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Attempts at a Marxist Critique of Cancellation

https://doi.org/10.1515/mopp-2023-0069
Received January 21, 2023; accepted July 14, 2024; published online September 9, 2024

Abstract: This paper advances a Marxist critique of the politics of cancellation and raises concerns about the possible development of a cancel culture. Rather than delving into debates on freedom of speech, crucial though they are, this paper focuses on the pragmatics of the political tool – its goals, mechanisms, effects, and the underlying reasoning. From a Marxist perspective, it is essential to analyse cancellation and cancel culture holistically, considering their rationale, the mechanism, the objectives, and the impacts, along with their relationship to the material conditions of society. Such an analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of any historical development and argues that addressing political problems in the long term requires such a holistic approach, including the development of relevant productive forces. If cancellation evolves into a culture, it may give rise to a polity that reinforces market relations. Within the framework of historical materialism, this would be a case of the superstructure supporting the base, turning politics into a matter of private opinions, which is far from ideal. The paper concludes with some practical considerations.

Keywords: blame; dialogue; market; historical materialism; exit

1 Introduction

In this paper I aim to offer a Marxist critique of the politics of cancellation and of cancel culture.[1] The paper is not meant to produce judgment on cases which are taken to be instances of cancellation. Individual acts of cancellation will be context

1 Cancel culture or cancellation or no-platforming have been discussed before, see Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), Stangroom (2021), Satta (2021). I do not engage thoroughly with the arguments of these papers (I engage with some of them) because my concerns are neither with the United States constitution (as is Satta's), nor with no-platforming being a university-specific incident (as is of both Satta, and Simpson and Srinivasan). My concerns are generally with the development of the politics

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dependent; one context will vary from another – regarding the issues for cancellation (gender, class, race, etc.), agents of cancellation (students, activists, colleagues, citizens, neighbours, etc.), and the cancelled party (individuals, organizations, groups, etc.). However, I see no reason why an acknowledgement of this will make any general inquiry into the nature and effects of a political practice not only difficult, but in principle impossible. Strategic and contextualized use of any political tool does not come with any prohibition on understanding its aim, its mechanism, the reasoning behind it, and its potential effects. Cancel culture, or for that matter any socio-political development, should be analysed considering (i) the aims, (ii) the process – such investigations may require comparing and contrasting this with other socio-political actions and policies, (iii) the rationale behind it, and (iv) the effects, which should be understood with reference to contemporaneous material conditions. The political development could either reinforce certain material conditions or be caused by them or be totally independent of such developments.

This paper does not turn on debates on freedom of speech, important though they are. The concerns of this paper are with the pragmatics of the political tool – its aims, mechanism, effects, and the reasoning behind it. I provide a Marxist critique of the politics of cancellation and raise some worries regarding the (possible) development of a cancel culture. A Marxist or historical materialist analysis is pertinent in this regard, given that it attempts to understand historical developments in a holistic way – incorporating all aspects of the development, the relation one development has with others, and how a particular development relates to the contemporaneous material conditions of the society. In other words, it gives a 'bird's eye' and not a 'worm's eye' view of the historical field (Farrelly 2011, 3).[2] My analysis of cancel culture will be significantly different from Simpson and Srinivasan's (2018) analysis of 'no platforming' which tries to reconcile no-platforming with liberal ideals. It will also be different from Satta's (2021) investigation into 'disinviting', which involves, among other things, interpretations of the US constitution (see also note 1). Cancellation and cancel culture, in a Marxist analysis, must be investigated holistically – involving its rationale, processes, aims, and effects, along with how it relates to other socio-political developments, particularly the material conditions of the society. I will investigate all of these aspects and particularly in Section 5.1, I will investigate the (potential) effects of a cancel culture and their relation to the material conditions that hold contemporaneously in our society. Such an analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of any historical phenomenon, and consequently it

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of cancellation, which can occur at numerous spaces – including, but not limited to, universities, organizations, groups, social media, etc.

2 Also see a similar comment by David Harvey (2022) in his Anti-Capitalist Chronicles, at https://www.democracyatwork.info/acc_marxs_historical_materialism.

argues, as we shall see in Section 3.1, that the elimination of any political practice cannot be achieved by transforming the political will of one or a few individuals or groups. Rather, long-term solutions require addressing the problem holistically, including allowing the development of the relevant productive forces.[3]

In Section 2, I differentiate cancellation from similar socio-political practices such as callouts and boycotts. Section 3 furthers an understanding of cancellation, provides a critique of its politics, and raises some worries about the rise of cancel culture. Section 4 discusses the market mechanism of exit and brings out its similarity with cancellation. Section 5 provides a Marxist critique of cancel culture. I argue that if cancellation becomes a culture, it will then enable the birth of a polity which reinforces market relations. Within the framework of historical materialism, this will be a case of superstructure supporting the base. This will make politics a matter of private opinions, which is far from ideal. I end with certain practical considerations.

2 Cancellation, Callouts, Boycotts

I start with comparing and contrasting cancellation as a political device with other similar socio-political actions such as callouts and boycotts (or buycotts). Cancellation is often used synonymously with boycott and callout, and often in practice cancellation may come together with a boycott or callout. Despite such close similarity among the three political actions, I think they can be distinguished from each other. This exercise will help us identify the distinctiveness of cancellation, which we can then critically assess in Section 3.

2.1 Callout

A callout refers to a public call for accountability. It is best interpreted as an instance of communicative blame understood as the communication of judgment of fault to a wrongdoer with added negative emotional force (Fricker 2016, 172). It is our everyday mechanism of holding people accountable (174). The purpose is to make the wrongdoer aware of their fault and bring about remorse for the same. The aim is *transformative* – to bring about 'increased moral alignment' between the wronged

3 Marxists disagree on which aspect 'drives' the engine of history – whether it is the productive forces, as Cohen (1978) and Eagleton (2000) think, or the social forms or class struggle, as Cohen's detractors claim (see Chibber 2011 for an illuminating discussion on the debate). However, it is clear enough that each of these has a nontrivial place in the Marxist conception of history and historical change. Therefore both must be considered to understand historical developments.

and the wrongdoer. Hence it is not enough for the wrongdoer to be 'sorry' for prudential reasons. But the wrongdoer must come to realize their wrong. The purpose of communicative blame is best served dialogically involving 'reasoning with emotional force' (173). Insofar as the aim of communicative blame is to bring about moral transformation in the wrongdoer this can be distinguished from acts driven by vengeance, anxiety, moral high-handedness, etc., which have different aims. Moral (and political) transformation and its attainment through dialogue are the two cornerstones of communicative blame. The same appears to be the case with the practice of calling someone out in public.[4]

2.2 Boycott

Boycott demands accountability by withdrawing engagement with the perceived wrongdoer (which may or may not involve commercial disengagement). This contrasts with buycott, which more specifically demands accountability by withdrawing *commercial* engagement with the perceived wrongdoer.[5] Boycotts are targeted at those who are perceived to have done or said something unjust, or put simply, something deserving public condemnation.

2.3 Cancellation and Cancel Culture

By cancellation I refer to the deliberate cessation of engagement with a party (person or group) in public, professional, and political life because of their opinion expressed verbally, through action, or in print which appears to diverge from the moral–political consensus of some group or of the general population.[6] This involves

4 See Chisti's (2023) column in *The Guardian*, where she called out the British Home Secretary Suella Braverman for some of her remarks on race and ethnicity; see Knight's (2020) discussion on calling out colleagues for microaggression; see Matei's (2019) discussion in *The Guardian*; see note 15 below.

5 One classic example of boycott is the Montgomery Bus Boycott, or what Martin Luther King preferred to call 'massive noncooperation' whose chief concern was not to drive bus companies out of business – which would happen as the bus companies represented the system in that instance – but, as King said, 'to put justice into business' ([1958] 2010, 39–40). A pertinent example of boycott could be the Swadeshi movement, which called for boycotting goods made in England in favour of those made in India (see Sarkar 1973, ch. III). Although the chief concern here was purportedly the struggle for independence, nonetheless the aim was more precise: to specifically target commercial relations.

6 See Clark's (2020) definition of cancelling as 'an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money' (88). See Simpson and Srinivasan's

the practice of no-platforming, disinvitation, demanding resignation, retracting publication, etc. This could have material consequences, including an adverse effect on livelihood (say, loss of jobs), blemished reputation, loss of community (professional, personal, civic, etc.). The act is often considered as a tool to punish someone for their expressed opinion, thus serving to achieve justice when other mechanisms seem to have failed, and/or are inaccessible or to prevent harm, which could be caused by expression of the opinions. Cessation of engagement may take place on any and every platform – virtual space (social media accounts),[7] forums, unions, groups, as well as in organizations and institutions such as universities, schools, parliament, etc. The issues over which a party can be cancelled could be many – issues related to gender, disabilities, racism, xenophobia, environmentalism, religion, community, and so on. This need not necessarily be a consolidated movement with a designated leader at the helm. It can be executed spontaneously by individuals who are brought together by the agenda of cancelling a particular party (person or group).

Cancellation must be distinguished from the act of barring people from the premises of any public or private spaces because the latter (person or group) presents physical threat to others – that is, they can cause physical harm to other individuals or groups inhibiting that space. (Sometimes they can also harm the *space* – vandalize the area, topple and/or deface statues, etc.) For instance, say the banning of conservative vigilante groups from public and private spaces on particular days because the former pose physical threat to those who observe or celebrate the day – maybe because the vigilantes think it is against the 'authentic culture' of the place, or it is blasphemous (claims which need not be true or even well argued).

By cancel culture I refer to the repetition of acts of cancellation in various public, political, and professional spheres, in the same or in a different country, by the same, related, or totally unrelated individuals on the same or on different issues. Thus, cancellation becomes a culture when it is recognized as a frequently used political device to deal with differences, or offences, and when it is generally recognized and used frequently as a process of serving justice or a process of 'justifiable harm prevention' (Simpson and Srinivasan 2018, 186).[8] It is important to

(2018) definition of no-platforming at university spaces: 'the practice of blocking, or attempting to block, an individual from speaking at a university because of her expressed moral or political views' (186).

7 Often people use social media platforms to cancel individuals. Bouvier and Machin (2021, 320) provide examples (by no means representative) of tweets that call for cancellation. Some use humour, sarcasm, some question the character of the person, some call for ousting the person from the country, and some even suggest the accused commit suicide.

8 See Norris's (2023) definition: '*collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds*' (148; original emphasis).

belabour the point that cancellation does not require consolidated political movement. It includes a diverse range of politically relevant affairs and can be furthered spontaneously by totally disparate individuals or groups: 'everyone is empowered to sanction bad behaviour' (Mueller 2021, 10).

After these preliminary remarks on the three kinds of socio-political action we can now begin to discern the similarities and dissimilarities among these three. This will help us understand the distinctiveness of the practice of cancellation.

2.4 Cancellation and Callouts

The chief difference between cancellation and callouts lies in the act of engagement through communication. Whereas callout is an act of communicative blame which has a transformative purpose, cancellation refers to a call for cessation of engagement. To what extent cancellation brings about moral and political transformation is something that remains to be analysed in the rest of the paper. At a minimum, practices of calling out and cancellation seem to have contrasting mechanisms – one requires dialogue and the other requires its cessation. Cancellation, one might say, has greater resemblance with expression of punishment than communication of blame – one can express punishment without requiring any communication whatsoever. But that connection too is contentious, as we will see in Section 2.5.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, calling out and cancellation may often come together – say, someone is called out for accountability and is then cancelled, but that need not always be the case. One can seek public accountability without necessarily demanding others to cease engagement with the wrongdoer.

2.5 Boycotts and Cancellations

Both cancellation and boycott are socially punitive actions. 'Socially' because they are driven by members of the society – citizens, activists, etc. – as opposed to punitive actions by formal institutions like police or judiciary or any quasi-legal body (e.g. human rights commissions in different countries).[9] However, there are a couple of crucial points to highlight about the two political actions.

First, boycott as a form of political action need not necessarily demand cessation of engagement. Instances are not unheard of when ongoing or even uninitiated boycotts are called off after the boycotted has agreed to meet the demands of the

9 I am also not discussing cases where one country boycotts or puts sanctions on another.

boycotters. Radzik (2017) writes, 'A boycotter who refuses to do business with the target is typically still willing to speak with him. Indeed, boycott leaders may be eager to engage in debate and negotiation with the target' (108).

On the contrary, cancellation is a form of shunning where the cancelling party ceases to engage with the cancelled counterpart. This withdrawal of engagement has the potential to fragment the political sphere, which would ultimately lead to making politics a matter of exchanging favourable opinions in comfortable circles. There is great peril if the only voice one hears happens to be an echo.

The cessation of dialogue between the two parties would keep both parties impoverished of each other's (possibly revised) knowledge, arguments, or observations. The cancelling party may claim that they know their opponents' arguments and that the latter are redundant and flawed. Surely there are such cases – say, the flat-earth theorists or many conspiracy theories. These are easy cases because we hardly feel the need to cancel these people. We know that their 'theories' will not have many takers. For these there is no need to actively cancel because the majority of people will be inattentive to the speakers anyway. I'm more interested in hard cases where issues are not settled and either side is still developing arguments.[10] In those cases, the cancelling party may miss out important aspects of their opponents' arguments and/or rhetoric – albeit flawed but maybe persuasive, maybe a cunning manipulation of facts – consequently, keeping the possibility open for making their own case much less potent.

The practice of disciplining the (perceived) wrongdoer on moral–political grounds, irrespective of the wrongdoer's engagement in a dialogue, is similar to noncommunicative expressions of punishment. There are two expressivist conceptions of punishment – noncommunicative expressivism and communicative expressivism. The latter requires, as the name suggests, establishing communication with the wrongdoer. The communication is intended to transmit the disapproval (of the wronged or of society) with a further aim such as bringing about repentance, remorse, or reform in the offender, or a reconciliation with the offender (Glasgow 2015, 603–604). The former, on the other hand, is often called 'pure' expressivism, according to which punishment is expressed even if the wrongdoer is (intentionally or unintentionally) unresponsive to attempts of communication: 'unlike communication, expression is a one-way street' (Glasgow 2015, 608). No further aim is required to justify punishment. The act of expressing oneself constitutes the justification (Glasgow 2015, 608).

10 There is a particular issue with philosophy as a discipline, which is that questions on which consensus have been reached in other disciplines or in public remain open in philosophy (Simpson and Srinivasan 2018, 202).

This brings us to the second point about cancellation and boycott. Boycotts can be conceived of as punishment where the wrongdoer is punished for what the latter has *already* done. The action is retributive and backward-looking. But since boycotts need not cease engagement between the rival parties, it can be considered a form of communicative punishment with many types of aim, including transformative. Again, boycotts are often forward-looking too; after the initial threat of boycott, if the protesters and the wrongdoer dialogically resolve the issue and moral and political alignment is increased, the boycotters may (and often do) call off the boycott.[11] In such scenario's boycotts do not resemble punishment (Radzik 2017, 117). Cancellation, on the other hand, is *prima facie* backward-looking. The cancelling party shuns people in public life – at least that is a primary objective – because the former holds that the opinions of the latter are harmful and/or have already caused harm. It appears to be a pure expressivist (hence, retributive) condemnation which ensures justice by shunning the perceived wrongdoer for their stated views.

One may contest that cancellation is also forward-looking insofar as it acts as a deterrent against possible future harms.[12] Thus, the aim of cancellation, some consequentialists may argue, is prevention of future harms which could be caused by the opinions of the cancelled party. But such consequentialist motives can often legitimize punishing the (relatively) innocent to make a statement of deterrence. However, one need not necessarily be a consequentialist to make a statement of deterrence. Contemporary retributivists argue that it is part of the process of retribution to communicate to the wrongdoer that they should consider their actions in the future (Duff 2011, Sec. IV). Thus, the wrongdoer is deterred from causing further harms when they are justly (proportionately) punished.

There lies a problem, however, with defending cancellation as a forward-looking mechanism of delivering justice.[13] Philosophical and political defences of retributive punishment include cases which involve interventions by formal institutions such as the judiciary, police, etc. – that is, intervention by institutions which are understood to uphold a rational moral sensibility. They may fail in their task, and society

11 The Infant Formulation Action Coalition (INFACT) initiated a boycott of Nestlé, which was called off after Nestlé agreed to its terms and conditions. The boycott was reinstated by International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) for other violations (Micheletti and Oral 2018, 701).

12 With respect to harms done by speech, Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, 192–193) argue that 'all communicative acts – even those that just involve the expression of opinions – have some potential to negatively affect others in some respects'. One needs to make precise suggestions for regulation of speech and make a whole host of fine-tune distinctions – say between influence, persuasion, and incitement – and decide which causes (greater or lesser) harm. Such distinctions are often not possible to make (Simpson and Srinivasan 2018, 192–193).

13 That cancellation is often regarded as a process of 'justifiable harm prevention' (Simpson and Srinivasan 2018, 186) is well acknowledged.

must be on alert to intervene in such moments. In fact, society often contributes to the proper functioning of formal institutions.[14] But understanding social mechanisms as having similar authority to punish wrongdoers has its perils. It is several times more difficult to bring society to scrutinize its own actions against its previous decisions and against rational moral standards. On occasions where society fails to scrutinize its judgments, it inches closer to turning ideas into dogmas. Cancellation can be considered a forward-looking justice-delivering mechanism, but there is danger in accepting such a political tool as a standard instrument for ensuring justice.

To sum up: I have differentiated cancellation from other similar political practices – namely, boycotts and callouts.[15] Often, they may happen together – someone is called out and cancelled at the same time – so that it becomes difficult to neatly parse them out. Or they may appear the same to us, resulting in using boycotts, callouts, and cancellation interchangeably. However it is important to distinguish the phenomenon of cancellation to be able to properly understand its rationale, its mechanisms, and its possible effects – which I will attempt in the following sections. The reason behind this differentiation is not merely academic. It is equally important for us to be aware of the socio-political developments, to be able to distinguish one from another, and to decide which one to participate in, which one to refrain from, and which one to have a critical distance to. Politics, after all, is not a private affair – a point I return to in Section 5.1.[16]

3 Cancellation: The Politics, the Mechanism, the Effects

I have distinguished cancellation from calling out and from boycotts. I hinted at problems if cancellation becomes a standard socially punitive action. This section will critically examine three aspects of cancellation: its politics, how it is done, and its effects on the person cancelled and on society in general.

14 On how society works to check and balance the checks and balances system of a liberal institutional set-up, see Krishnamurthy (2015).

15 Rom and Mitchell (2021, n.1) make a similar distinction between calling out and cancelling.

16 What my analysis leaves out is a discussion on the relation between cancellation and protest. The latter can be distinguished from formal and informal social punishment (for an account of protest, see Pettigrove 2020). A comprehensive discussion on that relation is beyond the scope of the paper; however, it seems clear that investigating that relation will reveal newer insights about cancellation and cancel culture. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

3.1 The Politics

Let's take the case of no-platforming Germaine Greer. Greer was invited to deliver a public lecture at Cardiff University in 2015. A significant number of students challenged the invitation, accusing Greer of misogyny against trans women and disregarding the existence of, and at times enabling, transphobia. Students led a campaign for disinviting Greer which gained around 3,000 signatories.[17]

Shunning the person (or group) away from the public platform they inhabit – social (physical or virtual), professional, or political – appears to be the central political act of cancellation. A diagnosis of the situation is presented. *That* diagnosis is accepted on moral–political grounds. The possible resolution to the issue is the cessation of engagement, instead of communicating the disapproval and seeking accountability or redress via communication. The centrality of this action, I argue, has the power to overshadow the constructive, transformative potentials of complaint.

This portrayal can be challenged for its unfairness. One would claim that such a step often comes after seeking accountability or redress for multiple offenses. The individual concerned is called out for their views or actions, and only after receiving unsatisfactory responses (or none at all) is the person cancelled – disinvited, asked to leave their profession, etc. This argument has two shortcomings. First, it is difficult to comprehend how ceasing engagement could resolve issues which social engagement – dialogue, debate, etc. – could not resolve. Even if one can justify certain acts of cancellation – which we will discuss in Section 5.2 – it is difficult to envisage any productive outcome other than enhancing the fragmentation of the polity into several parts when it becomes a standard tool for resolving differences.

More importantly, taking away the platform from the individual does not necessarily challenge the ideas that the person propagates; it threatens the individuals but does not do enough to challenge the opinions. Bouvier and Machin (2021) argue that cancellation of individuals on social media (especially Twitter) on issues of racism and xenophobia often *individualizes* racism and xenophobia, making it more a matter of faulty personality traits, lack of education or culture. It dissociates the issues from their historical roots and ignores the structural problems, the material causes and effects. One might certainly think that ideas are born in

17 There was a countercampaign in *The Guardian* where an open letter, signed by many feminists, sought to save the right to free speech. Although Greer delivered the lecture in the end, it took place under high security with uniformed police guarding the lecture theatre (Morris 2015). I use this example simply because it has been previously used in the literature (Simpson and Srinivasan 2018, 190).

individual minds, and thus shunning the individual shuns the idea too.[18] But this does not sit well with a Marxist materialist understanding of history and politics (Engels 1883; Marx and Engels [1845] 1998, 61–62). Political ideas are formed due to, and find their legitimation in, a combination of influences – economic, cultural, religious, etc. Farrelly (2011), offering a Marxist analysis of patriarchy, observed that to understand patriarchy it is important to understand the interrelationships between the base – relations of production (relations between producers, non-producers, division of labour), productive forces (means of production, labour power), and the superstructure (political, legal, religious institutions, and other noneconomic ones). Elimination of the patriarchy, he argued, is not only a matter of the 'political will' of one or a few individuals or a group. Rather, 'lasting improvements' towards such social transformation could take place 'only when particular kinds of productive forces are present and permitted to develop' (18). This means that resolving a political problem requires a comprehensive understanding of the issue – in all its manifestations – and addressing the problems at its source(s). Similarly, if those very ideas and their sources – the ones considered problematic – are addressed, analysed, and defeated and/or structurally resolved with sufficient rigor, then there would be no need to cancel the party; the party's views would already become irrelevant. The knee-jerk reaction to cancel a person (or a group) with the aim to prevent them from executing a perlocutionary act – of convincing, communicating, informing, etc. – often antagonizes the accused, and those sympathetic to them, instead of bringing about any transformative change to the body politic.

3.2 The Mechanism

We looked at the politics of cancellation, how the cessation of dialogue assumes the central importance and the problems therein. Now I will discuss the mechanism of cancellation.

Such coercive methods provide two kinds of reasons to the perceived wrongdoer to rectify their wrongs – (i) prudential reasons (ii) moral–political reasons.[19] Prudential reasons are those that the wrongdoer may opt for just to get back into the community. These are not the reasons which make the wrongdoer realize what the wrong was. Moral–political reasons are those which are pertinent to the debate, and those which would make the wrongdoer realize why their views were wrong and what can be done to rectify them.

18 For instance, Satta (2021) claims that often it is realized (by the students) that giving a (university) platform to a speaker 'conveys legitimacy to a speaker's ideas' (113).

19 To use Duff's terminology (Duff 1991, 45–46; cited by Radzik 2017, 119–120).

Communicative acts of blaming (and punishing), given their transformative purpose(s) of bringing increased moral–political alignment dialogically, confer or are expected to confer greater weight on the second kind of reasons. It cannot be claimed that communicative blaming provides only the second kind of reason, because the wrongdoer might still have some prudential reasons to return to the community – maybe there are benefits to be obtained from the wronged person or some other benefits to be had. Nonetheless, given that the aim is a dialogical resolution to the problem, the moral–political reasons get greater weight in acts of communicative blame. On the other hand, the high stakes of the game – the associated threat of being punished (shunned from society) – makes both kinds of reason carry equal weight in cases of cancellation. It is difficult to tease apart the two kinds of reasons offered. If the number of people demanding cancellation is significantly high or if those people are in positions of power, then it seems more of a threat of punishment than an attempt to bring about moral–political alignment.

The threat of social punishment – which accompanies acts of cancellation – often drives people to conform to the majority view or the prevalent moral–political consensus. Self-censorship, among those holding divergent views, is a likely consequence in such situations. Norris (2023) analyses a global survey data comprising of about 2,500 academics working in the discipline of political science (World of Political Science, Norris 2022). One observation was that across the political spectrum there is a concern that there is increasing pressure to conform to the prevalent political norms, leading people to censor themselves, or design their expressions to 'fit in socially and avoid opprobrium' (Norris 2023, 164). There appears to be a general consensus among political science scholars 'about experiencing deteriorations in academic freedom to teach and research, which may reflect broader structural changes in higher education, as much as ideological shifts' (170). Surely, the data is not exhaustive as it only surveyed academics, and that too from a particular discipline. Nonetheless, we should take note of the warning signs before it is too late. The fact that people with divergent views censor themselves was first noticed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in her famous 'spiral of silence' thesis (1974). The claim was that in a group which is divided on certain moral and political issues, those holding the divergent views are more likely to suppress their beliefs and attitudes in open discussions, fearing that they may violate group norms and risk social isolation. On the contrary, those holding the majority opinion are more likely to be vocal about their views, openly defend them, confident that they will get support from the rest of the group members. It is not that people with majority views always try to persuade the rest and force others to withdraw or change their opinion. But popular support for the majority view makes those holding divergent views engage less in public conversations, ultimately causing them to withdraw and 'fall silent' (Norris 2023,

152). The majority view sometimes seems to be stronger than it actually is because those with the minority view are made to withdraw from conversations.

Thus, the threat of punishment often comes across as a good enough prudential reason for people to conform to the moral–political standards. The threat of cancellation either gives both reasons (i) and (ii) equal weight, or sometimes (i) more than (ii).

3.3 The Aftermath

There are material and reputational effects on the cancelled party. The person (or group) cancelled is left to fend for themselves with the damned reputation of being 'controversial':[20] employers refuse to employ, colleagues and friends may desert their association, readers may stop reading their opinions, and so on. Mueller (2021, 12) cautions: '"Cancel" was at one time the act of ostracizing another, while now it can become the destruction of one's future.'

Cancellation may also befall people who are associated with or complicit with the views of the cancelled party. That is why friends and colleagues are often quick to distance themselves from the 'controversial' person. Complaints of complicity generally require a certain amount of caution. Surely there are cases when complicity is palpable: anyone who tries to unnecessarily complicate issues must be considered either blind to the glaring facts and/or complicit in the offence. But there are scenarios where it is not so, especially when the issues are not settled or when they are substantially complicated.

A defender of cancellation may object that cancelling does not have such terrible effects on people's lives. It is, however, an open question how severe it actually turns out to be. In many cases that depends on how strong a social support the cancelled party has – some may face terrible consequences, for some it may be mild, for others none, for some others it can be beneficial. However, that there is potential for severe aftermath is, I think, not disputable.

To sum this section up: I have argued (Section 3.1) that withdrawal of engagement is central to cancellation. Punishing the person does little to challenge the views. If it is assumed that individuals or groups are the sources of moral and political opinions then that may lead to a gross misunderstanding of the issues; also it sits uneasily with a Marxist understanding of history and politics. Secondly, I argued (Section 3.2) that socially coercive actions – boycotts and cancellation – offer

20 The term *controversial* can be pretty vague. It may have any of the following three meanings: (i) the facts – or their interpretation – are truly in dispute (ii) they ignite strong emotions (iii) they reject evidence and are curated to provoke (Rom and Mitchell 2021, 611).

two kinds of reasons to the accused to rectify their wrong: (i) prudential and (ii) moral–political reasons. Communicative acts of blaming and punishing are expected to put more weight on (ii). But acts of cancellation put equal weight on both the reasons, and sometimes it appears more as a threat and less as a transformative exercise, hence putting all the more weight on (i). Lastly, I argued (Section 3.3) that cancellation has the potential to have many adverse consequences for the cancelled party and their close associates. Whether or not it has adverse effects on the cancelled parties depends on a lot of other factors.

Having understood what cancellation is in some detail I will discuss the market mechanism of exit in the next section. I will bring out how similar these two practices are. I will draw implications of this similarity in Section 5.

4 Exit

4.1 The Exit Option

Hirschman (1970) identified certain mechanisms which the society employs – in market and nonmarket spheres of social life – to deal with dysfunctional behaviour, or what economists call 'slack' or lapses in efficient performance.[21] The process of recovery from such dysfunctional behaviour breaks up into two categories. Those two

> contrasting, though not mutually exclusive, categories of exit and voice would be suspiciously neat if [they] did not faithfully reflect a more fundamental schism: that between economics and politics. Exit belongs to the former realm, voice to the latter. (Hirschman 1970, 15).

As an initial characterization, therefore exit is the mechanism employed in the sphere of economics whereas voice is 'political action par excellence' (Hirschman 1970, 16). I will describe what exit is and will mention two important features of exit. Following that I will bring out the resemblance it has with the act of cancellation. I will return to voice later.

Consumers are considered to have opted for exit when they signal their disapproval to a firm by ceasing to interact with it – not buy their products, refuse to meet their representatives, etc. This mechanism is most useful in the economic sphere (the market sphere) because this is one simple way of letting the firm know that their products and services have had a drop in quality and/or are not meeting the expectations of consumers. Although the proper functioning of this option depends

21 I am using an essentialised view of the market. For discussions on essences and market see O'Neill (1995) and Sayer (1997).

on some other factors,[22] still one can identify two noteworthy features of exit. I will argue that cancellation shares these features.

A caveat is necessary: exit is not the same as boycott. Hirschman argued that boycott sits 'on the borderline between voice and exit' (Hirschman 1970, 86). A boycott, as we know, takes place for the 'specific and explicit purpose of achieving a change of policy on the part of the boycotted organization' (Hirschman 1970, 86). Contra that, when a consumer 'exits' a firm, they need not place any such demand before the 'exited' firm. Hence, although the two practices – boycott and exit – may appear similar, they are quite distinct.

Now, cancellation may resemble boycott more than exit in this regard, since the cancelling party does it on moral–political grounds, demanding a change in the cancelled party's behaviour. True, in this respect an act of cancellation is more similar to a boycott than exit. However, as we have seen in Section 2.5 there are significant differences between boycott and cancellation, and, as we shall now see, there are important similarities between exit and cancellation – on some issues in which cancellation differs significantly from boycotts.

If social mechanisms operate in the exact same way, then it is pointless to highlight the similarities among them. The aim of comparing and contrasting social mechanisms is to find out which one is more or less similar to which other, and in which respects. As I aim to argue, cancellation is similar to exit in a many important respects – in terms of its procedure (argued in Sections 4.2 and 4.3), and effects (argued in Sections 5.1 and 5.2). With that caveat in place, we can move to the two important features of exit.

4.2 Neatness

Exit is distinct in its 'neatness'. There are two aspects to it. First, the action itself is not cumbersome. Once dissatisfied with the performance of the producer, the consumer can terminate their interaction with the producer without having to communicate with them. The act of exit is the only act that is undertaken by the consumer to communicate their disapproval of the firm's products.

Second, exit produces an either/or situation – either you exit, or you do not – thereby simplifying the options the customer has. Hirschman argued that the neatness of 'exit' – in both its avatars – makes economists regard it as the more efficient mechanism, which needs to be seriously cultivated.

Now it seems that cancellation is similar to exit in this respect. As discussed in Section 3.1, cessation of engagement is the central political act in cancellation. The

22 For instance, the existence of perfect competition, a suitable mix of alert and inert customers, the latitude of the producer in quality management, etc. (Hirschman 1970, 22–29).

act, much like exit, is not too cumbersome. Compared to similar political acts which require sustained dialogue and negotiation, cancellation is surely less cumbersome since after the cessation of engagement there is not much scope or need for dialogue (discussed in Sections 2.4 and 2.5). And given how calls of cancellation using hashtags has become quick and easy on social media, particularly on X/Twitter (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 309–310), it seems that there is not much hassle in calling for cessation of engagement with someone accused of wrongdoing. Users post quickly written, emotionally charged statements about sensitive topics, often without comprehensive knowledge of the issue in question.[23] The tweets or posts often do not carry a coherent discussion. Buzzwords, affectively loaded sentences, and polarizing sentiments carry the discussion (maelstrom?) and the judgment. However, it may be unfair to regard cancellation to be as easy as exiting in a marketplace. There are instances where even a proper no-platforming movement requires political mobilization – gathering likeminded people, collecting signatures, campaigns, etc. But if cancellation becomes a full-fledged culture, and if the 'spiral of silence' thesis holds true (as Norris's observation suggests that it may), then we might be looking at a future where cancellation would be much smoother than it is now. People with divergent views will censor themselves, participate much less in open debates, and silence will be regarded as acquiescence (Norris 2023, 152). There is thus reason to think that cessation of engagement – the central political act in cancellation – which is already less cumbersome than other political acts, may become even smoother and neater. That is, it will become much less cumbersome than it now is, as it grows into becoming a culture – a recognized and frequently used political tool for dealing with divergent moral–political opinions.

The other similarity cancellation has with exit is that both offer binary or simplified solutions. In the market sphere the binary is pretty clear – either you buy products of the firm, or you do not. If you do not, then you have chosen the exit option. There is no scope for negotiation after you have made a judgment that you will cease your engagement with the firm. And how you have come to that judgment is not much of concern – it could be because of serious concern for your wellbeing, or just a sudden change in taste,[24] or any other issue. Now in case of cancellation it is true that the decisions are not always that simplified or neat.

23 This is no comment on the general use of social media to discuss issues of social injustice. Social media offers a space to speak freely about such issues. My claim is regarding the way some of these debates, discussions or calls of cancellation are conducted. Insofar as the data suggests, they seem to require much more consideration on the part of those conducting the discussion or cancellation.

24 As we know a market is a 'want-regarding institution' which works on 'effective demand'. It does not distinguish between 'urgent needs and intense desires' nor does it distinguish between desires backed up by reasons and principles versus matters of taste (Anderson 1990, 183).

I say *not always,* because on social media, particularly X/Twitter, it seems that debates about many socially important issues tend to lack nuance, are reduced to simplified narratives, and offer binary choices between good and evil (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 308–309). Often, as Mueller's (2021, 10–11) study found, those who are accused of having divergent or bad opinions are often asked to 'apologize immediately'. Again, the studies are not exhaustive, but many empirical studies taken together offer strong hints at the existence of certain common features of cancellation and a developing culture.

However, we need not think that all calls for cancellation offer such simplified narratives and simple binaries. As mentioned in Section 3.1, cancellation may come after demanding some amount of accountability. Particularly in academic environments one may be given space to respond before being cancelled. However, once considered 'beyond the pale', disinvitation and cancellation seem to be justified.[25] Here, one ends up with the binary of whether one is cancelled or not.

Now there are two points of concern with the beyond-the-pale argument. The first is – also mentioned by Satta (2021, 107–108) – *who* determines *which* ideas or opinions are beyond the pale? Again, there are easy cases – such as flat-earthers or alien-invasion theorists – and hard cases regarding ethnicity, religion, gender, class, etc. With the easy cases it is clear that there is more or less general consensus (apart from a certain minority, maybe less consequential, group). In the hard cases the issues are of substantial complexity, and accordingly such general consensus is not reached – hence, 'hard cases'. Here, considering something to be beyond the pale so as to not even allow space to talk about it seems to be a rather strong move. Secondly, what happens to these beyond-the-pale opinions? They may go unheard in the spiral of silence, but if they are not resolved they may resurrect in different, sometimes stronger forms (more on that in the next section). What is important for now is that once something – an easy or hard issue – is considered beyond the pale – either on social media or in person, with or without elaborate discussion or consultation – then the cancellation of someone becomes an either/or affair. It boils down to whether a person's opinion is 'evil' or good, and consequently whether the person deserves to be cancelled or not. The gradation is lost once someone is considered beyond the pale and often (at least on social media) that process of considering whether or not someone is beyond the pale is not that elaborate or nuanced.

Thus, on the aspect of neatness, cancellation seems to have close similarities with the exit option, which is primarily a market mechanism. Next, we will see

25 See Satta's (2021, 107–08) argument that once considered beyond the pale it is justified for students to demand disinvitation of a speaker from a university event.

another similarity on how the divergent opinions or behaviour are thought to get resolved.

4.3 Invisible Hand to Rescue

By opting to exit, the consumer in the market begins interacting with other producers, thus using the market to improve their position, or at any rate, to not allow the deterioration of one's own wellbeing. By signalling their exit, the customer sets the market in motion, which may aid the exited firm in its recovery. However, 'any recovery on the part of the declining firm comes by courtesy of the Invisible Hand as an unintended by-product of the customer's decision to shift' (Hirschman 1970, 16).

In this context it is perhaps better to remember that the invisible hand is not as gifted and skilful a player as it is often made out to be by the defenders of the market. Hahn praises its theoretical success in proving that it is logically possible to describe an economy where despite all the agents pursuing their narrow self-interest a coherent economic disposition of resources can be achieved (1981, 5). That is, under certain ideal conditions the invisible hand seems to achieve its intended ends. However, that does nothing to describe actual economies, in nonideal conditions. Furthermore, problems of externalities – influence of others on one's own welfare – demand intervention by a visible hand (10).[26]

Whatever the efficiency of the invisible hand is in the sphere of the market, it is yet unknown if the same has any credibility in nonmarket spheres, such as that of politics. I am referring to the second point of concern I raised above about beyond-the-pale cases. What happens to those ideas (particularly in the hard cases) which are considered beyond the pale and hence speakers are disinvited or cancelled? If the idea behind cancelling such a person or a group is a hope or assumption that they will learn their lesson and return to behaving as they are required, then that seems to involve a long leap of faith. Moreover, cancellation may still work as threats to discipline individual persons or groups, but it is difficult to imagine that such a mechanism is credible for challenging and transforming ideas and judgments. Opinions and arguments are notorious for hanging around even when the person who made them is far removed from the scene. Disciplining opinions necessitates the presence of a visible hand. Unless the views are themselves analysed and nullified – by reason, argumentation, and credibility of sources – it does not seem that cancellation of individuals will achieve much

26 For an interpretation of Smith's use of the invisible hand as an ironic but politically useful 'joke' or a contrivance, see Rothschild (1994).

substantive end. And when arguments are nullified, it may well turn out to be futile to demand cancellation of individuals or groups.

Taking stock of the journey so far, I showed that cancellation differs from callouts and boycotts in some fundamental respects. Thereafter I raised some issues with cancellation developing into a culture – that is, as a frequently used political tool. In Section 3, I offered some further understanding of cancellation and provided a Marxist critique of its politics. In Section 4, I introduced the concept of exit and showed that cancellation as a practice is, in important respects, similar to the exit option, which is a mainstay in the market. Next, I will discuss the implications of this similarity.

5 Cancellation, Exit, Historical Materialism

In this section I want to argue that cancel culture as a political practice may become the perfect complement for the exit option, which is the standard mechanism in the economic sphere. This could redesign the political sphere on the model of the market. That, I would argue, is harmful for the polity. I will suggest an alternative.

5.1 Historical Materialism, Cancel Culture, Exit

Cancellation resembles exit in important respects – importantly, on the point of ceasing engagement with the accused party, which is not a necessary aspect in either callouts or boycotts. Cancellation will become a culture if it is frequently used as a political tool for dealing with divergent moral–political opinions (some statistics show that it is gradually becoming so), that is, when it becomes a standard mechanism in the political sphere. Now a cancel culture in the realm of politics is a perfect – perhaps *the* perfect – complement for the exit option in the market sphere. What is meant by being a *complement* to exit? Cancel culture, as I have understood it here, would legitimize the market mechanism of exit in the political sphere, thereby legitimizing market processes and aiding their expansion into the nonmarket spheres of social life.

To avoid any misinterpretation, I do not claim that this particular development in the political sphere – the use of cancellation as a political tool, and the tendency towards a cancel culture – is *caused* by or directly influenced by the market mechanism. After all we know that public shaming and coerced apologies were part of many older societies (Mueller 2021, 2), and so were shunning practices. I also do not claim that the political actors who participate in acts of cancellation are consciously advancing market principles and ideals. Rather, my claim is that developments in the

nonmarket (political) realm – which may have varied reasons for their genesis – may sometimes provide a conducive environment for the proliferation of market mechanisms. This particular development of cancellation – its apparent tendency towards a cancel culture and their similarity with exit – I argue, appears to be one such development in the political sphere which legitimizes market processes and aids it in their expansion.[27]

This argument is influenced by a standard interpretation of Marx's idea of historical materialism as captured in the base–superstructure metaphor. The *base* is the economic sphere – comprising relations between producers and nonproducers, between producers and productive forces, and nonproducers and productive forces. The *superstructure* is the realm of noneconomic institutions such as the law, religion, politics, etc. (Farrelly 2011, 8). The claim is that the base and the superstructure *need* each other to give rise to a particular kind of society. The economy needs the right kind of noneconomic institutions – that is, the ideal kind of politics – which will help sustain and advance its operations; the base and the superstructure 'are *organically* connected' (Cohen 1978, 233; emphasis in original). In our case, the market mechanism is legitimized by having a similar mechanism in the political realm. This is not an 'economistic' interpretation of politics, which reduces the superstructure into 'a mere epiphenomenon' (Farrelly 2011, 8). Instead, it understands base and superstructure as interacting with each other in a union.

I have been claiming that the market mechanism is legitimized in the political sphere. But what is the effect of this development? The exit option in the market operates on the private preferences of the consumers. The effect of cancel culture in the polity, as I have been suggesting, could be to fragment the political sphere and make politics a matter of private opinions, exchangeable within echo chambers. The problem with the latter development is twofold. First, politics does not belong to the private sphere but to the public sphere of the forum (Elster 2003). In the public political sphere, the voice of all participants must be given equal room to deliberate over pertinent issues. Surely, deliberation must not be too much as it may hinder action. Nonetheless, there should be sufficient and substantive deliberation over social and economic issues in the general public domain. Opinions must be evaluated against all possible alternatives in reasoned deliberation. If cancellation is recognized as a standard tool to resolve political differences and deliver justice, then politics would unfortunately be relegated to private echo chambers, which is unfortunate as 'social evaluations may be starved of useful information and good arguments if they are entirely based on separated and sequestered cogitation'

27 One could argue that a development of cancel culture complements neoliberalism's 'relentless efforts to remake social and political life around an ideal plucked from the market' (Davies 2018, 274).

(Sen 2009, 242). Instead of 'exit', the mainstay of the political realm ideally must be 'voice'. Hirschman defined voice as

> any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion. (Hirschman 1970, 30)

Unlike exit – which is neat, silent, and sophisticated – voice is messy, loud, and is an *art* which constantly evolves in new directions (Hirschman 1970, 43).

Secondly, making politics a private affair can make it very difficult for a fragmented polity to organize itself against various injustices, including those of the commercial system. The alternative to encountering disagreement could be a total absence of the space to debate or deliberate.

5.2 Lofty Ideals, Practical Politics

One may object that what I have been preaching are very demanding, idealist claims – that it is not possible to always debate and deliberate extensively over every issue. Indeed, my claims may sound impractical. Often voice becomes an ineffective tool: people are forced to remain within certain oppressive institutions because those institutions do not recognize exit as an option. On the other hand, many political movements demand the resignation of some person or group who are identified to be individually responsible for injustices. Many speakers spew hate, and it is at times justified to stop them from poisoning society. I agree with Clarke (2020): 'Not every critique can come wrapped up in niceties and polite speech. Nor should it. Sometimes, the urgency and weight of oppression require us to immediately cry out' (89).

In practical political life, therefore, we also need a healthy dose of cancellation, of exit. Hirschman (1970, 126) notes that often the injection of the nonstandard option is needed to prevent an overuse of the standard mechanism. Exit in politics is that injection which should be used strategically: the absence of engagement – that is, silence – often draws attention to opinions that were being advanced. One can thus justify certain individual acts of cancellation which are born out of sheer desperation as a 'last-ditch appeal for justice' (Clarke 2020, 89).[28] The shock that exit provides in those cases may help to communicate blame and may also express punishment. A defender of cancellation would say that I have conceded that (at least under some

28 I said in Section 3.1 that I would return to this.

circumstances) cancellation is justified. However, inherent in the concession is the resistance to this becoming the *modus operandi* in public and political spheres of a society – resistance to the development of cancel *culture*. Cancellation should be the last-ditch appeal, the 'nonstandard' injection, not the norm for it to work effectively.

One may ask how we can determine when the right time is to deploy the nonstandard mechanism. A truly effective answer to that will depend on the particular situation and cannot be procrustean in character. Although one can plausibly argue that if voice has been overused in a context and/or if the stakes are high and the threat is imminent then it makes sense to deploy the nonstandard mechanism – in this case it would be exit: that is, to cancel the party concerned. However, to gauge what the stakes are, how imminent the threat is, and whether voice has been overused, whether it is the last-ditch appeal will require understanding the particularities of the issue. My aim here has been to raise warning signs about certain complications with using cancellation as a political tool and about the apparent development of a culture where cancellation is regarded as the standard mechanism.

6 Conclusions

I differentiated cancellation from callouts and boycotts. I provided a Marxist critique of its politics and expressed concerns about the development of a cancel culture. Cancellation seemed to share some important characteristics with the exit mechanism prevalent in the market. A development of cancel culture could legitimize the market mechanism of exit in the political sphere, thereby transforming the nature of politics. That, I argued, is far from ideal.

To end on a personal (hopefully not overtly preachy) note: as a reminder to myself and to all fellow seekers of justice, I think it is imperative for socio-political movements seeking justice to not deviate from their aim.[29] Temptations abound on either side – one can seek vengeance against injustices or be unmoved by crimes. Conscious and rational political acts have always been about resisting both temptations.

Acknowledgments: This paper has brewed for a long time and has benefitted at various stages from the comments and criticisms of Thomas Smith, John O'Neill, Sahana Mukherjee, Shervin Mirzaeighazi, Lucija Duda, Radha Kapuria, Artemis

29 One can take inspiration from Martin Luther King in this regard: in the throes of racist onslaught, King made all volunteers pledge that the (nonviolent) movement in Birmingham 'seeks justice and reconciliation – not victory' (King 1964, ch.4).

Christinaki, Riccardo Jaede, and Annie Mukherjee. I absolve them of all responsibilities. The claims and errors are all mine. Thanks to the anonymous reviewers of Moral Philosophy and Politics whose detailed feedback has helpfully modified the paper. The paper was written during my doctoral studies at the University of Manchester. I thank the university for generously funding my PhD and this research.

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