Twitter Thread by Will Wilkinson ■



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This is why I'm not a critic of "cancel culture." It's crucial to impose social costs for the breech of key social norms. The lesson of overreaction is that we need to recalibrate judgment to get it right next time, not that we need a lot more bad judgment in the other direction.

> Every single critic of "cancel culture" just thinks the wrong people are getting canceled. pic.twitter.com/DDIVccj8zV
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> — Michael Hobbes (@RottenInDenmark) February 2, 2021

Obviously, people will disagree about which norms are important, about how bad it is to violate them, and thus about how severe the social cost ought to be. That's just pluralism, man, and it's good.

It's important to openly talk through these substantive differences, which is why derailing these conversations with hand-waving moral panic about "cancel culture" is obnoxious and illiberal.

Screaming "cancel culture!" when somebody pays a social costs other people have been fighting hard to get others to see as necessary is often just a way to declare, with no argument, that the sanction in question was not only unnecessary but in breach of a more important norm.

It's impossible to uphold social norms without social sanctions, so obviously anti-cancelers are going to want to impose a social cost on people they see as imposing unjustly steep social costs on others.

But you can't just declare yourself right. You can't just assume that the people imposing what they think are necessary and proportional social sanctions aren't just wrong about that, but are also imperiling a different super-precious norm. That's begging the question.

This sort of stance also commits the tu qoque fallacy or "whataboutism." It's a fallacy because it's a way to avoid the question that just got begged by accusing the other side of wrongdoing, which raises a different logically independent question.

The practical upshot of all this tends to be conservative. The people proposing that a certain norm is more important than previously recognized, and therefore ought to be enforced more vigorously, are often members of groups harmed by this lack of recognition and enforcement.

Tactically, question-begging whataboutism is a great way for more powerful groups to block this kind of proposed change in norms because less powerful people have to take "no, you're the norm violator who deserves to be sanctioned" charges very seriously.

You can't just say, "Your accusation is irrelevant to the question at hand" when more powerful people are effectively proposing a new norm you'd be violating by continuing to press your case. Self-defense requires addressing their charge to protect the liberty to make your case.

But then they've successfully tangled you up. You can't make your case when your stuck arguing that vigorously enforcing the norm you're proposing would not violate some other cherished social norm, and therefore you're not actually attacking it simply by making your case for it.

This amounts to a form of reactionary, anti-egalitarian bullying that leverages an unjust, structural inequality to trip up people trying to correct it. "Cancel culture" rhetoric is far more often than not deployed in this way.

But even when this sort of group power differential isn't in play, it tends to draw us away from the real substantive disagreement.

IMO, a lot of folks are attracted to this sort of distraction because they suspect that they can't make their case against a new norm without violating it, and they don't want to be in doghouse if they lose the argument.

And I think that's why lots of folks feel it's only fair to try to turn enforcing or making the case for the new norm into a higher-order norm violation. It feels like it levels the playing field. If I risk social sanction for making my case, they should risk it for making theirs

I think some good, well-meaning anti-cancel culture people see themselves as calling for mutual toleration and detente. "How about nobody gets sanctioned for making their case?" But this position tends to hand the W to the status quo by default.

Wasn't expecting to keep thinking this through in a tweet thread. Anyway, you can more thoughts along these lines here... https://t.co/9dTWmJWPKu