

Twenty-One

FREE SPEECH, “CANCEL CULTURE” AND THE “WAR ON WOKE”

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Introduction

It seems to anyone even remotely paying attention to public debate in the UK that free speech is never far from the headlines. At the time of completing this chapter, BBC television sports presenter and former England striker, Gary Lineker had just been reinstated to his role presenting the football highlights programme *Match of the Day* after he had been suspended for allegedly transgressing BBC impartiality rules (BBC, nd). Lineker’s suspension followed complaints from Conservative MPs and sections of the right-wing media that one of his tweets, suggesting that the current government’s language concerning migrants seeking asylum in the UK was “not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s”, had breached broadcasting impartiality rules. Critics argued that in addition to the alleged breach, his language amounted to comparing the Conservative government’s proposed asylum policy to Hitler and the Nazis and was “beyond outrageous, [bearing] no relation to reality” (*Mail Online*, 2023).¹ Despite the fact that this was clearly not what Lineker had said, there was a significant media storm surrounding the story which, however, eventually saw the BBC backing down and reinstating Lineker within days.

During the course of Lineker’s suspension, other previous alleged impartiality breaches by BBC staff were highlighted by Lineker’s supporters in order to suggest the BBC was behaving at best disproportionately, at worst hypocritically (Plummer, 2023). For example, Sky Sports reporter Kaveh Solhekol pointed out that high-profile political journalist and presenter Andrew Neil had hosted numerous political programmes on the BBC whilst also serving as chairman of the right-wing *Spectator* magazine. (Worse than that, he’d also tweeted on highly political subjects such as Scottish independence and attacked Carol Cadwalladr). Other examples include high-profile BBC presenters Jeremy Clarkson, Alan Sugar and Tory peer Karren Brady frequently expressing their political views. Alan Sugar was a regular critic of the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and in 2018 he tweeted a mocked-up picture (later deleted) of the former Labour leader sitting alongside Adolf Hitler (Sky News, 2018). Likewise former BBC presenter Jeremy Clarkson, again no stranger to controversy, once said of striking public sector workers that he “would take them outside and execute them in front of their families” (Mulholland and Halliday, 2011). Though Ofcom

received over 31,000 complaints about this remark, Clarkson was not judged to have broken any rules and the BBC was not taken to task for its presenters’ clear partiality. The Lineker story of course not only highlights how fragile the BBC is in the face of political pressure² but also signals how the issue of free speech is often used as a potent though malleable political tool (Fish, 1994). This case highlights the hypocrisy of those on the right who decry “woke” culture for its censorious tendencies yet are distinctly reluctant to defend the free speech rights of a high-profile public figure who happens to espouse progressive views.

This chapter will argue that the current apparent anxiety around free speech, “cancel culture” and the hysteria around “wokeism” are indicative of attempts by conservatives and the right to feed and sustain a culture war for political ends. Rather than advancing free speech, the right perversely use the language of free speech to limit freedoms and push back against progressive sentiments and ideas. By confecting a panic around free speech, the right has sought to delegitimise opposition and stifle debate in ways that actually limit freedom of speech and other rights more generally, which is the direct opposite of what they claim to be doing. Such strategies stem from an armoury of distraction, outright lies and disinformation which sow the seeds of chaos and misinformation and feed the reactionary populist ferment.

Culture wars in context

The culture war which seems all too evident in society today encompasses many aspects of our lives. Whether this is in education, media, politics, gender and sexuality (Gordon, 2022; Donnelly, 2021; Kovalik, 2021), the culture war seems to be a constant feature of public debate. Yet of course this culture war is not a new phenomenon and there are features of the present era that have their roots in the recent past. The notion of culture war is not new. As Julian Petley (202?) has pointed out the term originates in Prussia in the 1870s and signifies attempts by von Bismarck to stifle the power of the Catholic Church. The notion of culture war was also later used by the Nazis to attack liberal and progressive values. More recently, the notion of culture war has been used to shift the emphasis away from the significance of class and economic conditions towards a politics of identity and morality which can then be amplified to gain significant traction (ibid.). The culture war can therefore be seen as an effective political strategy, albeit often a strategy of distraction and scapegoating. In a similar vein Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale (in this volume) highlights how concerted attempts and considerable financial clout by conservatives sought to counter so-called political correctness and the progressive gains made by cultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Advances in civil rights, feminism and gay rights, within the context of a broad-based identity-focussed politics, were seen by conservatives as eroding traditional values and ultimately contributing to the breakdown of American society. For conservatives, political correctness operated as what she calls “a category of deviance” .

Likewise in the UK at this time, the conservative backlash against these shifts, particularly in relation to the politics of gender and sexuality, was being mobilised, most famously by the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association and its formidable founder Mary Whitehouse. Whitehouse sought to halt the perceived moral decline in society by formulating “a stance of perpetual moral outrage” (Thompson, 2013: 4) and stressing the need to uphold traditional Christian family values. By the time of the emergence of the New Right in the UK under the government of Margaret Thatcher, a full-scale culture war was waging, as in the United States, against progressive or “politically correct” attitudes. Just as in the US case, the response to this was to focus on sites where these movements and ideas seemed most

prominent. These were mainly the media, university campuses and Labour-controlled local councils, all of which were targeted across the right-wing press. As James Curran has noted, “the late 1970s and 1980s marked a time when a number of groups who were discriminated against or marginalised entered politics with growing effectiveness” (2019: 8) and such gains were seen as a direct challenge to the status quo. The right’s attack on political correctness is therefore central to their attempt to contain progressive ideas and movements. This of course made its way into real-world politics and impacted people’s lives directly. During the 1980s this was arguably most apparent via the 1988 Local Government Act, Section 28 of which sought to prevent discussion, or as the government saw it, the “promotion”, of homosexuality in schools and other publicly funded services.³ In addition to being an assault on gay identity, Section 28 was also a political device to disempower local government, particularly those troublesome left-wing local authorities to which the Conservative administrations under Mrs Thatcher were so ideologically opposed. Reducing funding and changing the rules on how local authorities could spend taxpayers’ money undermined their ability to target areas of significant need – social, youth and community services, unemployment support and social housing. This effectively neutered their political power as central government reigned in financial control over local government across the decade.⁴ As today, the public debate about political correctness – which has now been reframed as cancel culture – was carried out in the pages of the right-wing national press (Curran et al., 2019). The legacy of this era continues, with universities often front and centre.

Universities and the “crisis of free speech”

In February 2021 the then education secretary Gavin Williamson announced proposals which he argued were intended to strengthen free speech at UK universities citing the

rise of intolerance and ‘cancel culture’ upon our campuses [as] one that directly affects individuals and their livelihoods. Students have been expelled from their courses, academics fired and others who have been forced to live under the threat of violence.

(Department for Education, 2021: 5)

While emphasising the alleged chilling effect of these factors on free speech and academic freedom on university campuses, the proposals also cited research⁵ as evidence of the need to clamp down on universities, students and academics accused of stifling freedom of speech. Recent high-profile controversies⁶ have also contributed to the perception that freedom of speech within universities is under threat from so-called “woke” culture (Cammaerts, 2022) and “snowflake sensitivities” (Haslam-Ormerod, 2019). Such phrases, habitually used by the right, highlight how the current debate about free speech on campus should be framed within a broader discussion about the apparent erosion of free speech in wider society.

A 2018 study, conducted by YouGov, commissioned by *Prospect* magazine (Clark, 2018) suggested that 48% of British voters thought that “there are many important issues these days where people are not allowed to say what they think”. A total of 67%, a two-to-one majority of the people polled, reject the idea that more care is needed when it comes to language. The view expressed was that far too many people are too easily offended these days, compared to the past, and there appears to be some concern that people feel less able to freely say what they think than they could previously. In other words, there’s an apparent perception that freedom of speech is being “chilled”. A study conducted by Jonathan Grant for the

Policy Institute at Kings College London suggested that university students are broadly in agreement with the public about the value of freedom of expression. However, rather than being worried about freedom of expression being under threat on campus, students surveyed were more concerned about freedom of expression in wider society, as most students were broadly supportive of how their university supports freedom of expression on campus. The study also indicates that 81% of students think that freedom of expression is more important than ever, but 86% are specifically concerned that social media are enabling people to express intolerant views (this apparently mirrors trends in the general population) according to this report (Grant et al., 2019).

A more recent study by the Policy Institute at Kings (Duffy, 2022) surveyed students and members of the public on the topic and showed that there is a growing sense that freedom of speech is under threat at universities, even though a majority of students (59%) think that free speech is either not very threatened or not threatened at all. However, almost half (49%) of students and 56% of the public feel that universities are becoming less tolerant. This is not surprising as the report’s authors rightly highlight that the broader context of this debate has seen increased media coverage, thereby amplifying the issue, irrespective of the veracity of the media reports themselves (Duffy and Malcolm, 2022). It is important to emphasise that by exaggerating the free speech crisis in universities, the right also provide justification for greater levels of official interference in higher education. This has been done principally via the Office for Students and cheerleaders in the right-wing press but also, in recent years, via the self-styled guardians of free speech – the Free Speech Union.⁷

The Free Speech Union

Established by Toby Young in 2019, The Free Speech Union (FSU) describes itself as a “non-partisan, mass membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members” (FSU, nd). Its website states that “free speech is currently under assault across the Anglosphere, particularly in those areas where it matters most, such as schools, universities, the arts, the entertainment industry and the media” (ibid.). Though its advisory board⁸ is extensive, it is not politically diverse and, searching through the media items archived on the FSU’s website, it does not take long to see that the overwhelming political slant of the organisation is deeply conservative. For example, an article archived on its website⁹ and published by *The National* newspaper proclaims: “Ex-Brexit Party candidate in fight against ‘education indoctrination’” (Robertson, 2023). Another highlights a petition (Young, 2023) set up by the FSU demanding that ITV not sack *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* presenter Jeremy Clarkson, who had written an article in the *Sun* newspaper noting that “he was dreaming of the day when (Megan Markle) is made to parade naked through the streets of every town in Britain while the crowds chant, ‘Shame!’ and throw lumps of excrement at her”. Though the newspaper apologised (Badshah, 2022), the FSU had indicated that the campaign to sack Clarkson from his ITV show was disproportionate and an example of “cancel culture at its most brutal” (Young, 2023). Another indicator of the FSU’s right-wing mind-set is of course the aforementioned Lineker affair, where the FSU failed to come out and support the presenter as fulsomely as it had done in the case of Clarkson, with Young stating on GB News¹⁰ that he “wasn’t sure it’s free speech issue, yet” given that Lineker hadn’t been fired from his job at the BBC. Clearly the free speech rights of liberals are not as in need of defending as those on the right.

One of the more complex and prominent controversies that the FSU has passed judgement on is the ongoing and sometimes quite vitriolic debate concerning trans rights and accusations of transphobia. The debate gained traction when the author J. K. Rowling tweeted: “If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives” (Rowling, 2020). Rowling’s statement was in response to an online article (Sommer et al., 2020) that referred to “people who menstruate”, apparently indicating her concern that the status of womanhood as a feature of biological sex was being eroded by trans women who, though born male, were now seeking to use the term “woman” to describe their identity. In a subsequent article on her website (Rowling, 2020b), she added context to and further explanation of her perspective but noted that since her original tweet, she had been “cancelled” numerous times and subject to vitriolic and hateful attacks on Twitter. The resulting cacophony on Twitter and across the legacy media saw the discussion broaden into debates about trans identity and the meaning of the word “woman”. Though flagged as a free speech issue by the FSU and others, the extensive discussion online and within the broader public sphere on this issue clearly demonstrates that the debate around trans rights is ongoing and not being shut down as the FSU suggests, although it is certainly characterised by a good deal of vitriol and threatening discourses .

While the nuances of the trans debate are beyond the scope of this chapter, like many free speech debates, the debate itself revolves around language and its power to legitimise or validate identity. While the FSU might feel empowered to wade into any controversy it sees as furthering its cause, care needs to be taken not to disempower and silence those who historically have struggled to have a voice. As Evan Smith (2020) has powerfully argued with reference to “no-platforming” in universities, debates such as these demonstrate the shifting focus of no-platforming as a form of political activism as they highlight the flux and mutability of student politics and the debates and controversies therein. It is real-world politics playing out within student unions and on campuses, with students deciding for themselves the parameters of the debate. Smith signals the ways in which student activism, and “no-platforming” as a part of that activism, reflects the shifting cultural and social realities of life. What is ironic about those free speech fundamentalists who seem to be in such a panic is that they fail to acknowledge the dynamics of culture and the fact that priorities and concerns change in response to political and societal forces. One of the successes of student activism over the last 40 years has been its ability to respond to this shift and to utilise no-platforming, sometimes in controversial circumstances, to reflect the messy complexity of student political life. For example, in 2020, the University of Leeds reversed a policy in response to a petition organised by the Student LGBT Trans Welfare Officer that was signed by over 4,000 students. The basis of the petition was that “when creating the draft of the trans equity policy, the University’s Equity Policy Unit didn’t consult with any trans staff or students on their proposed changes” (Minas, 2020). The decision to reverse the policy was as a result of the sorts of activism that Smith is referring to in his book. Thankfully student politics is alive and well and I’d suggest that the best people to decide who should speak at student union events are the student body themselves, and though this can be a messy and fraught process, it is only right that the students make those decisions and do not bow to pressure from the likes of the FSU or the Office for Students.

Another controversy that has recently made the culture war headlines and provoked the ire of the FSU¹¹ was the decision by the publishers of Roald Dahl’s children’s books to make changes to some of his language to reflect societal shifts in language. Puffin and the

Roald Dahl Story Company, which is owned by Netflix which recently acquired the author’s catalogue, have come under fire for making so-called “sensitivity changes” to some of the authors works. Salman Rushdie called this editing “absurd censorship” in response to a @PENAmerica tweet expressing “alarm” at the news of “hundreds of changes” to Dahl’s works (Hassan, 2023), and the current prime minister Rishi Sunak criticised the changes to some of the texts as attacks on freedom of speech (Rawlinson et al., 2023). Some of the more hysterical responses to the changes across the Twittersphere included many references to George Orwell’s *1984* and Big Brother’s imperative to continuously rewrite history. Those decrying this as an attack on free speech, however, seem unable to acknowledge how literature sometimes evolves to reflect societal shifts and how texts change. More pertinently, it is the maximisation of profit in the wake of the Netflix buy-up, which is most likely to be the rationale for the changes.¹² As the comedian and *Observer* columnist David Mitchell noted, Puffin had indicated that they had made changes to the books so that they can be continued to be enjoyed, but of course the changes were “commercially ruthless” given that

the major disadvantage that dead authors’ work previously suffered – the fact that it dates – has been removed. [...] The huge plus of brand recognition that famous dead authors’ estates enjoy now has no compensatory downside. On the contrary, they can morph to suit the mores of any era – so much more accommodating to market forces than those pesky living authors with their obstructive artistic concerns.

(Mitchell, 2023)

In the wake of the controversy, the publishers agreed to keep the original versions in print in addition to the changed versions, thereby only emphasising Mitchell’s point about profit maximisation. Despite these more economically pragmatic drivers, the sensitivities of those quick to cry “censorship” never seem to miss an opportunity to whip up anxiety about “cancel culture” and to poison the well of rational discussion in their never-ending crusade. Never shy of wading into the fray, Young told *Breitbart* that “Puffin needs to go further and stick a banner on the woke versions of the book that says ‘CENSORED’ in massive letters” (Zindulka, 2023).

Legitimation crisis and the “cultural backlash”

The aforementioned culture war against socially liberal and egalitarian social change has of course not happened in a vacuum. Complex historical transformations have occurred in society that have helped to drive the culture war and the apparent anxieties around freedom of speech today. Though there are obvious reactionary responses from conservatives to these gradual social and cultural shifts, their existence does not necessarily explain the phenomenon. For that we need to look at the factors that have enabled these reactionary tendencies to assume a mainstream presence in both political discourse and sections of the media and to provide its adherents with a vocabulary and framework through which to articulate their concerns (Mondon and Winter, 2020). In doing so it is necessary to explore a combination of developments that have provided fertile ground for such reactionary movements – the deep crisis in political legitimacy and what Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019) term the “cultural backlash”.

Studies concerning the decline in the legitimacy of political and public institutions are not new (Habermas, 1973; Buchanan, 2002; Hay, 2007; Van Ham et al., 2017; Studebaker,

2022). However, as Colin Hay (2007) has signalled, recent domestic and global sources of depoliticisation, largely driven by neoliberalism, have provided fertile soil for widespread disillusion in political institutions. Recent years have also seen the emergence of “post-truth” (McIntyre, 2018) in which fake news, lies, denialism and political spin are commonplace and which further undermine faith in political institutions and actors. In examining the seeds of post-truth, Moustafa Bayoumi (2023) has suggested that the Iraq war of 2003 was pivotal in degrading our faith in politics and ushered in an era where “the apparatus of lying became institutionalised in our government and abetted by our media”. He goes on to note that before Kellyanne Conway’s “alternative facts”¹³ and the use of the term “fake news” by Trump and his allies, “we were already living in a post-truth world, one created in part by an established media willing and able to amplify government lies”. The present crisis of legitimacy, which arguably has its roots in Bush and Blair’s “war on terror”, has certainly been magnified in the wake of the economic impact of over ten years of economic austerity, Brexit and failures in government to effectively manage the Covid-19 pandemic. Such policy failures and attempts to shift the blame for social problems – onto migrants and other minorities, for example – have no doubt led to a more reactionary populist disposition amongst citizens of advanced democracies such as the UK (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Fuelled by libertarian think-tanks funded by dark money (Mureithi, 2022), the right-wing media and high-profile “culture warriors” have stoked the fires of the culture war for political ends, to distract and disorientate us, both across the mainstream media and online as well as within the corridors of power.

In combination with the legitimisation crisis exacerbated by the post-truth era, the origins of the contemporary culture war can also be traced to the cultural backlash which has given rise to a form of populist rhetoric which has sought to further “corrode faith in the legitimate authority of elected representatives in liberal democracies”. Moreover, it “is the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric which we regard as potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 6). The cultural backlash thesis draws from an extensive body of empirical studies to highlight how long-term changes in post-industrial societies have wrought changes in culture and politics that have destabilised the relative certainty of the post-war settlement in these societies. The authors cite factors such as a growth in prosperity, increased access to college education, urbanisation and shifts in the politics of gender and sexuality as contributing to a gradual shift in social values (ibid.: 15). They suggest that this “silent revolution” towards more socially liberal attitudes and values has brought about a reaction or backlash amongst members of those societies who retain socially conservative values and that “these groups are therefore most likely to feel that they have become estranged from the silent revolution in social and moral values, left behind by cultural tides that they deeply reject” (ibid.: 16). Such movements, the authors suggest, are evident in a particular form of populist politics which seeks to build on social crises and to identify scapegoats who are positioned as responsible for social conservatives’ sense of dislocation and turmoil.

“Cancel culture” provides one such focus for their ire, and in this respect Norris (2021) draws on the work of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) to assert that such an idea tends to emerge from the perception that one’s moral and political views are being challenged or are under threat from an alternative ideological perspective. Norris notes that in liberal democratic societies, the apparent increased perception of “cancel culture” tends to be made by those on the right of the political spectrum who perceive their values as being eroded by “woke” sensibilities and worldviews. In making this argument, Norris highlight a liberal/left

political prominence within the academy in liberal democratic societies, which has intensified the perception that universities and other public institutions are attempting to “cancel” or silence opposing political viewpoints. Norris goes on to suggest that in more conservative societies, where extremes in material well-being are more prominent, it is left-leaning academics who see themselves under threat of cancellation by the dominant conservative social mores and conventions, noting that “perceptions of being ‘silenced’ in academia will depend primarily upon whether individual scholars hold moral values which are congruent with the group, community or society” (2021: 145).

Viewed through this prism, the so-called “war on woke” and attacks on “cancel culture” can be seen as a reaction against, and resistance to, longer-term societal trends towards socially progressive values. The backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement and other socially progressive drives which seek to highlight and address longstanding and deeply entrenched inequalities or social injustices can therefore be seen as an attempt by conservatives to limit these strategies of repair. In other words, the current right-wing backlash against “woke” culture is part of a continuum of reactionary moments, dating back to the 1970s by means of which the right seeks to hold on to traditional values which it sees as both threatened and the bedrock of society.

As we have seen, rather than promoting freedom of expression, this reactionary call to arms tends to act to silence those who might hold contrary views by seeking to delegitimise the basis upon which the original complaints are made. Cries of “censorship” are selective and geared towards the interests of those that already have a significant voice. It is the reactionary nature of these claims of “cancel culture” that I argue are the real danger to freedom of expression because these claims themselves, and those who make them, are actively engaged in a process of silencing. This they do by using their confected victimhood to attack the real victims of censorship in our society, namely those without adequate access to the dominant means of expression.

Conclusion: The left’s response

This chapter has sought to highlight how the panic around the erosion of free speech and “cancel culture” is largely a manufactured “crisis” which not only plays to reactionary impulses and populist politics but has also gained traction in the wake of a deeper crisis of legitimacy and cultural backlash in recent years. But what strategies might progressives adopt in order to counter this crisis? Arguably, part of the reason these sentiments have gained traction is that the left has been unable to provide an alternative prism through which to address the deeper structural transformations in society. Its apparent failure to defend the notion of freedom of speech is in part because of its inability to build a coherent alternative narrative to counter the framing of the culture war by the right. As US academic Jodi Dean (2009) has suggested, one of the key successes of the right is that it has successfully used the very language of liberation and freedom that the left has employed over the last 40 or so years but has done so *against* left-wing and progressive ideas in society. The right has apparently taken ownership of discussions about inequality and poverty, about representation, about the environment, about homophobia and racism. The free speech panic is just one manifestation of this, which also serves to distract and disorientate publics from building responses to the status quo. Ronan Burtenshaw (2021) has argued that the left has been far too slow to respond to this discursive power grab by the right, which has adopted “progressive” lan-

guage and used it to effectively delegitimise progressive ideas.¹⁴ He notes sarcastically that it's interesting that the anxiety about the erosion of free speech doesn't include discussions of matters such as the UK libel laws, which prohibit people from speaking truth to power as most people generally do not have the financial resources to do so. It doesn't address the fact that large corporations can monitor their employees' social media accounts in case they criticise their working conditions. In other words, as I have suggested, the right is highly selective in its choice of targets in that it carefully avoids topics which ultimately pose a challenge to the status quo.

Though there are genuine concerns about free speech in society being eroded and undermined, especially given the overzealous enforcement of the new Public Order Act 2023 during the 2023 coronation (Weaver, 2023) and against climate change protestors, the challenge for the left is not only to highlight such incursions into free speech but also point out the hypocrisy around free speech, particularly with regards to the way in which the culture war crisis has largely been confected by the right for political ends. There are many oppressed constituencies in society whose freedom to express their opinions and experiences is limited and stifled, and always have been, and if anyone's freedom of expression *is* being curtailed, it is those constituencies facing the realities of neoliberalism and the weakening of the right to protest and stand up for their democratic rights. Despite claims by the right that we inhabit a "snowflake" culture, continued attacks on women, domestic violence, racism, homophobia and intolerance suggest that the battle is still not won. Questions of free speech are questions about power, who has it and how they use it. The argument of this chapter is that the present culture war, like those before it, signals the power of a resurgent right to reframe the parameters of the debate about free speech and to do so overwhelmingly on their terms and in their interests. By delegitimising their opponents and by ascribing to them a derogatory status as moaners, and "woke", "politically correct" censors, they are themselves asserting their power to silence those with whom they disagree. The challenge for progressives is to develop a positive and meaningful articulation of freedom of expression that is sufficiently robust so as to withstand assault from the right.¹⁵

Notes

- 1 In addition to the right-wing media, members of the Conservative party and senior members of the opposition Labour party initially indicated that Lineker "had gone too far" in criticising the government in this way. However, shortly afterwards, the Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer recognised the political capital of this story and changed his view, highlighting the close relationship between the current government and the senior management of the BBC.
- 2 For example, during the Lineker furore emails also came to light indicating that senior management at the BBC had asked correspondents to avoid using the term "lockdown" and to "turn up the scepticism" on Labour's plans during the pandemic (Mason and Elgot, 2023).
- 3 Such as citizens advice centres, youth facilities and public libraries.
- 4 For a fuller discussion of this era see Curran, et al. (2019).
- 5 A poll of 505 university undergraduate students undertaken by the right-wing think-tank Policy Exchange which is one of the leading players in the "culture war" in the UK (Simonson and Kaufman, 2019; see also Griffin, 2023).
- 6 For example Kathleen Stock's resignation from Sussex University following student protests and hostility from some of her colleagues in response to her views on biological sex and transgender rights (Adams, 2021); the withdrawal of Selina Todd's invitation to speak at the Oxford International Women's Festival following pressure from trans rights activists (BBC, 2020); and

- Social Work student Felix Ngole’s expulsion from his postgraduate degree for expressing his views on homosexuality online (BBC, 2019).
- 7 It is also briefly worth mentioning Academics for Academic Freedom (AFAF) which is one of many splinter organisations to emerge from the right-wing online publication *Spiked* whose affiliates and contributors are heavily invested in the “culture war” (see Smith, 2020a; Bloomfield and Edgar, 2022). AFAF’s website publishes a “Banned” list which purports to provide a listing of those “banned from speaking at universities, or faced campaigns to silence them, or sack them for their views”. Many of the examples, however, highlight that speakers were not in fact “banned” but faced opposition or criticism, which is of course ironic. Other examples of “censorship” often link to familiar bastions of the “culture war” such as *The Telegraph*, “*UnHerd*” and of course *Spiked* itself (see <https://www.afaf.org.uk/the-banned-list/>).
 - 8 Amongst its advisory council are Baroness Claire Fox, of the Institute of Ideas, a libertarian think-tank aligned with *Spiked*; Professor David Starkey, who was dropped by his publisher Harper Collins and asked to resign his honorary fellowship at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge for saying in an interview that “slavery was not genocide, otherwise there wouldn’t be so many damn blacks in Africa or in Britain would there?” (Flood, 2020); right-wing columnist Julia Hartley-Brewer, presenter of Talk Radio (parent company – Wireless Group owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News UK); author and *Spectator* columnist Lionel Shriver; and Paul Staines of the *Guido Fawkes* website are amongst some of the most high-profile members.
 - 9 <https://freespeechunion.org/media/page/2/>.
 - 10 The clip is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrGn3IInNmw>.
 - 11 See <https://freespeechunion.org/weekly-news-round-up-102/>.
 - 12 As a number of other contributors to this volume have noted, market censorship is a real yet often ignored constraint on freedom of expression.
 - 13 Conway was a former Senior Counsellor in the Trump administration. See “Kellyanne Conway denies Trump press secretary lied: ‘He offered alternative facts’” *Guardian*, January 22 2017, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2017/jan/22/kellyanne-conway-trump-press-secretary-alternative-facts-video>.
 - 14 See also Kovalik (2021).
 - 15 I’d like to thank Julie Firmstone and Julian Petley for their comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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