

Earth Democracy: Reviews and Commentary

What Happens When Good People Are Persecuted for Asking the Wrong Questions

A review of “The Canceling of the American Mind: Cancel Culture Undermines Trust and Threatens Us All – But There is a Solution” by Greg Lukianoff & Rikki Schlott, 2023

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Lukianoff knows what he is talking about - his organization FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression) maintains a large database of US cancellations and assists with the investigation and resolution of many of them. He was also co-author with Johnathan Haidt of the groundbreaking book “The Coddling of the American Mind” (2018). Lukianoff’s junior author Schlott also works at FIRE. This book brings the reader uptodate in this fast changing scene. Social media is identified as the key to the recent explosion of cancel culture: “it’s nearly impossible to have civil, thoughtful dialogue”.

The political left has constructed a “Perfect Rhetorical Fortress” for both offense and defense, while the right has constructed an “Efficient Rhetorical Fortress”. The former is based on ad-hominem attacks with multiple layers of defense, while the latter is far simpler – it simply tunes out anyone with the wrong opinion, regardless of expertise or well-reasoned critique.

As to cancel culture, “we should consider it part of a dysfunctional way members of our society have learned to argue and battle for power, status, and domination”. In other words it is about winning arguments “without actually winning”; that is, by slandering, deplatforming, etc. All this is illustrated by 11 case studies that span the three parts of the book: (1) What is Cancel Culture? (2) How Cancel Culture Works (3) What to Do About it.

In part II the authors go through the dirty tricks commonly used by both the left and the right:

What-aboutism: Defending against criticism of your side by bringing up the other side's alleged wrongdoing.

Straw-manning: Misrepresenting the opposition's perspective by constructing a weak, inaccurate version of their argument that can be easily refuted.

Minimization: Claiming that the problem doesn't exist or is too small scale to worry about.

Motte & Bailey arguments: Conflating two arguments: a reasonable one (the Motte) and an unreasonable one (the Bailey).

Under-dogging: Claiming that your viewpoint is more valid than your opponent's because you speak for a disadvantaged party.

Accusations of bad faith: Asserting that your opponent is being disingenuous or has a sinister, selfish, or ulterior motive.

Hypocrisy projection: Asserting that your opponent is hypocritical about a given argument without actually checking the consistency of their record.

That's offensive: Responding to an idea you don't like with "that's offensive", rather than engaging with its substance.

Offense archeology: Digging through someone's past comments to find speech that hasn't aged well.

Making stuff up: Fabricating information to bolster a weak argument – and asserting it with confidence.

Then the authors look at some "barricades" of the Perfect Rhetorical Fortress. These are attributes used in ad-hominem

attacks to dismiss a speaker rather than argue the evidence on an issue.

Is the speaker conservative? What is the speaker's race? What is the speaker's sex? Is the speaker trans or cis? Is the speaker "phobic"? Are they guilty by association? Did the speaker lose their cool? Did the speaker violate a "thought terminating cliché"? Can you emotionally blackmail someone? Darkly hint that something else is what's really going on.

The Efficient Rhetorical Fortress has its own barricades. Are you "liberal", or have the "wrong opinion", or a journalist, or not MAGA? The key reason for these purity tests, according to author David French, is that "In-group moderates represent a far greater threat to any radical enterprise than out-group opponents", an observation that applies to both the left and the right from any era.

Nevertheless, Lukianoff and Schlott advise that "there is no better way to end intimidation than refusing to be intimidated". The alternative is that "the ever-present threat of being canceled harms friendships, undermines trust, and fosters paranoia", turning Gen Z into a "self-insulating" generation. Specifically, "overly involved, anxious parenting meant to help Gen Z succeed has actually done the precise opposite". The authors have similar advice for corporations and organizations – be proactive in developing resiliency and trust. Consciously avoid cultures of victimhood, trigger warnings, microaggressions, harms, blaming and shaming, etc., in favor of time-tested principles of ethics and psychology.

Their conclusion is that "reinvigorating a Free Speech Culture is also the antidote to authoritarianism".