

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN AMPLIFYING NEO-LIBERAL CANCEL CULTURE

Cancel culture and wokeism are dangerous trends that are increasing in their intensity and the self-destruction of Western civilization is a matter of time as the underlying historical myths and value/normative philosophies that led to its global hegemony is destroyed by a messianic ideology that is engineering an exclusive homogenous worldview in the name of pluralism and inclusivity. In this world of Orwellian doublespeak, the current struggle for ideological hegemony is taking place in the information space for hearts and minds in the cognitive realm. Social media is the very frontline in the future and even very existence of Western civilization, and it has chosen to support those waging the neo-liberal cancel culture in the name of justice, liberation and equality.

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As the 21st century gradually progresses, one of the clearly observable trends and processes is the increasing relocation of politics and political mobilization from the offline physical world to the online digital world. Politics and political identity affect civilizational form and substance, where the viability of a political organism depends on its intangible value that is found in its reputation that carries its sense of value and legitimacy or the absence of such. In such a situation, communication becomes a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human, providing a sense of belonging and order in the real world, which is crucial when the mass public is living in a highly complex social and political collective. It is not only a matter concerning the basic and fundamental tasks of relating to other individuals or groups on basic objective needs, desires or facts in and of the physical realm, but also a subjective interpretation or projection of the physical realm as a means of cognitive influence and persuasion. The ability to communicate is considered by Western society as a basic human right, which is often enshrined into law and fundamental value principles, although the right to freely communicate is also tempered by the responsible exercise of that communication.¹ One of the most powerful and popular means of mass communication in the contemporary era is social media, which have effectively removed the traditional physical barriers of time and space to the ability to communicate, instantly and globally. Social media operationalization is the frontline of the current political struggle underway in Western civilization for shaping the ideological cultural identity of its citizens (across national boundaries) through informational and cognitive domain dominance and bringing about the End of History through the complete hegemony of liberal democracy. Although, the form of this ideological dystopia is neither liberal (tolerant or accepting) or democratic in nature, and will result in killing its host – Western civilization. The frontline of this political struggle to impose an ideological set of values, norms and identity in Western civilization are through the cancel culture movement strategies and activities in social media.

What is the Role of Social Media?

There has been a gradual and steady decline in the importance of and trust in traditional mass media (print, radio and TV), which has paved the way for a rapid rise in the use and importance of the internet and social media, where an individual's right to receive and impart information is enshrined as a fundamental human right.² Initially, the digital world of cyber communication that includes social media was heralded as being a free, open and democratic space for expressing and consuming information and ideas. In part this hope and expectation was based on the revolutionary change

¹ "European Convention on Human Rights," *Council of Europe*, 14 October 2021, https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf

² Alan MacLeod (ed.), *Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent* (London: Routledge, 2019).

to mass communication, which leveled the physical constraints of time and space. It also shifted mass communication from a passive one to many form of communication, to an interactive many to many form of communication that saw the rise of the prosumer (producer and consumer of information) in the contemporary information society. This was the initial optimistic orthodoxy of knowledge (consensus based ‘facts’ and assumptions about definitions of the world that surrounds us), the consensus of hopes and expectations as to the ideal role played in an open society.

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However, there were others that suggested these ‘democratic’ means of communication can be repurposed to function as a mean of limiting and narrowing discourse and as a mechanism of social control. Evgeny Morozov wrote of the delusional expectations of the supposed democratizing potential and the dark side of internet freedom.³ There were other authors also breaking ranks, who noted the illusions of a seemingly borderless world by virtue of noting who and what interests control the internet.⁴ As the intention and outcome of mass communication has rhetorically shifted from that of enlightening and educating the public, to influencing and persuading audiences, the importance of social media has only increased.

Cyberspace is an ideal platform for waging political warfare and information warfare in the contemporary age. It is a relatively and contextually inexpensive and a less risky indirect means of engaging and subverting a target by priming and emotionally mobilizing individuals and groups online. It is the new frontline of warfare, the ability to dominate in this area of operations is seen as offering an actor advantages over rivals, in effect it is perceived as a form of “digital Blitzkrieg.” The German Blitzkrieg of 1939-1942 was a form of shock and awe through tangible and kinetic military operations in the physical domain that were designed to rapidly overwhelm the cognitive capacity of the victim to offer effective or meaningful

³ Evgeny Morozov, *The Dark Side of Internet Freedom: The Net Delusion* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

⁴ Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

resistance. “Digital Blitzkrieg” of the current cancel culture and wokeism consists of intangible and non-kinetic informational domain shock and awe operations that rapidly affect the cognitive domain of the audiences by coercing conformity and ‘consensus.’ However, both the original and current digital Blitzkrieg rely on speed and shock to overcome their target. If the target survived the initial shock and awe onslaught, there is an increased chance of survival, whether on a tangible or intangible level.

As politics and political mobilization have gradually shifted from a physical offline to a digital online format, the role of the constraints and restraints of time and space on human activity and especially in relation to communication, has been reduced significantly. Politics has gradually shifted from substantive issues and questions towards group rights, group identity and value/virtue signaling to ideological constituencies as a test of loyalty has assumed greater prominence. The more widespread use of social media has accelerated the bunkering effect and instigated a form of toxic tribalism.⁵ Thus cancel culture has been emerging as one of the cultural power brokers in an increasingly politically and culturally polarized West.

Cancel Culture: What is it and Why is it Significant?

Cancel culture is a new and contentious concept and practice that is at the center of many heated emotional debates and discussions currently. Thomas Mueller defines the practice of cancel culture as “the withdrawal of support for individuals who have acted in a way deemed to be unacceptable or problematic related to social media, viewership, or the purchase of products or services.”⁶ Pippa Norris defines cancel culture as being “collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds.”⁷ Furthermore, Norris noted that the presence of “heated debates about the cancel culture have intensified in recent years as part of deepening ideological and value cleavages dividing progressive liberals and social conservatives.”⁸ Cancel culture fuels the intense polarization that is resulting from issues related to identity politics, which creates a cognitive environment where participants are inclined to be quick to judge and somewhat slow to question. Norris notes that “perceptions, by themselves, are important for the social construction of reality.”⁹ Therefore,

⁵ Marty Stern, “Beyond Postmodern: The Neoliberal Roots of the Woke Cancel Culture,” *Aero*, 13 October 2020, <https://areomagazine.com/2020/10/13/beyond-postmodern-the-neoliberal-roots-of-woke-cancel-culture/>

⁶ Thomas S. Mueller, “Blame, Then Shame? Psychological Predictors in Cancel Culture Behaviour,” *The Social Science Journal* (2021), p. 1.

⁷ Pippa Norris, “Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?” *Political Studies* (2021), p. 4.

⁸ Pippa Norris, “Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?” (2021).

⁹ Pippa Norris, “Closed Minds? Is a ‘Cancel Culture’ Stifling Academic Freedom and Intellectual Debate in Political Science?” *Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP20-25*, Harvard Kennedy School (August 2020), p. 17.

cancel culture's significance lies in its intent and/or use to stifle the free flow of speech and ideas, a form of deeply coercive ideological censorship. Although supporters argue that cancel culture is a form of activism that brings accountability, whereas victims and targets of cancel culture argue creates another form of lack of accountability.¹⁰ In 2019 former US President Barack Obama entered the debate by saying cancel culture is “not activism” and created a hostile and negative societal climate.¹¹ Cancel culture is something that has been brought to life, but is now evolving and transforming with processes and events in increasingly politicized and divided information spaces.

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The notion of cancel culture is certainly not something that is static and unchanging, rather it is “shifting, fluid and transforming.”¹² Mueller adds a chilling warning concerning the potential use and outcome from cancel culture tactics as a “force of intolerance for opinions and ideas contrary to those dominant on social platforms. ‘Cancel’ was at one time the act of ostracizing another, while now it can become the destruction of one’s future.” However, it is not a matter of the targets for canceling being restricted to people, organisations and topics, but also the ideas and values that are embedded in political and civilizational identity. The intention is to socially and politically engineer the ideological foundations and inter-relations of a civilization and its citizens.

Underlying Lying Reasons for Neoliberal Cancel Culture

Cancel culture and the social media interaction can be understood as conveying or communicating the consciousness of the movement’s activity and intent of ideologically purging the public information space and the communication sphere.¹³

¹⁰ Emily A. Vogels, Monica Anderson, Margaret Porteus, Chris Baronavski, Sara Atske, Colleen McClain, Brooke Auxier, Andrew Perrin and Meera Ramshankar, “Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment,” *Pew Research Centre*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>

¹¹ Zoe Thomas, “What is the Cost of ‘Cancel Culture’?” *BBC News*, 8 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-54374824>

¹² Thomas S. Mueller, “Blame, Then Shame? Psychological Predictors in Cancell Culture Behaviour,” *The Social Science Journal*(2021), p. 12.

¹³ Joseph Ching Velasco, “You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging,” *Rupkatha Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (2020), p. 1-7.

The operational advantage of using social media as a mechanism for carrying and spreading cancel culture is that “any user can be the judge, jury, and executioner of any individual or issue.”¹⁴ At face value, cancel culture is rhetorically positioned itself as a means and mechanism of ‘justice’ that can be something that is hard to gain when the system and where key personalities are not especially held accountable. Thus the notion of some form of justice by the ‘underdog’ within the framework and narrative of a non-transparent and unaccountable system is a central narrative of an attempt to legitimize the concept and practice of cancel culture in engineering a more ‘just’ and ‘equal’ system.

Helen Lewis understands that it is capitalism that drives cancel culture, where progressive values have been shaped into a powerful branding tool. This is done in a cognitive environment where members of a community can be more concerned with their personal reputation and the preservation of their power than those of the institutions to which they belong.¹⁵ Therefore, those public figures that are under attack or at risk from cancel culture action tend to be more concerned and motivated at saving their own reputation or power base than in defending the principles or values of their organizational entity or civilization. As such, a successful cancel culture attack on a public figure may induce a bandwagoning effect on other public figures in close proximity, to virtue signal their symbolic support for the attackers as a self-survival tactic. Therefore fear among those targeted or risk being targeted can create a snowballing effect that can seemingly alter the cognitive balance of power among the opposing parties.

There is a deeply ideological root that propels the cancel culture movement. Marty Stern, points out that critics of post-modernism rise is ideologically linked to Neo-Marxism or Marxism and especially with regards to the utopian promise of liberation and equality. “The pretence to egalitarianism is perfect cover for what ‘identity politics’ actually is the very perennial and ubiquitous elitist-separatism the political-left ethos attacks and denies; rendered a quasi-religion, being an ideology in the wake of the Christian notion of ‘the promised land’ in the utopia/dystopia of equality-of-outcome.”¹⁶ The rise of cancel culture and the age of the social justice warrior has been propelled by the disastrous policies of neoliberalism that have magnified inequalities and especially economic inequality.

The political identity and ideology of neoliberalism were assumed to be the

¹⁴ Ibid., p.2.

¹⁵ Helen Lewis, “How Capitalism Drives Cancel Culture,” *The Atlantic*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/07/cancel-culture-and-problem-woke-capitalism/614086/>

¹⁶ Marty Stern, “Beyond Postmodern: The Neoliberal Roots of the Woke Cancel Culture,” *Aero*, 13 October 2020, <https://areomagazine.com/2020/10/13/beyond-postmodern-the-neoliberal-roots-of-woke-cancel-culture/>

uncontested hegemon in the wake of the end of the Cold War in 1991. However, growing divisions and fractures in society created by neoliberal policy and various crises (economic and social) have eroded the support and legitimacy of neoliberalism by groups that have been disempowered and marginalized.¹⁷ This has in turn created an aggressive defensive stance by the supporters of neoliberal democracy that have increasingly focused on liberalism at the expense of democracy.¹⁸ The ‘tyranny’ of the majority in a democracy has been supplanted by the tyranny of the minority in the world of cancel culture.

The Effects on Western Civilization

Social media is the new frontline, where a war is being waged, the outcome of which shall have a significant impact on how the future of civilization is conceived and constructed. Mueller has noted and understood that “the shift to digital, networked communication has shaped the future of our discourse.”¹⁹ Discourse in the information domain shapes and influences the cognitive domain, which then affects the perceptions and interpretations of people, institutions, ideas, and issues that are present in the physical domain. Although supporters of cancel culture argue that it is a positive force for good, by ‘holding to account’ those people and ideas that are deemed as being not tolerant or offensive, it creates an infected informational and cognitive domain where communicative violence is used to crush dissent in the name of tolerance. Therefore, one of the concerns expressed is that cancel culture can create a mob mentality and bring about vigilante justice in the name of social justice,²⁰ an outcome that is also inevitably unjust.

An immediate and logical effect of cancel culture, if the ‘Digital Blitzkrieg’ is effective on the cognitive domain of its target audiences is to stifle debate through coercing consensus on certain key signaled ‘good’ (desirable and to be emulated) versus ‘bad’ (undesirable and to be avoided) values and norms that a ‘virtuous’ citizen and civilization should have, i.e. mandated for the “greater good” in terms of calculated and perceived ‘just’ outcomes. This in turn is used as the basis for establishing an orthodoxy of knowledge.²¹ The concept of orthodoxy of knowledge refers

¹⁷ Simons, G., Terrorist Propaganda on Social Media: The Power of Attraction and ‘Positive’ Persuasion in Bazarkina, D., Pashentsev, E. & Simons, G. (Eds.), *Terrorism and Advanced Technologies in Psychological Warfare: New Risks, New Opportunities to Counter the Terrorist Threat* (New York: Nova Science, 2020) , p. 15-37.

¹⁸ Dani Rodrik, “The Double Threat to Liberal Democracy,” *Social Europe*, 19 February 2018, <https://socialeurope.eu/double-threat-liberal-democracy>

¹⁹ Thomas S. Mueller, “Blame, Then Shame? Psychological Predictors in Cancel Culture Behaviour,” *The Social Science Journal* (2021), p. 12.

²⁰ Aja Romano, “Why We Can’t Stop Fighting About Cancel Culture,” *Vox*, 25 August 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate>

²¹ Greg Simons, “International Relations in the Age of US Decline: Orthodoxy of Knowledge and Obstructive Foreign Policy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2 August 2021, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-orthodoxy-of-knowledge/>

to the situation where information domain dominance is used by an interested party to purge the information sphere of other alternative and competing interpretations and views used to define a person, an organization, a process or event, and entities. Therefore, by default, consensus is created by the effective coercion and/or manipulation of the information domain that restricts and censors definitions in order to elicit the desired and intended cognitive effects from the target audience. There is also the problem with the basic fact of consensus, just because a majority may publicly state that they agree on something being true, it does not mean that it is a fact, but an agreed upon fact.

It is even more problematic to seek consensus when the logic driving cancellation culture is emotional rather than rational. Marty Stern observes that “if neoliberalism’s central role in the market driven evolution of cancel culture were more widely recognized, its censorious morality could be seen as just another tool to stoke the pathological division among the economically disenfranchised and politically addicted.”²² The reason for this observation and statement being that the artificial politics of identity is a highly effective and divisive diversionary tool. One of the dangers outlined by an observer of the effects of cancel culture is that it erases those elements that make an individual human and part of something bigger. “Cancel culture annihilates that which makes us human — not just by abolishing reason, but in compromising the process of reasoning together in a dialogical and social manner. We make sense of the world often by reasoning together as members of a social community.”²³ There is, as stated earlier, an attempt to shape a new and rather dystopian citizen in a ‘new brave world.’

Where Western civilization historically bases itself on critical and reflective thinking, where individualism triumphs, something very different and alien is in the process of being created. “Cancel culture asserts itself as a form of Puritanism. It attempts to establish a homogeneity of social codes, moral attitudes and framing of narratives around issues of sex, politics, economics, cultural proprietorship and the politics of identity.”²⁴ A civilization is founded and maintained in tangible (physical – terrain, borders, people and so forth), and perhaps even more importantly, intangible (informational and cognitive – opinions, perceptions, values, evaluations and judgments, definitions and interpretations) forms. Western civilization is currently in deep crisis in terms of the external decline and retreat from centuries of

²² Marty Stern, “Beyond Postmodern: The Neoliberal Roots of the Woke Cancel Culture,” *Aero*, 13 October 2020, <https://areomagazine.com/2020/10/13/beyond-postmodern-the-neoliberal-roots-of-woke-cancel-culture/>

²³ Jason Hill, “The Battle Over ‘Cancel Culture’ May Not End Well – Its Guardians Seek Power at all Costs,” *The Hill*, 3 October 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/574583-the-battle-over-cancel-culture-may-not-end-well-its-guardians-seek-power>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

global domination is being exacerbated by the harmful and self-destructive internal politics of cancel culture.²⁵ The decline and gradual collapse of the intangible elements of civilizations facilitates the tangible degradation and eventual collapse of a once vibrant and thriving collective being.

Concluding Remarks

Cancel culture and its effective operationalization of social media in priming and mobilizing the eradication of people and ideas in order to coercively create a new identity and basis for relations between citizens and the state is a defining moment in the history of Western civilization. The tactical and strategic use of social media to convey their message to simultaneously evangelize to the masses and eradicate ideological or ideational opposition has been an illustration of a Digital Blitzkrieg that has been seemingly invincible and unstoppable. But as the original Blitzkrieg of World War Two proved, with the correct tactics and sufficient political will and belief in defending something worthy, these seeming unstoppable titans can be beaten.

At this stage, it is the will and resolve to resist and fight for the institution of political community that is Western civilization rather than capitulating as a tactical mechanism to avoid the attention of cancel culture, which is seemingly only growing stronger. Cancel culture will not compromise, and cannot be compromised with. Should the upholders and bearers of Western civilization not prevail, then this will serve as a very sage lesson for what happens for the emerging multipolar non-Western centric powers, when the fundamental values and structures of a civilization are not protected or defended as the Western civilization passes into the pages of history.

²⁵ Greg Simons, "Between Caligula and Nero: Cancel Culture and the Future of Western Civilization," *L Eurispes*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.leurispes.it/between-caligula-and-nero-cancel-culture-and-the-future-of-western-civilization/>.