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Cancel Culture: Bad guys can do good things, too



In the aftermath of the Second World War, Europe had to deal with a massive psychological upheaval to make sense of the new world order.

The threat of a Continent's freedoms and prospects led to a mass politicisation of people. The personal became the political.

Now it appears that the pendulum has swung towards the political becoming the personal. Somehow, rather than a focus on the merits of ideas and opinion, the biography of a person has become the tipping point for the new vogue. At its core is another neologism and it's known as "Cancel Culture".

For the purposes of definition, here's what Merriam Webster says: "For those of you who aren't aware, cancel culture refers to the mass withdrawal of support from public figures or celebrities who have done things that aren't socially accepted today.

This practice of "cancelling" or mass shaming often occurs on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook." Cancelled, obliterated, a non-person.

Not even a pithy Chinese formula to rationalise Chairman Mao's massive societal reforms by designating him, "70 per cent good; 30 per cent bad". In the West, you're at risk of 100 per cent cancellation.

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This trend emerged in the 1980's as political correctness: it focused on the use of language in an attempt to equalise society's perceptions of fairness and equality. And on the need to be intellectually and socially "right on", clearly.

"Chairman" became "Chairperson"; "Postman" became "post person" and so on. It evolved continuously, becoming the "me too" movement (I too have suffered society's

iniquities and my sufferings have not been acknowledged until now).

This is all gathered under the Western umbrella of "Woke" (defined by Merriam and Webster as, "aware and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)").

You're a bad person; your accomplishments and work are now nullified. You are cancelled. You are, as they say, "toast".

From pre-school nurseries to school libraries; student auditoriums to political rally halls; town hall meetings to large-scale public lecture halls: With tedious regularity, fringe activists, government officials, and, of course, politicians, leap on the Cancel bandwagon. Banning books is an easy way to start.

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Woke's advocates laud the Cancel Culture as a healthy approach to the Utopian society we strive to attain. Discussing it with teenagers, I've noticed how sweet and earnest they are in this crusade.

But being being ultra-earnest is tricky. It lures you into a failure to see the woods from the trees.

Its detractors will point out that you only need to dig down a few centimetres to unleash the range of sinister implications.

Nobody who has read George Orwell's dystopian warning in his novel 1984 can forget the spine-chilling horror of non-persons manipulated controlled by terrifying autocracy.

In 1989, the Western world howled with incredulity when the Ayatollah Khomeini issued the notorious fatwa against Salman Rushdie for publishing his novel, The Satanic Verses, which the Supreme Leader interpreted

as a blasphemy against Islam meriting a death sentence.

This was almost amusing in its perceived barbarity by the sophisticated West. Not even vaguely amusing for Hitoshi Igarashi, who was stabbed to death in 1991 for translating the Satanic Verses into Japanese nor Ettore Capriolo stabbed in his home the week before for translating it into Italian.

And not either Rushdie, who was badly injured in August 2022 by a willing enactor of the late Ayatollah's command.

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Let's crawl across the fault line of culture. Thirty four years later, in the US and Europe, books are being removed from libraries because they offend sensibilities and pose a danger to the safe, protected development of the learning curve.

Books that present indoctrination and threaten a detrimental effect on the safety of a child. We're going backwards, not forwards, despair librarians, classically trained educators. Who are the Barbarians now?

The easiest way to cancel an idea is to cancel the person who expresses it. We're human. We have flaws. Why does the biography of the person have such relevance to the works they have achieved and left their enriching legacies to our civilisation?

Michelangelo Caravaggio was a famous 15th century Italian painter whose innovative artistic techniques contributed to the Renaissance that shaped Europe's identity.

But he was a convicted murderer. He led a life of crime. Should we pulp his works into mush and throw them into the Tiber; excise him from history?

Michael Jackson was known as The King of Pop. He is recognised as one of the most

significant and best-selling 20th century musical performers.

But he was almost certainly an active paedophile who paid off his child victims. It's barely possible now to hear his music played publicly without trawling YouTube. Should we destroy all his records and ban his music for ever?

We all know nasty people. We can scream, taunt, vilify and threaten on social media if you don't mind negotiating the blurred lines of the law.

Cancel a date with a serial killer; don't cancel a person who said 10 years ago that they didn't like red haired people. It's better idea just not to invite them round to dinner.

There's always the great Enlightenment adage of Voltaire's: I don't like what you say, but I will die in a ditch to let you say it. Let's not stale our infinite variety.