about how rigorously you argue it, it's not about how charitably you present it. It's about whether you dissent from a new orthodoxy."²⁴

²⁰ Espen Hammer, "Marcuse's Critical Theory of Modernity." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 9 (November 2008): 1071–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453708098538>.

²¹ Espen Hammer, "Marcuse's Critical Theory of Modernity." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 9 (November 2008): 1071–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453708098538>.

²² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 35. For a good discussion of Marcuse's psychology, see Edward Hyman, 'Eros and Freedom: The Critical Psychology of Herbert Marcuse', in Robert Pippin, Andrew Feenberg and Charles P. Webel (eds), *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), pp. 35–66

²³ Jim Denison, "Amazon Cancels Evangelical Book on the Transgender Issue: A "digital Book-burning" and the Power of Holiness." *Denison Forum*. Last modified February 25, 2021. <https://www.denisonforum.org/columns/daily-article/amazon-cancels-evangelical-book-on-the-transgender-issue-a-digital-book-burning-and-the-power-of-holiness/>.

²⁴ Gabe Kaminsky, "Amazon Bans Scholar Ryan Anderson's Book On Transgenderism." *The Federalist*. Last modified February 23, 2021. <https://thefederalist.com/2021/02/23/digital-book-burning-amazon-bans-heritage-scholar-ryan-t-andersons-book-on-transgenderism/>.

An important question related to the findings mentioned above is how anybody can determine the concept of real justice and its following policies that fight against discrimination and racism without seeking ruin or destruction for other people's properties and assets.

For instance, it is relevant to mention one of the most recent cases where a call for "justice" affected the life of a young woman forever. Amy Cooper, who has no relation to Christian Cooper, issued multiple apologies on Monday after a video circulated on Twitter in which she can be heard telling the police there's "an African American man threatening my life," after Christian Cooper asked her to put her dog on a leash.²⁵ Christian Cooper posted the video he filmed, and immediately she received backlash on social media, she even lost her job because of the video. Within 24 hours, the woman, identified as Amy Cooper, had given up her dog, publicly apologized and been fired from her job. Mr. Cooper expressed regret for the extent of the retribution.²⁶ Interestingly enough is that Amy and Christian were together when Sgt. Mary Frances O'Donnell, a policewoman, came to say and conclude from the situation that it was only a verbal dispute that happened between two citizens. But the video was posted on Monday and Internet sleuths digging into Ms. Cooper's life found an Instagram profile of her dog, Henry, and began sharing old photos documenting injuries he had suffered. By nightfall, she had surrendered Henry to the cocker spaniel rescue group she had adopted him from two years before, according to a Facebook post by the group.²⁷ Cancel culture in today's American culture is represented in the way the internet community made Amy give her dog, Henry, away, and Franklin Templeton decided in response to the great critique over social media to fire her. Understandably, it was troubling for many people according to Professor Russell-Brown, because it ties taps into a long history of white women, in particular, falsely accusing black men of crimes that leads to great harm."²⁸ However, the situation got confronted by the policewoman before with only three people involved, but this was not enough just like it was not enough in the past with the Civil Rights Act.

According to Alexandra D'amour, cancel culture has been incredibly effective at combating sexism, racism, or any other type of abuse or harmful wrongdoing to others.²⁹ And, despite of the negative outcome of the movement of cancel culture, the movement has created an awareness and accountability for actions that were characterized by racism, inequality, and

²⁵ Kelly McLaughlin, "The Man Who Filmed His Encounter with a Woman in Central Park Says Her Actions Were 'Definitely Racist,' but He's Asking People to Stop Making Death Threats against Her." Insider. Insider, May 27, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/christian-cooper-speaks-out-about-central-park-amy-cooper-2020-5>.

²⁶ Sarah Maslin Nir, "White Woman Is Fired After Calling Police on Black Man in Central Park." The New York Times. The New York Times, May 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/nyregion/amy-cooper-dog-central-park.html>.

²⁷ Nir, Sarah Maslin. "White Woman Is Fired After Calling Police on Black Man in Central Park." The New York Times. The New York Times, May 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/nyregion/amy-cooper-dog-central-park.html>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Toni-Jan P Quince, fill says: Tenacious says: Anonymous Says: Pearl says: and Matej says: "Cancel Culture: The Good, The Bad, & Its Impact on Social Change." On Our Moon, April 2, 2020. <https://onourmoon.com/cancel-culture-the-good-the-bad-its-impact-on-social-change/>.

injustice. Cancel culture projected the possible consequences in accountability that the aggressor had to face due to demands of social change addressing the deep inequalities to the outcry with a cultural boycott as an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, give money to those individuals/institutions.³⁰ So, one would say that artificially the movement had been inspired by good intentions against racism, discrimination, and inequality; however, even D'amour recalled the negative destructive effects that this movement has in today's society she said said: "we need to push for critical thinking, and encourage people to read beyond the headlines and potential media manipulation." She was referring to the pressure of ignorant supporters of cancel culture that have insisted on taking away jobs, titles, even pets from the "aggressor" without any type of critical thinking research first. The rise of cancel culture in American society has increased especially among teenagers that are the next generation of leaders in the country. According to a new report by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that promotes safe technology and media for children, teens spend an average of seven hours and 22 minutes on their phones a day.³¹ So, they are directly exposed to the newest trends online with cancel culture.

Accordingly, the *New York Times* conducted a research with teenagers, and they asked them how they feel about cancel culture. They are the best audience to ask because about 54% of U.S teens recognize that they spend way too much on their cellphone.³² And, one of the most acclaimed answers was by Mercy V from IPoly High who said: "I think that cancel culture is generally an unhealthy practice. I believe that everyone should have a chance to learn and recover from the mistakes that they have made. In my opinion, it's better to try to patiently educate someone instead of bashing and insulting them or trying to ruin their careers."³³ Therefore, one would conclude that if the group of people that spend most of their time navigating on the internet recognizes the real negative consequence and essence of cancel culture, the movement itself is indeed unhealthy and dangerous for the American Society.

In conclusion, accountability and justice are great valuable things that American society wants to treasure today more than ever before. However, there should be a moment for the individual to reflect on the most effective way to find solutions when facing situations of conflict in discrimination, racism, or inequality. Like calling people to engage in the conversation instead of calling them out with questioning, mistrustful heart. It is effortless to engage in a judgemental and condemning trial against one another, but clearly, it is problematic and brings even more

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Juliana Jacobo, ABC News. ABC News Network, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/us/teens-spend-hours-screens-entertainment-day-report/story?id=66607555>.

³² Jingjing Jiang, "How Teens and Parents Navigate Screen Time and Device Distractions." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. Pew Research Center, August 14, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/08/22/how-teens-and-parents-navigate-screen-time-and-device-distractions/>.

³³ The Learning Network, "What Students Are Saying About Cancel Culture, Friendly Celebrity Battles and Finding Escape." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/learning/what-students-are-saying-about-cancel-culture-friendly-celebrity-battles-and-finding-escape.html>.

hate, resentment, and thirst for more “justice” threatening one of the most cherished and important values in American society: first Amendment that is freedom of speech.

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