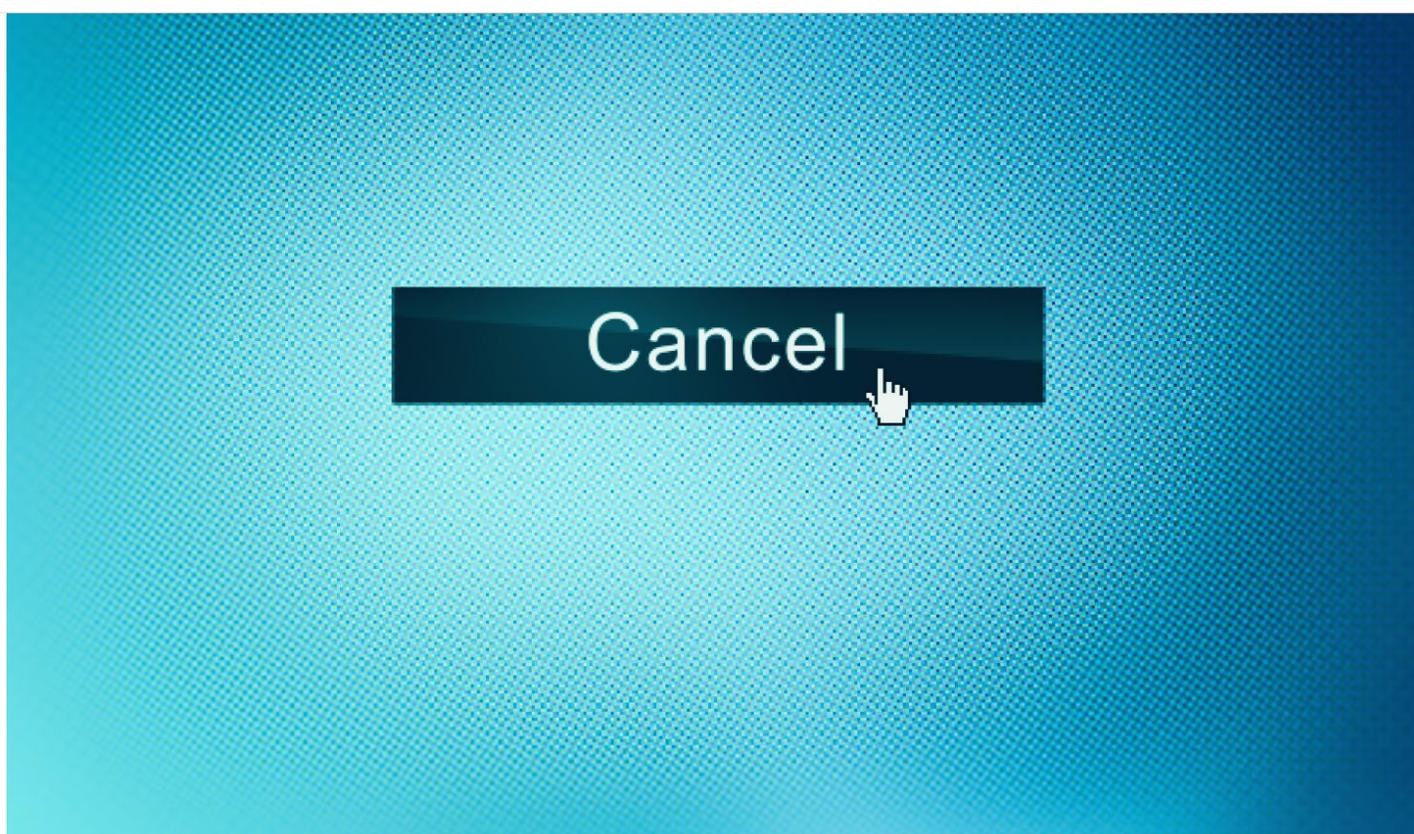




Reporting by Matt Taibbi

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Last Friday, over 500 students and lecturers signed a letter denouncing Harvard professor Steven Pinker. Citing five tweets and one line from a book, the signatories demanded Pinker be repudiated by the Linguistics Society of America for a history of “speaking over genuine grievances” at “the exact moment when Black and Brown people are mobilizing against systemic racism.”

The charges were beyond obscure. The effort to find traces of racism in Pinker’s massive bibliography of public statements recalled the way excited Christians periodically discover the

face of Jesus in tree stumps or wall mold.

Pinker for instance is accused of having tweeted "Police kill too many people, black and white" (an "all lives matter" trope, signatories cried!), of using the phrase "urban crime" (a dog whistle!), and of calling it "statistically obtuse" to suggest the incel murderer of six women at UCSB was not acting as part of a sexist pattern.

That last episode particularly enraged signatories, as evidence of "downplaying the actual murder of six women." Unfortunately, none of the accusing lecturers and PhD candidates, who presumably have done research before, noticed the actual spree killing to which Pinker referred involved two women and four *men*, not six women. But who's counting? "Regardless of the identities of his victims," the letter-writers noted in a bitter correction, "the murderer was driven by misogyny."

To back up a charge of "downplaying actual violence," the signatories pointed to a description of subway shooter Bernhard Goetz as a "mild-mannered engineer" in Pinker's book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

This passage, about the ways American culture shifted in response to a rise in the violent crime rate, has to be quoted at length to show the absurdity:

The flood of violence from the 1960s through the 1980s reshaped American culture... Mugger jokes became a staple of comedians... New Yorkers imprisoned themselves in their apartments with batteries of latches and deadbolts... Books, movies and television series used intractable urban violence as their backdrop, including *Little Murders*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Warriors*, *Escape from New York*, *Fort Apache the Bronx*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Women enrolled in self-defense courses to learn how to walk with a defiant gait, to use their keys, pencils, and spike heels as weapons, and to execute karate chops or jujitsu throws to overpower an attacker, role-played by a volunteer in a Michelin-man-tire suit. Red-bereted Guardian Angels patrolled the parks and the mass transit system, and **in 1984 Bernhard Goetz, a mild-mannered engineer, became a folk hero for shooting four young muggers** in a New York subway car. A fear of crime helped elect decades of conservative politicians...

Pinker wasn't litigating the justice of the Goetz incident. He was making an offhand description as part of a huge list detailing what he called the "overblown" reactions of a city gripped by fear and paranoia. If he had written in language closer to what the letter-writers would have found acceptable, e.g. "a rage-filled neo-Nazi named Bernhard Goetz became a

folk hero after shooting four Black youths who asked him for five dollars” (signatories had a problem with the word “mugger” as well), it would have strengthened rather than changed Pinker’s rhetorical point: that New Yorkers, to at least some degree irrationally, were afraid of crime during a twenty-year period of rising crime rates. This letter was written by *linguistics* experts, and they don’t know how to read. It’s incredible.

When I reached out to the group’s listed email, they declined comment:

*As hundreds of linguists have signed the letter, and since we have received a number of death threats, we are not comfortable either saying things that would go beyond the letter (as we have no mandate to do so), or to reveal our identities. Kind regards, the letter editors*

To recap: 500-plus academics sign a letter publicly smearing one of their own as a racist, but when asked for comment, the “editors” insist on anonymity. The campaign seems to have failed, as it doesn’t appear the LSA is planning on taking action. “I’m one of the lucky ones. I’ve got tenure,” Pinker says. “It’s the more vulnerable junior faculty and lecturers and people who work for private companies who are much more worthy of concern.”

Pinker is a successful public intellectual whose niche is the analytic corrective to disaster-porn coverage strategies of modern news. If you turn on the TV every day to see street crime, terrorism, “killer” storms and plane crashes statistically over-represented in “dirty laundry” eyeball-grabbing schemes, Pinker has compiled data for you arguing that, statistically speaking, life isn’t so bad. Critics dismiss him as trite and seethe at his full head of Einsteinian hair, but he’s basically an optimist, which is a strange thing to be offended by – unless we’re talking about 2020 America, where we hate everyone except Greta Thunberg (and we hate her too, of course).

Pinker didn’t see this exact campaign coming, as “I don’t consider myself a political provocateur, and I’m a mainstream liberal Democrat.” However, he says, “over the years I’ve realized I have some vulnerabilities.” His main problem, apart from being a famous white guy, is that he ascribes to a view of the world that may be going out of style. By way of explaining, he referenced pseudonymous psychiatrist Scott Alexander of Slate Star Codex, who also went through difficulty lately – he deleted his blog after a *New York Times* reporter decided for some reason to out his real name.

Alexander, Pinker explained, described two different views on solving social problems in an essay called *Conflict Versus Mistake*.

In the first view, "we're all like physicians trying to diagnose an illness. Society is the patient," Pinker says. In contrast, in the "conflict mindset," there's "a faction that has been monopolizing power, and it's time for the wrongs to be righted, and previously disempowered groups to seize power."

Pinker added, "Therefore anything said from the mistake perspective in terms of diagnosing the problems of society would be seen in the conflict perspective as part of a problem, namely a justification for maintaining the status quo."

Any attempt to build bridges between the two mindsets falls apart, often spectacularly, as we saw this week in an online fight over free speech that could not possibly have been more comic in its unraveling.

A group of high-profile writers and thinkers, including Pinker, Noam Chomsky, Wynton Marsalis, Salman Rushdie, Gloria Steinem and Anne Appelbaum, signed a letter in Harper's calling for an end to callouts and cancelations.

"We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom," the authors wrote, adding, "We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences."

This Hallmark-card-level inoffensive sentiment naturally inspired peals of outrage across the Internet, mainly directed at a handful of signatories deemed hypocrites for having called for the firings of various persons before.

Then a few signatories withdrew their names when they found out that they would be sharing space on the letterhead with people they disliked.

"I thought I was endorsing a well meaning, if vague, message against internet shaming. I did know Chomsky, Steinem, and Atwood were in, and I thought, good company," tweeted Jennifer Finney Boylan, adding, "The consequences are mine to bear. I am so sorry."

*Translation: I had no idea my group statement against intellectual monoculture would be signed by people with different views!*

In the predictable next development – no dialogue between American intellectuals is complete these days without someone complaining to the boss – Vox writer Emily VanDerWerff declared herself literally threatened by co-worker Matt Yglesias's decision to sign the statement. The public as well as Vox editors were told:

*The letter, signed as it is by several prominent anti-trans voices and containing as many dog whistles towards anti-trans positions as it does, ideally would not have been signed by anybody at Vox... His signature on the letter makes me feel less safe.*

Naturally, this declaration impelled Vox co-founder Ezra Klein to take VanDerWerff's side and publicly denounce the *Harper's* letter as a status-defending con.

"A lot of debates that sell themselves as being about free speech are actually about power," tweeted Klein, clearly referencing his old pal Yglesias. "And there's a lot of power in being able to claim, and hold, the mantle of free speech defender."

This Marxian denunciation of the defense of free speech as cynical capitalist ruse was brought to you by the same Ezra Klein who once worked with Yglesias to help Vox raise \$300 million. This was just one of many weirdly petty storylines. Writer Thomas Chatterton Williams, who organized the letter, found himself described as a "mixed race man heavily invested in respectability politics," once he defended the letter, one of many transparent insults directed toward the letter's nonwhite signatories by ostensible antiracist voices.

The whole episode was nuts. It was like watching Bruce Springsteen and Dionne Warwick be pelted with dogshit for trying to sing *We Are the World*.

This being America in the Trump era, where the only art form to enjoy wide acceptance is the verbose monograph written in condemnation of the obvious, the *Harper's* fiasco inspired multiple entries in the vast literature decrying the rumored existence of "cancel culture." The two most common themes of such essays are a) the illiberal left is a Trumpian myth, and b) if the illiberal left does exist, it's a good thing because all of those people they're smearing/getting fired deserved it.

In this conception there's nothing to worry about when a Dean of Nursing at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell is dismissed for writing "Black Lives Matter, but also, everyone's life matters" in an email, or when an Indiana University Medical School professor has to apologize for asking students how they would treat a patient who says 'I can't breathe!' in a clinical setting, or when someone is fired for retweeting a study suggesting nonviolent protest is effective. The people affected are always eventually judged to be "bad," or to have promoted "bad research," or guilty of making "bad arguments," etc.

In this case, *Current Affairs* hastened to remind us that the people signing the *Harper's* letter were many varieties of bad! They included Questioners of Politically Correct Culture like

“Pinker, Jesse Singal, Zaid Jilani, John McWhorter, Nicholas A. Christakis, Caitlin Flanagan, Jonathan Haidt, and Bari Weiss,” as well as “chess champion and proponent of the bizarre conspiracy theory that the Middle Ages did not happen, Garry Kasparov,” and “right wing blowhards known for being wrong about everything” in David Frum and Francis Fukuyama, as well as – this is my favorite line – “problematic novelists Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, and J.K. Rowling.”

Where on the irony-o-meter does one rate an essay that decries the “right-wing myth” of cancel culture by mass-denouncing a gymnasium full of intellectuals as problematic? Already another group letter is circulating, denouncing the character deficiencies of the *Harper's* signatories in even stronger language. “Jesse Singal, another signer, is a cis man famous for advancing his career writing derogatorily about trans issues,” is one example, while Chatterton-Williams stands accused of believing, contemptibly enough, “that racism at once persists and is capable of being transcended.”

The series of events was likely only followed by a tiny sliver of too-online media personalities, myself included. The rest of the world, to the extent that it heard what happened at all, seems mostly to have recoiled from everyone involved and/or wished the NBA season had re-started early enough for them to have missed the whole thing. It did sort of matter, though, as the *Harper's* letter was basically an attempt to build a small statue to the “free exchange of information and ideas,” only to have it beheaded and tossed in a pile with Columbus, Grant, and the rest.

It shouldn't and doesn't matter what Yale University ends up being called (I actually like “The University Formerly Known as Yale”), and no one who thinks about it should really be bothered if a cringey statue of Teddy Roosevelt gets taken down. I doubt most people have much personal attachment to statues of Thomas Jefferson, for that matter. The real issue with the symbol-erasing mania of the last weeks is what it says about the erasers' attitudes toward the ideas that people like Jefferson represent. Do they want those dumpstered, too? Because that would be a much more serious issue.

The intellectuals whose ouster is being called for by the new revolution were themselves products of the last cultural revolution. People like Chomsky, Steinem, and even Pinker came of age during the sixties liberation movements, which shaped academia and popular culture

for generations. These were people raised on beat poetry, antiwar marches, Jimi Hendrix and movies like *The Graduate*, whose one-word summary of the aspirations of their parents' generation – "Plastics" – represented everything these new educators *didn't* want for their students.

This new intellectual class had grown up in a time of empowerment for women, for gays and lesbians, and for black and brown people, but also of the human spirit generally. Long before the term "intersectionality" was coined in 1989, post-sixties liberals understood the interlocking nature of political and intellectual repression.

The tumult of the sixties revealed the clear relationship between the ignorant conventions that kept women at home and gays in the closet, and the academic orthodoxies suppressing the research of people like Alfred Kinsey, whose work would lift everything from the female orgasm to bisexuality out of the dungeon. Dr. Benjamin Spock became famous for telling "good mothers and fathers" that what they "instinctively feel like doing for their children" was better than a century of ignorant child-rearing books (written by highly-credentialed men, mainly) that told them not to kiss or hold their kids.

So many things that were banned, from *Where the Wild Things Are* to *The Catcher in the Rye* to Billie Holliday's *Strange Fruit*, turned out to be revelatory. The animating principle of the revolution that swept through America back then was that once ignorance was conquered, we would be free to celebrate our common humanity.

It's no accident this message made great art. The power of everything from jazz and rock to abstract painting and Gonzo journalism derived from exploding conventions. There was symbolism in the way people of all backgrounds felt like dancing to the new music or laughing at Richard Pryor's forbidden comedy (similarly, cracks formed in the Soviet state when dissidents overseas chuckled over *samizdat* copies of *The Master and Margarita*). There was a universal urge toward peace, love, forgiveness and humor that brought people together. No one needed to be driven by whip toward this message. People were born with a hunger for it, which is why it became culturally hegemonic for half a century after Vietnam and Woodstock.

Contrast that with today. If sixties liberals were able to sell their message to the rest of the country by making music even squares and reactionaries couldn't resist, the woke revolution does the opposite. It spends most of its time constructing an impenetrable vocabulary of oppression and seething at the lumpen proles who either don't get it or don't like it.

Its other chief characteristics seem to be a total lack of humor, an endless, crotch-sniffing enthusiasm for hunting skeletons in closets, a love of snitching and decency committees, a fear of metaphor (woke culture is 100% literal), a mania for collectivist scolding ("Read the room" is this week's "Destroy the four olds!"), and a puritanical mistrust of humping in the apolitical context. The woke version of erotica is writing an article for the *Guardian* about how "ejaculating" skyscrapers are symbols of cishnormative dominance. They make the Junior Anti-Sex League seem like Led Zeppelin.

The question isn't whether or not "cancel culture" exists. The question is, without canceling, what would this culture be?

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