

Middle-Aged Panic About Cancel Culture

Goldberg, Michelle . New York Times , Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]. 21 Sep 2021: A.21.

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FULL TEXT

"The Chair," a Netflix comic drama about academia starring Sandra Oh, turns on a particularly absurd and unfair cancellation. In the first episode Bill, a onetime superstar English professor who's falling apart after the death of his wife, is giving a lecture on modernism when, drawing a connection between fascism and absurdism, he gives a mock Nazi salute.

After some students capture the gesture on their phones, a campus meltdown ensues and -- spoiler alert -- Bill, played by Jay Duplass, gets railroaded out of his job. Bill has a very specific sort of irony-laden aging hipster sensibility, one that is in many ways my own. (The Joy Division T-shirt he wears in another scene is a nice touch, since Joy Division is both a quintessential Gen X band and one whose name, an arch reference to sex slaves in Nazi concentration camps, would never fly today.) He is far more sympathetic than the maliciously literal-minded students who mobilize against him and think, or at least pretend to think, that he's a genuine white supremacist. I don't think Bill's story really reflects what's happening on college campuses; few instances of real-life cancellations are so factually simple or ethically ridiculous. But it is a near-perfect reflection of the generational anxiety driving much discussion about cancel culture, one that causes otherwise sensible people to make wild historical analogies between today's intellectual climate and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the U.S.S.R. or 17th-century theocracies.

A few weeks ago Anne Applebaum published a piece in *The Atlantic* titled "The New Puritans," about people who have "lost everything" after breaking, or being accused of breaking "social codes having to do with race, sex, personal behavior or even acceptable humor, which may not have existed five years ago or maybe five months ago." Around the same time, *The Economist* published a cover package about the illiberal left, warning that as graduates of elite American universities have moved into the workplace, they have "brought along tactics to enforce ideological purity, by no-platforming their enemies and canceling allies who have transgressed."

I agreed with parts of Applebaum's argument, particularly about how political attacks can be a cover for petty power struggles. But it is bizarre to bring earnest talk of Mao and Stalin into a discussion of the travails of figures like Ian Buruma, who lost his job as editor in chief of *The New York Review of Books* after publishing a misleading and self-justifying essay by a man accused of serial sexual assault.

In a sharp essay in *Liberal Currents*, Adam Gurri looked at empirical evidence that might tell us how big a crisis academic cancellations really are, and he came away nonplussed. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, for example, documents 426 cases of scholars "targeted for sanction by ideological adversaries" since 2015, a relatively small number given the size of American higher education. "If any other problem in social life was occurring at this frequency and at this scale, we would consider it effectively solved," writes Gurri.

Yet to many in elite enclaves, the problem feels far bigger than this -- so big that it's tempting to reach for dramatic historical analogies to describe it. *The Economist* compared today's progressive cultural vanguard to the state churches of the 1600s. "In Restoration England, Oxford University burned the works of Hobbes and Milton in the great quad next to the Bodleian Library," it said. "Today academics put trigger warnings on books, alerting students to the dangers of reading them. Young publishers try to get controversial books 'canceled.'"

This is so histrionic that it suggests the usually sober *Economist* is in the grips of extremely strong emotions. One

of these emotions, I believe, is loss. Many people I know over 40 – maybe 35 – resent new social mores that demand outsized sensitivity to causing harm. It has been jarring to go from an intellectual culture that prizes transgression to one that polices it. The shame of turning into the sort of old person repelled by the sensibilities of the young is a cause of real psychic pain.

As Maggie Nelson writes in her new book "On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint," it "can be tempting for those of us over, say, 40, to judge the current moment against the idealized circumstances of our own coming of age, and find it less fun, less free."

In "The New Puritans," Applebaum reveals a blind spot about the true source of intellectual repression in America. "There are currently no laws that shape what academics or journalists can say; there is no government censor, no ruling-party censor," she wrote. This statement is incorrect. A number of state laws do shape what academics can say, but these laws, aimed at critical race theory, censor the left. There is a crisis of intellectual liberty in this country, but the victims are overwhelmingly people in red states who teach about racism.

A real-world tenured professor like Bill would be extremely unlikely to lose his job for making fun of Nazis in the wrong way. He might, however, see his status erode because his worldview has fallen out of fashion. For the individual, this may be a source of anguish. That doesn't make it a political emergency.

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Jay Duplass in "The Chair." (PHOTOGRAPH BY Eliza Morse/Netflix FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

DETAILS

Subject:	Culture; Economists; Sex crimes; White supremacists; Books; Ostracism
Business indexing term:	Subject: Economists
Location:	United States--US New York
Company / organization:	Name: Netflix Inc; NAICS: 512120, 518210, 532282; Name: Joy Division; NAICS: 711130
URL:	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/20/opinion/generation-cancel-culture.html
Lexile score:	1690 L
Publication title:	New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y.
Pages:	A.21
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Sep 21, 2021
column:	Michelle Goldberg
Section:	A
Publisher:	New York Times Company

Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	03624331
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
ProQuest document ID:	2574588841
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/middle-aged-panic-about-cancel-culture/docview/2574588841/se-2?accountid=4179
Copyright:	Copyright New York Times Company Sep 21, 2021
Last updated:	2021-09-21
Database:	ProQuest One Academic,eLibrary

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