

Review of
The Canceling of the American Mind

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Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott, *The Canceling of the American Mind: How Cancel Culture Undermines Trust, Destroys Institutions, and Threatens Us All*, Allen Lane/Penguin Random House UK, 2023, 443 pp.

British readers may be forgiven for worrying — given the prominent reference to “the American mind” in this book’s title — that it represents yet another exercise in ethnocentrism: promiscuously transporting ideas from the United States to a different social context where they fit badly (as Tomiwa Owolade has eloquently shown concerning ideas about race).

Fortunately that is not the case here, as the book’s subtitle intimates. The subject, so-called “cancel culture”, is an amalgam of ways of thinking and acting — on both “left” and “right”, it should be stressed — that, the authors argue, dangerously undermine the possibility for serious debate, democratic decision-making, and social harmony. And pernicious ideas (as well as good ones) are rarely stopped by national borders. Sometimes, it is true, those ideas originate in the United States and are transported by the prevailing winds across the Atlantic; often enough, however, they arise independently in different places and times, by a kind of convergent evolution. Whatever may be the case here, there is no doubt that the debate around “cancel culture” is alive and well today in the UK. The task is to bring some clarity to this notoriously muddled — and sometimes bad-faith — discussion.

So the first thing that needs to be established is: What do the authors mean by “cancellation”, and what do they mean by “cancel culture”? Only once we get these things straight can we assess whether cancel culture is real or a mere right-wing fantasy; and whether, if real, it is good, bad or some of both.

The authors’ definition of “cancellation” is clear enough: namely, being “fired, dis-invited, deplatformed, or otherwise punished” for the lawful expression of disapproved ideas (31; see also 315). It is worth stressing — though the authors, surprisingly, do not — that this definition refers solely to objective harms, not to the loss of reputation (be it deserved or undeserved) or psychological harms. That is a merit: by adhering rigorously to this narrow definition, one can avoid indiscriminately expanding the concept of “cancellation” into domains that would require a very different type of analysis.

Nevertheless, the undeserved loss of reputation and the psychological harm inflicted by mass hounding are very real injustices, which should not be neglected. The authors allude to this when they cite Christina Hoff Sommers’ proposed definition: “cases where individuals face absurdly harsh consequences for relatively minor lapses. Sometimes there are no lapses at all.” (30) And they give several examples of this (20–21, 63–68, 103–105, 107–109, 211–213, 233–235, 242–247). But these situations require a separate analysis, to determine whether the loss of reputation is indeed undeserved and the punishment (if indeed there was a lapse) unduly harsh. Let’s call these cases “cancellation in the wider sense”.

But the deepest contribution of this book is concerned, not with “cancellation” in either of the two senses — which are injustices against individuals — but rather with “Cancel Culture” as practiced today on both “left” and “right”:

an approach to winning arguments by skirting them . . . Cancel Culture should be understood not as an isolated phenomenon but rather as part of an embrace of cheap argument tactics that rely on ad hominem arguments . . . More precisely, Cancel Culture allows people to dismiss their ideological opponents without refuting their arguments, while also intimidating anyone who might make that same point. (31)

The principal merit of this book, to my mind, is its clear cataloguing of some of these spurious argumentative tactics, along with some modest suggestions for combatting them. As the authors say at the outset, advocates in public debates have available to them two alternative strategies:

The first is going through the process of engagement and persuasion — and accepting the possibility that you might not succeed in convincing most people. It’s a long and arduous road.

The second tactic is attacking your opponents on an ad hominem personal level — digging up things to discredit them, making them fear for their jobs, and “winning” arguments simply by making people too scared to say what they really think. This latter route is much quicker. Although it won’t *actually* change minds, you can surely intimidate enough people into pretending they agree with you. (31–32, emphasis in the original)

But the authors then hasten to add, astutely, that

Cancel Culture [did not originate] out of a rational calculation about how to win arguments most effectively. Rather, Cancel Culture was born out of a sort of evolutionary process.

Cancel Culture survives because it wins — and things that win get repeated. The only way we can stop its progression is by developing the cultural immune system that allows us to resist or simply prevent its replication. (32)

And they put forth what will become the main theme of the book, which goes back at least to John Stuart Mill:

Scholarship, science, and democracy itself all rely on a humble realization: that we may all be wrong. Therefore, rather than cancel our opposition, we must listen carefully to what they say. Then we can refute it, accept it, or come to some new position.

But Cancel Culture is an attempt to shrug off that responsibility. (32)

So, let’s begin with the fundamental question: Are cancellation and Cancel Culture real phenomena, or are they a mere “right-wing moral panic”, as Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth contend (cited on 52, 344n10)? Or perhaps more relevantly, since it is hard to deny that *some* cases exist: *How big* a problem is this? And to what extent do cancellation and Cancel Culture arise from the “left”, from the “right”, or from both?

Let’s first consider cancellation, interpreted in the narrow sense as being “fired, disinvited, deplatformed, or otherwise punished” for the lawful expression of ideas.

The most serious type of cancellation is obviously the loss of livelihood. And here the statistics, in the US higher-education sector alone, surprised even me:

From just 2014 to mid 2023, we know of more than 1,000 attempts to get professors fired, punished, or otherwise silenced. . . . [This] has resulted in almost 200 professor terminations.¹ That exceeds even the estimated 100 to 150 professors terminated in the second Red Scare (1947 to 1957). (26–27)

Even taking into account that the American professoriate was about 8 times as large in 2020 as it was in 1950, and that the 100–150 figure for the McCarthy period may be an underestimate, this is still a startling comparison, given that McCarthyism constituted the worst violation of civil liberties in the United States since the post-World War I Red Scare.

And here is an interesting fact: Of the 214 terminations in the period 2014–2024, nearly equal numbers came from the “left” of the scholar (94) and from the “right” (99); a further 21 were unclear or apolitical.² The inevitable but depressing conclusion is that political partisans of all stripes have a tendency to act in censorious and authoritarian ways whenever they have the power to do so. The question is simply: who has that power, and where?

At public institutions in conservative states, the “right” holds that power, and it has repeatedly used it against liberals and leftists that it deems vulnerable, especially those on contingent contracts — often accusing them of being “anti-American” or “far left” when they are not. (And even if they were, they would still be protected by academic freedom unless there was proof of their objective unfitness as a scholar or teacher.) In these cases, the impetus for cancellation typically originates off campus — for instance, from Fox News, right-wing pressure groups such as Turning Point USA (which sponsors Professor Watchlist), or Republican politicians — and is subsequently carried out by compliant college administrators.

At private and public universities and liberal-arts colleges in liberal areas, by contrast, administrators are overwhelmingly “progressive”, and anyone who is too vocally dissident — particularly on hot-button issues of race and gender identity — may end up within their sights, accused of racism or transphobia. This of course includes conservatives; but conservatives in academia are in any case few and far between. As a result, the targets of cancellation “from the left” tend most often to be, not conservatives, but rather moderate liberals and heterodox leftists — such as Canadian political scientist Frances Widdowson, a self-identified Marxist, who was fired by Mount Royal University in 2021 (despite being tenured) after years of conflict over her opposition to “indigenization of the curriculum”. Furthermore, the impetus for cancellation “from the left” typically originates on the campus itself — from students, other faculty, or administrators, or a combination of the three — though it may subsequently be amplified by off-campus social-media campaigns.

¹[Note added by me] 198 cases in 2014–2023, plus 16 thus far in 2024, according to data kindly supplied to me by Komi Frey at FIRE. Here “professor” includes also lecturers, PhD students/candidates, post-docs, visiting scholars, and researchers at university-affiliated centers. “Terminations” include the following outcomes: scholar was not hired, scholar’s contract was terminated, scholar’s contract was not renewed, scholar’s contract extension was revoked, scholar’s tenure was revoked, and scholar was forced to resign.

²Data from FIRE.

A recent quantitative analysis of the targeting of scholars at American universities confirms these general trends.

On the other hand, in the society outside colleges and universities, “cancellation” (in the wider sense) is often fratricidal, on the “right” as well as the “left”. For instance, conservative evangelical Christian David French (now a columnist for the *New York Times*) was subjected for years to despicable harassment from some other conservatives and evangelicals — as were his wife and teenage daughter — because he dared to oppose Donald Trump. And the left’s penchant to eat its own is legendary: as in the case of David Shor, who was fired in 2020 — at the time of the George Floyd protests — by the progressive data analytics company Civism Analytics for tweeting a summary of an article by Princeton political scientist Omar Wasow (who is Black) showing that nonviolent civil-rights protest was effective in shifting election results towards liberals, particularly if it was met by police repression, but that violent protest had the opposite effect.

But how much of this story applies here in the UK? Fortunately, the situation here seems to be far less dire than in the US. The Academics for Academic Freedom (AFAF) database shows numerous cases of de-platforming but only a handful of firings. As for “cancellations” outside academia, someone should try to make a careful compilation of publicly revealed cases; I’m not aware of any such database.

However, the Free Speech Union has shared with me some data from their private database of the 3000-odd cases they have handled since their inception in 2020. Of the 1460 closed cases, only about 21% come from the education sector (primary, secondary and higher); the rest come from a variety of contexts, often employment-related. The “other parties” can be private businesses (21%), universities/colleges (14%), local or central government (14%), police (11%), and various others. In 2023, 38% of the cases concerned gender/sex, 28% politics, 16% race, 7% religion, 6% Covid-19, 3% alleged defamation and 2% environment.

The first author of the book under review, Greg Lukianoff, is a lawyer by training, and president since 2006 of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), which defends free-speech rights on university campuses and in American society as a whole. So it is not surprising that many of this book’s case studies draw on FIRE’s work, and that there is much reference to the legal principles underpinning the freedom of expression. But there are also some important differences between the legal situations in the US and the UK, which need to be borne in mind.

The United States has a written constitution and a no-weasel-words First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press”. And yet, as the authors point out, the First Amendment, though adopted in 1791, “had very little actual legal force until 1925” (36) because the courts had interpreted it to constrain only the federal government (“Congress”) and not the state governments. As a result, infringements on free speech abounded: state governments in the antebellum South prohibited public opposition to slavery, and state governments in the early twentieth century prosecuted anarchists, socialists and other left-wingers for “criminal syndicalism” and “criminal anarchy”.

That changed with a landmark 1925 Supreme Court decision that employed the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in the aftermath of the Civil War, to protect First Amendment freedoms also against state governments. Even so, the two Red Scares took their toll, and it was only gradually that the courts began to seriously protect the expression of unpopular ideas. This process reached its culmination in 1969 when the Supreme Court held, in the case of *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, that all political speech — even the advocacy of violence or other unlawful conduct — is protected by the First Amendment unless it is aimed at inciting *imminent* lawless action. (This refers to the expression of ideas; harassment or defamation of individuals are not protected.)

But the First and Fourteenth Amendments, strong as they now are, protect people only from governmental action, not from the action of private parties such as employers. Indeed, the default law in the United States is “at-will employment”, in which the employer has the right to fire an employee for any reason whatsoever (or indeed no reason at all), and without warning, provided only that the real basis for the firing is not an illegal one (e.g. discrimination on race, religion, sex, national origin, or disability status, or retaliation for reporting illegal or unsafe workplace practices). Roughly three-quarters of employees in the U.S. are “at will” (the rest either have union or other contracts that provide “just cause” protections, or are public-sector workers covered by civil-service laws that do the same). So nothing protects those employees from being fired for exercising their First Amendment rights.

In the UK the story is rather different. On the one hand, the current law in the UK enshrines — unfortunately in my opinion — a vastly narrower view of free speech, arising from parliamentary sovereignty and the absence of a written constitution, with only the notoriously hedged Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights serving as a partial constraint. The gross illiberalisms of our Terrorism Act — criminalising many forms of nonviolent political speech — are one scandalous example.

On the other hand, the employment law in the UK is vastly more protective of employees’ rights than that in the US, with the concept of “unfair dismissal” having been established by the Employment Rights Act 1996. What that means in practice may depend, of course, on the vagaries of Employment Tribunals — as well as on the employee’s financial wherewithal (or crowd-funding) to bring a case in the first place — but there is nevertheless an established body of case law that protects employees, at least in some situations, from dismissal because they have lawfully expressed ideas that their employer disfavors. For instance, a series of recent Employment Tribunal judgments have vindicated gender-critical feminists who were fired (or otherwise harassed or discriminated against) based on tendentious accusations of “transphobia”. And earlier this year an Employment Tribunal partially vindicated anti-Zionist sociologist David Miller, who was fired by the University of Bristol on grounds that the Tribunal found to be discriminatory.

But the most interesting part of the Lukianoff–Schlott book is concerned, not with the cancellation of individuals, but with “Cancel Culture”, understood as “an approach to winning arguments by skirting them”.

In Chapter 5, the authors catalogue, with examples, some of the “cheap rhetorical dodges” (93) that are used by both “left” and “right” (the scare quotes are mine, not theirs) in public debate. The first five are classic, albeit disreputable, argumentative tactics (94–97):

1. Whataboutism: Defending against criticism of your side by bringing up the other side’s alleged wrongdoing.
2. Straw-manning: Misrepresenting the opposition’s perspective by constructing a weak, inaccurate version of their argument that can be easily refuted.
3. Minimization: Claiming a problem doesn’t exist or is too small-scale to worry about.
4. Motte and Bailey arguments: Conflating two arguments — a reasonable one (the motte) and an unreasonable one (the bailey).
5. Underdogging: Claiming your viewpoint is more valid than your opponent’s because you speak for a disadvantaged party.

The rest — which are also, alas, classic — are applications of what the authors call (98) “the Great Untruth of Ad Hominem”, namely, that bad people can have only bad opinions (98–102):

6. Accusations of bad faith: Asserting that your opponent is being disingenuous or has a sinister, selfish, and/or ulterior motive.
7. Hypocrisy projection: Asserting that your opponent is hypocritical about a given argument without actually checking the consistency of their record.
8. “That’s offensive”: Responding to an idea you don’t like with “that’s offensive,” rather than engaging with its substance.
9. Offense archaeology: Digging through someone’s past comments to find speech that hasn’t aged well.
10. Making stuff up: Fabricating information [about someone] to bolster a weak argument — and asserting it with confidence.

These ten techniques are omnipurpose: they can be employed by people of any political persuasion (as well as in completely apolitical contexts) to protect themselves from having to grapple with disfavored ideas, and at the same time to mislead their audiences.

But Lukianoff and Schlott then go on to enumerate, in subsequent chapters, some of the specific rhetorical tactics that are used by the contemporary “left” and “right”. All are variants of *ad hominem*, but the details differ. For the “right”, there are four simple rules (165):

1. You don’t have to listen to liberals (and anyone can be labeled “liberal” if they have the “wrong” opinion).
2. You don’t have to listen to experts (even conservative experts, if they have the “wrong” opinion).
3. You don’t have to listen to journalists (even conservative journalists if they have the “wrong” opinion).

4. And, among the MAGA wing, there's a fourth provision: You don't need to listen to anyone who isn't pro-Trump.

Lukianoff and Schlott quote several times (157, 166, 175) from an eloquent 2022 essay by the heterodox conservative David French in which he denounces, with numerous specific examples, a growing “culture of intolerance [that] pervades the Right”. They also denounce, in Chapter 7, attempts by Republican state legislators to outlaw discussion of “divisive concepts” (notably critical race theory) in public schools and even in state universities, in vaguely worded laws that fail to distinguish, as Helen Pluckrose has cogently observed, between *teaching about* ideas and *indoctrinating in* ideas.

For the “left”, the array of barriers against open debate is more formidable, as it concerns not only political views, real or alleged, but also (and perhaps above all) demographic identities such as the person's race, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. (In the old days one would have added class, but few on the “left” these days seem, alas, to care much about that.)

As with the “right”, the first filter is ideological: Is the speaker conservative? Or if not, can they somehow be labeled as “right adjacent”, “in league with the far right”, or even “in a position of woeful complicity with the key aims of new fascism”?

Next comes the barrier of race. In principle this allows dismissing any white person who dares to offer ideas about racial issues, but in practice the prohibition is invoked only against those who have disfavored ideas: thus, “antiracist” superstars like Robin DiAngelo, author of the best-seller *White Fragility*, get a free pass. On the other hand,

lest you think that being black absolves you from elimination, we have disappointing news: if a black person says something deemed “conservative,” that person can be accused of not “actually” being black. (119)

This fate befalls not only avowed conservatives like economists Glenn Loury and Thomas Sowell and political scientist Wilfred Reilly, but even heterodox liberals like linguist (and *New York Times* columnist) John McWhorter. As the young writer Coleman Hughes told the authors:

I've met people who say that being Black is the key qualification needed in order to have a valid opinion on race issues. Strangely enough, the moment they realize that I have the ‘wrong’ opinions, they are quick to say that I must not really be Black. It's a worldview perfectly protected from challenges: the non-Blacks who disagree can be dismissed because they're not Black, and the Blacks who disagree can be dismissed because they aren't either. (119)

This denigration of Black and Asian conservatives as “not really Black” — or worse yet, as traitors to the race — is, alas, far from unknown here in the UK.

But the dirty secret here seems to be that this “racial barrier” is not fundamentally about race, after all; rather, race is simply a convenient pretext for the rejection, without analysis, of the ideas that one dislikes. As Lukianoff and Schlott say,

The key factor that makes these dodges so effective is optionality: you are never *obligated* to use them. You can apply the barricades to dismiss arguments you don't like, while letting other people just waltz through. (115, emphasis in the original)

The next barrier is sex:

Any argument made by a man can be dismissed as “mansplaining.” The term is a critique of men who explain things to women, especially situations in which a female expert is lectured on her topic of expertise by a male layperson. That is undoubtedly obnoxious.

But, over time, the accusation of mansplaining has been lazily used to shut down any argument uttered by a man . . .

Greg experienced this barricade firsthand in a rather bizarre way during a conference at Bard College. That’s where a non-lawyer told him he’d been “mansplaining” Title IX — a complex body of law that affects everything from how sexual assault is handled on campus to college sports — to a fellow panelist. While Greg has been neck-deep in Title IX law for over two decades of his career, his copanelist was a recent law school graduate.

The implication of the critique: that the female copanelist had some sort of special understanding of a body of law simply by merit of being a woman. (119–120)

The barriers of sexual orientation and gender identity function similarly.

Unfortunately the authors fail to address situations in which it can be legitimate (or less so) to take account of a speaker’s demographic, ideological or economic identity: for instance, distinguishing between people’s *personal testimony* about things they experienced or witnessed (which has some privileged status, even if testimonies should not always be accepted at face value) and people’s *interpretations* of their “lived experience” (which are always debatable, even by outsiders); or distinguishing between indications of *possible* bias (which should be investigated rigorously on their merits before being accepted or rejected) and the mere presumption that identity or self-interest *invariably* entails bias (which is unjustified). Including a brief discussion of these issues could have provided some nuance.

But after this, the barriers turn from identity back to ideas:

Barricade 6: . . . If you can be accused of any kind of “ism,” be it racism or sexism, or having any kind of “phobia,” like transphobia or Islamophobia, then your point doesn’t matter. Whether or not you’re actually guilty of being “phobic” is beside the point.

Barricade 7: Are They Guilty by Association? . . . We saw this on spectacular display in Moira Weigel’s *Guardian* review of *The Coddling of the American Mind* [authored by Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt]. In a piece full of menacing hints of guilt by association, Weigel went to great lengths to link Greg and Jonathan Haidt to everyone from conservatives like Roger Kimball and Dinesh D’Souza to alt-right figures like Milo Yiannopoulos. (124–125)

Of course, readers ought not take Lukianoff’s word for this; they can consult the review and decide for themselves.

One of the most interesting barriers (#9) involves the notion of a “thought-terminating cliché. They quote Andrew Doyle:

How often have we heard commentators intuiting the motives of their opponents through accusations of “dog-whistling,” the practice of sending out secret signals that only one’s followers can hear? Or the kind of amateur clairvoyance that denounces people for being “on the wrong side of history”? Or dismissals of legitimate opinions as “right-wing talking points”? The implication of all such clichés is that there is no further discussion to be had . . . They act as hermeneutic shortcuts which disoblige the speaker from considering carefully whether or not [the ideas in question] have merit. (127)

It goes without saying that this tactic is widely used also on the “right”, where accusations that an idea is “liberal” or “socialist” or (god forbid) “Marxist” — accurate or not — are seen as sufficient to end the conversation.

The bottom line, as the American journalist Jonathan Rauch eloquently observed in his book, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, is that there is a profound difference between cancel culture and honest criticism:

Criticism seeks to engage in conversations and identify error; canceling seeks to stigmatize conversations and punish the errant. Criticism cares whether statements are true; canceling cares about their social effects. Criticism exploits viewpoint diversity; canceling imposes viewpoint conformity. Criticism is a substitute for social punishment (we kill our hypotheses rather than each other); canceling is a form of social punishment (we kill your hypothesis by killing you socially).

Fortunately, there are some people on both Left and Right who have raised their voices against Cancel Culture within their own house. Among conservatives, one can cite David French, Sol Stern, and (to some extent) Ross Douthat. Among leftists, entire books have been written on the subject by Ben Burgis, Norman Finkelstein and Umut Özkırmılı — thinkers who, it should be stressed, may have profound differences of perspective among themselves on some substantive political questions, but who nevertheless concur on the importance of robust internal dissent.

But how much of this is new? Lukianoff and Schlott concede at the outset that

there has never been some utopian period . . . where everyone argued fairly and thoughtfully. There was never a time when people only cared about truth, never made ad hominem arguments, and always operated in good faith. (5)

But, they contend,

it’s also foolish to assume that America has always been as bad as it currently is at talking about its problems and discussing solutions. There have, indeed, been moments in human history when society was better at arguing productively.

But, over the last several decades, many of the institutions tasked with teaching us how to argue productively have failed in their duties — most notably, American higher education. This is surely bad enough on its own, considering [that] we rely on institutions of higher learning to help us sort falsehood from truth, good ideas from bad, and tenable solutions from untenable ones. (5)

And “just as higher education began to fail in that mission” — a complex issue on which numerous entire books have been written — “an epochal technological shift took place” (5) with the rise of social media.

The main technological novelty is simply the vastly increased speed of human interaction, together with its nearly universal reach. Here a personal testimony may illuminate the situation. Back in 1996, I published a faux-scholarly article satirizing some post-modernist sectors of the academic left, with the declared aim of strengthening the left by defending it from a trendy segment of itself. Some fellow leftists, notably Ruth Rosen, Katha Pollitt, Barbara Epstein and Barbara Ehrenreich, supported me; others criticized me, sometimes harshly. A conference was even organized at the University of California–Santa Cruz to attack “left conservatives” such as Pollitt, Ehrenreich and myself (it was a great honor to be included in such illustrious company). But the timelines were long: a few weeks for a newspaper op-ed, a few months for journal articles, a year-and-a-half for the conference.

Thank god. These days a social media pile-on can be organized in a few hours; and a petition demanding the retraction of the article and/or punishment of the miscreant author can net hundreds or even thousands of signatures in a matter of days — as Rebecca Tuvel, Bruce Gilley, Norman Wang, Susanna Diaz and Michael Bailey, and several others can testify. And of course academia is only the tip of the iceberg; innumerable ordinary citizens have been subjected to mass hounding for minor lapses or none at all.

This historically unprecedented speed of mass communication reinforces both tribalism and intellectual sloppiness. Pressed for time, many people — even prominent academics — sign petitions and retweet posts based on support for their chosen “side”, without bothering to inform themselves adequately about the specific concrete issue (for instance, actually *reading* the impugned article, much less reflecting on it).

This effect is further magnified, as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has pointed out, by social-media algorithms that “bring each user the content most likely to generate a ‘like’ or ... ‘share’ ... Later research showed that posts that trigger emotions — especially anger at out-groups — are the most likely to be shared.”

Haidt continues (and here I refer readers to his illuminating article for details of the evidence):

Social media has given voice to some people who had little previously, and it has made it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their misdeeds, not just in politics but in business, the arts, academia, and elsewhere. ... However, the warped “accountability” of social media has also brought injustice — and political dysfunction — in three ways.

First, the dart guns of social media give more power to trolls and provocateurs while silencing good citizens. ...

Second, the dart guns of social media give more power and voice to the political extremes while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority. ...

Finally, by giving everyone a dart gun, social media deputizes everyone to administer justice with no due process. ...

All this is important because, as Haidt emphasizes,

The most pervasive obstacle to good thinking is confirmation bias . . . The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don't share your beliefs. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument. John Stuart Mill said, "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that," and he urged us to seek out conflicting views "from persons who actually believe them." People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider . . .

And to the extent that they are successful in silencing or intimidating their critics, they make the rest of us stupider as well.

So a practical question now arises: Given that Cancel Culture is nowadays ubiquitous on both "left" and "right", how can the defenders of free expression and reasoned debate push back against it?

In their final chapter, provocatively titled "The adulthood of the American mind", Lukianoff and Schlott argue convincingly that robust legal protection for the freedom of expression, though important, is far from sufficient for a healthy democracy: what is needed is a Free Speech Culture. They quote (299) the famous dictum of the American jurist Learned Hand, in a 1944 speech:

Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it.

That may be more eloquent than rigorously true — oppressive regimes have often succeeded in subjugating freedom-loving peoples — but the spirit that "liberty lies in the hearts of men and women" is nevertheless apt.

Lukianoff and Schlott point out that

Censoring is humankind's natural inclination. It's why we've spent such a small portion of human history *not* hunting down heretics. (300, emphasis in the original)

Referring to the slippery slope towards ever greater censorship, once the door is opened a crack, they observe that

The oil on the slope that makes it so slippery is "censorship envy." [Law professor] Eugene Volokh . . . defines censorship envy as "the common reaction that, 'If my neighbor gets to ban speech he reviles, why shouldn't I get to do the same?'"

This is a natural human instinct. In childhood, we shout "Unfair!" when a sibling gets a cookie but we don't. In adulthood, we tend to similarly say "Unfair!" when we see others policing speech to serve their own ends. For instance, imagine you, a Christian, see tweets critical of Islam censored by a social media platform. If

that’s the standard, you too may want to see tweets critical of your faith censored for the sake of “fairness.”

Censorship envy is precisely why many self-proclaimed free speech champions resort to fighting fire with fire — or, better put, censorship with censorship. Often, it’s the animating force behind conservative hypocrisy on free speech and Cancel Culture (and why Republican legislatures have cranked out so many unconstitutional laws in their fight against illiberalism on the left). (301–302)

But as Lukianoff and Schlott stress, the fundamental problem is not just censorship (public and private); it is the degradation of the standards of social and political debate. This degradation obviously has multiple causes, which moreover vary from country to country; but it is hard to argue with Lukianoff and Schlott’s observation that

For at least the past decade, Americans have been arguing with one another like kids on a playground. . . . [W]e’ve constructed rhetorical fortresses to box us in and justify our childish methods of argumentation, from ad hominem attacks to offense archaeology and disqualification of speakers based on their identity characteristics. (303)

They urge, by contrast, that

Americans must resume arguing, acting, and thinking like adults. As citizens we call for a resurgence of Free Speech Culture — *the adulthood of the American mind* — brought about by the return of old-fashioned rules of quality argumentation. . . .

That means actually talking to one another like adults and taking seriously the likelihood we might be wrong. . . . The adulthood of the American mind is a cultural state in which we don’t shrink away from difficult discussions, in which we don’t censor inconvenient facts, and in which we don’t sugarcoat hard truths. (305–306, emphasis in the original)

But how to get there? Lukianoff and Schlott cite approvingly (157, 175) a suggestion by David French: “Right has to reform Right, and Left has to reform Left.” The idea is eminently sensible, but it is also deeply ironic: we opponents of *ad hominem* argument insist that ideas should be addressed on their merits, without regard to the affiliations of their advocates or detractors; and yet we are now prescribing exactly the latter. French’s suggestion has to be considered an unfortunate yet perhaps necessary concession — hopefully temporary — to ingrained prejudices.

There is also a legitimate reason of principle to privilege intra-tribal critique. Differences concerning fundamental moral commitments are extraordinarily difficult to resolve; at best one can hope to come to some mutual recognitions. (For instance, pro-choice advocates could recognise that the unborn foetus has some moral claims, and pro-life advocates could recognise the moral rights of women to bodily autonomy, while continuing to disagree on the relative importance of these two moral interests.)

By contrast, there can be at least *some* hope of reasoned discussion, and openness to changing one’s views, among people who broadly share the same values and goals

but who differ on specific social diagnoses and policy proposals — for instance, between liberal feminists and radical feminists, or between Christian social conservatives and secular social conservatives. As Helen Pluckrose said in a wise recent essay:

I, an atheist, am unlikely to be able to convince Christian Nationalists that they are doing Christianity wrongly, because they could immediately (and reasonably) point out that I don't believe there's a way to do it correctly. Christians, who share their premise that the Christian God exists and their goal to convince others that Christ is the way, the truth and the life, but who believe that Christian Nationalists are not behaving in ways that are Christlike are the people who can most effectively convince Christians inclined to become Christian Nationalists not to do that . . .

She continues:

Why do some people seem to have so much difficulty grasping this? Why, when I first began criticising illiberal elements on the left did so many people assume I must hold values on the illiberal right? . . . Why, when I criticise authoritarian elements among gender critical feminists, did so many assume that I am an authoritarian trans activist or men's right activist (or, bizarrely, both), rather than that I am, as I say, a liberal feminist?

I think the answer to this is that too many people seek to engage in political and cultural debate purely by highlighting bad things on the other side and they assume everybody else to do the same. Further, many actively believe that everybody else *should* do the same. They take up a purely oppositional 'anti' stance and require an utter collectivist solidarity with that stance and regard anybody trying to fix problems on their own side (and thus strengthen it) as a traitor supporting the other team.

Here Pluckrose reinforces a point made also by French: that “in many of the cancel-culture incidents above, the cancellation is fratricidal” and indeed that “in times of extreme polarization, radicals often target so-called in-group moderates with greater ferocity than that reserved for the other side.” French continues:

The reasons make sense, on reflection. First, in-group moderates represent a far more immediate threat to any radical enterprise than out-group opponents. The in-group moderate is often speaking to the same constituency as the radical, and the battle for hearts and minds of a party or an institution is immediate and tangible.

Second, in-group moderates are vulnerable in a way that out-group opponents are not. . . . [W]hen out-group opponents attack, allies tend to rally in support. Thus, as we've seen, a conservative can be “canceled” by the Left yet see his power and stature only rise on the Right.

But when Right cancels Right? Or Left cancels Left? Then, the danger to your reputation and career is far starker. The Left won't truly embrace conservatives who remain conservatives, and the Right won't embrace progressives who remain progressives, so when in-group moderates face persecution from their own tribe, the result can be a sense of overpowering isolation and vulnerability.

The pressure to conform or to switch sides entirely can be overwhelming. We are, after all, built for community, and when we lose one community, it's entirely natural to seek out another — often as an act of sheer self-preservation.

Third, in-group moderates often trigger a visceral sense of betrayal. . . . The result is a toxic environment in which internal debate is stifled, dissent is greeted with outrage, and increasing numbers of individuals feel as if their careers and public reputations depend on public conformity to radical demands.

This is why French says that

Reform has to come from within. Right has to reform Right, and Left has to reform Left. And that means that the in-group moderates have to find their voices. They have to confront the scorn and the threats and respectfully but firmly make their dissent known.³

He concludes on a cautiously optimistic note:

Cancel culture feeds on its own victories. It is drained by its defeats. There is no better way to end intimidation than by refusing to be intimidated. The collective action has to reverse — away from individual retreat and toward individual advance. There is no path toward free expression and a healthy discourse that doesn't require personal courage.

And as French knows from bitter personal experience, “there are few challenges more difficult than confronting friends”; but he nevertheless insists that

absent those respectful confrontations, the tolerant voices will fall silent, and the public square will be lost to the radicals who are tearing this country apart.

That last phrase, sadly accurate today in the USA, would clearly be an exaggeration here in the UK, at least at present. But the degradation of political discourse, the animosity towards heterodox thinkers of all stripes, and the frequent invocation of guilt by association are very real phenomena on both sides of the Atlantic. As Lukianoff and Schlott say, “the only way we can stop [the] progression” of tribalist and *ad hominem* argument “is by developing the cultural immune system that allows us to resist or simply prevent its replication”.

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³But I need to make one small correction: it is not only “moderates” who can become internal dissidents. Consider, for instance, the case of Jamie Reed, a lesbian woman who describes herself as “politically to the left of Bernie Sanders”, but who became a whistleblower concerning the treatments of teenagers at the Transgender Center at St. Louis Children's Hospital, where she worked as a case manager. She is now Executive Director of the LGBT Courage Coalition, which decries

the current political and media environment that is actively censoring dissent, even and perhaps especially when it comes from Democrats, liberals, and progressives. This censorship promotes the false narrative that the only people to question medical transition for minors are “right wing” and conservative. Nothing could be further from the truth.

She supports the Tennessee law, currently before the U.S. Supreme Court, that bans transgender drugs and surgeries for minors.