

## “Cancel culture”, a rhetorical construction

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### Abstract

*This article examines the phenomenon of “cancel culture”, which has been the subject of intense media attention for several years. Never being clearly defined, the expression refers to very heterogeneous practices, actions and movements, which often have no other link between them than the diffused discomfort they inspire in a vast fringe of society. A close examination of this notion, its origin and its (mis)uses reveal a rhetorical construction that is more of a political slogan than any societal reality. The debate on “cancel culture” illustrates both the growing political polarisation in the West, the questioning of age-old values and social structures, and the strong reactionary opposition to them.*

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## SUMMARY

<b>The sources of “cancel culture: American tradition or media invention?</b>	<b>4</b>
A culture of public denunciation?	4
The consequence of (too much) freedom of expression?	5
The media factory of cancel culture	6
<b>Behind the “cancel culture”, the challenge to a moral and cultural order</b>	<b>7</b>
The question of the balance of power: who “cancels” whom?	8
Misconduct does not make the norm, let alone a “culture”	9
<b>As a conclusion</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>RÉFÉRENCES</b>	<b>12</b>

Imported straight from the United States, the “cancel culture” controversy has continued to grow and spread in recent years, to the extent that in 2020, the term was one of the top “words of the year” selected by the British Oxford Dictionary - competing with “Covid-19” and the “Black Lives Matter” and “QAnon” movements<sup>1</sup>. The ranking is subjective, admittedly, nonetheless indicative of the main societal concerns of the moment.

It must be said that the polemics follow one another with constancy: in July 2020, the tribune on “Justice and open debate”, signed by 153 personalities and published in *Harper's Magazine*, aroused an important echo and was translated into several languages<sup>2</sup>. In January of this year, American teachers caused a scandal after launching the #DisruptTexts movement, aimed at tracking down anything in classical works that might “offend the sensibilities of young readers”<sup>3</sup>. Then, when a few weeks later a Dutch publisher declined to choose a white author to translate Amanda Gorman's poem, which was declared at Joe Biden's inauguration, many voices were again raised to denounce the supposed dictate of *cancel culture*. More recently, it was Barack Obama's turn to strongly criticize the “wokeness”<sup>4</sup> and the *cancel culture* while, at the same time, the small world of American ornithology was being turned upside down by a campaign to decolonise bird names (mean “insult” in French). And these are just a handful of examples of the micro-polemics that have become almost daily occurrences, especially across the Atlantic: debunking of statues, renaming of streets and schools, public humiliation of public figures, etc. France, less affected, is not spared. The scandal caused by the cancellation, in March 2019, of Aeschylus' *Suppliantes* under pressure from anti-racist activists, or the one that followed, in August 2020, the new edition of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers*, renamed *They Were Ten*, is testimony to this.

Does multiplying the examples suffice to conclude that a new form of “euphemistic censorship”<sup>5</sup> has been introduced? The emergence of a “left-wing McCarthyism”<sup>6</sup>? There are reasons to be sceptical. Firstly,

<sup>1</sup> Oxford Languages. (2020). *Words of an Unprecedented Year*. [online] Available at: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2020/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>2</sup> N.A. (2020). A Letter on Justice and Open Debate. *Harpers.org*. [online] 07 Jul. Available at: <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

For the French translation, see: N.A. (2020). Mark Lilla, Margaret Atwood, Wynton Marsalis... : « Notre résistance à Donald Trump ne doit pas conduire au dogmatisme ou à la coercition ». *Le Monde.fr*. [online] 08 Jul. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/08/mark-lilla-margaret-atwood-wynton-marsalis-notre-resistance-a-donald-trump-ne-doit-pas-conduire-au-dogmatisme-ou-a-la-coercition\\_6045547\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/08/mark-lilla-margaret-atwood-wynton-marsalis-notre-resistance-a-donald-trump-ne-doit-pas-conduire-au-dogmatisme-ou-a-la-coercition_6045547_3232.html) [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>3</sup> The controversy was provoked, as is often the case, by a misinterpretation (and bad faith) of the movement's intentions. Several right-wing media outlets (such as *Fox News*, *The American Conservative* and, in France, *RT* and *Valeurs Actuelles*) reported on an article published in the *Wall Street Journal* by literary critic Meghan Cox Gurdon, in which she claimed that Homer's *Odyssey* had been banned by a high school in Massachusetts, although this was later denied.

<sup>4</sup> The term “woke”, derived from African-American slang, became widespread in the 2010s with the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Originally, the term was used to describe a state of alertness to the oppression of people from ethnic, sexual, religious and other minorities. The conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has popularised the term in a more offensive sense, using it in the way that some French-speaking columnists use the term “bobo”. The term “wokeness” refers by extension to the (alleged) ideological trend of “wokes”, perceived by the conservative right as a monolithic movement.

<sup>5</sup> The expression is used by the lawyer Agnès Tricoire and the philosophers Jacinto Lageira and Christian Ruby in an article published on AOC: TRICOIRE A., LAGEIRA J. and RUBY C. (2021). Cancel Culture: la censure euphémisée. *aoc.media*. [online] 21 Apr. Available at: <https://aoc.media/opinion/2021/04/20/cancel-culture-la-censure-euphemisee/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021]]. Moreover, the parallel between censorship and *cancel culture* is often drawn.

<sup>6</sup> This expression, which likens “cancel culture” to the hunt for communists launched by Senator McCarthy in the 1950s, was coined by the French writer Marc Weitzmann, before being taken up by many media.

because the examples in question are not that numerous. The symbolic importance given to them far outweighs their statistical importance, and they are often taken up and hyped by right-wing media. Moreover, the term *cancel culture* is used in a particularly extensive way: invoked to denounce facts of very different natures, it easily serves as a scarecrow to reject any form of evolution and progressive struggle. Of course, this does not mean that the criticisms levelled against it, on the right and the left, are necessarily unfounded. But in a context of strong political polarisation, the range of nuances diminishes drastically: either one is for it (but who is defending it?), or one is against it. So let's try to see things a little more clearly.

## The sources of “cancel culture: American tradition or media invention?”

In its most common meaning, the term cancel culture refers to a militant practice of mass denunciation and boycott of a public figure. It is said to have originated on American social networks and campuses, with the aim of damaging the reputation, image, and private and professional life of the person targeted. The #MeToo movement and its variants (such as #BalanceTonPorc, #balancetonagresseur or #agresseurluiaussi in France) were, for example, some of the most striking translations. The expression is also used more broadly to denounce any form of popular censorship - real or perceived - against a brand, a work or a practice deemed offensive by its detractors. But before passing judgement on this phenomenon, it is worth trying to understand its origin.

### A culture of public denunciation?

For some, *cancel culture* is the result of a specifically American cultural and religious heritage, which encourages denunciation. This is a hypothesis defended by Fabien Jobard, a researcher at the CNRS, in the pages of *Le Figaro*<sup>7</sup>. And it is true that citizen denunciation appears to be a virtue in the United States; witness the system of rewards that the State and individuals use to encourage citizens to denounce crimes and report any useful information. This is an ancient practice - popularised by the famous “Wanted” signs in Westerns - which dates back to the Puritan origins of the American nation. In the same article, Jean-Éric Branaa, a specialist in the United States and lecturer at the Université Panthéon-Assas, recalls how the first Puritans made denunciation a virtue, creating assemblies, “caucuses”, during which citizens had to denounce any behaviour deemed deviant, starting with adultery. This political and religious tradition is said to have inspired certain episodes in American history, such as the “Salem Witch Trials” in 1692 and McCarthyism in the early 1950s.

This culture of citizen whistleblowing, perfectly authorised and accepted by public opinion, is said to persist in various forms in the United States, particularly with regard to paedo criminality. As Jean-Éric Branaa reports: “When a person convicted of paedophilia moves into a neighbourhood, his neighbours sometimes put up posters in the streets with his name and the facts for which he was convicted. This is not considered harassment at all. The person is forced to move until the day when new neighbours discover his past, and so on”<sup>8</sup>. Here in France, where the memory of Vichy left a bitter taste, this very

<sup>7</sup> Comments collected and published by *Le Figaro* in an article dated 08 April 2018. The researcher states that “for Americans, [public denunciation] is not denunciation, it is a civic gesture”: DESCOURS, G. (2018). Les récompenses aux renseignements, une tradition américaine. *Le Figaro.fr*. [online] 08 Apr. Available at: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2018/04/08/01003-20180408ARTFIG00023-les-recompenses-aux-renseignements-une-tradition-americaine.php> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>8</sup> FEERTCHAK, A. and LE CAIN, B. (2017). Harcèlement sexuel : une culture de la dénonciation différente selon les pays. *Le Figaro.fr*. [online] 28 Nov. Available at:

American conception of civic responsibility has no equivalent. In America, however, this mentality is internalised from kindergarten onwards, “*children are encouraged to report to their parents or to the authorities if they observe something strange, it is part of their education*” explains sociologist Robert Sampson, a researcher at Harvard<sup>9</sup>.

However, this political and religious tradition cannot really tell us anything about the origins of cancel culture. Especially since the Puritan values, inherited from the WASP way of thinking and living<sup>10</sup>, are above all maintained by a certain fringe of the Republican and conservative right<sup>11</sup>. They cannot therefore satisfactorily explain the origin of activist practices that are said to originate from the radical left. A second, more convincing explanation would be to look to American law and the relationship to freedom of expression.

### **The consequence of (too much) freedom of expression?**

Thus, for the sociologist Nathalie Heinich, a researcher at the CNRS, “*the anchoring [of cancel culture] in North American society is not the effect of the prevalence in their countries of the evils against which these activists are fighting - often quite rightly -; it is above all the product of a specific legal system: the First Amendment of the American Constitution [which] makes freedom of expression a fundamentally positive right*”<sup>12</sup>. In France, freedom of expression is limited by law - which prohibits, for example, incitement to racial hatred, calls for murder, encouragement of discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexual orientation, or Holocaust denial - but in the United States, it is almost impossible to incriminate a person for his or her comments or positions, however outrageous. Mass mobilisations to “cancel” a particular artist, teacher or politician would fill this legal vacuum.

On the other hand, American defamation law considers that, in the event of a lawsuit, the duty to prove one's innocence lies with the plaintiff and not, as in France, with the accuser to prove the truth of his or her assertions (it should be noted that it is much more difficult to prove one's innocence than to substantiate a fact). The corollary is that journalists and other opinion leaders are freer to relay accusations against public figures. The Weinstein affair, which began on 5 October 2017, was triggered by a *New York Times* article<sup>13</sup>, reporting on the testimonies of several victims of sexual assault, which led to

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<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2017/11/28/01003-20171128ARTFIG00274-harcelement-sexuel-une-culture-de-la-denonciation-differente-selon-les-pays.php> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>9</sup> N.A. (2005). Aux États-Unis, dénoncer ou surveiller ses voisins fait partie de la culture du pays Le mouchardage, un sport américain érigé en vertu civique. *L'orient le jour.com*. [online] 16 Jul. Available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/506886/Societe - Aux Etats-Unis%252C denoncer ou surveiller ses voisins fait partie de la culture du pays Le mouchardage%252C un sport americainerige en vertu ci.html> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>10</sup> The acronym *WASP*, which stands for *White Anglo-Saxon Protestants*, refers to the descendants of Protestant immigrants from Northern and Western Europe whose way of life and thinking has long been a dominant model.

<sup>11</sup> On the links between puritanical ideology and the conservative right, see for example: TOINET, M.-F. (1995). Aux sources puritaines des États-Unis. *Le Monde Diplomatique.fr*. [online] May. Available at: <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1995/05/TOINET/6262> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>12</sup> Tribune published in the newspaper *Le Monde*: HEINICH, N. (2020). La “cancel culture” est la conséquence du sous-développement juridique nord-américain. *Le Monde.fr*. [online] 07 Aug. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/08/07/la-cancel-culture-est-la-consequence-du-sous-developpement-juridique-nord-americain\\_6048344\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/08/07/la-cancel-culture-est-la-consequence-du-sous-developpement-juridique-nord-americain_6048344_3232.html) [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>13</sup> KANTOR, J. and TWOHEY, M. (2017). Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades. *The New York Times.com*. [online] 05 Oct. Available at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html?_r=0) [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

a cascade of denunciations, often without proof and without legal proceedings - despite the accusations of defamation made by Harvey Weinstein's lawyers. In Europe, where press law is somewhat more restrictive, this is less likely to happen.

### **The media factory of cancel culture**

Finally, it remains to mention the decisive role of *Black Twitter* in the birth of what is now called cancel culture. Born out of the encounter between two major social facts - the systemic discrimination suffered by African-American communities and the formidable tool of expression provided by social networks - Black Twitter is “a network of people who share the same cultural experience, who discuss [in particular] what it is to be black and everything related to black life”<sup>14</sup>. A very dynamic and militant cultural group, *Black Twitter* has revealed its political strength on several occasions, in particular following the murder of Trayvon Martin, the murder of Eric Garner, and the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

It is also within this network, which is often prone to humorous diversions, that the expression “being cancelled” has been popularised into an internet meme<sup>15</sup>. As Meredith D. Clark, an expert on Black Twitter and cancel culture, explains, this marginal phenomenon has subsequently been dissected by outside observers, particularly journalists, who have greatly exaggerated and amplified its importance<sup>16</sup>. The term “cancelled” then replaced “call-out”, which was itself a common practice on Black Twitter - initiated by African-American women<sup>17</sup>: publicly criticising a person, place, brand or object, not so much to denounce specific individual behaviour as to 'point the finger' at systemic inequalities and demand change.

The fact is, however, that the two expressions that the media have made interposable, both through ignorance and convenience, do not have the same meaning. For the minority behind these practices, “cancelling” a person or thing - a punishment that amounts to a form of ostracism and/or censorship - comes only as a last resort, when the “call-out” is ineffective or the affront too great. In principle, the “call-out” acts as a warning: it gives the person the opportunity to change and revise their speech or practices. Talking about cancel culture is therefore meaningless, because although there is indeed a practice of *call-out* in African-American communities, the fact of cancelling is much more the exception than the norm.

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<sup>14</sup> Definition proposed by Meredith D. Clark, in her thesis on Black Twitter: CLARK, M. (2014). *To tweet our own cause: A mixed-methods study of the online phenomenon “Black Twitter”*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Graduate School.

<sup>15</sup> SHIFMAN, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), p. 362–377.

<sup>16</sup> CLARK, M. (2020). DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture.” *Communication and the Public*, 5(3–4), 88–92.

<sup>17</sup> NAKAMURA, L. (2015). The unwanted labour of social media: Women of color call out culture as venture community management. *New Formations*, 86(86), p.106–112.

Above all, the idea of cancel culture (intrinsically pejorative since it elevates censorship to the rank of a cultural practice) completely obscures the notion of power relations, which is essential for understanding the origin of these practices. The “call-out” appeared with the “Black Power” movement in the 1960s: faced with insurmountable structural inequalities, the African-American minority had little other instrument than its voice to raise public awareness of its cause. Since then, the practice has been perpetuated and has gained weight thanks to social networks. It is therefore important to remember that the “call-out” serves above all to influence otherwise unreachable figures (artists, public figures, brands, etc.) and to draw attention to subjects that are not visible in the “mainstream” media<sup>18</sup>.

In the end, if we can admit the existence of North American predispositions for public denunciation, both in terms of law and tradition, the fact remains that the expression “cancel culture” is nothing more than the media extrapolation of a marginal practice, itself the result of a social struggle. To be fair, however, it must be emphasised that the dubious origin of the concept does not in any way prevent the existence of aberrations, or even that an effective form of “culture of cancelling” may have emerged a posteriori. It should nevertheless alert us to the fact that the notion of cancel culture is not neutral; it is even deeply political.

## Behind the “cancel culture”, the challenge to a moral and cultural order

Those who are now alarmed by “left-wing censorship” should perhaps remember that they are not the first. As far back as the 1990s, the conservative right in the United States was protesting against the progressive offensive of minorities and feminists, which was seen as a dictatorship of political correctness. Interestingly, the term - which had previously circulated quietly in the narrow circles of the academic radical left - was popularised by a series of articles in the *New York Times*<sup>19</sup>. It became a pejorative term and entered the lexicon of conservatives. The media of the time (which are, incidentally, the same as today) were full of micro-polemics and examples, often exaggerated, sometimes invented, of the intolerance of a left that was quick to denounce sexism, homophobia and racism<sup>20</sup>. The counter-offensive of the American conservative right was quickly exported, and soon made the headlines in the French press and magazines.

Two quotes sum up the fears of the time quite accurately. One, from President George W. Bush, was delivered at a graduation ceremony at the University of Michigan: “*The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits*”<sup>21</sup>. The

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<sup>18</sup> TYNES, B., SCHUSCHKE, J. and NOBLE, S.U. (2016). *The Intersectional Internet*. Bern: Éd. Peter Lang.

<sup>19</sup> The article of Richard Bernstein, « IDEAS & TRENDS; The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct », published on 28 October 1990, was the first of many (and the most influential in the public debate). BERNSTEIN, R. (1990). IDEAS & TRENDS; The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct. *The New York Times.com*. [online] 28 Oct. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/28/weekinreview/ideas-trends-the-rising-hegemony-of-the-politically-correct.html?pagewanted=all> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>20</sup> FASSIN, E. (2020). Cancel culture (l’importation d’une polémique), *Publictionnaire.huma-num.fr*. [online] 17 May. Available at: <http://publictionnaire.huma-num.fr/notice/cancel-culture-limportation-dune-polemique/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>21</sup> For the transcript of the speech: BUSH, G. W. (1991). Remarks at the University of Michigan Commencement Ceremony in Ann Arbor. [online] 04 May. *George W.H. Bush Presidential Library & Museum*. Available at: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2949> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

second, by political scientist Philippe Raynaud, complements the first: *“This liberal inflection of American democracy would not be so significant if it were not accompanied by another major phenomenon: the segmentation of society into a heterogeneous set of minorities, the protection of which has become the sole political project of American liberals. The result of these two forces is easy to understand: the democracy of rights is above all a democracy of minorities”*<sup>22</sup>. Any resemblance to an existing controversy is obviously not accidental.

### **The question of the balance of power: who “cancels” whom?**

Whether it's about political correctness or cancel culture, the criticism is basically the same: censorship, thought police... In short, “we can't say anything more!”. But what the self-proclaimed defenders of public debate often forget, sometimes deliberately, is once again the importance of the balance of power. Who is really being “cancelled”? Who is invisibilized? Who is “cancelling” whom?

As the sociologist Éric Fassin rightly points out, *“in the United States, D. Trump's sexism and racism clearly did not prevent his election in 2016; and accusations of sexual assault did not block the confirmation of two of the nine justices who sit on the Supreme Court. On the other hand, as Thomas Chatterton Williams himself [the author of the column on 'Justice and open debate', mentioned in the introduction] acknowledges in an interview with the New Yorker, no one has been more 'nullified' than Colin Kaepernick.”*<sup>23</sup> A remark that also applies to France: *“Gérald Darmanin, under the shadow of a rape accusation, was appointed Minister of the Interior at the very moment when the courts ordered the resumption of investigations, while the television channel CNews hired the far-right polemicist Éric Zemmour just after his conviction for inciting Islamophobic discrimination was confirmed. In both cases, this is the opposite of a sanction. [...] Despite the protests, Roman Polanski was rewarded by the Académie des César, and it is to the book by his victim Vanessa Springora that we owe the re-launch of the investigation against Gabriel Matzneff: the latter had been claiming his taste for teenage girls (and even children) in his work for decades. The two men are still evading justice today. As for Woody Allen, accused of sexual assault by his adopted daughter for nearly thirty years, he continues to make films that are celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic”*<sup>24</sup>.

Of course, the french polemicists on CNews - Éric Zemmour, Pascal Praud, etc. - are the first to complain about the deleterious effects of cancel culture and to declare themselves victims of it... in front of nearly one million daily viewers. Brandishing the spectre of a threat of censorship against public and media speech is a very convenient rhetorical strategy to stifle any form of criticism. And it does not matter that one expresses oneself without real contradiction on a medium with a large audience. It should also be noted that in “cancel culture”, there is... “culture”. As the sociologist James Davison Hunter wrote in the 1990s, *“the power of culture is the power to define reality, the power to frame debate, and this power resides among the elites”*. To place culture on the side of those who supposedly censor, boycott and cancel is to implicitly reverse the balance of power.

It is true, however, that social networks now allow hundreds of thousands (or even millions) of people to collectively put pressure on individuals, institutions or brands that would otherwise be out of reach. They allow those who were previously unheard to express themselves. Elite circles, whether media, intellectual, artistic or other, see their power - that of shaping the debate, of controlling the public space -

<sup>22</sup> RAYNAUD, P. (1992). De la tyrannie de la majorité à la tyrannie des minorités. *Le débat*, 2(69), pp. 48-56.

<sup>23</sup> Colin Rand Kaepernick is an American football player whose career was abruptly cut short in 2016 for choosing to take a knee to the ground during the national anthem in support of victims of police violence.

<sup>24</sup> RAYNAUD, P. (1992). De la tyrannie de la majorité à la tyrannie des minorités. *Le débat*, 2(69), pp. 48-56.

challenged by the emergence of these minority counter-publics. And it is precisely this loss of power, the object of a kind of moral panic, that explains the extent of the controversy. What lies behind the “cancel culture” is therefore a struggle, a power struggle, the issue of which is the (re)definition of social values: what should society value? And which practices, on the contrary, should be discredited? The fact that minorities now have the power to take up this issue is not a threat to debate and freedom of expression. On the contrary, it is a sign of a more open reconfiguration of the public space.

### **Misconduct does not make the norm, let alone a “culture”**

The idea of “cancel culture”, as we have seen, is primarily a media and political construct. Public denunciation, boycotts and other related practices are not part of a culture; they are political instruments used to counterbalance an overwhelming power relationship. That said, it would be dishonest to dismiss all criticism as an expression of conservative fears. After all, many of them come from reputedly left-wing figures: Barack Obama, Thomas Chatterton Williams, Noam Chomsky, Gloria Steinem, etc. They denounce, for example, “a climate of fear, contrary to freedom of expression” which would make social relations “more brutal”<sup>25</sup> and would lead to self-censorship for fear of “reprisals” and “disastrous professional consequences”<sup>26</sup>.

Some cases are frequently cited as examples, such as that of Justine Sacco, director of a public relations company, who, before boarding a plane from London to Soweto (South Africa), had the brilliant idea of writing on Twitter that she would not catch AIDS because she was white. A (bad) joke - which, according to her, mocked the complete disconnection of Americans from African realities - unfortunately interpreted in the first degree by her 170 or so subscribers. As a result of this clumsiness, she lost her job, the support of her family, and was subjected to a traumatic public lynching<sup>27</sup>. Also, often mentioned is the case of Bret Weinstein, a university professor who was forced to resign after refusing to participate in a day when white people had to stay off campus in order to leave it completely open to people from minorities<sup>28</sup>. In France, the cancellation of the performance of Aeschylus' *Suppliantes* at the Sorbonne, under pressure from anti-racist activists, is also regularly cited<sup>29</sup>.

However, the question is not whether these examples are problematic. They undoubtedly are. But there is nothing to suggest that they are symptomatic of a fundamental trend. The fact that there are radical groups and excesses on the fringes of social struggles is not in itself surprising. It is even a constant

<sup>25</sup> Comments by Thomas Chatterton Williams, the main initiator of the *Harper's Magazine* column, collected and published by *Le Monde* on 26 July 2020: BHERER, M.-O. (2020). Thomas Chatterton Williams : « Un espace public corseté par la “cancel culture” ne sert pas les intérêts des minorités ». *Le Monde.fr*. [online] 26 Jul. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/26/thomas-chatterton-williams-un-espace-public-corsete-par-la-cancel-culture-ne-sert-pas-les-interets-des-minorites\\_6047306\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/26/thomas-chatterton-williams-un-espace-public-corsete-par-la-cancel-culture-ne-sert-pas-les-interets-des-minorites_6047306_3232.html) [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>26</sup> N.A. (2020). Mark Lilla, Margaret Atwood, Wynton Marsalis... : « Notre résistance à Donald Trump ne doit pas conduire au dogmatisme ou à la coercition ». *Le Monde.fr*. [online] 08 Jul. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/08/mark-lilla-margaret-atwood-wynton-marsalis-notre-resistance-a-donald-trump-ne-doit-pas-conduire-au-dogmatisme-ou-a-la-coercition\\_6045547\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/07/08/mark-lilla-margaret-atwood-wynton-marsalis-notre-resistance-a-donald-trump-ne-doit-pas-conduire-au-dogmatisme-ou-a-la-coercition_6045547_3232.html) [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>27</sup> See for example: RONSON, J. (2015). How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life. *The New York Times.com*. [online] 12 Feb. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>28</sup> See for example: WEISS, B. (2017). When the Left Turns on Its Own. *The New York Times.com*. [online] 01 Jun. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/opinion/when-the-left-turns-on-its-own.html> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].

<sup>29</sup> See for example: WEITZMANN, M. “Les Suppliantes” et le blackface : les nouvelles censures au théâtre. *Signes des temps*. France culture. 07 avril 2019. 45mn.

regardless of political affiliation. What is more, the number of significant examples, although difficult to quantify, seems to be fairly limited. This is shown, for example, by a study conducted by the sociologist Renaud Maes on teacher 'cancellations' in the United States. Of the 172 cases listed by the National Association of Scholars (as of June 2021), he concludes that only 32, at most, are actually dismissals linked to a controversy over a social issue - 32 out of the 638,702 full-time teaching staff in the United States<sup>30</sup>. Finally, it should be remembered, as we mentioned earlier, that many examples of abuses considered scandalous are in fact only media exaggerations<sup>31</sup>.

## As a conclusion

At the end of these reflections - obviously far from being exhaustive - it is at least possible to draw some conclusions. Firstly, it is clear that the debate on cancel culture and the practices with which it is associated are closely linked to American culture. It is part of a centuries-old political tradition, a particular conception of freedom of expression, and the very strong polarisation of American opinions on moral and cultural issues (the famous "culture wars"<sup>32</sup>). Consequently, the export of this controversy raises questions: does it really make sense in Europe? Is it relevant to transpose the collective action repertoire of American activists to the French context? This is what the sociologist Nathalie Heinich contests, for example, when she says that cancel culture "has no place in France, where freedom of expression is regulated and protected by law"<sup>33</sup>.

On the other hand, the very expression "cancel culture" is both a media construct, which responds to market logics (arousing indignation in order to gain an audience), and a political and ideological product. It is a caricature of the practices developed by the progressive left, which are far more complex and nuanced than what it implies. In fact, the expression certainly says more about the people who coined it than about the object it designates. This is reminiscent of the recent polemic on "Islamism-leftism"...

Finally, the practices to which it refers are the result of a balance of power: denunciation, massive boycott, or, in more extreme cases, "cancellation", are all political tactics aimed at bridging the huge inequalities in access to public space. That there are extreme behaviours, unfortunate consequences or questionable actions is an undeniable fact. But the radicalism of a few does not make the norm, let alone a "culture". As for the "we cannot say anything more", regularly chanted by some, it is the expression of an understandable unease when faced with the often brutal questioning of the values and models that have dominated the West for centuries. Yes, the ongoing process of deconstruction can be destabilising,

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<sup>30</sup> MAES, R. (2021). La « cancel culture » à l'assaut du débat public. *La Revue Nouvelle*, 4(4), p. 2-8.

<sup>31</sup> The case of the alleged banning of the *Odyssey* in an American high school comes to mind. Another example is the forced resignation of *New York Times* reporter James Bennett, who was portrayed by many as a victim of cancel culture, but the paper actually had strong reasons for demanding his departure. Another example is the case of a *San Francisco Gate* article in which two journalists questioned whether the Snow White story was problematic in the context of consent education. The story was then blown out of proportion by *Fox News*, under the headline "Feminists want to cancel Snow White", and spread widely in France.

<sup>32</sup> The concept of "culture wars" was developed by sociologist James Davison Hunter in his landmark book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991). He notes the polarisation of the American population around certain moral and cultural issues: minority rights, positive discrimination, public education, etc.

<sup>33</sup> HEINICH, N. (2020). La "cancel culture" est la conséquence du sous-développement juridique nord-américain. *Le Monde.fr*. [online] 07 Aug. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/08/07/la-cancel-culture-est-la-consequence-du-sous-developpement-juridique-nord-americain\\_6048344\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/08/07/la-cancel-culture-est-la-consequence-du-sous-developpement-juridique-nord-americain_6048344_3232.html) [Accessed 23 Jul. 2021].



upsetting and frightening. And yes, sometimes it undoubtedly goes astray, searching for its way at random. But it is no less legitimate.

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