

Education in a Cultural War Era: Thinking Philosophically about the Practice of Cancelling

Reviewed by Donna M. Davis and Shirley Marie McCarther



**Education in a Cultural
War Era: Thinking
Philosophically about the
Practice of Cancelling**

Author: Mordechai Gordon
Publisher: Routledge
Pages: 132
Publication Year: 2022
ISBN: 9781032103662

In *Education in a Cultural War Era: Thinking Philosophically about the Practice of Cancelling*, Mordechai Gordon challenges us to reexamine our beliefs about “cancel culture” and the threat it poses to democratic systems. Indeed, Gordon fervently asserts that the very nature of “cancelling” controversial individuals or ideas may lead to the destruction of a society that requires robust dialogue and dissent to thrive. Ultimately, Gordon wants us to think very carefully about who and what we decide needs cancelling, and suggests that those decisions should be predicated on rational thought and sound criteria, rather than mob mentality grounded in emotion and narrow-mindedness. To help us with this examination, Gordon divides the book into seven chapters, each designed to give an overview of an argument, provide specific examples of cancellation or a philosophical point of view, and then offer his own justification for any suggested action.

In Chapter 1, Gordon defines “cancel culture” and immediately finds fault with the term, since we do not have an equitable system, i.e., an agreed upon “culture,” for holding individuals accountable for bad behavior. Further, he asserts that cancellation meted out randomly results in a silencing of important voices and ideas, perhaps most problematically in higher-education settings, where students should be encouraged to explore uncomfortable topics and challenge their preconceived notions about the world around them. Thus, the question Gordon asks is,

“how do we hold people accountable for their words and deeds while simultaneously not eliminating the conversations that [give] rise to...conflict?” (p. 15).

With this fundamental question in mind, Chapter 2 provides a well-researched historical account of cancellation, noting that this phenomenon is nothing new, and in fact one of the earliest examples of a cancelled individual was Socrates (469-399 B.C.E) who, Gordon says, “was cancelled in large part because he did not fit in with either the traditional education that continued to hold sway in ancient Athens or the professional teachers who offered their services for a fee” (p. 29), and that his eccentricity and nonconformity ultimately led to his death. The chapter also discusses other cancelled historical figures including Baruch Spinoza, Delmira Agustini, and Rosa Luxemburg, and Gordon makes the argument that cancelling provocative ideas or people “may be expedient in the short term, but has adverse social, political, cultural, and educational consequences for generations thereafter” (p. 40).

Chapter 3 is a review of the cancellation during the McCarthy era, and provides an historical examination of this period, outlining four critical factors that played a role: the Truman Loyalty Program, laws like the Smith Act and the Internal Security Act, the hearings organized by McCarthy, and the activities of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI during this timeframe. Here, Gordon cautions against blacklisting those who express dissent, noting that dissent and disagreement are precisely what is required for democratic institutions to flourish.

Chapter 4 gives readers a philosophical rationale against cancel culture and restricting speech, relying on John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, and John Stuart Mill to make the argument that the suppression of ideas—particularly those that are controversial—leads to the destruction of democracies. The goal is to create systems that allow for open debate and, of course, dissent as democratic institutions sustain when they embrace the plurality of a society.

In Chapter 5, Gordon gives us very specific examples of when cancelling is warranted, including when individuals, groups, or institutions promote racism, bigotry, and hatred; when they disseminate lies; when they undermine voting rights; and when they incite violence. Gordon confronts these dreadful illustrations squarely, providing recent and extremely timely examples of what happens when hate speech, misinformation, and suppression of freedom through the act of voting are allowed to expand. He outlines the nightmare of the January 6, 2021 insurrection, the tragedy of the church shooting by the racist Dylann Roof, and the ongoing voter suppression activities in Georgia. In each of these instances, those who behave in such a horrific manner deserve to be cancelled because their speech, actions, and behaviors undermine democracy and lead to tragedy and even death. These specific kinds of activities and/or people need not be given space to express damaging views that are actually detrimental to our overall democracy.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Gordon proposes that cancelling is a risk to education and prevents open-mindedness and meaningful dialogue. Indeed, he contends that too often, cancellation results in a suppression of minority or controversial views, leads to epistemic closure or the blocking off of views other than one’s own, a herd mentality, and a false sense of consensus. Instead of cancellation, we need to support academic freedom and intellectual conflict. Gordon argues that we must educate for open-mindedness and even discomfort, and that ultimately “it is democracy itself that is diminished when we decide to cancel, ban, or boycott viewpoints that we do not like or offend us” (p. 124).

If there is any critique of the book, it is perhaps the brevity of the conversation and the feeling that we are only scratching the surface on many of these ideas. And sometimes, the juxtaposition

of examples reads like they are being equated, which is probably not intentional. There is also, always, the needling reality that one person's interpretation of "offensive" is another's "no big deal," and that both views may indeed be legitimate. Gordon is careful to provide arguments against his own position in a genuine effort to acknowledge another point of view, but occasionally the reader is still left with more questions—or at the very least, a desire for more discussion. However, this may be precisely what Gordon intended: for us to think about these issues and use these examples to further our own reflection and dialogue. The conversation by its very nature must be ongoing, as with each new controversy comes the potential for cancellation, the possibility of misunderstanding, and ultimately, the risk of losing what makes a democracy viable. Gordon's book is necessary and timely as, with the advent of social media and iPhone cameras, anyone at any time at any place and in any circumstance may find themselves cancelled.

Author Biographies

Donna M. Davis, PhD, is currently a Professor of Educational Foundations in the School of Education, Social Work, and Psychological Services at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). She has over 30 years of experience in the field of education, and spent nearly a decade teaching high school English in the Los Angeles Unified School District before earning her doctorate at the University of Kansas. Dr. Davis teaches courses in the history and philosophy of education at UMKC. She has been published in several scholarly journals in the areas of urban education, multicultural education, philosophy of education, history of education, arts education, and social justice. She has presented at national conferences including the American Educational Research Association, American Educational Studies Association, Organization of Educational Historians, and the National Association of Multicultural Education. Most significantly, she is the mother of two artists!

Shirley Marie McCarther, EdD, is currently interim chair and associate professor in the School of Education, Social Work, and Psychological Services and senior fellow at the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership, Bloch School of Management at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). She has over 35 years of experience in the field of education, teaching and leading in urban, rural, and suburban school districts and universities. She earned her doctorate at the University of Cincinnati. Dr. McCarther teaches courses in cultural foundations and educational leadership at UMKC. She is editor of the American Educational History Journal and has been published in numerous scholarly journals in the areas of leadership in urban education, multicultural education, equity, and diversity issues in education, arts education, and social justice. She is actively engaged with civic and philanthropic organizations, and is a loving wife and devoted mother to a daughter who is a successful health care professional.