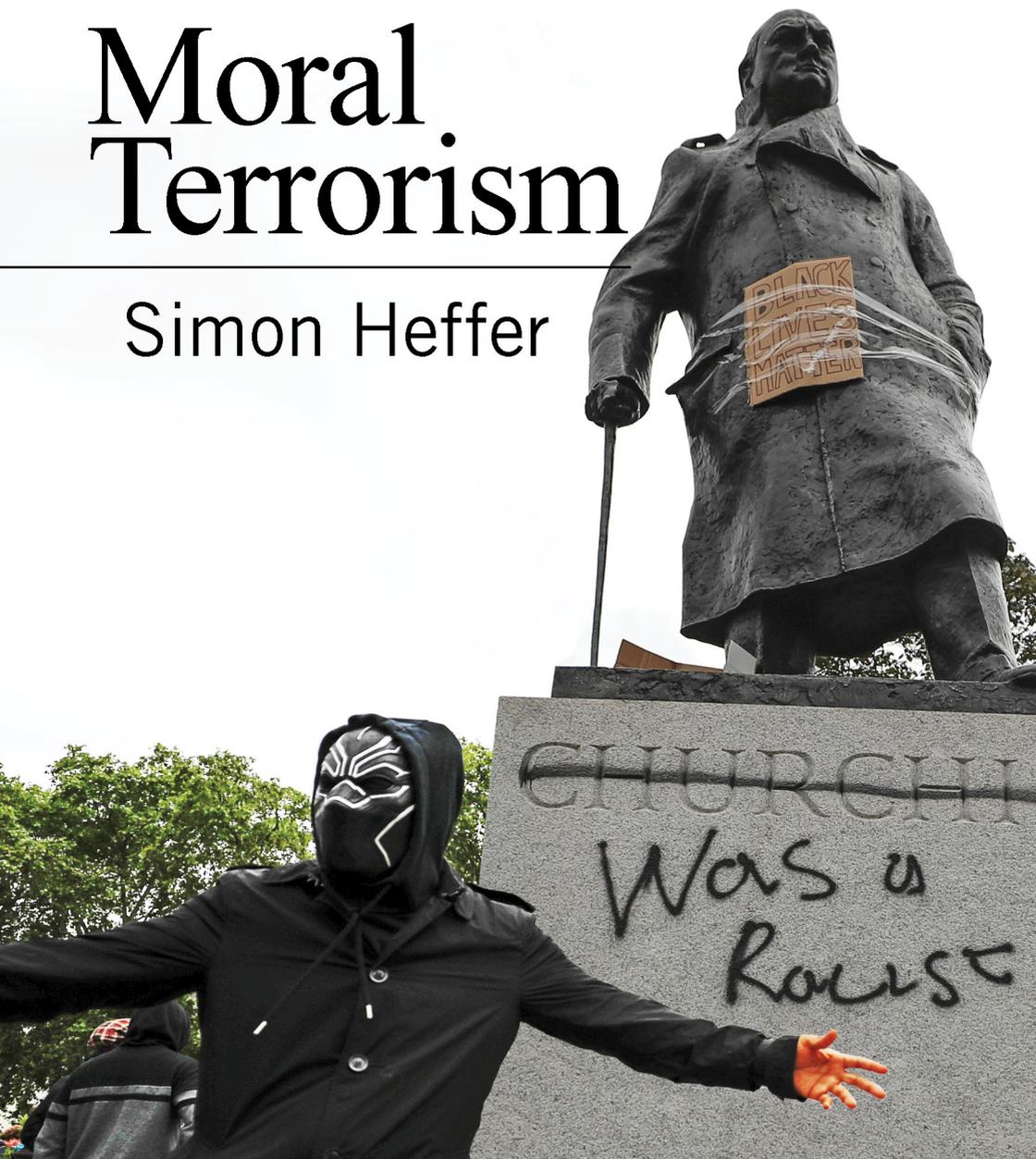


THE CENTRE FOR
INDEPENDENT
STUDIES

Moral Terrorism

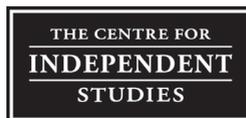
Simon Heffer



Moral Terrorism

Simon Heffer

CIS Occasional Paper 174



2020

Published July 2020
by the Centre for Independent Studies Limited
Level 1, 131 Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: cis.org.au

Views expressed in the publications of The Centre for Independent Studies are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, advisers, directors, or officers.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

Moral Terrorism

We find ourselves living in an age when a small but highly vocal, and zealous, minority are availing themselves of the power of social media, and of sections of the printed press, to seek to force their opinions and attitudes on everyone else. In normal circumstances, this would simply be tedious: if, say, the public were being pressured to watch a particular television channel, or buy a certain brand of coffee. In our society we are conditioned to such things; but we are less conditioned to being told we should not, for whatever reason, watch a certain channel, or should boycott a certain brand of coffee. Mature and advanced societies — liberal societies — take an attitude of ‘live and let live’ in such matters. It is one thing to be an advocate for your own interests; quite another to seek to attack, undermine and destroy someone else’s. Yet that is what the so-called ‘cancel culture’ seeks to achieve; and it is why the present circumstances of discourse are far from normal. In the pretence of wishing to shield vulnerable people from words that might wound or cause offence, they seek to render others terrified to utter the words at all.

Most of us have gone through our lives being offended by something or other from time to time, and occasionally the offence is as hurtful as a physical injury. Most of us learn to live with it, not least because we understand the best way to silence our critics is to prove them wrong. We have also learned the important distinction between things we find offensive, and things that appear to be incitements to promote hatred or harm against another person or group of people. There is now a fashion among some — predominantly younger — people that there is in fact no

distinction between these two things; that any statement with which they disagree, particularly if it can be construed as offensive to members of any interest group that they have decided to include in their coalition of opinion, is to be regarded as shameful. Furthermore, the person who might have uttered or broadcast it needs to be treated with ferocity and punished as a pariah. An apology is seldom considered sufficient to rectify the matter. A full, humiliating retraction and long-term act of contrition might be enough to deflect the venom of the accusers from the accused; but the stain on the accused cannot, in their view, be eradicated. Maoism believed something similar. If one seeks evidence of the Maoist influence on this movement, Youtube is now littered with videos by young ‘influencers’ and minor celebrities grovelling in pitiful apology for what this mob now tells them were their past, usually inadvertent, transgressions.

The cancel culture focuses on a distinct sort of brand: the individual. It looks particularly at people who rely on the endorsement of the public for their livelihood — writers, actors, musicians and politicians — and polices their statements and their views. If those public figures say or profess something the zealots disapprove of, they create a mob through social media to secure the withdrawal of public support from that person. Writers stop selling books; actors get no roles; musicians fail to sell tickets for their gigs; politicians lose votes — or at least that is the intention. Even if much of the public, not sharing the prejudices of the zealots, refuses to boycott those they target, the targets have to endure vilification and, sometimes, threats. It is ironic that the zealots normally turn on their targets because the targets are deemed to have said something hurtful or offensive to a particular group; for they react by recruiting an army to hurt and offend the targets in return.

This amounts to nothing less than an international campaign to erode freedom of speech; a necessary precursor to the success of all extremists. It seeks not simply to create a certain orthodoxy of view, but to punish those who do not subscribe to that orthodoxy, even to the point of seeking to deny them a livelihood. In most cases there is

a silent majority who take no part either in these campaigns or in the campaigns that attempt to counter them. The existence of that silent majority reinforces the point that those seeking to impose the new orthodoxy speak mainly for themselves; but that takes no account of the moral danger they present by so aggressively advocating the view that some opinions — the opinions they choose to proscribe — cannot be aired, or discussed.

In July, as the debate about the ‘cancel culture’ continued, British singer and left-wing activist Billy Bragg took issue with what many in his country consider to be one of their beacons of political correctness: the BBC. In 2017, a statue of George Orwell was erected outside the BBC’s London headquarters, New Broadcasting House. Engraved in the stone in the wall behind it are some of Orwell’s words: “If Liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they don’t want to hear.” He once broadcast for the BBC, and understood the toxic effects of totalitarianism; a political creed in which the deprivation of liberty of expression is an essential component.

But in the three short years since the inscription was engraved on the BBC’s wall, the liberal firmament has undergone a schism on the question of liberty of expression. For some of its members, free speech has become relatively dispensable. Mr Bragg said that seeing the BBC inscription made him “cringe”. He called Orwell’s pronouncement “a demand for licence”, and claimed that the young generation that is at the forefront of the ‘cancel culture’ “prioritise accountability over free speech”. Mr Bragg is neither stupid nor naïve, and he also claims that Orwell is the English writer whom he admires most; which makes it all the more remarkable that he should express the view that there should be such a restraint on free speech as is envisaged by his statement.

Mr Bragg sought to qualify his remarkable opinion. “Although free speech remains the fundamental bedrock of a free society, for everyone to enjoy the benefits of freedom, liberty needs to be tempered by two further dimensions: equality and accountability.” Sadly, his intellect seems insufficiently subtle to see the contradiction in that statement: speech whose freedom is ‘tempered’ by equality and accountability is unlikely to

be free at all. If everyone has freedom of speech, then that is an element of equality; but Mr Bragg made no attempt to give a definition of equality, which most would regard as having to include the right to free expression for everyone. And the normal accountability that has always gone with freedom of speech in a free society is an accountability to the rest of that society; every member of which enjoys the same right to freedom of speech as those with whom they disagree. What Mr Bragg is in fact defending — though he would doubtless sincerely profess he intended the opposite — is the right of one group of people in a society to dictate, principally by intimidation, what opinions can or cannot be expressed. No society that tolerates such conduct can even pretend to be free. But Mr Bragg had more to say.

“Without equality”, which he still fails to define, or to recognise must include absolute liberty of expression, “those in power will use their freedom of expression to abuse and marginalise others. Without accountability, liberty can mutate into the most dangerous of all freedoms — impunity.” Who, also, does he consider to be ‘in power’? If he refers in the conventional sense to those elected to exercise power, then they have the accountability of being questioned in their tribunals — be it parliament, an assembly or council chamber — and they know to exercise their freedom of speech accordingly. If he is simply referring to non-elected public figures — the writers, actors, musicians mentioned earlier — then he is referring to the power of influence that comes with celebrity. The ideas or views expressed by such people are, in a free society, subjected to the power of debate. If their opponents lose that debate, it will be the opponents who have to retreat; if the public figures lose it, they will learn to be more careful before they open their mouths again. That makes the idea of impunity absurd: there have always been consequences of deploying freedom of speech unwisely, even if they are only shame and ridicule. The key point is to have the debate: and not allow a small group of zealots to try to ensure the debate can’t happen. For if they do, again, all pretence to a country having a free society become a nonsense.

In the mid-1990s, the British Labour party, then in opposition and led by Tony Blair, was determined to prove its anti-racist credentials. The then shadow home secretary, Jack Straw, said he proposed to make ‘holocaust denial’ a crime. He was rounded on for proposing this, not

least by British Jews. They argued it was not merely a denial of freedom of speech, but a denial of freedom of speech that would encourage the very anti-semitism it sought to eliminate. But another calculation in Jewish opposition to the proposed law was that the wealth of evidence of Hitler's genocide of the Jews — the newsreel footage, the copious witness statements, the evidence given even by the guilty at post-war trials, and the fact that many people were still alive whom the Nazis had tried to kill — would ensure anyone who tried to argue that the genocide, and all its machinery, were figments of the imagination would be swamped by ridicule and quickly exposed as a charlatan. The law was not passed. When in 2019 the British Labour party — under the Marxist Jeremy Corbyn — ran in an election campaign preceded by months of Labour activists' anti-semitic rhetoric, the party was thrashed at the polls. It proved that, in a free society, you can use your liberty of expression to make foul assertions about certain groups of people; but it will get you nowhere.

II

Perhaps had the fightback against these recent attempts to limit free speech been launched by the ‘usual suspects’ on the conservative wing of discourse, it would have struggled. However, in the form of a letter to *Harper’s* magazine in early July, it was led by figures with impeccable liberal credentials: notably Sir Salman Rushdie, who spent much of the 1980s railing against what he perceived to be the iniquities of Thatcherism, before an Iranian government gave him a lesson in what iniquitous rule really looks like; and JK Rowling, who made a fortune out of her *Harry Potter* novels, and made significant donations to Britain’s Labour party. Miss Rowling is also a noted philanthropist who has given away a sizeable chunk of her earnings, an act that has failed to impress those who have gone after her for what they unilaterally define as her incorrect thinking on people who choose to change their gender. The letter was signed by 150 other people, many of them with international reputations.

Miss Rowling wrote a blog post in June that suggested gender was determined by biology, rather than being a matter of choice. She joined the blacklist of the cancel culture; deemed beyond the pale and deserving of being reviled and her work shunned. The predominantly young people who attacked her decided to make her a non-person, and to challenge those associated with her to repudiate her. In the age of Twitter, Facebook and other social media, generating a mindless mob to round on somebody requires little effort beyond the skills of rabble-rousing. Fan sites closed down. The former child actors who also made fortunes starring in the films of her books denounced her. They made it clear that Miss Rowling was not entitled to have an opinion on transgender people unless it was the same as theirs, which was not to allow any debate on the practice of changing gender at all. To most people, the views of Daniel Radcliffe or Emma Watson on such matters are about as significant as those of their domestic pets. However,

thanks presumably to the failings of the education system, many people did find their views valuable and convincing, and they gave impetus to the campaign against Miss Rowling for expressing what most people felt, and still feel, was a legitimate, lawful opinion.

But Miss Rowling fought back, signing the letter to Harper's magazine that attacked the "restriction of debate", the "vogue for public shaming and ostracism" and the "blinding moral certainty" of those who deployed these tactics. The letter also argued that "the free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted." The signatories, many of them writers in various genres, are all too aware that if the mob decides to cancel them, their livelihoods are effectively over. To most people who choose the career of writer, whether of fiction or non-fiction, the view of Lionel Shriver, expressed in her recent Centre for Independent Studies lecture — "I'll write what I damn well please" — has to be the foundation of what they do. Otherwise they lack the basic necessity of any writer, which is a commitment to the search for the truth.

But to many in England, the new wave of illiberal intolerance of the views of others dates back to 2017, when the Revd Professor Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford, a Fellow of Christ Church College and one of the country's most distinguished theologians, wrote an op-ed article in *The Times* of London about the British Empire. He was reviewing the work of Bruce Gilley, of Portland State University in the United States, and praised him for his "courageous call for a balanced reappraisal of the colonial past." To compound what would quickly come to be considered Prof Biggar's appalling contention, he added that people should recognise that "the history of the British empire was morally mixed."

Prof Biggar was, objectively, right to support the idea of a balanced reappraisal of colonialism. After all, aspects of the British legacy in former colonies are widely apparent today, be they the influence of Westminster-style democratic politics, the cultural opportunities provided by access to the English language, the continuation of the Anglican communion (not least in former

African and West Indian colonies, where religious observance is generally more serious and sincere than in parts of the ‘White Commonwealth’), or even the continued desire to play cricket. The liberated peoples of these countries continue to co-exist happily with these legacies as result of choices they, not the former colonial power, have made and continue to make.

Equally, Prof Biggar was correct to say the history of British imperialism was morally mixed: he would have displayed ignorance to a remarkable degree, given his academic eminence, had he said anything else. Native peoples in America during the first British Empire were sometimes treated with a harshness and absence of consideration eclipsed only by what the Americans inflicted upon them after assuming control of the country in 1783. Things were little better in Canada, and some notorious episodes litter Australian history, notably in Tasmania. The ‘scramble for Africa’ in the 1880s showed European powers motivated mainly by profit rather than by any sense of improving the lives of the native people they colonised — though that may, and often did, happen later. In all cases, the colonisations were undertaken without consultation, or with any attempt to treat indigenous people as if they might have any opinion in the matter. This is widely recognised in countries such as America, Australia and Canada, and governments in all countries have gone to exhaustive lengths to make amends for the behaviour of their antecedents.

However, the reaction Prof Biggar’s remarks prompted did not even begin to represent a balanced discussion of the topic. Oxford historian Professor James McDougall rounded up 170 academics from around the world to sign an open letter disagreeing with Prof Biggar. Unintentionally, that letter displayed the depressing absence of pluralism in the teaching of history, and how history faculties in universities internationally have sought to marginalise those who disagree with them on such questions. But it was not only historians who decided to target Prof Biggar: so too did Cambridge English faculty lecturer, Dr (now Professor) Priyamvada Gopal, a fellow of Churchill College, who accused him of “outright racist imperial apologetics.” On 23 June this year, after the killing of

George Floyd, Prof Gopal tweeted that “White lives don’t matter. As white lives”, and later tweeted “Abolish whiteness.”

Cambridge, which had been urged by a number of its alumni to discipline Prof Gopal for her statements, responded that “The University defends the right of its academics to express their own lawful opinions which others might find controversial and deplores in the strongest terms abuse and personal attacks.” Prof Gopal had been subject to such abuse and attacks. A University defence of another controversial academic, Dr David Starkey, was not apparent a few days later, when he had the full social media mob after him for a reference to “damn blacks” and for a denial that slavery was identical to genocide. Dr Starkey was deemed guilty of racism (though no charges were brought against him under Britain’s racial hatred or incitement laws) and prevailed upon to resign his honorary fellowship of his Cambridge alma mater, Fitzwilliam College. It was beyond question foolish of Dr Starkey to use such rude language about black people, and entirely unbecoming of a man of his intellectual distinction. He soon realised this and apologised, but his redemption and rehabilitation are far from certain. In a civilised society, apology and the contrition that should accompany it are taken as a signal to express forgiveness, and to move on. But in the current climate of aggressive intolerance, the mob simply regards it as a sign of another victory in its campaign to control freedom of expression (however unpleasant such expression might be), and moves on to search for another victim.

The *Harper’s* letter was carefully couched, emanating precisely the sort of reasonableness the social media mob refuse to show their opponents. The fact is that many writers, academics, politicians and public figures find it abominable that narrow-minded, immature, self-righteous and naïve young people seek to dictate how others should feel about certain issues. It is Maoist, or reminiscent of the worst excesses of the dictators of the 1930s: blacklisting people because they sincerely feel and believe things that do not coincide with the feelings and beliefs of a minority of highly vocal and (whether they realise it or not) politically manipulated agitators. Their acts of agitation are designed to terrify people into confessing

their unorthodox thoughts and seeking forgiveness for them, and frightening others into silence lest they offend too.

As many academics will privately admit, this form of moral terrorism starts in universities. They are a cradle of this brand of intolerance. Students, manipulated by people more politicised and cynical than they, seek to intimidate their teachers; teachers then intimidate those who run their institutions. Curriculums have to be ‘decolonised’; western civilisation comes to be greeted with suspicion because it is assumed that anyone studying it or teaching it must be doing so because they believe it to be superior to non-western civilisations, and it is a short step from that to downright white supremacism. History and literature courses must have ‘trigger warnings’ in case something that happened in a previous age shows a lack of regard for the rights of the oppressed, or because something an author wrote centuries ago refers to a designated minority in a way those who police the subject now deem offensive. A student at Rutgers University in America recently suggested that Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* should be preceded by a trigger warning in case it encouraged suicidal feelings in readers. There have been demands for such warnings at Cambridge because of lines in Shakespeare.

There have been more and more instances in recent years of teachers plainly terrified of their students, and refusing to denounce episodes of ‘no-platforming’ of speakers known to hold perfectly legal views that a clique of extremists opposes. Such notional authority figures in universities have done more than anyone else to ensure that the erosion of freedom of speech in societies where it has long been regarded as a moral imperative comes to be regarded as inevitable, if not acceptable. Worse, universities present perfect opportunities for the mobilisation of the gullible by extremists, who then deploy such useful idiots to close down discussion and create a uniformity of opinion that accords with their own narrow and unpopular political doctrine.

III

As a result of these cultural developments, protecting freedom of speech is now the main challenge facing democratic, pluralist and truly liberal societies in the immediate future. It is salutary that those of us living in free societies should have to say such a thing, after all the evidence provided by the 20th century of what happens when freedom of expression is suppressed.

The principal triggers for those who seek to restrict freedom of speech are questions affecting race or sexuality. Part of being an educated person is to accept that it is ignorant to assume someone is inferior (or superior) to another because of ethnic origins. There may be all sorts of other reasons why two people, whether of the same race or of different races, differ from each other — intelligence, morality, work ethic, physical prowess and so on: but this will have nothing to do with those people's race. Therefore, anyone who says a black person, or a homosexual person or a person who has changed his or her gender, must by dint of that be inferior to another, merely reveals their own ignorance and stupidity.

But it remains entirely legal for an individual to express, for example, reservations about the idea same-sex marriage — as many people do for religious or philosophical reasons. It does not mean that person hates or dislikes homosexuals; it just means he or she can't philosophically support same-sex marriage. In many societies, same-sex marriage is now a fact; it is a fact that will not be changed by people disagreeing with it as a philosophical or theological concept. No-one is harmed by someone expressing such a view; no same-sex marriage is, can be or will be invalidated by it. In a civilised society people just accept that we do not all think alike on such questions of conscience (for that is what they are), and life goes on. However, the self-appointed guardians of the cause suggest that offence — or, beyond offence, hurt or even trauma — is caused by the expression of such opinions. If that is so,

the onus is on the people who take offence to reconcile themselves to what they will consider the foolishness of the person expressing an opinion contrary to their own. After all, many people who take the deeply personal decision to live in a devoutly religious way have to put up with the attacks on them by militant atheists, some of whom even question their sanity. The devout learn to live with such affronts, and get on with their lives. Such behaviour — which the social media mob would describe as ‘bullying’ were it directed at one of their cherished causes — is all part of the cost of living in a free society, and a small price to pay for avoiding the prevalence of an Orwellian thought-police.

Miss Rowling in no way sought to humiliate, bully or attack the right of people to change gender. Most reasonable people will think like her about the biological causes of gender. If a consenting adult wishes to change gender, that is up to him or her: but some people may express opposition of varying degrees of firmness to, for example, minors being helped to do it, because of society’s belief in the vulnerability and impressionability of those whom the law normally regards as too young and inexperienced to take responsibility for themselves in such profound matters. Similarly, no-one should — or indeed, short of brainwashing, can — be compelled to regard a man who has changed gender into a woman as being the same as a woman who has had that gender from birth. The distinguished Australian academic Dr Germaine Greer, long resident in England, was several years ago vilified for making precisely that point. And matters of conscience go beyond sexual orientation and gender. Even though opinion polls suggest a majority of Britons regard some murders as so wicked that their perpetrators should receive the death penalty, pundits who advocate the restoration of capital punishment are treated in a fashion similar to those who support paedophilia. Yet in a free, pluralist society, it must be an opinion that those who feel strongly about the deterrence and appropriate punishment of serious crime have a perfect right to hold.

Those who run the ‘cancel culture’ fail to grasp one fundamental point; that you can take a different view of their sacred causes

without wishing to obliterate those who uphold them, and without wishing to obliterate or even attack the groups they have appointed themselves to defend. In their ignorance and unreasonableness, they do not extend the same courtesies to their opponents, who by dint of holding heterodox opinions are deemed so inhuman that they are unworthy of such consideration. This is a profoundly imbalanced and ultimately dangerous theatre of debate: dangerous because in some cases it has already invited an extremist response, but also because if too many people surrender to this attack on freedom of expression, we shall end up living in that Maoist state.

IV

The rough and tumble of discourse is a long-standing tradition in pluralist societies, and underpins freedom of speech. To be fair to many of the young people in the cancel culture movement, they also do not realise that, in much of what they have decided to believe, they are being manipulated by professional agitators who are plainly and simply anarchists; who wish to wreck the social order of any established society in which they live, and are willing to enlist anyone gullible in order to swell the numbers of the force they can mobilise, and the chaos they can cause. Also, the young and gullible are susceptible to peer pressure, and when they see the rest of their age group subscribing to views such as these, have the instinct to go along with them — rather than to question, for example, the effect on a free society of the suppression of freedom of speech. Nor does it ever occur to them that one possible consequence of the curtailment of freedom of speech is that they, too, might one day find their own liberty of expression curtailed. The desire to conform by signalling virtue has become paramount, because the alternate course requires courage and can bring insecurity and isolation.

Nor does this herd mentality apply only to the young. In Britain, for example, after the killing of George Floyd, sportsmen and women and those who commentate on sports were quick to virtue-signal by wearing badges or sports kit carrying the Black Lives Matter logo. Some stopped doing so when they realised the British version of Black Lives Matter was run by a group of anarchists committed to the overthrow of capitalism, the destruction of the nuclear family and to the elimination of the state of Israel (with all the anti-semitic baggage that goes with that). All of this was a long way from promoting racial equality for black people, and from the values of the highly capitalistic, family-oriented organisations that are now professional sport in Britain. And the anti-semitism

suggested that not all forms of racial prejudice were anathematical to these would-be revolutionaries.

Floyd's killing saw an immediate move to close down freedom of speech in America. The *New York Times* editorial page editor, James Bennett, was sacked for having the temerity to publish Republican senator Tom Cotton's piece arguing for the military to be deployed to restore public order in US cities when the police are overwhelmed. The *New York Times*, which as a newspaper should exist on the basis that speech is free, effectively signalled it does not believe in debate. Of course, many on the left have long felt that opinions other than their own are positively dangerous. The Soviet Union, over 100 years ago, was founded partly on that very precept.

What happened to Bennett was the culmination of a growing culture of fear at the paper, and it was too much for one of its luminaries, Bari Weiss. She resigned in July, and this extract from her resignation letter is remarkable in its crystal-clear portrayal of the state of mind that has crippled what should have been a beacon of free expression:

But the lessons that ought to have followed the [2016 Presidential] election — lessons about the importance of understanding other Americans, the necessity of resisting tribalism, and the centrality of the free exchange of ideas to a democratic society — have not been learned. Instead, a new consensus has emerged in the press, but perhaps especially at this paper: that truth isn't a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else.

Twitter is not on the masthead of The New York Times. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor. As the ethics and mores of that platform have become those of the paper, the paper itself has increasingly become a kind of performance space. Stories are chosen and told in a way to satisfy the narrowest of audiences, rather

than to allow a curious public to read about the world and then draw their own conclusions. I was always taught that journalists were charged with writing the first rough draft of history. Now, history itself is one more ephemeral thing molded to fit the needs of a predetermined narrative.

Although the Floyd killing was responsible for accelerating this movement to suppress free speech and edit history, it is not the only attempt to standardise opinion to bring it into line with the diktats of the aggressive minority who seek to impose their views on everyone else.

V

Those who incite the mob by leading calls for ‘cancellation’ are cynically and nakedly exploiting one of the basic weaknesses in human nature, shared by the billions of human beings of all races and creeds whose instinct is not to look for a rabble to rouse: the desire to be liked and, perhaps as part of that, the desire to conform in preference to thinking for oneself. The result is a disproportionate response to a perfectly reasonable decision by a person to say, write or do something that is not an incitement to any rational person, but which is disapproved of by those whose ‘moral certainty’ is such that they feel able to direct the mob, and those who wait to be told what to think.

In that respect, the education system is at fault. An ideal education should teach people *how* to think, not *what* to think. Deciding what to think can only be properly achieved after listening to and participating in debate and weighing up the options. If a debate is forbidden, and no-one is permitted to express a contrary, heterodox view, people will remain in a condition where they can only be told what to do, not decide it for themselves. The self-righteousness and censoriousness of intellectually immature young people means they cannot even consider the arguments of people already damned (on whatever evidence) as homophobes, racists, transphobes and bigots.

Flora Gill, a 29-year old woman writing in July in the *Sunday Times* of London, asserted that “most people would agree that certain opinions don’t deserve a platform.” Really? If an opinion is truly appalling — such as denying that five or six million Jews died under Nazism, or (even more extreme) that if they did it was no bad thing — then in a free society, the person who expresses such an opinion will be ridiculed and despised to such an extent that he or she is unlikely to attract many followers, other than among the wicked or the mentally disturbed, and will never be more than a most marginal figure in any civilised context. As such, they end up

by denying themselves a platform, because no-one respectable will take them seriously. But let us suppose we agree with Miss Gill, that certain opinions don't deserve a platform. Who is to decide what those causes are? What would Miss Gill's response be if something to which she did *not* object were to be added to the list of things that cannot be discussed? What does this mean to academic freedom? Even if Miss Gill were to agree with the contents of such an imaginary list, does she stop to ask herself by what right she or anybody else draws the list up? Later in her article, she argued that people such as her were "merely pointing out rhetoric they consider harmful and asking for it to be addressed in return for their support." Let us leave aside the value of that 'support' (which one must presume is a sort of reverse threat to summon the howling mob of social media, and which underlines her generation's suspicion of people who are capable of thinking for themselves); why is these people's definition of what constitutes 'harmful' rhetoric superior to anyone else's? And by what right do they seek to impose it on the rest of us? And do they ever ask themselves how such puritanical, dictatorial attempts to control the thinking of others can be commensurate with life in a free society? Do they stop to consider that they, rather than the people they attack, are the bullies?

Miss Gill's justifications for the actions of this mob is that "they aren't bullies – they are trying to protect vulnerable groups from being bullied by the powerful." Why should Miss Rowling's perfectly reasonable statement that gender was determined by biology be considered bullying? Surely Miss Rowling was bullying no-one; she was merely explaining how she saw this question. She was not by any means launching an attack on any transgender person, or on anyone who might be considering changing gender. Others are at liberty to disagree with her. Holding that opinion does not make Miss Rowling a bad person. It just means her views are different from those of Miss Gill. Many of us will regard Miss Gill's views as foolish; but we shan't magnify her foolishness into wickedness, and recruit a Twitter mob against her, instruct people not to read her, but to vilify and seek to destroy her. One day, perhaps, she will be mature enough to realise that were she to

exercise the same civility towards her opponents as we do towards her, society would be stronger and the world, in the end, a happier and more reasonable place.

This cannot go on. In most developed countries, laws, quite rightly protect innocent people, whether in minorities or majorities, from acts of violence and intimidation, and against those who seek to incite them. It is the job of the legitimate forces and structures of law and order to arrest, prosecute and try such people; not of a mob posing as self-appointed police enforcing laws they have drawn up, before sitting as judge and jury on expressions they deem as infractions of the self-made laws. It is not their job to whip up the sort of hatred they accuse others of manufacturing. Every writer, every democratic politician, every public figure who reaps the benefit of a free society through liberty of expression has a duty to fight this moral terrorism, and to help drive it to the place of inconsequence and ridicule where it deserves to stay. The alternative is end of free speech, and surrender to the mob.



The Centre for Independent Studies is a non-profit, public policy research institute. Its major concern is with the principles and conditions underlying a free and open society. The Centre's activities cover a wide variety of areas dealing broadly with social, economic and foreign policy.

The Centre meets the need for informed debate on issues of importance to a free and democratic society in which individuals and business flourish, unhindered by government intervention. In encouraging competition in ideas, The Centre for Independent Studies carries out an activities programme which includes:

- research
- holding lectures, seminars and policy forums
- publishing books and papers

For more information about CIS or to become a member, please contact:

Level 1/131 Macquarie Street,
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia
Ph: 02 9438 4377
Email: cis@cis.org.au

cis.org.au

Council of Academic Advisers

Professor James Allan
Professor Ray Ball
Professor Jeff Bennett
Professor Geoffrey Brennan
Professor Lauchlan Chipman
Professor Kenneth Clements
Professor Sinclair Davidson
Professor David Emanuel
Professor Ian Harper

Professor Chandran Kukathas
Professor Tony Makin
Professor R. R. Officer
Professor Suri Ratnapala
Professor David Robertson
Professor Steven Schwartz
Professor Judith Sloan
Professor Peter Swan AM
Professor Geoffrey de Q. Walker

Moral Terrorism

We find ourselves living in an age when a small but highly vocal, and zealous, minority are availing themselves of the power of social media, and of sections of the printed press, to seek to force their opinions and attitudes on everyone else. In normal circumstances, this would simply be tedious: if, say, the public were being pressured to watch a particular television channel, or buy a certain brand of coffee. In our society we are conditioned to such things; but we are less conditioned to being told we should not, for whatever reason, watch a certain channel, or should boycott a certain brand of coffee. Mature and advanced societies — liberal societies — take an attitude of ‘live and let live’ in such matters. It is one thing to be an advocate for your own interests; quite another to seek to attack, undermine and destroy someone else’s. Yet that is what the so-called ‘cancel culture’ seeks to achieve; and it is why the present circumstances of discourse are far from normal. In the pretence of wishing to shield vulnerable people from words that might wound or cause offence, they seek to render others terrified to utter the words at all.



Simon Heffer is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Buckingham. A columnist for the *Daily and Sunday Telegraph*, he is author of, most recently, *Staring at God: Britain in the Great War*. He was a guest of the Centre for Independent Studies in September 2019.

CIS Occasional Paper 174
ISBN 978 1 925744 16 3
ISSN 0155 7386

cis.org.au

THE CENTRE FOR
INDEPENDENT
STUDIES