

## Articles by Jonathan Rauch

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### The Cancel Culture Checklist

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CANCEL culture now poses a real threat to intellectual freedom in the United States. According to [a recent poll by the Cato Institute](#), a third of Americans say that they are personally worried about losing their jobs or missing out on career opportunities if they express their real political opinions. Americans in all walks of life have been publicly shamed, pressured into ritualistic apologies or summarily fired.

But critics of the critics of cancel culture make a powerful retort. Accusing others of canceling can, they claim, be a way to stigmatize legitimate criticism. As Hannah Giorgis [writes in the Atlantic](#), “critical tweets are not censorship.”

So what, exactly, does a cancellation consist of? And how does it differ from the exercise of free speech and robust critical debate?

At a conceptual level, the difference is clear. Criticism marshals evidence and arguments in a rational effort to persuade. Canceling, by contrast, seeks to organize and manipulate the social or media environment in order to isolate, deplatform or intimidate ideological opponents. It is about shaping the information battlefield, not seeking truth; and its intent—or at least its predictable outcome—is to coerce conformity and reduce the scope for forms of criticism that are not sanctioned by the prevailing consensus of some local majority.

In practice, however, telling canceling apart from criticism can be difficult because both take the *form* of criticizing others. That is why it is probably impossible to devise a simple bright-line test of what should count as a harmful instance of cancellation.

A better approach might therefore be diagnostic. Like the symptoms of cancer, the hallmarks of a cancellation are many. Though not all instances involve every single characteristic, they all involve *some* of its key attributes. Rather than issuing a single litmus test, the diagnostic approach allows us to draw up a checklist of warning signs. The more signs you see, the more certain you can be that you are looking at a cancel campaign.

Six warning signs make up my personal checklist for cancel culture.

#### Punitiveness

*Are people denouncing you to your employer, your professional groups or your social connections? Are you being blacklisted from jobs and social opportunities? Does what is being said to or about you have the goal—or foreseeable effect—of jeopardizing your livelihood or isolating you socially?*

A critical culture seeks to correct rather than punish. In science, the penalty for being wrong is not that you lose your job or your friends. Normally, the only penalty is that you lose the argument. Even the phenomenon of retracting papers is new and deservedly controversial, because the usual—and very effective—method has been for science to simply discard mistakes and move on. Wrong answers and bad science die on the vine and disappear. Incentives are mostly positive, not punitive: for being right, you win citations, promotions, fame and fancy prizes. Taking a punitive attitude toward mistakes undermines the scientific process because knowledge advances by trial and error.

Canceling, by contrast, seeks to punish rather than correct—and often for a single misstep rather than a long track record of failure. A professor [swears](#) to “ruin [a graduate student’s] reputation permanently and deservedly.” Campaigners against an art curator [declare](#) he “must be removed from his job, effective immediately.”

The point is to make the errant suffer.

#### Deplatforming

*Are campaigners attempting to prevent you from publishing your work, giving speeches or attending meetings? Are they claiming that allowing you to be heard is violence against them or makes them unsafe?*

A critical culture tolerates dissent rather than silencing it. It understands that dissent can seem obnoxious, harmful, hateful and, yes, *unsafe*. To minimize unnecessary damage, it goes to great lengths to encourage people to express themselves in a civil manner. But it also understands that, every so often, an obnoxious dissenter is right—and so it opposes silencing and deplatforming.

Canceling, by contrast, seeks to shut up and shout down its targets. Cancelers often define the mere act of disagreeing with them as a threat to their safety or even an act of violence. Staffers at the *New York Times* [claimed](#) that the mere act of publishing a controversial op-ed piece endangered them. Staffers at the *New Yorker* demanded that Steve Bannon be [deplatformed](#). Shout-downs, [disinvitations](#) and demands for retractions and withdrawals are cancelers’ stock in trade.

#### Organization

*Does criticism appear to be organized and targeted? Are the organizers recruiting others to pile on? Are you being swarmed and brigaded? Are people hunting through your work and scouring social media to find ammunition to use against you?*

Critical culture relies on persuasion. The way to win an argument is to convince others that you are right. Often, of course, schools of thought form, and arguments between them can grow heated; but organizing pressure campaigns against political or ideological targets is usually considered out of bounds.

By contrast, it’s common to see cancelers organize hundreds of petition-signers or thousands of social media users to dig up and prosecute an indictment. Recently, for example, campaigners picked through the social media posts of the psychologist (and member of *Persuasion*’s Board of Advisers) Steven Pinker in the hope of digging up some kind of case against him. Though they only came up with [trivial charges](#), such as that he had twice used the terms “urban crime” and “urban violence,” they got hundreds of signatories to join a group denunciation.

#### Secondary boycotts

*Is there an explicit or implicit threat that people who support you will get the same punitive treatment that you are receiving? Are people putting pressure on employers and professional colleagues to fire you or stop associating with you? Do people who defend you, or criticize the campaign against you, have to fear adverse consequences?*

With its commitments to exploring a wide range of ideas and correcting rather than coercing the errant, a critical culture sees no value in instilling a climate of fear. But instilling fear is what canceling is all about. By choosing targets unpredictably (almost anything can trigger a campaign), providing no safe harbors (even conformists can get hit), and implicitly threatening anyone who sides with those who are targeted, canceling sends the message: “you could be next.”

Thus, a canceled journalist was quickly dropped by his employer, his professional association and his publisher, becoming [“radioactive,”](#) as he put it. (At last check, he was applying to law schools.) In the resulting climate, people will often join public denunciations or [refrain from defending targets they believe to be innocent](#), to avoid becoming controversial themselves.

#### Moral grandstanding

*Is the tone of the discourse ad hominem, repetitive, ritualistic, posturing, accusatory, outraged? Are people flattening distinctions, demonizing you, slinging inflammatory labels and engaging in moral one-upmanship? Are people ignoring what you actually say—talking about but not to you?*

Precisely because speech can be hurtful, critical culture discourages extreme rhetoric. It encourages people to listen to each other, to use evidence and argumentation, to behave reasonably and to avoid personal attacks.

Cancel culture is much more invested in what philosophers Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke call [“moral grandstanding”](#): the display of moral outrage to impress one’s peer group, dominate others, or both. Grandstanders who condemn someone are not interested in persuading or correcting her; in fact, they are not really talking *to* her at all. Rather, they are using her as a convenient object in a campaign to elevate their own status. Pile-ons, personal attacks and bidding wars to show the most outrage are all ways of engaging in moral grandstanding.

#### Truthiness

*Are the things being said about you inaccurate? Do the people saying them not even seem to care about their veracity? Do they feel at liberty to distort your words, ignore corrections and make false accusations?*

Concern for accuracy is the north star of a critical culture. Not everyone gets every fact right, nor do people always agree on what is true; and yet people in a critical culture try to present their own and others' viewpoints honestly and accurately.

Though I may fail to live up to this standard in some cases, I recognize that I should address what you actually said, not an inflammatory caricature or some out-of-context quotation.

One of many reasons Donald Trump is a menace to democracy is that he views truth instrumentally, as something to use, abuse or ignore depending on the needs of the moment. He repeats discredited assertions again and again—or shifts ground to another when one assertion is definitively debunked. Cancelers often play the same kind of rhetorical Calvinball.

Cancelers' characterizations of a paper by the philosopher Rebecca Tuvel, for example, were demonstrably incorrect. The person who initiated the campaign even admitted to not having read the supposedly objectionable paper. "So little of what has been said ... is based upon people actually reading what I wrote," Tuvel lamented in a public statement.

But that did not stop anybody. For canceling is not about seeking truth or persuading others; it is a form of information warfare, in which truthiness suffices if it serves the cause.

Those are my six warning signs. If you spot one or two, you should fear that a canceling may be happening; if you see five or six, you can be sure.

Obviously, mine is not the only approach. Other people, such as Emily Yoffe and Greg Lukianoff, have made their own attempts at characterizing the current climate of fear or defining cancel culture. Hopefully, many more suggestions and refinements will follow.

As with most other concepts, we might never come to a complete consensus about its best definition. Still, I predict that it won't take long to reach a more sophisticated understanding of what cancel culture is—and, just as importantly, what it isn't.

Though our critics like to claim that those of us who worry about cancel culture just don't like being criticized on the internet, cancel culture is all too real. And though it may at times bear a superficial resemblance to critical culture, the two are diametrically opposed—and not so very difficult to tell apart.