Twitter Thread by Tom

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Actually going to do a "thread".

A couple of friends recommended Waleed Aly's essay in The Monthly, "Woke politics and power", so I read it and I had a pretty negative response to it. I wrote a few numbered notes as I was going through it …

1. Aly is correct to note the prevalence of "cancel culture" as linked to the failures of liberal society and the relative disempowerment of individuals, as individuals, within it.

2. An early slippage happens when Aly claims "a generation that inherited the world liberals helped transform". Liberalism is a much older political ideology that emerged alongside the most intense periods of industrialisation and colonisation the world has known.

2a. Liberalism has its foundations in the assignment of certain formal legal rights, especially the right to own private property and sell one's labour—it's intimately tied to capitalism.

2b. Liberalism is the ideology of the Enlightenment and the British Empire, of both slaveowners and abolitionists. It assigns legal rights and status, but we know it inflicts terrible difficulty on many of the bearers of those rights.

2c. Aly's critique of liberalism is nowhere near sharp enough ... most historical liberation movements were led by militant radicals, not liberals, many of whom have been historically revised and represented as less radical than they were.

2d. Aly's essay reproduces this false naturalisation of liberalism as the origin point of the expansion of formal legal rights, anti-discrimination laws, and other "progressive" changes to liberal society.

3. Aly: "For instance, it holds that race and gender are so essentially different, so thoroughly incomparable that identifying as transgender is to be respected, but identifying as transracial (as in the Rachel Dolezal case) is emphatically not"

3a. Since race and gender are differently constructed and differently entangled with power, there's really no paradox here—in fact it takes a liberal view of society as a "gas" of atomised individuals with specific legal rights to foster this illusion.

4. Aly states "woke culture" supports sex workers' rights and not the rights of "grid girls" without giving an example. Usually SW supporters want sex work treated as work with appropriate payment, conditions and safety—the same applies to grid girls so … citation needed.

5. Aly holds up DiAngelo's WHITE FRAGILITY as representative of "woke culture" when it was probably the single most heavily criticised and called out book analysing the social construction of race during the George Floyd uprising. His target is very slippery here.

6. Aly describes critical social justice theory as "postmodern" while name-dropping all sorts of scholars who don't really fit the label—Foucault, Derrida, Derrick Bell, Fanon, the Frankfurt School. The claim needs a meaningful account of "postmodernism" but the best given is …

6a. … [understanding society] "as a series of ideologically loaded systems that are designed to preserve the power of certain groups over others"

Not particularly postmodern …

6b. … and it also misses out mentioning writers such as Du Bois, Crenshaw, Davis, Selma James, and others, none of them postmodern, as well as anyone writing accounts about this continent. And there must be many, many others I would struggle to name.

7. Aly cites John McWhorter's claim that cancel culture is "a profoundly religious movement", but cancel culture has no clergy, no scripture, no institutions. It's organic, diverse and inconsistent (and incoherent). It's claimed "confession and apology" are central but …

7a. … just as often the objectives of cancellation are financial loss, sackings and resignations, lost opportunities due to reputational damage, legal changes and other quite different concerns.

7b. The claim cancel culture is a religion amounts to a reactionary attempt to discredit cancel culture, among various other attempts to build alternative forms of power in the public sphere—and to divert attention from institutional ideologies that are more like religions …

8. Aly: [cancel culture has an] "aim of deconstruction so complete … it careers headlong into absolutism … casting everything as either liberation or oppression …"

Enforcing a new binary isn't deconstruction, but cancel culture doesn't, and rarely practises deconstruction.

9. Aly goes on to note that cancel culture is without principle, noting that critics of the Anzacs, the religious, or atheists might be "next" … a fairly correct vision of the public sphere as an unprincipled terrain of struggle.

9a. The argument shows its weaknesses a bit here, repeatedly. Firstly, Aly begins to acknowledge that the type of "woke culture" he's focusing on is more or less a form of liberalism: "cancel culture adopts a postmodern version of identity that becomes highly individualistic" …

9b. (Aly throws in a bit of a TERFy side-eye here with the suggestion "So, on gender (though not on race) identity is largely determined by individuals who declare themselves into existence, then require society to recognise them") …

9c. Leading to the premise of his conclusion, that "Wokeness wants to remoralise [liberal] politics". I'd reject this. It's about power, not morality. The animus against oppression that mobilises cancel culture understands that appeals to principled authority are failing.

10. There is an argument made that "harm" and "safety" in cancel culture are "promiscuous" concepts—ie prone to disproportionate, uncalibrated, or unreasonable application. However, given that there is no single organised power or theory behind cancel culture …

10a. … this is far more descriptive than normative, whether true or untrue. I'd question whether it's possible to be normative here, to define and enforce what cancel culture "should" be.

11. The great threat Aly states thus: "Civic space cannot survive this culture of mutual contempt".

What does "survive" mean here? "Civic space" remains replete with contempt, coming from established voices, for the groups whose actions define cancel culture.

11a. Should "Australian civic space" "survive"? Big question mark over that for me. It's a steady recruitment zone for some of the most horrible writers and thinkers you'd ever be unlucky to meet.

To conclude … Aly's take naturalises liberalism as the origin of historical progressive change, while marginalising the history of conflict in the public sphere and radical action, in order to represent "cancel culture" as a special threat.

My take is "no justice, no peace". The anger(s) and polarisation(s) of the public sphere are a consequence of disempowerment, of the blatancy with which society isn't governed either in the collective interest or with justice to a host of minority groups.

Speech takes the place of foreclosed action, and (most) cancel culture tries to substitute informally for the enforcement of norms and laws which would arguably be commonplaces of a just society.

It's easy to cherry pick problem or misguided examples of cancel culture—Aly bases a lot of his polemic on one such—but if his argument is founded that way, it's as "extreme" as saying that miscarriages of ordinary law imply there should be no laws at all.

If decisive justice for specific causes became possible, cancel culture would have little purpose. The objective of anyone substantially concerned about cancel culture should be to achieve that justice for those causes.