

# *An Ameliorative Account of Cancel Culture*

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“Social norms are changing. I understand that, and I’ve heard what these women are saying. Politics to me has always been about making connections, but I will be more mindful about respecting personal space in the future.” – Joe Biden

## **1.1 Public figure**

*Public figure*: Public officials and those who have “pervasive power and influence in society.”

## **1.2 Problem**

The normative<sup>1</sup> landscape for public figures appears to be highly demanding.

Public figures may be:

- (a) subject to stricter normative expectations;
- (b) subject to more extensive systems of normative surveillance;
- (c) more exposed when social norms undergo change (more liable to be scrutinized for slow uptake and to be held accountable for having subscribed to a superseded norm); and
- (d) subject to enhanced penalties for social norm violations.

This provokes worries about *unfairness* and *hypocrisy*.

## **1.3 Cancel Culture**

When I talk of “cancellation,” I focus on one aspect of cancel culture and, in so doing, I employ an *ameliorative definition*.

*Cancellation*: the public expression of outrage to the end of a public figure’s removal from their position *as* a public figure.

Note: I am not concerned with other practices sometimes called “cancellation”, or with the “cancellation” of private figures.

Critics of cancel culture often allege that: it is *unfair* and *hypocritical* to impose and enforce a relatively more demanding system of social normativity for public figures. They argue that this undermines the legitimacy of cancel culture activity, including what I have termed *cancellation*.

## **1.4 Dialectic**

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<sup>1</sup> Social norms are informal rules that prescribe behavioral standards for different situations. They may be understood as “a sort of grammar for social interactions” (Bicchieri and McNally 2018, 24). Our appreciation of social norms is informed by our empirical and normative expectations respectively: expectations about what others would do in that situation, and expectations about what others would think that one should do. Social norms need not be grounded in people’s beliefs about absolute moral laws or the like (although they might be) – they are defined simply in terms of *expectations*.

I aim first to defuse the worries of unfairness and hypocrisy, and then to outline values and commitments that might justify cancellation.

### **2.1 Unfairness**

I look at two forms that the worry about unfairness takes – the first, general; the second, specific:

1. It's simply unfair to permit the imposition of higher standards, or a more demanding normative landscape, on some people and not others.
2. Temporality – it's somehow an unjustified form of moral luck to hold people accountable for things they did before entering public office. This worry about unfairness becomes especially acute when someone is retrospectively judged for having observed a defunct norm when it was in effect.

### **2.2 Response to Unfairness**

*General:* Distinctive normative expectations are priced into the status, “public figure”. As such, public figures cannot cry unfairness when held to those standards.

*Specific (temporality):* If it is fair for us to select potential leaders because they were before the normative curve, or because of their expressive function, it is *by parity* fair to reject them on the same grounds.

### **2.3 Hypocrisy**

The worry: How can we, the public, justifiably impose strict standards and penalties on public figures, where we do not subject ourselves or our peers to similar treatment?

### **2.4 Response to Hypocrisy**

Even if we are hypocritical, this does not favor reducing scrutiny or sanction of the behavior of our leaders. Being hypocritical does not make you incapable of identifying right or wrong action. Nor does it undermine standing to accuse and even participate in sanction for good social purposes.

## **3. Defense of the social function of cancellation**

We can view the emergence of cancel culture as a response to some of problems to which ostracism responded.

In a democracy, there is no presumed right to public status.

It is always inappropriate to view someone as a victim merely in virtue of the fact that they have had their public role stripped from them, because their public role is not something that they had a right to in the first place. It is something akin to a category mistake in a democracy to make claims of social deprivation, when the deprivation is of a status of power and social consequence.

A public figure in a democratic society is indeed one who exercises the sorts of influence sketched at the start of this paper, but they enjoy this status on the gift of the public, and because of that, a public figure is also someone who is, and should always be, subject to the prospect of cancellation.