

Concours CPGE EPITA-IPSA-ESME 2023

Anglais

Synthesis (Cancel Culture) and short answers

“Joanna Bourke, the [Australian] NSW arts minister, and the unruly contradictions of cancel culture”

By Jennifer Ann McDonell

Correction de synthèse : 300 mots, 10 points

Cancel culture is a term used more and more often in today's society. Professor McDonnell discusses the subject in her 2022 article from The Conversation, “Joanna Bourke, the [Australian] NSW arts minister, and the unruly contradictions of cancel culture”

First of all, Ms. McDonell argues that the term “cancel culture” is not properly defined and understood in our society: it has suffered a “semantic drift”. At first, it was used to condemn wrong behaviour. The term is now used in an abusive manner: it is often mentioned when talking about censorship, free speech, decolonizing the curriculum, wokeness, and political correctness.

The author gives an example of this ambiguity. Arts Minister Ben Franklin, who is known for promoting freedom of expression and diversity of opinion, found himself trying to cancel a talk about historian Joanne Bourke about bestiality. This led to her being trolled by lowlives.

Indeed, one of the objections of “cancelling” someone or something is to destroy one's reputation or financially ruin them. The author develops another example of cancel culture, where these objectives are not met. World famous author JK Rowling faced backlash after comments she had made about gender identity. No significant harm seems to have been done to her career as a result.

The debate over cancel culture is clearly linked to free speech. The idea is not so much to redefine the latter principle, but rather to identify the “grey areas of where we draw the boundaries.” The author states that in our society, such problems are regulated by social media platforms, the most important one being Twitter. It is the heated debates and scandals on this platform that generate profit.

McDonell says there are competing values between groups, and an evolution of norms. She implies that progressive and minority groups are obtaining power, and changing the definition of what is allowed. Cancel culture is being used as a “rear-guard” action by the old elite, to keep its power.

Corrigé de conclusion : 200 mots, 10 points

Professor McDonell says in her article that the meaning cancel culture has drifted from its original definition and purpose. While this is true, society has adopted its new meaning. Cancel culture's main playground is social media, as said in the article. However, it has turned into censorship. People who are calling for public figures to be cancelled do want them to be censored, and everyone else understands it as such. One famous example of this occurrence is the attempt to cancel comedian Dave Chappelle's Netflix special *The Closer*, in which he expressed his views on the transgender issue. The public then asked the platform to take his show down, because people thought it was offensive.

This is the main issue with cancel culture. Wrong or socially unacceptable behavior should be called out. However, just because someone disagrees, however strongly, with a person's thoughts, they should not be censored. On the contrary, it should be seen as an opportunity to discuss and have a healthy conversation about the matter.

McDonell's "genealogy" tries to say cancel culture was used by the powerless. In fact, cancel culture is mostly practiced by persons who are white, upper-class, tech savvy, and organized. Her emphasis on "competing groups" is a way to give a "wartime" justification of repression but isn't an accurate description of society.

SHORT ANSWERS

1. How is a boycott an example of cancel culture?

1. Boycotting an artist may prevent institutions from giving him an outlet. They may be afraid of losing money or of bad publicity. The institutions will prefer not to hire the artist in question. Thus it may effectively "cancel" the artist, keeping him from expressing his opinions to the public.

1. Read paragraph 24. Explain your understanding of Ben Franklin's statement about a boycott.

2. Franklin's description of a boycott is similar to my definition above. However, the example he gave reversed the normal situation. Instead of people boycotting an artist, here we had artists boycotting an event and institution, an arts festival. We can wonder how much power individual artists may have, but it's true that a boycott against a festival would affect not just one particular person, but diversity in general.

1. In paragraph 14, the author refers to anti-intellectualism. What do you think she means by this?

3. In this context, anti-intellectualism seems to be another way to say cancel. In the same sentence, she writes "across the political spectrum" so I assume she means hostility toward or mistrust of the expression of ideas, going from progressive ideas all the way to conservative ones. In a more specific way, because Joanna Bourke is a historian, she may be referring to Franklin's resistance to thinking, or debate, in an education context.

