

The Need to Respond to Cancel Culture

by Michael Curtis



Kathleen Stock

Person who leaps off cliff jumps to conclusions.

The cancel culture continues in academia and in general society, though rejoinder is becoming more pronounced, and lack of sensible behavior and speech is all too evident.

Identity affiliation increasingly results in rejection of traditional values. The topsy turvy behavior is illustrated by Worcester College, Oxford, which in 2021 apologized to students for the distress caused after it hosted a Christian conference, a Christian concern training camp for students, after bigots said the event was Islamophobic because it discussed the nature of Islam.

Even more disconcerting is the pusillanimity on display at the University of Sussex. Because of her views on a presently hot concept of a sexual theme, Kathleen Stock, a 48 year old professor of philosophy was verbally attacked by students, and then advised by police not to attend campus for a time and to teach her classes online, to install CCTV in her home, to have cameras on the front door, and to consider hiring bodyguards. Stock is a confessed lesbian with teenage children who is devoted to and espouses academic truth. The dilemma of Stock, an academic expert in gender and sexual orientation, stems from the fact she was accused of being "transphobic," the theme of hot dispute, which she denies. The theme has become an existential crisis, which demands sacrifices.

Stock's writings about sex and gender identity, leading to the aggression against her, stress that womanhood and manhood

reflect biological sex, not gender or gender identity. She wrote that people cannot change their biological sex, that there should be a ban on transgender women using women's changing rooms, and that many trans women are still males with male genitalia. Not exactly the voice or fanaticism of Lady Macbeth but enough to lead to her academic extinction.

Stock also claims that Oxford University Press, to its discredit, abandoned a book on female philosophers because of her inclusion in it which would make it too controversial and would attract negative attention. The situation resembles that in June 2020 concerning the more well-known J.K. Rowling who was accused of being transphobic, and attacked after insisting that only women experience menstruation. But Harry Potter knew that.

It is disgraceful that Stock is not supported by her academic union and will probably lose her job. But it is gratifying she has been defended by the up and coming Liz Truss, British Minister for Equalities, asserting that no one should be targeted and harassed simply for holding an opinion. In addition to this simple and sensible reminder of academic behavior there is the 2021 Higher Education bill which attempts to end the process of "no platforming" by giving a regulator authority, the Office for Students, the power to fine institutions and student unions for breaching duties designed to foster a culture of open and robust intellectual debate, against those opposing the promotion of freedom of speech within the law.

In an earlier case, the vice-chancellor of Cardiff University, Colin Riordan has recognized the present divisive issue of gender, but called for debate on it. How else will we ever resolve it?

In 2015 Riordan supported the right of Germaine Greer, the notable Australian major voice of radical feminism, to speak at Cardiff though she was criticized for making what was said

to be transphobic comments.

At the University of Glasgow, a lesser known feminist, Sarah Honeychurch, a fellow of the Adam Smith business school, was fired from being editor of Hybrid Pedagogy after she had signed a public letter mainly written by Kathleen Stock expressing their disquiet over a program run by Stonewall which has no academic credibility, and criticized universities for being ideologically captured by anti-scientific views on gender identity. Honeychurch explained the letter was not an attack on the transgender community but a defense of academic integrity and academic freedom. The controversy continues at Glasgow, in essence on the right to express one's opinion as individuals.

Before the issue of Stock, Essex University has already been irresponsible when two other women, Jo Phoenix and Rosa Freedman were "platformed." Phoenix, professor of criminology at the Open University was due to give a lecture at Essex on the tensions around planning trans rights in prisons. She was called a transphobe and her talk was cancelled. Freedman is professor of law at Reading University and was attacked both because of her views on gender politics, such as that men cannot become women by surgery, and because she is Jewish. The two unrelated facets came together at Essex when she was disinvited from a panel on antisemitism held in January 2020 to mark Holocaust Memorial week.

In olden days academics and students once knew better words writing prose, now with cancel culture anything goes. Isaac Newton, the genius who owned shares in the South Sea Company, once had three laws named after him, but they are renamed the "three fundamental laws of physics," though it is not clear how many black physicists were active in 1687. In May 2021, St. John's University in Queens, NYC, suspended and then fired a female adjunct professor who had taught there for 20 years because she read to her class the N word from Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson, a work in which Twain pointed out the

absurdity and tragedy of racism and slavery. Other academics and parents have challenged the reading out aloud of the racial slurs and of the N word used in *To kill the Mockingbird*, and *Of Mice and Men*.

At Aston University in central Birmingham, sociology students have been advised to stop using words that can be seen to reinforce prejudices. Offending words include immigrant, third world, tribe, civilized, native, colonization, because of their racist overtones. We are told to refrain from using manmade, one man show, old masters, masterful.

Pictures as well as language are meaningful. Disney is not alone in dealing with facial issues. It has changed some of its classic films, *Dumbo* and *Fantasia*, to get rid of racist stereotypes, such as the minstrel shows where white performers had blackened faces. Already in October 2021, the University of Michigan removed a professor who had taught there since 1995 for showing the 1965 film *Othello* starring Laurence Olivier who appeared in blackface throughout the film, a performance that indeed was controversial in its time. No one today is likely to approve of a white actor blacking his face to play the role of Othello. But the incomparable Olivier is here and cannot be deleted. The professor at the school of music in Ann Arbor, Bright Sheng, accomplished composer, conductor and pianist, explained his intention was to show how Verdi had adapted Shakespeare into an opera, but he was removed from his teaching post after students complained.

Some fight the good fight. At Bristol University, Steven Greer, professor of law who had been accused by the University's Islamic society of Islamophobia and of expressing bigoted views as part of his course was cleared after a five month investigation by an independent lawyer, but the material on his module was removed. He had used a lecture slide that included the 2015 terror attack on the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo that had published cartoons of the Prophet

Mohammed. Greer argued that this attack was evidence of Islam's stance on freedom of speech, and that Jihadi terrorism was the principal terrorist threat for the UK.

He argued that the attack on him was an attack on a fundamental freedom, and that militant minorities are increasingly intent on dictating the nature of university education by using vilification, intimidation, and threats.

Resistance has come from some academics. Because Cecil Rhodes still stands, more than 100 Oxford academics had refused to give tutorials to Oriel College, Oxford, undergraduates or to assist the college in its outreach work, or activities sponsored by the College. Critics of them have criticized Oriel for surrendering to left wing students by erecting a plaque depicting Cecil Rhodes as a virtual devil, and distorting his legacy. They argue the plaque lacks balance by being concerned only with his racist and imperialist policies, as a colonialist who exploited the minerals, land, and peoples of southern Africa, leading to great loss of life. These critics hold the plaque ignores the rest of Rhodes career and what he was trying to do, to bring benefit in southern Africa in the late 19th century and founded Rhodesia and that he was not a slave trader though he supported apartheid measures .

All these events and occasions show what is at stake, attacks on fundamental speech and expression. Universities and society as a whole should recognize this and stand up to oppose cancel culture.