

'Cancel Culture' Letter Is About Stifling Free Speech, Not Protecting It

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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An [open letter](#) published by Harper's magazine, and signed by 150 prominent writers and public figures, has focused attention on the apparent dangers of what has been termed a new "cancel culture".

The letter brings together an unlikely alliance of genuine leftists, such as Noam Chomsky and Matt Karp, centrists such as J K Rowling and Ian Buruma, and neoconservatives such as David Frum and Bari Weiss, all speaking out in defence of free speech.

Although the letter doesn't explicitly use the term "cancel culture", it is clearly what is meant in the complaint about a "stifling" cultural climate that is imposing "ideological conformity" and weakening "norms of open debate and toleration of differences".

It is easy to agree with the letter's generalised argument for tolerance and free and fair debate. But the reality is that many of those who signed are utter hypocrites, who have shown precisely zero commitment to free speech, either in their words or in their deeds.

Further, the intent of many of them in signing the letter is the very reverse of their professed goal: they want to stifle free speech, not protect it.

To understand what is really going on with this letter, we first need to scrutinise the *motives*, rather than the substance, of the letter.

A Letter on Justice and Open Debate

July 7, 2020

The below letter will be appearing in the Letters section of the magazine's October issue. We welcome responses at letters@harpers.org

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Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we also raise our voices against the second. The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump, who represents a real threat to democracy. But resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting. The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides.

[Click to access Harper's article](#)

A new 'illiberalism'

"Cancel culture" started as the shaming, often on social media, of people who were seen to have said offensive things. But of late, cancel culture has on occasion become more tangible, as the letter notes, with individuals fired or denied the chance to speak at a public venue or to publish their work.

The letter denounces this supposedly new type of "illiberalism":

"We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. ...

"Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; ... The result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement."

Tricky identity politics

The array of signatories is actually more troubling than reassuring. If we lived in a more just world, some of those signing – like Frum, a former speechwriter for President George W Bush, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former US State Department official – would be facing a reckoning before a Hague war crimes tribunal for their roles in promoting "interventions" in

Iraq and Libya respectively, not being held up as champions of free speech.

That is one clue that these various individuals have signed the letter for very different reasons.

Chomsky signed because he has been a lifelong and consistent defender of the right to free speech, even for those with appalling opinions such as Holocaust denial.

I will never forget watching this video of Noam Chomsky — a Jewish anarchist – defend a Holocaust denier's *right to freedom of speech* against a ravenous mob, and it had such a profound impact on me.

I strive to have this level of integrity.

Fuck clout. pic.twitter.com/xHtFqStBoz

— Anna Slatz | 🇺🇸 (@YesThatAnna) [July 5, 2020](#)

Frum, who coined the term “axis of evil” that rationalised the invasion of Iraq, and Weiss, a New York Times columnist, signed because they have found their lives getting tougher. True, it is easy for them to dominate platforms in the corporate media while advocating for criminal wars abroad, and they have paid no career price when their analyses and predictions have turned out to be so much dangerous hokum. But they are now feeling the backlash on university campuses and social media.

Meanwhile, centrists like Buruma and Rowling have discovered that it is getting ever harder to navigate the tricky terrain of identity politics without tripping up. The reputational damage can have serious consequences.

Buruma famously lost his job as editor of the New York Review of Books two years ago after he published and defended an article that [violated](#) the new spirit of the #MeToo movement. And Rowling made the [mistake](#) of thinking her followers would be as fascinated by her traditional views on transgender issues as they are by her Harry Potter books.

‘Fake news, Russian trolls’

But the fact that all of these writers and intellectuals agree that there is a price to be paid in the new, more culturally sensitive climate does not mean that they are all equally interested in protecting the right to be controversial or outspoken.

Chomsky, importantly, is defending free speech *for all*, because he correctly understands that the powerful are only too keen to find justifications to silence those who challenge their power. Elites protect free speech only in so far as it serves their interests in dominating the public space.

If those on the progressive left do not defend the speech rights of everyone, even their political opponents, then any restrictions will soon be turned against them. The establishment will always tolerate the hate speech of a Trump or a Bolsonaro over the justice speech of a Sanders or a Corbyn.

By contrast, most of the rest of those who signed – the rightwingers and the centrists – are

interested in free speech *for themselves and those like them*. They care about protecting free speech only in so far as it allows them to continue dominating the public space with their views – something they were only too used to until a few years ago, before social media started to level the playing field a little.

The centre and the right have been fighting back ever since with claims that anyone who seriously challenges the neoliberal status quo at home and the neoconservative one abroad is promoting “fake news” or is a “Russian troll”. This updating of the charge of being “un-American” embodies cancel culture at its very worst.

Social media accountability

In other words, apart from in the case of a few progressives, the letter is simply special pleading – for a return to the status quo. And for that reason, as we shall see, Chomsky might have been better advised not to have added his name, however much he agrees with the letter’s vague, ostensibly pro-free speech sentiments.

What is striking about a significant proportion of those who signed is their self-identification as ardent supporters of Israel. And as Israel’s critics know only too well, advocates for Israel have been at the forefront of the cancel culture – from long before the term was even coined.

For decades, pro-Israel activists have sought to silence anyone seen to be seriously critiquing this small, highly militarised state, sponsored by the colonial powers, that was implanted in a region rich with a natural resource, oil, needed to lubricate the global economy, and at a terrible cost to its native, Palestinian population.

Nothing should encourage us to believe that zealous defenders of Israel among those signing the letter have now seen the error of their ways. Their newfound concern for free speech is simply evidence that they have begun to suffer from the very same cancel culture they have always promoted in relation to Israel.

They have lost control of the “cancel culture” because of two recent developments: a rapid growth in identity politics among liberals and leftists, and a new popular demand for “accountability” spawned by the rise of social media.

Cancelling Israel’s critics

In fact, despite their professions of concern, the evidence suggests that some of those signing the letter have been intensifying their own contribution to cancel culture in relation to Israel, rather than contesting it.

That is hardly surprising. The need to counter criticism of Israel has grown more pressing as Israel has more obviously become a pariah state. Israel has refused to countenance peace talks with the Palestinians and it has intensified its efforts to realise long-harboured plans to annex swaths of the West Bank in violation of international law.

Rather than allow “robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters” on Israel, Israel’s supporters have preferred the tactics of those identified in the letter as enemies of free speech: “swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought”.

Just ask Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of the Labour party who was reviled, along with his supporters, as an antisemite – one of the worst smears imaginable – by several people on the Harper’s list, including [Rowling](#) and [Weiss](#). Such claims were promoted even though his critics could produce no actual evidence of an antisemitism problem in the Labour party.

Similarly, think of the treatment of Palestinian solidarity activists who support a boycott of Israel (BDS), modelled on the one that helped push South Africa’s leaders into renouncing apartheid. BDS activists too have been smeared as antisemites – and Weiss again has been a prime [offender](#).

The incidents highlighted in the Harper’s letter in which individuals have supposedly been cancelled is trivial compared to the cancelling of a major political party and of a movement that stands in solidarity with a people who have been oppressed for decades.

And yet how many of these free speech warriors have come forward to denounce the fact that leftists – including many Jewish anti-Zionists – have been pilloried as antisemites to prevent them from engaging in debates about Israel’s behaviour and its abuses of Palestinian rights?

How many of them have decried the imposition of a new definition of antisemitism, by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, that has been rapidly gaining ground in western countries?

That definition is designed to silence a large section of the left by prioritising the safety of Israel from being criticised before the safety of Jews from being vilified and attacked – something that even the lawyer who authored the definition has come to [regret](#).

Why has none of this “cancel culture” provoked an open letter to Harper’s from these champions of free speech?

Double-edge sword

The truth is that many of those who signed the letter are defending not free speech but their right to continue dominating the public square – and their right to do so without being held accountable.

Bari Weiss, before she landed a job at the Wall Street Journal and then the New York Times, spent her student years trying to get Muslim professors [fired](#) from her university – cancelling them – because of their criticism of Israel. And she explicitly did so under the banner of “academic freedom”, claiming pro-Israel students felt intimidated in the classroom.

The New York Civil Liberties Union concluded that it was Weiss, not the professors, who was the real threat to academic freedom. This was not some youthful indiscretion. In a book last year Weiss cited her efforts to rid Columbia university of these professors as a formative experience on which she still draws.

Weiss and many of the others listed under the letter are angry that the rhetorical tools they used for so long to stifle the free speech of others have now been turned against them. Those who lived for so long by the sword of identity politics – on Israel, for example – are worried that their reputations may die by that very same sword – on issues of race, sex and gender.

Narcissistic concern

To understand how the cancel culture is central to the worldview of many of these writers and intellectuals, and how blind they are to their own complicity in that culture, consider the case of Jonathan Freedland, a columnist with the supposedly liberal-left British newspaper the Guardian. Although Freedland is not among those signing the letter, he is very much aligned with the centrists among them and, of course, supported the letter in an article [published](#) in the Guardian.

Freedland, we should note, led the “cancel culture” campaign against the Labour party referenced above. He was one of the key figures in Britain’s Jewish community who breathed life into the [antisemitism smears](#) against Corbyn and his supporters.

But note the brief clip below. In it, Freedland’s voice can be heard cracking as he explains how he has been a victim of the cancel culture himself: he confesses that he has suffered verbal and emotional abuse at the hands of Israel’s most extreme apologists – those who are even more unapologetically pro-Israel than he is.

He reports that he has been called a “kapo”, the term for Jewish collaborators in the Nazi concentration camps, and a “sonderkommando”, the Jews who disposed of the bodies of fellow Jews killed in the gas chambers. He admits such abuse “burrows under your skin” and “hurts tremendously”.

and the antisemitic abuse he gets seems to come from Pro Israel supporters pic.twitter.com/RNUrjkibxF

— Keir Still Not Twenty Points Ahead Starmer 🇬🇧 (@TheBirmingham6) [July 7, 2020](#)

And yet, despite the personal pain he has experienced of being unfairly accused, of being cancelled by a section of his own community, Freedland has been at the forefront of the campaign to tar critics of Israel, including anti-Zionist Jews, as antisemites on the flimsiest of evidence.

He is entirely oblivious to the ugly nature of the cancel culture *–unless it applies to himself*. His concern is purely narcissistic. And so it is with the majority of those who signed the letter.

Conducting a monologue

The letter’s main conceit is the pretence that “illiberalism” is a new phenomenon, that free speech is under threat, and that the cancel culture only arrived at the moment it was given a name.

That is simply nonsense. Anyone over the age of 35 can easily remember a time when newspapers and websites did not have a talkback section, when blogs were few in number and rarely read, and when there was no social media on which to challenge or hold to account “the great and the good”.

Writers and columnists like those who signed the letter were then able to conduct a

monologue in which they revealed their opinions to the rest of us as if they were Moses bringing down the tablets from the mountaintop.

In those days, no one noticed the cancel culture – or was allowed to remark on it. And that was because only those who held approved opinions were ever given a media platform from which to present those opinions.

Before the digital revolution, if you dissented from the narrow consensus imposed by the billionaire owners of the corporate media, all you could do was print your own primitive newsletter and send it by post to the handful of people who had heard of you.

That was the real cancel culture. And the proof is in the fact that many of those formerly obscure writers quickly found they could amass tens of thousands of followers – with no help from the traditional corporate media – when they had access to blogs and social media.

Silencing the left

Which brings us to the most troubling aspect of the open letter in Harper's. Under cover of calls for tolerance, given credibility by Chomsky's name, a proportion of those signing actually want to restrict the free speech of one section of the population – the part influenced by Chomsky.

They are not against the big cancel culture from which they have benefited for so long. They are against the small cancel culture – the new more chaotic, and more democratic, media environment we currently enjoy – in which they are for the first time being held to account for their views, on a range of issues including Israel.

Just as Weiss tried to get professors fired under the claim of academic freedom, many of these writers and public figures are using the banner of free speech to discredit speech they don't like, speech that exposes the hollowness of their own positions.

Their criticisms of "cancel culture" are really about prioritising "responsible" speech, defined as speech shared by centrists and the right that shores up the status quo. They want a return to a time when the progressive left – those who seek to disrupt a manufactured consensus, who challenge the presumed verities of neoliberal and neoconservative orthodoxy – had no real voice.

The new attacks on "cancel culture" echo the attacks on Bernie Sanders' supporters, who were framed as "Bernie Bros" – the evidence-free allegation that he attracted a rabble of aggressive, women-hating men who tried to bully others into silence on social media.

Just as this claim was used to discredit Sanders' policies, so the centre and the right now want to discredit the left more generally by implying that, without curbs, they too will bully everyone else into silence and submission through their "cancel culture".

If this conclusion sounds unconvincing, consider that President Donald Trump could easily have added his name to the letter alongside Chomsky's. Trump used his recent Independence Day [speech](#) at Mount Rushmore to make similar points to the Harper's letter. He at least was explicit in equating "cancel culture" with what he called "far-left fascism":

"One of [the left's] political weapons is 'Cancel Culture' – driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone

who disagrees. This is the very definition of totalitarianism ... This attack on our liberty, our magnificent liberty, must be stopped, and it will be stopped very quickly.”

Trump, in all his vulgarity, makes plain what the Harper’s letter, in all its cultural finery, obscures. That attacks on the new “cancel culture” are simply another front – alongside supposed concerns about “fake news” and “Russian trolls” – in the establishment’s efforts to limit speech by the left.

Attention redirected

This is not to deny that there is fake news on social media or that there are trolls, some of them even Russian. Rather, it is to point out that our attention is being redirected, and our concerns manipulated by a political agenda.

Despite the way it has been presented in the corporate media, fake news on social media has been mostly a problem of the right. And the worst examples of fake news – and the most influential – are found not on social media at all, but on the front pages of the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times.

What genuinely fake news on Facebook has ever rivalled the lies justifying the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that were knowingly peddled by a political elite and their stenographers in the corporate media. Those lies led directly to more than a million Iraqi deaths, turned millions more into refugees, destroyed an entire country, and fuelled a new type of nihilistic Islamic extremism whose effects we are still feeling.

Most of the worst lies from the current period – those that have obscured or justified US interference in Syria and Venezuela, or rationalised war crimes against Iran, or approved the continuing imprisonment of Julian Assange for exposing war crimes – can only be understood by turning our backs on the corporate media and looking to experts who can rarely find a platform outside of social media.

On 31.5.2019 I exposed the sustained & concerted abuse inflicted on [#Assange](#) by 4 States & demanded his [#persecution](#) must end here & now! But his persecutors seem to consider [#DueProcess](#) & [#Torture](#) ban optional, [#PressFreedom](#) disposable & truth a nuisance. <https://t.co/yRFu38K1hUpic.twitter.com/Hu7XFymSkq>

— Nils Melzer (@NilsMelzer) [May 31, 2020](#)

Algorithms changed

I say this as someone who has concerns about the fashionable focus on identity politics rather than class politics. I say it also as someone who rejects all forms of cancel culture – whether it is the old-style, “liberal” cancel culture that imposes on us a narrow “consensus” politics (the Overton window), or the new “leftwing” cancel culture that too often prefers to focus on easy cultural targets like Rowling than the structural corruption of western political systems.

But those who are impressed by the letter simply because Chomsky’s name is attached

should beware. Just as “fake news” has provided the pretext for Google and social media platforms to change their algorithms to vanish leftwingers from searches and threads, just as “antisemitism” has been redefined to demonise the left, so too the supposed threat of “cancel culture” will be exploited to silence the left.

Protecting Bari Weiss and J K Rowling from a baying leftwing “mob” – a mob that that claims a right to challenge their views on Israel or trans issues – will become the new rallying cry from the establishment *for action* against “irresponsible” or “intimidating” speech.

Progressive leftists who join these calls out of irritation with the current focus on identity politics, or because they fear being labelled an antisemite, or because they mistakenly assume that the issue really is about free speech, will quickly find that they are the main targets.

In defending free speech, they will end up being the very ones who are silenced.

UPDATE:

You don’t criticise Chomsky however tangentially and respectfully – at least not from a left perspective – without expecting a whirlwind of opposition. But one issue that keeps being raised on my social media feeds in his defence is just plain wrong-headed, so I want to quickly address it. Here’s one my followers expressing the point succinctly:

“The sentiments in the letter stand or fall on their own merits, not on the characters or histories of some of the signatories, nor their future plans.”

The problem, as I’m sure Chomsky would explain in any other context, is that this letter fails not just because of the other people who signed it but *on its merit too*. And that’s because, as I explain above, it ignores the most oppressive and most established forms of cancel culture, as Chomsky should have been the first to notice.

Highlighting the small cancel culture, while ignoring the much larger, establishment-backed cancel culture, distorts our understanding of what is at stake and who wields power.

Chomsky unwittingly just helped a group of mostly establishment stooges skew our perceptions of free speech problems so that we side with them against ourselves. There is no way that can be a good thing.

UPDATE 2:

There are still people holding out against the idea that it harmed the left to have Chomsky sign this letter. And rather than address their points individually, let me try another way of explaining my argument:

Why has Chomsky not signed a letter backing the furore over “fake news”, even though there is some fake news on social media? Why has he not endorsed the “Bernie Bros” narrative, even though doubtless there are some bullying Sanders supporters on social media? Why has he not supported the campaign claiming the Labour party has an antisemitism problem, even though there are some antisemites in the Labour party (as there are everywhere)?

He hasn't joined any of those campaigns for a very obvious reason – because he understands how power works, and that on the left you hit up, not down. You certainly don't cheerlead those who are up as they hit down.

Chomsky understands this principle only too well because here he is [setting it out](#) in relation to Iran:

“Suppose I criticise Iran. What impact does that have? The only impact it has is in fortifying those who want to carry out policies I don't agree with, like bombing.”

For exactly the same reason he has not joined those pillorying Iran – because his support would be used for nefarious ends – he shouldn't have joined this campaign. He made a mistake. He's fallible.

Also, this isn't about the left eating itself. Really, Chomsky shouldn't be the issue. The issue *should be* that a bunch of centrists and right-wingers used this letter to try to reinforce a narrative designed to harm the left, and lay the groundwork for further curbs on its access to social media. But because Chomsky signed the letter, many more leftists are now buying into that narrative – a narrative intended to harm them. That's why Chomsky's role cannot be ignored, nor his mistake glossed over.

UPDATE 3:

I had not anticipated how many ways people on the left might find to justify this letter.

Here's the latest reasoning. Apparently, the letter sets an important benchmark that can in future be used to protect free speech by the left when we are threatened with being “cancelled” – as, for example, with the antisemitism smears that were used against anti-Zionist Jews and other critics of Israel in the British Labour party.

I should hardly need to point out how naive this argument is. It completely ignores how power works in our societies: who gets to decide what words mean and how principles are applied. This letter won't help the left because “cancel culture” is being framed – by this letter, by Trump, by the media – as a “loony left” problem. It is a new iteration of the “politically correct gone mad” discourse, and it will be used in exactly the same way.

It won't help Steven Salaita, sacked from a university job because he criticised Israel's killing of civilians in Gaza, or Chris Williamson, the Labour MP expelled because he defended the party's record on being anti-racist.

If you support (or signed) the Harper's letter, don't invoke me as an example of somebody who was “cancelled.” My academic career was systematically destroyed by the same institutional forces the vast majority of signatories uphold (and from which they benefit).

— Steven Salaita (@stevesalaita) [July 9, 2020](#)

The “cancel culture” furore isn't interested in the fact that they were “cancelled”. Worse still, this moral panic turns the whole idea of cancelling on its head: it is Salaita and

Williamson who are accused – and found guilty – of doing the cancelling, of cancelling Israel and Jews.

Israel's supporters will continue to win this battle by claiming that criticism of Israel "cancels" that country ("wipes it off the map"), "cancels" Israel's Jewish population ("drives them into the sea"), and "cancels" Jews more generally ("denies a central component of modern Jewish identity").

Greater awareness of "cancel culture" would not have saved Corbyn from the antisemitism smears because the kind of cancel culture that smeared Corbyn is never going to be defined as "cancelling".

For anyone who wishes to see how this works in practice, watch Guardian columnist Owen Jones cave in – as he has done so often – to the power dynamics of the "cancel culture" discourse in this interview with Sky News. I actually agree with almost everything Jones says in this clip, apart from his joining yet again in the witch-hunt against Labour's anti-Zionists. He doesn't see that witch-hunt as "cancel culture", and neither will anyone else with a large platform like his to protect:

"Cancel culture" is being used to describe everything from people disapproving of pedophiles to celebrities being criticised on social media.

It's become a means to protect the powerful and wealthy from being scrutinised for things they say or do. pic.twitter.com/IL7iClrHxE

— Owen Jones 🇬🇧 (@OwenJones84) [July 11, 2020](#)

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This essay first appeared on [Jonathan Cook's blog](#).

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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