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# Sigal R. Ben-Porath, "Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy"

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**Sigal R. Ben-Porath.** *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy.* University of Chicago Press 2023. 198 pp. \$20.00 USD (Paperback 9780226823805).

Sigal R. Ben-Porath's *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy* provides foundational ideas to help mitigate democratic backsliding and political polarization in the United States through a healthy balance of free speech and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through the creation of a shared epistemic understanding, Ben-Porath argues that educators, educational leaders, and students can develop practices and habits conducive to advancing the democratic mission. By identifying current challenges to this goal posed by culture war disputes, Ben-Porath offers educational researchers and practitioners an initial roadmap toward fostering constructive dialogues on controversial topics and restoring trust in education institutions.

The book's primary purpose is to provide an effective and sustainable alternative to more divisive and adversarial strategies to navigate free speech challenges such as cancel culture. Instead of these common culture war tactics, Ben-Porath advocates for focus to be placed on creating 'epistemic networks' that can make 'expanding and disseminating knowledge possible and can help rekindle the civic trust that is necessary for revitalizing democracy' (4).

The book contains five chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. Chapter one presents the problem of increasing polarization in US education and society and how it contributes to the weakening of democracy through tactics such as cancelling, exclusion, and censorship that limit the potential for common ground and further entrench ideological and identity-base divides (6-15). Ben-Porath argues that this phenomenon erodes individuals' trust in societal institutions and trust in each other, and that unlike previous points in history where tensions have been high, twenty-first century innovations in communications technology pose new challenges and risk fanning the flames (15-25).

Chapter two calls for fostering a 'shared epistemic foundation' (39) as a key initial step to work toward depolarization (26-39). This step comprises three components, the first of which involves on clearly differentiating facts and opinions (29-33). The second consists of restoring recognition of the value of expert knowledge to help with such differentiation (34-36). The third entails information sources recognized across the political spectrum that can be relied upon to regularly contribute facts for use in political discourse (36-39). While underlying political motivations behind reasoning and 'willful ignorance' (41) prevent these three components from sufficiently creating a shared epistemic foundation on their own, postsecondary institutions can create networks that can strengthen the three components and determine appropriate boundaries of discourse through collective dialogues and efforts (39-58).

Chapter three describes various culture war tactics, the common motivations behind them, and their impacts on polarization and democracy. These tactics largely revolve around debates over the boundaries of free and acceptable speech (59-60). One such tactic comprises individuals self-reporting that they have been harmed by particular speech, which Ben-Porath argues can be subjective and can be misused to censor and exclude those with different views and thus must 'be



weighed in consideration of multiple factors' (67) to ensure due process (61-68). Another tactic is cancelling, an attempt to exclude or remove platforms from voices perceived to be harmful (68-72), which is critiqued as having 'no due clear process norms and no sense of gradation' (71). Safe spaces, areas where some speech is prohibited to prevent harm, are given criteria to help determine which speech to accept: the speaker's identity, the audience's identity, and the speaker's intent (72-83). Regarding civility, a concept used to depict respectful behaviour, can be misused to censor some forms of expression and resistance (82-84), Ben-Porath argues that it should focus on providing, 'norms of exchange that suit a given context and that can be negotiated by participants within the boundaries of an institution's values' (84). The idea of the common good is presented to help rebuild trust (85-91), 'recognize the viability of diverse views' (86), 'and rehumanize ideological opponents' (86).

Chapter four outlines the challenges facing speech in US elementary and secondary education and provides ideas for improvement. Some challenges include the removal of civics education from curricula, court rulings restricting ways in which students can express their views and organize in collective actions, minors being viewed as less than full citizens, the censorship of student newspapers, and 'the expression or discussion of controversial views' (93) being banned in workplaces (92-95). To improve civic education, Ben-Porath advocates for more focus on media literacy, more free speech protections for educators and students, open discussion of controversial political topics, and allowing students to openly share views and consider views of others (96-110).

Chapter five offers ideas to support civic education at the postsecondary level, tying the concepts explored in the first three chapters together to premise these recommendations, notably challenges navigating free speech and equity, the need for a shared epistemic foundation, and the need to foster a sense of common good to enable dialogues across divides (111-123). An important point is raised that, similar to how students' free expression has been limited in elementary and secondary education as communicated in chapter four, students and educators are subject to considerable free speech restrictions imposed in large part by 'GOP-led state chambers' (124) that seek to expel students who protest as well as subject course syllabi to state review to evaluate 'perceived ideological bias' (124) and censor topics deemed too controversial (123-125, 136-137, 140-143). Ben Porath recommends that educational leaders not be too rash in reacting to culture war flare-ups, but to do a thorough investigation (126-127). Statements issued by postsecondary institutions reiterating their values and rejecting improper behaviour are viewed as potential ways to deescalate tense situations without having to resort to censorship or punitive measures and as being best written only 'for the most significant issues' (129) and by leaders whose jurisdiction is closest to the situation (127-132). Educators are encouraged to outline clear norms for discussion at the start of each course, welcome peer observation for suggestions on improving pedagogy, make efforts to anticipate controversial topics, determine which topics would be best to leave open for different views to emerge or to focus more on correcting falsehoods, do free writing sessions in the wake of stressful societal phenomena, and, in cases where discussions get heated, take some time aside in the following class to collectively evaluate different perspectives raised (133-134, 148-150). Regarding controversial speakers, it is recommended that in most cases choosing not to

attend, organizing a competing event at the same time, or allotting time for structured debate and critique could be beneficial tactics to communicate opposition, though protests may be warranted in extreme cases (135-136). Potential benefits of unpopular views are considered, including helping initiate dialogues between higher education and surrounding communities or across societal divides, and helping with developing counterarguments and identifying systemic problems that universities should work toward alleviating (137-140). Free speech observers that attend events upon request to advise on ensuring events are open and inclusive, organizations dedicated to creating spaces for discussions across political divides, and encouraging joint events between multiple student organizations that would not otherwise interact and may be at odds with each other are suggested as other ways to promote depolarization (145-147, 151-152).

The brief conclusion highlights the urgent issue of democratic erosion and the potential for education institutions to serve a pivotal role in depolarizing tensions, helping determine healthy free speech boundaries, and teaching free speech practices conducive to good democracy (153-157).

While the book presents some beneficial first steps to revitalize political discussions in ways more conducive to promoting good democratic habits, I cannot help but feel that more is needed. How can schools and universities be reasonably expected to promote democracy if they themselves largely do not operate democratically? I believe that education institutions must also look at what needs to change in their own decision-making structures and micropolitics to practice the democracy they want to see in the world. Students should have structural power in such decision-making that is consequential and not tokenized. Further research would also benefit from exploring the potential of democratic student government to contribute to the democratic mission and the potential impacts the decline in student democracy in the United States over the past half-century may have on perpetuating current culture war challenges.

More engagement with poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault who focus on the underlying power relations behind knowledge creation, even if refuting these thinkers, as well as engagement with different ways of knowing such as those held by Indigenous Peoples, would be beneficial in developing a comprehensive framework for a shared epistemic foundation. While Chapter five has examples of more tangible potential actions and activities that can be implemented for postsecondary education contexts, more ideas similar in level of tangibility would also be beneficial in chapter four to include more next steps for elementary and secondary education contexts.

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