

# Free Speech and Tolerance on Campus and in Society

## Rich Harris, seminar leader

We will be meeting at 3 PM on Wednesday, January 11 at the Lewes library.

### Instructions

Please consider the readings and videos listed below. Along with the writing prompts, these materials provide a basis for preparing your 200-400 word written reaction.

Please email your reactions to [lewesseminar@gmail.com](mailto:lewesseminar@gmail.com) no later than Monday, January 9<sup>th</sup> to allow enough time for everyone to read all reactions.

### Introduction

So-called *cancel culture* is a hallmark of our polarized society. The right portrays cancel culture as throttling free speech and silencing conservative voices. The left sees it as a means to eliminate hate speech and promote inclusivity. From another perspective, though, *cancel culture*, however well-intentioned, may generate illiberal and censorious effects on society. Tension between free expression and censorship is not a new societal concern (see for example Henrik Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* or Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*). This tension is especially problematic in universities where free expression is crucial to robust education and inquiry.

Interestingly, the case for cancel culture can be traced to the academy, specifically, to Herbert Marcuse's 1965 call for, "Repressive Tolerance." In this view, our liberal ideals of tolerance and free speech are canards that paper over an exploitative, racist society. Although Marcuse had little use for Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the postmodern critique that gained traction on campus in the 1980s, reinforced the claim that liberalism and tolerance were merely masks for oppression; true freedom would require repression, not only of overt racists and bigots, but also those who were insufficiently aware or pro-active.

This ideology began to manifest itself publicly in the 1980s with [campus speech codes](#). After the Supreme Court struck down the code at the University of Michigan, the issue morphed into what we now recognize as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs which, in their own way reflect *repressive tolerance*. In 2015, the question of cancel culture entered public discourse with Yale's controversy around Halloween costumes and the University's takedown of [Drs. Nicholas and Erika Christakis](#). Since then, there have been numerous examples of *repressive tolerance* on campus, including Princeton terminating of [Dr. Joshua Katz](#), and MIT revoking a coveted lecture invitation to renown Geophysicist [Dorian Abbot](#) because he published criticisms of affirmative action. While, high profile cases of cancel culture such as [Gina Carano](#) at Disney, James [Benet at the NYT](#), or Jennifer Sey at Levi-Strauss, indicate the issue has spilled over into wider society, our campuses were ground zero for the explosion of cancel culture.

## Materials to Read and View

The readings and YouTube materials should be tackled in order as follows:

1. Herbert Marcuse's essay, "Repressive Tolerance," excerpted from the original. (See Attachment 1) At the end of the Marcuse reading, you will find a proposal from Ibram X. Kendi for a new Federal Department of Anti-Racism. Please consider the connection between Marcuse and Kendi.
2. The second part presents three cases of cancel culture on campus.
  - a. A video of Dr. Bret Weinstein testifying before Congress after he and his wife Dr. Heather Heying were forced out of their tenured positions at Evergreen State. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRIKJCKWla4>
  - b. A short film about Harvard's suspension of economist Dr. Roland Fryer and the cancellation of his research projects. This film has a point of view, but sets out the facts well. [Harvard Canceled its Best Black Professor. Why? - YouTube](#)
  - c. Two short news articles on Dr. Kathleen Stock's being forced out of her tenured position at the University of Sussex. The first approves her leaving and the second laments it.  
1<sup>st</sup> article -- <HTTPS://WWW.PINKNEWS.CO.UK/2021/10/28/KATHLEEN-STOCK-QUITS-SUSSEX-UNIVERSITY-TRANS/>  
2<sup>nd</sup> Article <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-sussex-59084446>
3. Here you will find some material on cancel culture has in the wider society.
  - a. An open letter on free expression, published in *Harper's Magazine*. Please note the political breadth of the signatories. (See Attachment 2)
  - b. A rejoinder making the case for limiting expression and suppressing hate speech.
  - c. An overview of Cancel Culture in Society. (See Attachment 3)
4. Finally, you will find excerpts of Vaclav Havel's essay, "The Power of the Powerless, sometimes referred to as the parable of the greengrocer." (See Attachment 4) It invites a more philosophical consideration of the cancel culture/free speech problem.

## Writing Prompts

1. Why are free speech and tolerance valuable on campus? In society at large?
2. Are there legitimate limits to free speech and tolerance on campus? In society at large?
3. What is cancel culture and how serious a challenge is it?
4. Why do universities that profess enlightenment values of free inquiry succumb to demands for disinviting speakers, disciplining "problematic" faculty, or even revoking admission from applicants with offensive social media history?

Looking forward to reading your responses.