

Book Notes

CANCEL WARS: HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN FOSTER FREE SPEECH,
PROMOTE INCLUSION, AND RENEW DEMOCRACY

by Sigal R. Ben-Porath

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 208 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

Whether in classes, campuses, or checkbooks, US colleges and universities are feeling the force of democratic erosion. While colleges have long been sites of conflict over speech and political advocacy, that manifestation of this conflict feels unique as partisan politicians and donors seek to increase their influence over hiring (Golden & Berg, 2022) and tenure decisions (Heyward, 2021), the types of research conducted (Callender, 2022), and even classroom discussions (Hidalgo Bellows, 2022). It's easier for those who take a zoomed-out perspective—like me—to make broader claims about what institutions should do in an epistemic ecosystem writ large or how to shape federal policy to promote that mission. But it is often less clear what many individuals *within* those institutions should do. Consider the overworked, underpaid, and unprotected adjunct professor navigating how to deal with a politically sensitive topic in class; the entry-level administrator looking to support their students without alienating another group; the leadership trying to build a supportive campus without losing funding from a hostile conservative legislature. The ethics of navigating democratic erosion is arguably hardest on the ground as stakeholders try to achieve both justice and survival. Such questions are urgent yet often underexplored. Without more shared conversations or frameworks, actors are often left to weather these crises and responses in isolation.

It is here—in this especially challenging, punishing terrain—that Sigal Ben-Porath intervenes. To do so, she leverages her academic research on freedom of speech and her personal experience consulting for higher education institutions in the US, UK, and the Netherlands as they navigated political conflicts among students and faculty. The resulting text, *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy*, is a careful and precise guide for faculty, administrators, and students on how to not merely survive our antidemocratic landscape but improve it.

Cancel Wars opens with a discussion of the civic mistrust and polarization (chapter 1) that poison how many identify and share information (chapter 2). Unlike those who locate democratic erosion in the complexities of truth in a digital age, Ben-Porath argues that “the main issue seems not to be the information or its purveyors, but in its consumers, or in the ways in which citizens

select, judge, and endorse the information available to them” (44–45). In particular, polarization fosters “politically motivated reasoning,” or choosing information for ideological rather than evidentiary reasons. Ben-Porath’s account offers examples of such motivated reasoning, like Charles Mills’s (2007) definition of the “willful ignorance” of whiteness or the logics fostered in epistemic echo chambers. She further contends that postsecondary education’s dual civic and truth missions position it to help intervene against mistrust and polarization, even if not alone and not perfectly. Indeed, the book considers US higher education’s role in perpetuating inequality too, with only a fraction of the population enrolling and with graduates often having better political and economic outcomes. It stresses that, of course, the education sector cannot be the only set of institutions within a democracy intervening but that it can be a part of the effort.

The remainder of the work outlines both a theoretical framework for this intervention and pragmatic action that a variety of campus stakeholders can take within it. Inclusive freedom “aims to make free speech tangible by sustaining broad boundaries for permissible expression and ensuring that all members of the community can benefit from them” (10). Pursuing this means creating opportunities for discourse that permit intellectual risks (or the ability to “leave behind existing beliefs and accepted knowledge, to assume that new answers are possible”) while preserving dignitary safety (or the “assurance that all participants in an exchange are valued as equal contributors to the shared endeavor”) (53). Chapter 3 explores how to reconsider speech on campus in light of this, carefully problematizing dichotomies of speech as either limiting harmful speech or permitting almost all forms. Ben-Porath instead proposes that agents distinguish between *harm* as an experience versus a *wrong* as a breach in someone’s rights on campus and take harms seriously “within their context” (74). This includes creating conditions for students to speak out when they are harmed and for faculty to be more responsive to their concerns. Taken together, this can lead to greater between-group trust, which encourages more opportunities, leads to more trust, and so on.

Chapter 4 outlines contextual considerations for postsecondary practitioners about students’ experience with speech—namely, that K–12 students have limited opportunities in school to practice speech norms due to historical rulings from the Supreme Court and more recent cuts to civic education initiatives. Chapter 5 offers more specific recommendations and strategies for nearly every campus stakeholder, including trustees and leaders (for instance, when crafting public statements), faculty (when mediating class conflict), and even students (when navigating controversial guest speakers). This chapter will prove invaluable to stakeholders all across campus seeking to navigate and improve discourse.

One of the text’s most impressive accomplishments is how its principles safeguard against whataboutism, or countering the identification of a wrong by deflecting to another topic, often some other action taken by the speaker. Ben-

Porath's careful analysis gives administrators the principles to better distinguish between types of speech-related conflicts and their potential consequences. While a few readers might stiffen at the book's emphasis on polarization, which is often critiqued for distributing equal blame on both sides, that criticism misses what is a fundamental strength of the book: it is positioned so that everyone from trustees to recent undergraduates can leverage it to take inclusive, democracy-promoting action on campus while defending that action within the mission of higher education itself rather than simple partisanship.

However, though the book is extremely effective at outlining how to tackle individual-level dilemmas amid political strife, it is at times unclear how structures outside the university might over time complicate this response. Some of the examples of politically motivated reasoning—like Mills' (2007) account of willful ignorance or Nguyen's (2018) account of actions in echo chambers—are cases that bite back. Mills (2007), for instance, views willful white ignorance as a sort of ignorance that is "militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that . . . refuses to go quietly" (13). Nguyen (2018), too, expects that breaking out of an echo chamber may call for an "epistemic reboot" that is sparked by but distinct from diverse relationships (157). In such a reboot, individuals would have to not only accept different beliefs and the shortcomings of their own assumptions, but they would have to put some substantial effort into rewriting them. Not all disagreements, of course, will be rooted in structures as sinister as the ones Mills and Nguyen imagine. But some very likely will be, and even more as the conservative media apparatus solidifies. It's unclear what the university's role should be in guiding students in these cases. What does it mean for the university's relationship to a democracy where postsecondary institutions, with all their barriers to access, disproportionately promote these increasingly challenging realizations? Does it risk edging closer to technocracy if more educational institutions are performing this work via and for only those who can attend?

Still, these questions are arguably posed from a more zoomed-out place than where Ben-Porath's account is situated. In that sense, *Cancel Wars* is an exceptionally useful guide for strengthening campus communities for those who feel them to be most under threat, as well as for developing a stronger sense of the civic trust that democracy depends on. This new pathway, even if challenging and imperfect, is worth exploring both for the urgency of moving campuses and our broader democracy forward and for identifying what we must leave behind to do so.

MEGAN L. BOGIA

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ALGORITHMS OF EDUCATION: HOW DATAFICATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE SHAPE POLICY

by Kalervo N. Gulson, Sam Sellar, and P. Taylor Webb

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In a later chapter in their book *Algorithms of Education*, Kalervo N. Gulson, Sam Sellar, and P. Taylor Webb describe the Class Care System in Chinese schools, where software analyzes classroom footage to categorize student states into behavioral categories like “listening,” “writing,” and “sleeping.” Algorithms translate this facial data into statistical data by generating scores between 0 and 100 that are then used by teachers and administrators to modify instruction or intervene. While this artificial intelligence (AI) system includes human actors by allowing them to use new kinds of data to make decisions in the classroom, it also excludes them by blackboxing the (exclusively machine-readable) algorithms and pattern recognition codes at work here. Does a system like this provide more control to humans in matters of decision-making in education, or does it actually take away control? This paradox of the blurring of the assumed distinctions between human and machine agency lies at the heart of the authors’ key argument in this provocative book about AI-based governance in education.

Discussions about AI in education today could be considered an extension of long-standing conversations about datafication. However, many critical commentaries often border on popular cautionary science fiction tropes of robots replacing humans in the classroom and in policy making. Gulson, Sellar, and Webb contest this human-machine dichotomy and emphasize that AI in education “does not involve direct replacement of human minds and bodies, but rather it produces new ways of thinking through the conjunction of human and nonhuman cognition” (2). While analyses of education policy and governance until now have focused on the agencies, identities, and rationalities of human actors and systems, what might they look like in this new era where humans and machines interact to coconstruct decisions about education? In