

Questioning the Productivity of Cancel Culture in a Time of Extreme Social Change

“As the world becomes safer, our definition of harm expands”

- Robert Henderson, University of Cambridge

Introduction

2020 was a monumental year for social change. The dissatisfaction with on-going social inequalities gained enough momentum over the years to result in the expressions of outrage that took place throughout the entirety of my most memorable year to date. For the first time in my lifetime, I witnessed protests and communities coming together for social movements that were previously non-existent and invisible to the average household. Now, the themes of these protests are common knowledge and have been added to our vocabulary on a daily basis, often coming up as a recurring conversation at the dinner table. As these opinions regarding change become stronger and societies are in the process of rebuilding, I've noticed a larger divide between people than ever before. While it is easy to compare left to right, I believe this divide is much larger and more complex than a simple binary. Such opposing views and unwillingness to accept anything less than supposedly moral behaviour has resulted in what is now known as “cancel culture.” By way of the internet, cancel culture has become a common phrase used to explain the ways in which we no longer support those who have exhibited racist, sexist, abusive behaviour, and all other unethical practices from anywhere between now and forty years ago. Ranging from Don Cherry to Harvey Weinstein, household celebrities, friends, and family are being “cancelled” and forcibly removed from the lives of their former supporters.

It is important to note that the internet plays a significant role in the production and reproduction of cancel culture, as the digital structure has revealed itself as not being a friendly space for anti-racist and anti-misogynist narratives (Board, 2020). Preventing or simply cutting racist and misogynist perspectives from the source proves to be more difficult than ever before in this digital era, when identifying a majority sentiment is more difficult and the voices of the radical fringe dominate the space (Holder & Josephson, 2020). Extremists can now, very easily, find support and community at their fingertips (Holder & Josephson, 2020). Although there is little academic research regarding cancel culture currently, I'm sure you have witnessed the process, or even cancelled a celebrity or friend, yourself. However, I question how truly effective cancel culture is in producing change towards a better quality of life for all people. Unfortunately, this idea only operates under the assumption that all of us have the same morals and perception of acceptable behaviour for every person in the world, which is clearly not true. By analyzing the meaning of cancel culture, its origin, repercussions, and space created for women, I question its productive capacity in a time of major social change. This article unfolds cancel culture in a series of topics ranging from its roots in disagreement to its positive relationship to our brain, while asking thought provoking questions regarding its general success. The big question to you is — and I believe that there is no single answer — to what extent does cancel culture succeed in identifying and policing immoral behaviour, therefore reducing social inequality for all people?

What is cancel culture?

On one hand, cancel culture may be thought of as negative or imposing on one's freedom of speech, although it is both knowingly and unknowingly practiced regularly. According to Rob Henderson (2020) in *Psychology Today*, "cancel culture refers to

ending (or attempting to end) an individual's career or prominence to hold them accountable for immoral behaviour." Henderson explains how, driven primarily by "young progressives," "most often through social media, cancel culture has attracted controversy since it swept into the national conversation." Such national conversation ranges from major celebrities to some of our closest friends and family members. Cancelling someone can be as easy as unfollowing them on social media, a complete removal from one's personal life, or a lifetime sentence in prison. Racist tweets and abusive behaviour have resurfaced from decades ago, ensuring people are being held accountable for their harmful actions and their lasting repercussions.

However, there are some positive opinions regarding cancel culture in that it has contributed to the downfall of serial predators such as Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and Bill Cosby (Henderson, 2020). Additionally, it has given voice and influence to those with no other way of holding powerful figures accountable, operating as a tool for social justice, instilling new values of equality and destroying dangerous precedent (Henderson, 2020). Similarly, according to Meredith Clark, a professor at the University of Virginia's department of media studies, "[cancel culture] is ultimately an expression of agency" (as cited in Bromwich, 2020). By unfollowing and ignoring someone whose opinions and morals do not align with your own, cancelling them and disassociating from their life may seem to be the simplest way to cut them off from any further contact or indignation they represent. Having the agency to banish a supposedly undeserving celebrity from their life in the spotlight or to cut someone out of your life is not only liberating but it is powerful in that it proves one's unwillingness to associate with such behaviour. There are celebrities who have been cancelled that have been seen to resurface and come back from their mistakes, such as Kevin Hart and

Justin Trudeau. However, there have also celebrities who, to this day, are cancelled for their actions from years since with no chance for forgiveness or re-entry back into society with their previous status. This ultimately begs the question: Is cancelling someone a modern-day death sentence? Does anyone deserve to be entirely cancelled, forever?

Simple differences or moral dilemma?

In this conversation surrounding cancel culture, I found myself interested in the origin of disagreements and how exactly they function in society, especially within relationships that are closest to us. After all, disagreements -- to a certain extent -- are inevitable in every relationship and are part and parcel of human existence (Mölder & Simm, 2020). If the very root of cancel culture rests in our inability to act according to the same “good” morals, I wonder exactly where the line is drawn between two opposing views. At what point is it “fair” to cancel someone? How different do the opinions need to be in order for someone to be cancelled? What is the difference between a mere opinion and someone’s deepest moral beliefs? Theoretical philosopher and author of “Disagreements: An Introduction,” Bruno Mölder (2020) reassures us that the comprehensive categorization of disagreements, the unpacking of premises, contexts, and conclusions have been a significant tradition in the study of philosophy but should be of interest and importance beyond the realm of philosophical research and into the hands of less theoretical applications. In this article, Mölder (2020) explains how further analyses of disagreements will deepen our understanding and awareness for different resolution strategies, which is a crucial component of cancel culture. For example, we rarely feel the need to cancel an individual after a minor inconvenience or misunderstanding, but it often feels like the only resolution strategy when it reaches a certain point. Other times, it may be unclear whether an individual should be

cancelled. For example, for sexual predators, the case may be clear-cut, but for those who posted prejudiced tweets as a teen, the case is more ambiguous, yet many people are targets for what some might perceive as minor transgressions (Henderson 2020). So, there is no formula dictating who exactly deserves to be cancelled and at what point in their purported mistake. In order for cancel culture to be successful, we must agree on what it means to transgress and the severity by which is acceptable. Additionally, If cancelling someone isn't a justified solution for every level of transgression, I begin to reconsider the ethicality of cancel culture, entirely.

But, we are forced to revert back to the limitation resting in the assumption that there could be a universal set of morals and acceptable behaviours. I chose to connect Mölder's (2020) conversation regarding meta-ethical pluralism and moral discourse to cancel culture. Mölder writes meta-ethical pluralism as the "view that our ordinary moral discourse contains a plurality of moral concepts." In other words, this concept explains how moral discourse for individuals is much less uniform than commonly assumed. With this being said, we realize that there are people who have different morals than our own and are compelled to question how this fact operates in relation to cancel culture. Cancel culture not only exists due to the difference in morals but also in the belief that one's set of morals is above another's. With the existence of meta-ethical pluralism, although controversial, is it fair to assume that the foundation in which cancel culture is built on to be inevitable?

For a disagreement to occur, someone must be at fault for acting outside the confines of acceptable behaviour. However, if an objective set of morals does not exist, then disagreements cannot be any one person's "fault." Mölder explains the controversial opinion of faultless disagreements by saying that if there is no official signification in

which fundamental principles or commitments are incorrect or false, then “it is also hard to see how one party to a deep disagreement could be making a mistake” (2020). Also, the very fact that such disagreements are so common within our daily lives provokes the question of what we should do in the face of disagreements that appear to have no straightforward solution (Mölder & Simm, 2020). So, are deep disagreements between family members different than distant disagreements between yourself and a beloved celebrity? Should we excuse generational differences since we are all socialized and enculturated within the context of our own lifetime? Does the evolution of thought render the grounds for cancelling? It goes without saying that the ability to dismantle deeply ingrained ideologies and socialized processes regarding meaningful subjects such as politics is extremely challenging. But are all political conversations considered to be deep disagreements? Are deep disagreements only about politics and economics or can they be about supposedly meaningless subjects such as television and favourite pizza toppings? I have a hard time believing that solutions for disagreements could ever truly be categorized and formulated to cater to all styles of conversations. I do, however, believe it is important to gain a deeper understanding of how disagreements function in relationships and how their contribution to cancel culture can be analyzed. Perhaps a better understanding of disagreements could prevent them from happening. Is the goal for us to disagree less? Or is the goal to disagree more productively?

So.... Is cancelling productive?

There is a reason why refusing to watch any Kevin Spacey films ever again or blocking a racist friend from high school on Facebook feels good and productive. The ability to condemn wrongdoers “implies that one can be above such transgressions and be a better person than the latter” (Henderson, 2020). Not only do humans desire to be

respected but studies have shown that we desire to be accorded more respect and deference than others (Anderson & Hildreth, 2016). However, the effort to boost one's social status by doing something good outweighs the effort it takes to simply publicize the bad behaviour of others. After all, social status is all relative. So, one person losing social rank is comparable to another gaining it (Henderson, 2020). Rather than looking to increase one's social status through the cancellation of others, perhaps more sustainable progress can be achieved by working through and understanding varying values. However, evolutionary psychologist, David Buss, explains how modern living allows humans to be less worried about survival, thus not feeling the need to spend time and energy on maintaining meaningful alliances with others (as cited in Henderson, 2020). Henderson writes that in the ancestral human environment, "death was often around the corner, so people depended on one another...But modern life is so comfortable that people are rarely presented with serious challenges to survival" (2020). Therefore, people are no longer required to prove themselves to others within their social lives, making it complicated in distinguishing genuine from deceptive friendships (Henderson, 2020). So, aligning one's morals with others' is no longer essential to our survival as a species. If we can live in disagreement, then why should anyone argue against cancel culture?

Is there an alternative option if we do not want to cancel someone who acts immorally? Rather than cancelling someone, another answer could be to take the moment as an opportunity for growth instead. In other words, the wrongdoer is given another chance, hopefully proving themselves in the future or even becoming an activist for their unethical actions. For instance, Kevin Hart could take his experience with resurfaced homophobic tweets from 2009 and become an activist for the LGBTQ+

community. But, is it naive to think that every time you see a racist Facebook status posted by your aunt that this is always a chance for a new learning opportunity? Perhaps a conversation could have the ability to change the opinion of a racist family member. But, are all people capable of changing? How do we go about instilling this willingness to alter people's preconceived perceptions?

How does cancel culture affect women in particular?

So, with this comprehensive overview of cancel culture, I am curious about its effects on women, in particular. As previously mentioned, many of the recent cancelled male celebrities in the media have been specifically called out for their sexual harassment and abuse allegations and controversies regarding inappropriate behaviour against women. As a woman, I believe that cancel culture has shown me that people are finally listening and holding abusers accountable of their actions that have gone unnoticed for so long. Most notably, the #MeToo movement's exposure of Harvey Weinstein in 2017 finally gave victims of sexual assault an audible voice. At the same time, the movement gave people a more accurate understanding of the magnitude of sexual violence against women. Originally founded in 2006 by American activist, Tarana Burke, the #MeToo movement paved the way for sexual misconduct to go public. This activism paved the way for Harvey Weinstein receiving a twenty-three year prison sentence on Wednesday, March 11, 2020 (Levenson et al. 2020). Along with the sentence, The Weinstein Company (TWC), was eliminated from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Barnes 2017). Watching the trial and the cancelation of The Weinstein Company unfold gives women the security that their voices are beginning to be heard and that this behaviour will no longer be tolerated at a higher level of power. When abusive men are held accountable, women are then able to feel more comfortable using their

voices as the victim. On the other hand, due to the overwhelming amount of men cancelled for their history with sexual violence, often women take the brunt for the negative implications of cancel culture. A common perception for women is that they are now severely lacking a sense of humour, finding a reason to be offended by everything in the media. In an article titled, “What could it mean to say that today’s stand-up audiences are too sensitive?,” author Phillip Deen (2020) writes about former comedianLindy West. West, who is now a cultural and political writer, admits that some people may actually be humourless but believes that “‘contemporary audiences’ criticism of comedy arises not from oversensitivity but from the inclusion of previously marginalized voices and an expansion of basic moral decency” (Deen, 2020). The former comedian explains that, “what Seinfeld and some other comedians see as a threat, I see as doors being thrown open to more and more voices. ... It’s so-called political correctness that gave me the courage and the vocabulary to demand better from the community I love” (West, 2015, as cited in Deen 2020). Therefore, individuals like West show how women play a significant role in the functionality of cancel culture, and that cancelling people can have a positive effect on marginalized individuals.

Conclusion

This essay is designed to be a thought provoking, open-ended conversation, encouraging readers to think beyond the confines of their own social circles and dive into the depths of discomfort and disagreement. Questioning our common practices as social beings is the first step required in order to enact social change. It is clear that I, myself, have yet to come to a conclusion regarding the productivity of cancel culture. However, I do know that there is room to question how we act in the presence of “immoral” behaviour. Cancel culture is inherently divisive in that it excludes individuals based on

their moral beliefs and social behaviour. Although disagreeing with someone will no longer affect our ability to survive as a species (even though it feels like it can sometimes), there is room to evolve in the direction towards social equality, increasing the quality of life for people on a global scale.

References

- Anderson, C., and Hildreth, J.A.D. (2016). Striving for superiority: The human desire for status. IRLE Working Paper No. 115-16.
- Barnes, B. (2017, October 14). *Harvey Weinstein ousted from Motion Picture Academy*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/business/media/harvey-weinstein-ousted-from-motion-picture-academy.html>
- Board, W.E. (2020). 'Intersectionality went viral': Toxic platforms, distinctive black cyberfeminism and fighting misogynoir - An Interview with Kishonna Gray. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 15(1), 68–73.
- Bromwich, J.E. (2018, June 28). *Everyone is canceled*. The New York Times.
[https:// www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/style/is-it-canceled.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/style/is-it-canceled.html)
- Deen, P. (2020). What could it mean to say that today's stand-up audiences are too sensitive? *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 78(4), 501-512.
- Henderson, R. (2020). What propels cancel culture? *Psychology Today*, 53(2), 36-38.
- Holder, R.W., and Josphehson, P.B. (2020). Donald Trump, white Evangelicals, and 2020: A challenge for American pluralism. *Society*, 57, 540-546.
- Levenson, E., del Valle, L., and Moghe, S. (2020, March 11). *Harvey Weinstein sentenced to 23 years in prison after addressing his accusers in court*. CNN.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/11/us/harvey-weinstein-sentence/index.html>

Mölder, B., and Simm, K. (2020). Disagreements: An introduction. *Trames: A Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 24(3), 271-277.