ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

Cancel Culture:

Why It Is Necessary for the Sake of Social Justice

In the age of digital technology, the events of the past and present are accessible at any time with the click of a button. There has never been an easier time to summon groups of people to join the public fray in order to challenge others online for past words or actions (Mueller, 2021). In the digital age, past actions that are regarded as incongruent with current norms are subject to criticism and rebuke (Richards, 2013). This phenomenon is now commonly referred to as “cancel culture” which is understood as a strategy carried out by groups of individuals using social pressure to shun a target that has been accused of offensive words or deeds (Norris, 2021). Cancel culture is said to have originated from Black Twitter, the informal community on social network Twitter which largely consists of African-American users, and its related queer communities of colour (Shifman, 2013). It can be directed to public figures and corporations that have been accused of racial discrimination, sexual misconduct, sexism, bullying, homophobia, and more (Mueller, 2021). Within the past few years, the idea that a person can be “cancelled” has been a polarising topic of debate. Proponents of cancel culture argue that this process is a form of publicly calling for accountability for certain actions (Pipyrou, 2018), while others argue that it is actually a form of punishment and that it discourages free-speech (Norris, 2020). This essay argues that cancel culture plays important roles in both raising awareness about social injustice and promoting social change. To support this argument, this essay will look at three reasons why cancel culture makes an important contribution to society: Firstly, cancel culture seeks to address the deep inequalities in society and promote positive social change. Secondly, cancel culture fosters a sense of
community which can lead to greater publicity and public involvement. And finally, cancel culture shrinks the power gap between social elites and minorities by providing the latter with a voice.

First, cancel culture promotes positive social change by encouraging members of the public to hold an individual, group or organisation accountable for their words and actions, and in so doing raise awareness about societal injustice. In 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum after a jury found George Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black high school student whom Zimmerman shot and killed (Leyh, 2020). Since then, the movement has established wide support, operating through a social media-based activist network that has concentrated on police brutality and injustices in the criminal justice system towards black people (Clark, 2020). Additionally, in 2017, the “MeToo” movement gained widespread attention and served to publicise the prevalence of sexual harassment, assault, and gender inequality in the workplace (Pipyrou, 2018). Following the sexual misconduct allegations of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, thousands of women took to social media in solidarity with the victims to share their own stories of sexual mistreatment. In 2020, Weinstein was convicted for some of his crimes and, although social problems persist in this environment, this movement has sparked necessary conversations and led to some positive outcomes. The Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements are examples of how cancel culture can help bring injustices to the attention of a wider audience and create pressure on perpetrators to take accountability for their actions (Bouvier, 2020).

Second, the act of calling out problematic behaviours or “cancelling” builds a sense of community that can help to fuel further publicity and gain increased exposure of socially unjust practices. In 2018, Kelly Pocha was filmed yelling at a group of Afghan-Canadian men in a racist rant. The video was widely circulated on the Internet and harshly condemned, and Pocha’s
employment was terminated as a result. Events like this suggest that there is a communal drive to call out a person in the name of social justice (Bouvier, 2020). In the digital age where social media use is ubiquitous, connectivity between users and engagement with current events makes it easier for individuals to become involved as co-creators of policy and to promote social change (Mueller, 2021). This process starts by calling out inappropriate behaviour, such as with Pocha’s racist outburst case. Henderson (2019) claims that pleasure plays a role in these kinds of processes as people find pleasure in mobilising together for a cause which allows a sense of togetherness at low personal cost. This feeling of pleasure, combined with a low entry barrier, can combine to prompt a greater number of people to become involved. Bouvier (2020) similarly claims that when on the Internet, users will collectively experience an affective flow of both outrage and enjoyment as they have a sense of working together to help a vulnerable party (Bouvier, 2020). Nonetheless, the calling out of inappropriate actions or words should not be mistaken for the more negative mob mentality, or the adoption of instinctive behaviours based on one’s circle of influence and should instead be seen as a movement against a specific, individualistic transgression (Clark, 2020). Thus, cancel culture can be seen as playing a role in building a community with low barriers to entry, allowing many people to become involved and increasing public awareness of socially unjust practices.

Third, cancel culture bridges the gap between social elites and minorities. If we consider the mainstream media as communicating elite ideologies top-down into society, then social media has allowed groups and individuals to negotiate control over mainstream media by speaking back and playing a role in democratising social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and MeToo (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Florini, 2014). Platforms such as Twitter also allow elitist ideologies transmitted by mainstream media (for example, negatively representing immigrants,
asylum seekers and ethnic minorities) to be more easily challenged by voices with alternative views (Bouvier, 2020). Cancel culture most often allows previously silenced groups to make a real (if small) dent in the power of those traditionally privileged by gender, race, and so on by providing a platform through which those sources of power are not needed in order to be heard. This brings a greater representation of diverse perspectives to the table, rather than the conversation being controlled by those holding societal power.

In conclusion, cancel culture makes important contributions to both public awareness about social injustice and the promotion of social change. Firstly, it promotes social change by increasing public awareness about injustices and advocating for parties to be held accountable for their actions. Secondly, cancel culture builds community with low barriers to entry which help to broaden involvement and impact. Lastly, cancel culture reduces the power gap between elites and minorities by providing a platform that does not rely on traditional sources of privilege. All these factors indicate that this new phenomenon plays an important role in combating injustice in our modern, digital society.

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