

Review of

Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy

by Sigal R. Ben-Porath, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023

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Sigal Ben-Porath's *Cancel Wars* represents a level-headed attempt to mediate ongoing conflicts over truth and inclusion in US universities, and to suggest how educational institutions might play a leading role more broadly in bridging social and political divides and strengthening democracy. The book builds on and refines arguments from her 2017 book *Free Speech on Campus*, arguments centred on the key concepts of "inclusive freedom" and "dignitary safety." Further, it continues a line of thinking that she developed in the pages of this same journal in her 2016 response to Eamonn Callan's paper "Education in Safe and Unsafe Spaces." That issue's special invited symposium also included my own, somewhat less generous response to Callan, and so the present review of Ben-Porath's latest effort might be considered a continuation of that discussion – a discussion that now benefits from eight additional years of scholarship, activism, and hindsight, informed by such developments as the Trump presidency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a genocide of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Central to *Cancel Wars* is the premise, laid out in chapter one, that the US and other ostensibly democratic states suffer from increasing polarization. Ben-Porath cites scholarship and public debate supporting this claim, although she also cites research suggesting that it is, in reality, an exaggerated "*perception* of polarization rather than polarization itself that causes negative attitudes about the out-group" (p. 162–163, n23, emphasis added). Nevertheless, if we accept that polarization is truly as severe as Ben-Porath implies it to be, I posit that efforts to effectively address it might benefit from determining who or what is most responsible for causing it. Assigning blame would contradict her conciliatory posture, but the examples of polarization that Ben-Porath offers are telling: racist, sexist guest speakers pushing for the inclusion of more "conservative and right-leaning views" in universities (p. 8); "rising support for authoritarian populism" (p. 13); and the January 6, 2021, attack by Trump supporters on the US Capitol. She continues: "Some influential scholars ... trace much of our current polarization to the rise of right-wing newspapers and TV shows and the propaganda such outlets disseminated, later spreading to social media platforms" (p. 23). Moreover, "[i]t can be argued that polarization is rooted in racial distrust or prejudice," particularly toward "Black Americans and other visible minorities" (p. 21) – what some might simply call white supremacy. It follows that what Ben-Porath frames as polarization could more accurately be referred to as a resurgence of conservatism and even ultra-conservatism, and a dramatic rightward shift in the locus of mainstream politics. Unfortunately, Ben-Porath dismisses "accusations of fascism" as unwarranted hyperbole, equating it with "accusations of socialism" on the

other side (p. 12) and failing to account for pre-eminent academic experts such as Robert Paxton (2021) who have indeed identified Trump and his most ardent supporters as fascist.

Chapter 2 goes on to attribute polarization to the lack of a shared epistemic foundation, a problem that universities are particularly well-positioned to help solve. But once again the examples put forth illustrate that the problem principally tends toward one side of the political spectrum: disputed US election results, climate and COVID-19 denialism, willful ignorance regarding systemic racism, and mass delusions such as QAnon all reflect a sweeping “populist rejection of expertise” (p. 34). And rather than acknowledge that it is actually right-wing ideology and ruling class power that supports and enables this populist rejection, Ben-Porath generally gestures toward “lenses of values and ideology” (p. 26) as the problem. Her simple assertion that “[i]deology ... is a choice” (p. 47) contradicts the scholarship theorizing ideology as an unconscious phenomenon. For example, Louis Althusser (1971/2014) suggests that “man is by nature an ideological animal” who lives “spontaneously” in ideology, which “interpellates individuals as subjects” (p. 188). He continues: “[T]hose who are in ideology ... believe that they are by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology. Ideology never says ‘I am ideological’” (p. 191, emphasis in original). Indeed, Ben-Porath at times appears to believe herself capable of observing matters more clearly from a purely objective, unbiased perch by somehow “rising above the fray” (p. 137). This view of ideology precludes Ben-Porath’s reflection on the American liberal dogma underpinning her own work, or on the possibility of herself being inside the kind of information bubble that she discusses in this chapter.

Ben-Porath later asserts, in contrast, that “[h]iding behind a cloak of objectivity, trying to stay above the fray of politics, is unfeasible as higher education is already politicized, has already been drawn into the struggle over knowledge and truth, diversity, and inclusion” (p. 153–154). However, this still ignores the fact that higher education *has always been political*, that “decision-making [being] done by scientific and other experts at all is itself a democratic choice” (p. 19), and that the nature of democracy, how it should be implemented, and whether it should be implemented at all have likewise always been up for debate. Even before the campus activism of the 1960s, “free speech” served for centuries as an “active partisan signifier” for the political left, in opposition to the right’s penchant for censorship, until it was eventually “repackaged first as a universal imperative ... and then as a banner behind which an electoral right and a street far right could ally” (Renton, 2021, p. 11).¹ In much the same way, the now-ubiquitous framework of “equity, diversity, and inclusion” (EDI) has been appropriated from radical left-wing (socialist, even) movements and fashioned into “an apolitical abstraction” and marketing slogan for the neoliberal university (Bray, 2017, p. 163).² EDI is now a multi-billion dollar industry that “has left its social justice principles, and the people who established them, far behind” (Tran, 2021, para. 7), more concerned with shielding a growing corps of administrators from lawsuits and projecting an appearance of progressiveness than with actually achieving any meaningful progress. Once depoliticized, such a framework can easily be repoliticized back against members of marginalized and oppressed groups by those “that not only deny the humanity of those populations, but are actively organizing movements to physically deprive them of their existence” (Bray, 2017, p. 164). For example, Ben-Porath mentions the derivative slogan of “viewpoint diversity” (p. 137), which is now being used – often by those who also support book bans and legislation restricting academic freedom – to try to reintroduce long-discredited and reactionary views into the curriculum and welcome right-wing extremist organizations on our campuses.

This brings us to Ben-Porath’s framework of “inclusive freedom,” which is central to chapter 3. It was outlined in greater detail in her previous book, *Free Speech on Campus* (2017), in which she described

¹ Other scholars who address the appropriation of “free speech” as part of a right-wing political project include Ulrich Baer (2019) and Ralph Wilson & Isaac Kamola (2021).

² Olúfẹ́mí Táíwò (2022) examines the broader phenomenon of identity politics, a concept developed by “queer, Black feminist socialists” (p. 6), being co-opted by the elite in order to neutralize left-wing movements and protect their own interests.

it as “an approach ... that takes into account the necessity of protecting free speech ... while recognizing the equal necessity of making sure that all are included in the ensuing conversation” (p. 12). It does so by seeking to maintain the broadest possible boundaries for speech while acknowledging and mitigating the harms that it can cause, which are distributed unevenly among members of the community. In short, Ben-Porath attempts to reconcile and recast as mutually reinforcing the seemingly conflicting values of inclusion, which she attributes to the political left, and freedom, which she associates with the right.

Being so vital to Ben-Porath’s work, the notion of inclusive freedom deserves more attention than I can offer in this short review. Suffice it to make four brief comments. First, inclusive freedom as Ben-Porath describes it seems a largely *reactive* approach; it affirms the equal dignity and belonging of marginalized and oppressed community members principally in response to individual incidents and specific attacks, rather than challenging the systemic and institutional causes of their marginalization and oppression. A second and related point is that, while inclusive freedom appears to reconcile inclusion and freedom, in practice the inclusion of these community members may remain subordinate to the freedom of the powerful and the oppressive. This is most evident where Ben-Porath contrasts a “broad” commitment to protecting speech with “a thin, flexible commitment to an inclusive atmosphere” (p. 91). Consequently, Ben-Porath may overstate inclusive freedom’s ability to restore the dignitary safety of particular community members, and does not adequately address the myriad *other* negative effects of hateful and oppressive campus speech, both within and beyond the campus community. Finally, in all of Ben-Porath’s examples of planned speaking events featuring hateful or oppressive speech, those events ideally proceed as planned, or with only minor adjustments to the format. She frequently endorses efforts “to ensure that *all* can express their views” (p. 141, emphasis added), although she elsewhere calls for “a more nuanced approach” than “the inclusion of all ideological voices, including hate-based and bigoted ones” (p. 89). She adds that “[u]niversities can legitimately prohibit or punish some expression that is legally permissible,” such as expression “working against the institution’s mission” (p. 126). Still, Ben-Porath neither provides concrete examples of such expression nor suggests democratic avenues for deciding on or carrying out such prohibition or punishment.

In chapters 4 and 5, Ben-Porath proposes more tangible ways in which educational institutions can foster democratic habits, from the kindergarten to the university. I am sympathetic to her appeal to have schools contribute to the strengthening of democratic practices, and in our initial 2016 exchange with Callan, I went even further by concluding that educational institutions themselves should be democratized. It seems to me that the best way to encourage democratic practices in the broader social formation is to live those practices every day in our communities – in our homes, workplaces, and of course, in the Deweyan tradition, schools. And to me, speech in a democracy should contribute to deliberation on the distribution of our resources and on the conditions of our lives, predicated on a presumption of equality. This means that our education from an early age should include “learning to rule ourselves” (Turcotte-Summers, 2016, p. 94), and that important decisions about how our educational institutions are run should be made collectively by students, faculty, and staff – not by appointed board members that Ben-Porath notes “tend to skew conservative” (p. 136), or by the small but rapidly proliferating cadre of administrators that they, in turn, appoint. Decisions include who should be offered the privilege of a platform, and ideally how we should protect our communities from increasingly dangerous reactionary movements as well as from a ruling class that funds and profits from them.

Thankfully, Ben-Porath does not employ her phrase “cancel wars” anywhere but in her title, and denounces the wanton overuse of the term “cancel culture” against political adversaries. Indeed, “cancel culture” and “wokeism” may be seen as the latest moral panics in a well-financed right-wing culture war that began in the 1980s with assaults on “political correctness” and then “cultural Marxism.” Ben-Porath is at her strongest when she overcomes her reluctance to take sides and defends students from the culture warriors’ contradictory allegations that they are both fragile “snowflakes” and heavy-handed authoritarians. Her book may well convince those who find themselves to her political right to reject the ever more extreme rhetoric they are being fed and to renew their commitment to democracy. On the other hand, those of us to Ben-Porath’s left, and particularly those belonging to marginalized and

oppressed groups, would be wise to remember that professed commitments to free speech as a universal imperative are often disingenuous, and to reconsider her call for us to trust and make ourselves vulnerable to those who would oppress and *definitively* cancel us – in the most extreme eliminationist sense of the term. This, too, is “what politics and history can teach us” (p. 90).

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