

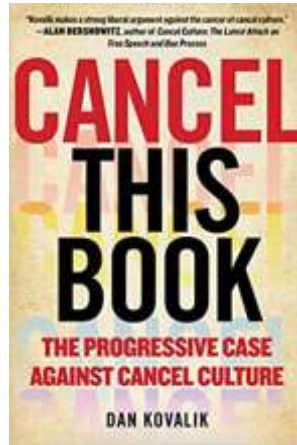
“Hits it on the Head”

A 5 star Review by Dick Burkhart of

“Cancel This Book:

The Progressive Case Against Cancel Culture”

by Dan Kovalik (2021)



This is a principled critique from the Left: “Too many on the Left, wielding the cudgel of ‘cancel culture’, have decided that certain forms of censorship and speech and idea suppression are positive things that will advance the cause of social justice. I fear that those who take this view are in for a rude awakening” (p x). “Indeed, there is strong evidence that liberal social media accounts have been much greater victims of censorship than right-leaning accounts” (p ix). As someone who is on the economic Left myself, all this certainly rings true.

And when Kovalik gets into politics, he really hits it on the head: “Such tactics give excuses to such institutions as the *Post-Gazette* [a once-liberal Pittsburgh newspaper] to make the endorsement of a right-wing demagogue like Trump ... This also take the focus away from our quite-justified demands for social, racial, and economic justice” (p xii), replacing it by a “purely symbolic struggle” which “alienates many people”. “Sadly it is these very people – otherwise known as the white working class – who have been largely forsaken by liberals” (p xiii). That is, think about Hillary’s “deplorables” comment.

Instead Kovalik, a long-time labor lawyer for the United Steel Workers, reminds us that MLK was one of “America’s greatest working class heroes” when he became determined to “build bridges between the civil rights and labor movements” (p xiv). Du Bois, as a Marxist, had also held out hope that black and white workers “could come together to defeat capitalism”. “Meanwhile Trump seized upon the abandonment of the working class to win the 2016 election” (p xv). “Liberals have also shown themselves as willing to deny science and facts as much as the right to advance their own political goals”.

But what actually constitutes “free speech” – where do we draw the line? Here Kovalik suggests “speech that offends, but does not interfere with another’s right of participation, should not be banned or otherwise suppressed” (p 2). This seems right on track to me since it would eliminate call-outs for “micro-aggressions” and other false claims of “harm” due to ideological or linguistic differences or a simple faux pas. Kovalik even quotes Ibram Kendi that an “anti-racist” is “gonna allow both themselves and other people to make mistakes”.

But Kovalik wants far more – to turn “free speech” into more effective communication. He points to a recent study that found “the practice of non-judgmental, in-depth conversations with voters about their experiences and struggles was 102 times more effective in actually convincing voters than brief ‘drive-by’ interactions” (p 3). Even more startling, he cites the story of Daryl Davis, an African American who ... befriended members of the KKK”...convincing “200 Klan members to give up their robes” (p 4) over 30 years. Whereas confronting or canceling such people typically results “in racists simply doubling down on their bigotry”. In other words, the “deplorables” are not so deplorable once you get to know them.

In fact, Kovalik cites studies that “unionization and activity – which requires workers of all races, genders, and backgrounds to work together in common cause – inevitably made workers less racist and sexist” (p 6). And when it comes to politics, his personal knowledge backs this up: Union “members would support a progressive candidate like [Bernie] Sanders because of his policy positions, such as Medicare for All, but not Hillary Clinton, whom they viewed as a liberal elitist who looked down on them and whose husband, Bill Clinton, negotiated many of the free trade agreements that led the to the mass flushing of industrial jobs out of the United States” (p 8).

For much of the rest of the book Kovalik documents particular cancellations and their other abuses of power. This starts with Molly Rush, a revered, elderly

peace activist in Pittsburgh, over her reposting on facebook of “Looted nothing, Burned nothing, Attacked no one, Changed the World” (p 15) under a picture of MLK. This led to vicious social media attacks by some blacks and their white allies, even though the quoted statement was true and represented a legitimate protest against the nighttime violence in some cities, violence which eventually led to a huge loss in public support for Black Lives Matter.

In addition Kovalik cites journalist Michael Tracey of “‘riots’ motivated by consciously insurrectionist ideology – consisting of arson attacks and other actions intended to maximize chaos – appearing to have been largely instigated by left wing activist whites” (p 24). In Seattle we know such types as “black bloc anarchists” for their clothing, not their race. Noting that people-of-color businesses were often targeted, Kovalik says that the “indifference of white progressives to this loss might itself be seen as a manifestation of racism and white supremacy, but few dared to call it such” (p 24). And that “it is deemed heresy in the ‘woke’ left to even discuss the episodes of white protest condescension toward Black leaders” (p 28), especially those who protested property destruction. He points out that even Lenin advised that “violent acts people and property...tend only to turn off and alienate the masses” (p 25).

A closely related kind of persecution cited by Kovalik is illustrated by certain kinds of diversity trainings, such as the 800 company trainings over 30 years studies by Dobbin and Kalev. “This study showed that diversity training tends to enforce racial stereotypes and to lower sympathy toward poor whites” (p 18), breeding resentment, especially among whites of modest means, “that they somehow benefit from ‘white supremacy’ even while struggling to make ends meet”. In fact I know that other studies show that the white working class in the US has suffered over the last 40 years substantially greater reductions of income and status than their black working class cousins. But Kovalik notes that “employers can have the benefit of virtue signaling by pretending to do something for racial justice and gender equality...and the consultants themselves can cash in”.

Kovalik reiterates the observation of others, like John McWhorter, about the religious nature of the BLM protests, though he doesn’t cite its ideological source in critical race theory. He says that the BLM protests that he witnessed “were indeed more religious in nature than they were political. They seemed more about white protesters going to somehow purify themselves than about achieving any particular political ends” (p 33). He contrasts this with the plight of the many poor whites living in “abject poverty and squalor in this country

who would be surprised to hear that the system is rigged in their favor”, noting that in Alabama and West Virginia “a high proportion of the population is not served by public sewage and water supply services” (p 37).

Kovalik observes “I guess there will always be people who will respond to the stick, who will voluntarily wear a hair shirt as penance for sins they didn’t know ...they had...but for how long?” (p 38). So for him the BLM protests were a “huge lost opportunity”. And, as to the effects of unjust cancellations, J.K. Rowling is quoted “People find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than for being right” (p 39). I’ve seen this in my own Unitarian Universalist Association, where many accusers behind a major witch-hunt just bore down harder rather than apologize and move on. Indeed, Kovalik cites a study of Politically Correct Authoritarian personality types, who shared the same triad of pathologies, weather on the Left or the Right: Machiavelianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy” (p 46). In fact, these radicals on the Left and Right “feed off each other, with the one hardly able to exist without the other”.

To sum it up, Kovalik observes that “A number of people refer to such cancellations as the New McCarthyism” (p 42). He points to the McCarthy era cancellation of the famous African American singer and activist Paul Robeson, who “had an incredible rapport with these members of the white working class [the miners of Wales]” (p 43). He concludes that the cancellation “movement, as currently constituted, knows how to destroy...not to create, and this is the problem” (p 49).

Next, Kovalik takes a dive into the classism behind cancel culture. He quotes Thomas Frank: “Why do Americans despise liberals?...That liberalism has become a politics of upper-class bullying and of character assassination is an impression that’s daily becomes more and more difficult to avoid” (p 54). The diagnosed attitude, from River Page, is that “those among us who are prosperous are so because of their moral superiority” with virtue signaling “by focusing almost entirely on issues that will not burden their wallets, such as flying a rainbow flag for supporting LGBT rights or putting up a ‘Black Lives Matter’ sign in their yard” (p 52) ‘while “essential workers ‘... are treated more like ‘expendable workers’”.

Kovalik concludes that “while the ‘woke’ revolution will not be televised (actually it is, quite a bit), it will receive corporate sponsorship” (p 63). Meanwhile Ajuma Baraka, of the Black Alliance for Peace, “expressed disappointment ... that the protests over the summer did not address ... the most pressing problems facing all Americans, but especially African

Americans” (p 74). Instead Democratic pollster Danny Barefoot found a deep “distaste for the slogan ‘defund the police’” (p 77), a “horrible error” that many think was a key factor in the failure of the “blue wave” in the November 2020 elections.

Being in touch with miners, Kovalik observes that “many living in the Iron Range voted for Trump, not because they are racist, but because they believed, and for good reason, that Trump helped saved the mining industry in the region,, something the Democrats made no pretense of doing” (p 80). But “all the democratic socialists who won [in November, 2020] ran on platforms that included the very popular Medicare for All and a Green New Deal” (p 83). In fact, “preliminary numbers indicated that 26% of Trump’s ... share came from non-white voters – the highest ... for the GOP ... since 1960” (p 86), declining from 2016 only for white males, while the increase for non-whites came from those without college degrees (the working class). Thus Kovalik concludes that “finding common ground is more within reach than we are told” (p 89).

Then class and history get even more attention, citing the case of the eminent black Marxist Adolph Reed, himself recently canceled for not toeing the party line. His observation is that “lasting victories were achieved ... when working class and people of all races fought together, shoulder to shoulder, for their rights” (p 95). Yet Reed fears that “antiracism [as popularized by Kendi] in the 21st century would ... may be used for the same purposes as racism in the 20th century – to divide the working class” (p 93). Kovalik finds that ‘wokeness’ “is nothing more or less than a form of elitism in which the better educated look down on the less educated” (p 103), a view shared by black scholars like John McWhorter, even Cornel West in more measured terms.

Further chapters focus the hypocrisy of US imperialism, the scurrilous attacks on Bernie Sanders and Tulsi Gabbard, the plight of dissidents in the university, historical censorship, and attacks on defenders of Palestine. In other words, Kovalik marshals a vigorous, insightful, and thorough response from the Old Left to the hypocrisies and elitism of today’s Radical Left. The radicals’ cancel culture has not only failed to defeat Trumpism, but paved the way for Trump’s victory in 2016 and the conspiracy theories that now prey on the abused masses.