The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture

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ABSTRACT. What are the moral implications of cancel culture? If it is viewed as a means to achieve social justice, we might be more inclined to say that cancel culture is morally good. However, one could argue that cancel culture has too harsh consequences or involves immoral – even hateful – behaviour. We propose that cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for (at least) two different kinds of 'cancelling'. Cancelling is often seen in public debate as punishment. Following Radzik's objections to social punishment we argue that this kind of cancelling is morally reprehensible. However, cancel culture as an umbrella term also includes other kinds of cancelling. Many also refer to cancel culture as a phenomenon when someone is being called out or held accountable for their supposedly problematic behaviour. Such cancelling does not need to be punishment, but is often rather an attempt to remove privileged access to the public sphere. In this way, cancelling is used as a tool for redistributing attention: it can (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere. We conclude that cancel culture as a whole cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because 'cancelling' can be used as a tool for both punishment and redistribution. Each have their own moral implications: cancelling as punishment is reprehensible, but cancelling to redistribute attention might be less of a problem.

KEYWORDS. Cancel culture, social punishment, social justice, social media, public sphere, attention

I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon 'cancel culture' has been subject of much public debate. On the one hand, it appears to be a good thing related to social and political justice, attacking those who express what the 'cancellers'

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think of as problematic worldviews. Eve Ng defines cancel culture as "[…] the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues" (2020, 623).

'Cancelling' can include people refusing to buy certain books or stream certain shows or movies. Literal cancellation can likewise be the effect. Comedian Louis C.K., for example, saw his show cancelled after some fans accused him of sexual misconduct. Sometimes cancel culture involves an attempt to literally silence a person. When musician R. Kelly was exposed in the documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly* (2019) for sexual harassment and abuse involving several under-aged women, the hashtag #MuteRKelly was widely spread on Twitter.

Cancelling can be highly effective and severely damaging to the lives and careers of the public figures involved. Consequently, cancel culture as a phenomenon has followed a trajectory of being initially embraced as empowering to being denounced as emblematic of digital ills (Ng 2020). Politicians, pundits, celebrities, academics, and everyday people alike have narrativized being cancelled into a moral panic akin to actual harm, associating it with a fear of censorship and silencing (Clarke 2020).

What are the moral implications of cancel culture? If it is viewed as a means to achieve social justice, we might be more inclined to say that cancel culture is morally good. However, one could argue that the consequences of cancel culture are too harsh or involve immoral – even hateful – behaviour.

The present contribution analyses the moral implications of cancel culture. We will illustrate our arguments with a particular cancel culture case, as a thread throughout the following pages. We will start by clarifying this particular case to show what the phenomenon of cancel culture entails. We propose throughout that cancel culture is used as an umbrella

term for (at least) two different kinds of cancelling. First, we explain cancelling as punishment. Following Radzik's objections to social punishment we argue that this kind of cancelling is morally reprehensible. Second, we explain how a different kind of cancelling is aimed at removing someone's privileged access to the public sphere. In this way cancelling is used as a tool to redistribute attention: it can (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere. We conclude that 'cancel culture' as a whole cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because 'cancelling' as a tool can be used very differently, with different ends and consequences. Each have their own moral implications. We argue that cancelling as punishment is indeed reprehensible, but using cancelling as a tool to redistribute attention might be less of a problem.

II. The Case of Carissa Pinkston

At only 20 years of age, Carissa Pinkston seemed to have everything going for her. An international super model on the rise, travelling the world for renowned fashion designer Marc Jacobs and artist and beauty entrepreneur Rihanna's lingerie brand Savage X FENTY. Pinkston could have become the new international modelling superstar, had she not been 'cancelled' over the course of the summer of 2019. The trouble started in May, when a number of transphobic Facebook posts surfaced that Pinkston had made under the name Rissa Danielle. On May 23 she wrote:

> Being transgender does NOT make you a woman. It makes you simply transgender (Hermstad 2020).

Pinkston had deleted the posts, however, screenshots of her remarks began circulating widely on social media a few months later. Within a short amount of time the posts had drawn a wide audience, leading to famous Twitter users with a large following retweeting images of

Pinkston's posts. "It started to spiral out of my control," Pinkston later reflects (Hermstad 2020). People started to call her transphobic. Elite Model Management, the company that represented Pinkston at the time, consequently brought her back from a job in Japan and fired her two weeks later. The supermodel on the rise was now suddenly without a job and under massive scrutiny. The storm did not die down. In what Pinkston later calls the result of "taking some really bad advice" (Hermstad 2020), she tweeted another post that caused even more controversy:

> I wasn't ready to come about it yet but today I got fired and I've been receiving hate mail and death threats ever since so I'm being forced to tell the truth. I'm Transgender. I transitioned at a very young age and I've lived my Life as a female ever since. It's been very hard to keep this secret but what I said about Trans-Women is a direct reflection of my inner securities and I have since come to realize that I am a Woman. WE ALL ARE! (Hermstad 2020)

Pinkston is not a trans woman. "I did it out of spite, 'cause I was upset that […] transgender people called the agency and got me fired," Pinkston later said when she appeared as a guest on the Dr. Phil show (Hermstad 2020). A week after her false coming-out, she admitted publicly in a tweet, that she had lied about being trans. Online commentary increased rapidly, and the fact that Pinkston kept defending herself did not diminish it. Pinkston was announced '#cancelled' by many social media users. Several trans people and others supporting the trans community called out her behaviour. Model Aaron Philip, who is openly trans herself, tweeted:

> […] imagine being a model who got exposed for being a raging transphobe/saying extremely transphobic shit in the past and then resorting to LYING ABOUT BEING TRANSGENDER ONLINE FOR CLOUT IN ATTEMPT TO SAVE YOUR CAREER...? (Philip 2019)

There were much more hateful comments, too, according to Pinkston. The hate mail and death threats reportedly got significantly worse. The online commentary had 'huge consequences' and had 'affected her life'

(Hermstad 2020). On July 26 Pinkston eventually apologized in a tweet for any transphobic remarks she had made. The tweet ended with an appeal to understand her learning process:

> […] I'm only 20 and I'm human. I make mistakes but I refuse to let them define me. I hope you all can forgive me and move on from this incident and I'm not a coward. I'm taking some time to reflect on my actions and I hope you all can try to understand (Hermstad 2020).

All her posts have since been deleted, but screenshots of the posts keep surfacing online. In December 2020 Pinkston appeared on the Dr. Phil show in order to "take accountability for her actions" (Hermstad 2020). On the TV show she tells psychologist and TV host Phil McGraw that she wants to make amends and possibly reparations – and move on with her career. "I refuse to let this define me," Pinkston repeated several times during the interview (Hermstad 2020).

The Pinkston case illustrates several features of cancel culture as described above: a public figure is being held accountable for statements or actions that are deemed problematic, which has severe consequences such as Pinkston being fired from Elite Model Management, and a firestorm of condemnation and indignation on social media. Pinkston notes that the online behaviour has affected her life immensely, ranging from the burden of receiving hate mail and death threats to her international career suddenly coming to a halt: no agency wanted to hire her because of the controversy around her name (Hermstad 2020). In the following sections we will come back to this particular case to support our arguments. We propose that cancel culture is an umbrella term for (at least) two different kinds of cancelling. On the one hand Pinkston got punished by social media users for issuing transphobic statements. This led to the collapse of her career, which could be viewed as both a part of the punishment as a consequence of it. However, we could also say that by cancelling Pinkston, people were holding her accountable for her behaviour. Pinkston later admits she was in the wrong, apologises and puts emphasis

on a learning process. Furthermore, by calling Pinkston out, the trans community did (re)claim attention and recognition, by claiming several platforms to amplify their views. The latter seems more related to social and political justice and less to punishment. Even in this one example, cancelling as a tool is used in different ways. In the following sections we will explain these two different kinds of cancelling and their moral implications.

II. Cancelling as (Social) Punishment

Bouvier and Machin (2021) express their concern that social media tends to extremes, moral outrage, lack of nuance and incivility. In this light, cancel culture is often viewed as an immoral practice. One could argue, for example, that great harm is being done to the person who is cancelled (hereafter 'one-cancelled'), or that the person that is cancelling (hereafter 'one-cancelling') has ulterior motives, such as wanting to display how virtuous they are. One could also question whether the brutality of the call-out is disproportional to the original offence. In line with recent social media scholarship we can ask: "[…] what are the risks in cases where campaigns seek to cancel individuals in relation to perceived transgressions against specific issues of social justice?" (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 308). What happens when, what may well be good sentiments relating to social justice, are communicated on social media as a violator is dealt with?

Linda Radzik (2020) has connected this online behaviour ('call out culture' and 'online naming and shaming') to her theory of social punishment. One could argue that cancel culture consists of cancelling as a tool to punish someone for a (supposedly) problematic remark or action. If we view cancelling as a person being harmed, or having something taken away from them, it would follow to think of cancelling as some kind of punishment. According to Radzik's framework, this would be a form of *social* punishment, as there are no legal authorities involved.

In *The Ethics of Social Punishment: The Enforcement of Morality in Everyday Life* (2020), Radzik defines the term social punishment as follows: "Informal social punishments are just non-legal forms of authorizes, intentional, reprobative, reactive harming between people who are not acting within hierarchically-structured institutional roles" (2020, 9). Radzik emphasizes that the difference between social and legal punishment lies in the fact that social punishment does not entail a clear, hierarchical, institutionalized structure. While legal punishment involves being punished by a clear authority, for example a public prosecutor, social punishment lacks this kind of authority and hierarchy. In legal punishment, the punishable acts and the corresponding punishment are enshrined in law. In social punishment this is different: there are no clear guidelines for what counts as punishable. There is no clear authority on both what is punishable and what the punishment should consist in. This poses a few problems for cancel culture.

Radzik raises some practical objections to social punishment in general and applies them to 'naming and shaming in social media' and concludes that in the light of all of these risks of injustice and mischief, this online behaviour looks like a particularly problematic method of social punishment (Radzik *et al.* 2020, 59). We will now address some of these objections. They support the argument that cancelling as a tool for punishment is morally reprehensible. The objections Radzik mentions are especially relevant to cancel culture as it is viewed today. Radzik is able to capture what those in the public debate have so often brought up against cancel culture: the lack of opportunity to defend oneself, the disproportionality between the wrongdoing and the consequences of cancelling, a fear of losing freedom of speech. After discussing Radzik's objections, we will briefly illustrate how this captures those voices in the public debate who are opposed to cancel culture as a whole. We conclude that cancelling as a tool for punishment is indeed morally reprehensible.

First, Radzik discusses the lack of authority that is prevalent in cancelling. As briefly discussed above (cf. the difference between legal and social punishment), the absence of a clear, official authority makes it

harder for the accused to make their rectification and defence accepted. This objection also includes the fact that in legal punishment, the accused are able to defend themselves before any punishment is issued. In the case of social punishment, and hence cancelling, there is often not a fair possibility for the wrongdoers to defend themselves. A person who is cancelled will not have the same opportunity to be fairly heard (and thus treated) as an accused person in court. On social media, the one cancelled can be overloaded by hatred and condemnation so that attempts to defend themselves are often rendered insignificant. Defences are often overshadowed, and in some cases the one cancelled will even worsen the situation because of backlash. In the case of Pinkston, the situation got significantly worse when she started to reply to the hateful reactions (Hermstad 2020), defending her earlier comments.

A second objection that Radzik discusses concerns the disproportionality between the wrongdoing and the punishment (2020, 53). For legal punishment, the proportionality of the punishment is an important principle in punishing a wrongdoer. In cases of social punishment, cancel culture included, disproportionality of the punishment as unfair condemnation compared to the wrongdoing can be a tremendous problem as there is no authority involved. As Radzik states, online naming and shaming does not lend itself to much nuance (2020, 53). Hence, social punishment lacks clear rules which protects a wrongdoer against disproportional consequences. In the case of Pinkston, we can ask ourselves whether it is fair and proportional for her to be receiving death threats over transphobic posts on the internet. In cancel culture, the condemnation of a single wrongful action may lead to harmful punishment of the one cancelled.

This can lead to another problem Radzik mentions, namely the accumulation of harmfulness (2020, 53). Where cancelling does not allow for much nuance and proportionality, there is also often no point at which the harm against the one cancelled can be stopped. Radzik argues that this can set off a firestorm of indignation, when online naming and

shaming becomes uncontrollable (2020, 53). Accumulation of harmfulness is a typical problem for cancel culture as it often viewed as a bloodthirsty witch hunt, which is led by an angry mob causing a snowball effect of harm against the one-cancelled.

Fourth, social punishment can lead to unintended consequences such as a chilling effect on speech (Radzik *et al.* 2020, 55). According to Radzik, social punishment may in some cases lead to consequences that bring more harm than good. It not only tends to inspire backlashes, but it can also cause people to decide to not express themselves at all because of the risk to be publicly shamed (2020, 55). This might lead to mitigation of our freedom of speech and the loss of benefits of the moral discourse.

These objections and particularly those concerning a fear of speaking out, have been a popular argument against cancel culture in public debate. In July 2020, Harper's Magazine published "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" also known as "the Harper's Letter". The letter was drafted by five people as a defence for freedom of speech and was signed by 153 scholars and writers, including academics at Princeton University and Harvard University amongst others. They object to cancel culture and refer to 'an intolerant climate' and 'constrictions of liberal society' (Chatterton *et al.* 2020). The letter conveys exactly those objections that Radzik poses: they deem cancel culture as disproportional punishment and worry that "[…] the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal" (2020). They add: "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away."

Another objection Radzik raises against social punishment, is the way a wrongdoing is determined in the context of the circumstances. Radzik's point is that we should never value an act independent from the circumstances. Pinkston makes this objection herself when tweeting that she is 'only 20', referring to her young age and that she is in a learning process. She asks of the one cancelling to take these circumstances into consideration, asking not to be too hard on her.

Besides these *consequences* of cancel culture, one might also see problems in the *intention* of the one cancelling. According to Radzik, a more general problem with social punishment is that it is often driven by retributive motives (Radzik *et al.* 2020, 26). The retributivist view holds the idea that wrongdoers have to be punished for the sake of suffering, in order to 'get what they deserve'. It is a repugnant bloodthirsty view as it makes suffering an intrinsically valuable goal of the punishment (Radzik *et al.* 2020, p. 26). Cancelling as a tool for punishment may sometimes seem to revolve around retribution, i.e. trying to get even with the wrongdoer. It could be understood as the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' principle, where the punishing party thinks the wrongdoer themselves should be harmed. In the case of Pinkston, people expressed their happiness that her career was over and that they enjoyed the fact that Pinkston was now the one who suffered (Hermstad 2020). This might be an additional reason why cancel culture is viewed by some as a bloodthirsty endeavour, a witch hunt.

A final relevant objection to social punishment, also related to intention, is the vulnerability of ulterior motives (Radzik *et al.* 2020, 54). Radzik argues that a punisher should always morally pressure the wrongdoer to make amends, but that their motives are often different in reality (2020, 54). The ulterior motives objection describes the idea that the motives of the one-cancelling are not always focused on redemption, but on showing off their own virtue in pointing at someone else's vices. In the case of cancel culture as social punishment, we can draw an interesting parallel with the idea of moral grandstanding by Tosi and Warmke (2016, 210). Moral grandstanding holds the idea that an agent wants to be recognized as a virtuous person by other members of the moral community. Tosi and Warmke claim that moral grandstanding is a harmful endeavour for the public moral discourse, as it is a self-aggrandizing, self-promoting act of vanity (2016, 211).

Applying Radzik's objections for social punishment to cancel culture as a phenomenon, we can see the moral dangers of cancel culture. We conclude that cancelling as a tool for punishment is indeed morally

reprehensible. This theoretical elaboration explains often heard arguments against cancel culture in the public debate. However, in the following section we will show that all that is referred to as cancel culture in the public debate, does not always consist in punishment. Cancel culture as an umbrella term encapsules other actions, too. Cancel culture is also referred to when people are calling someone out and hold them accountable for their behaviour. This is not the same as using cancelling as a tool for punishment and thus Radzik's objections would not hold. Not all uses of cancelling as a tool are as problematic as sketched above. In the following sections we analyse this 'call out' part of cancel culture and how its moral implications diverge from cancelling as a tool for punishment. We conclude that cancel culture as a whole cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because it consists of different kinds of cancelling with each their own moral implications. Cancelling as a tool for punishment is reprehensible, but a different kind of cancelling might be less of a problem.

III. A Different Kind of Cancelling: Removing Privileged Access

Cancelling does not need to be used as a tool for punishment. It can also be used as a helpful tool for a collective of typically marginalized voices to call out and express their censure of a powerful figure. Cancelling a person, place, or thing has its origin in queer communities of colour (Clarke 2020). Black Twitter – the meta-network of culturally connected communities on the microblogging site (Clark 2015) – made the language of being cancelled into an internet meme (Shifman 2013). Later, the #MeToo movement, aiming at exposing the scope of sexual harassment and assault, 'turbocharged cancel culture' (Ng 2020, 623). Former film producer Harvey Weinstein did not have the social media profile to be dramatically cancelled, but a number of subsequently accused figures did, such as comedian actors Louis C.K. and musician R. Kelly.

We can situate cancel culture as a phenomenon within the Habermasean concept of the public sphere (1989). Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere must be understood as an idealized public sphere: a realm of our social life which functions as a public discussion arena that is open to 'all' as opposed to private affairs (Habermas 1989, 27). This concept describes a form of the public sphere that is accessible for everyone, but critics (cf. Fraser 1990) have argued it is merely an idealized view as access to the public sphere is limited to the bourgeois. Sociologist James Davison Hunter declares that "[…] public discourse is a discourse of elites. […] The power of culture is the power to define reality, the power to frame the debate, and that power resides among the elites" (1991). Access to the public sphere is thus limited to those with privileges.

We argue that cancelling can also be used as a tool to *remove someone's privileged access* to the public sphere. We agree with media studies scholar Meredith Clarke (2020) that any examination of cancel culture must begin with an analysis of the power relations by which it is defined. Since social media is extremely accessible in comparison with (earlier) forms of access to public discourse, one might argue that the Habermasean concept and its critique of being elitist might not apply here: how can one have privileged access to the public sphere if virtually everyone with an internet connection can enter this new public sphere?

However, we can understand privileged access as the epistemic authority that some people have, as their voices are heard more frequently or taken more seriously than other, more marginalized voices (Fricker 2007). Miranda Fricker argues that statements by members of particular groups are systematically neglected or discredited, for example when negative social stereotypes are associated with them (2007). On the other side of that coin are those who have epistemic privilege, are being listened to, followed, liked and retweeted. While Fricker is mostly referring to social identities (e.g. gender or race), there seems to be an important additional dimension to this when considering cancel culture. Fame and celebrity

ensure privileges: people are put on a pedestal. Celebrities have a large audience and enjoy greater epistemic authority than the non-famous, all other things being equal (Archer *et al.* 2020). Celebrities' access to the public sphere is not limited to social media, of course. Celebrities like Pinkston are given attention by news outlets and are invited for TV shows. Privileged access to the public sphere can thus both be seen as *literal* access, as *epistemic* access.

Cancelling consequently can be viewed as an attempt to remove (or lower) this pedestal. Cancelling is, as Clarke puts it: "[…] a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in) action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time and money" (2020, 1). Social media as the public sphere allows millions of everyday people to "[…] leverage networked collectivity and a sense of immediacy to demand accountability from a range of powerful figures" (Clarke 2020, 3-4). The aim of cancelling is that these powerful figures should no longer be looked at as (epistemic) authorities, but as people with problematic views.

While the above analysis of cancel culture focuses on the one cancelled, Hannah Arendt's concept of the public sphere adds another perspective to this, which focuses more on the one cancelling. In *The Human Condition* (1958) she describes the public sphere as a place for human flourishing: a shared space where people can meet and discuss topics they deem important. In the public sphere people can express their beliefs and make themselves be seen as an individual: show who they really are (Arendt 1958, 41). Mutual recognition among these individuals in the public sphere can trigger political activity.

There has been much scholarship that has celebrated the potential of social media in democratisation and social justice. Because of social media we are allowed to hear the stories of marginalized people, formerly lacking a platform to speak (Castells 2015). Consequently, we can become more aware of injustices that are being done to them. In line with Arendt, Alexey Salikov discusses how social media as the new public sphere

functions as a breeding ground for online activism (2018, 89-90). Marginalized people now have access to several platforms with a worldwide audience where they can address what concerns them. They are not only able to be heard, but also to share their ideas and mobilise themselves and others. Bouvier and Machin (2021) note that "[…] hashtags such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are some of the high-profile cases bringing formerly more concealed social injustices into open view". If we think about mainstream news media as communicating elite ideologies top-down into society (Van Dijk 1998), social media allows voices from below to speak back (Clarke 2020). There is potential to challenge problematic views or ideologies that are carried in the mainstream news media. The callout on social media platforms such as Twitter is a form of activism undertaken voluntarily to protect the particularly vulnerable in online spaces (Nakamura 2015). We can view some cases or actions within cancel culture in this light: people can express their discontent or aversion against privileged public figures, when those figures express problematic views. Social media allows people to actively express they are against the ideas of this public figure.

We have now looked at cancel culture through critiques of Habermas' notion of the public sphere which reveal the public sphere as more accessible to the elite, adding to this notion of access Fricker's theory of epistemic authority. Furthermore, we looked at Arendt's concept of the public sphere as a breeding ground for political activity, and recent (social) media scholars' accounts of these platforms' ability to amplify (previously) marginalized voices. By doing so, we propose that cancelling can also be used as a tool to reduce someone's epistemic authority and privileged access to the public sphere, as opposed to the bloodthirsty witch-hunt it is often conceived as. Reducing someone's epistemic authority and privileged access to the public sphere in turn reduces their ability to issue any other statements that are seen as problematic by the one-cancelling. In the following section we will discuss the moral implications of this kind of cancelling.

IV. Punishment *versus* Redistribution: The Case of the Privileged

We agree with Radzik that there is no moral value in punishing a wrongdoer for the sake of punishment. Similarly, if the one cancelling does so out of ulterior motives such as moral grandstanding, we would not categorize such a practice as morally good or permissible. If the one cancelling is cancelling for the sake of punishment or out of selfish interest, cancelling is indeed morally wrong. We understand that in light of using cancelling as a tool for punishment, 'cancel culture' as a phenomenon receives much critique in the public debate.

However, in the previous section we have shown that cancel culture as a phenomenon includes different kinds of cancelling. Cancelling does not need to be used as a tool for punishment, but can also be used as a tool for removing privileged access. We think that cancel culture as a whole is often wrongfully viewed as solely retribution or selfish interest. Not all kinds of cancelling have the intention to punish or seek out self-promotion. One *could* have these intentions, but it is not a necessary condition for all actions that are grouped under 'cancel culture' by the public debate. Critics of cancel culture as a phenomenon often underestimate that cancelling as a tool can be a way for marginalized groups to speak up and call out. Of course, such actions have different moral implications than punishment. We argue that cancelling as a tool to remove privileged access might be less problematic.

One could argue that removing privileged access to the public sphere is in itself punishment, and thus, following Radzik's objections, problematic. They might view the removal of privileged access to the public sphere as a harm, or having something taken away from them and conclude that cancel culture as a whole is a form of punishment. We propose, however, that removing privileged access should rather be seen as a *redistribution of attention*. Viewing cancelling in this light, the cancelled are not being denied something to which they are entitled. An analogy might demonstrate the argument: a rich person might complain that they are

being punished by high tax rates. However, it is wrong to view this as a form of punishment, as it is simply a form of redistribution of resources. One is aiming at equality instead of punishment.

Scholars have shown the link between 'callout culture' and marginalized groups. E.P. Johnson describes the practice as an 'indigenous expressive form' particular to the Other (2011, 434, 437, and 443). Clarke writes that the practice "[…] has been perfected by Black women, like our grandmothers, who let us know what they see, even if they don't directly say it; minors deprived of a sense of agency, who quickly learn how to detect and name adults' ulterior motives; and queer folk whose first line of defense is withering critique" (2020, 2).

Furthermore, Clarke similarly links cancel culture to the attention economy and describes why the privileged might view cancel culture as a practice that takes something away from them:

> In their attempt to separate Black discursive accountability praxes – calling out, reading, and cancelling – from their origins in the creative spaces occupied by the oppressed, and reposition them as a threat to their real and aspirational peers, elite public figures fall victim to their own worst fears: a realization that the social capital they've worked so hard for is hyperinflated currency in the attention economy (2020, 4).

Without using our proposed terminology of redistribution, Clarke describes cancelling as a tool for marginalized groups to focus attention on incidents that previously would not have been considered substantive enough to get attention by mainstream media: "Black Twitter's hashtag-driven discussion of these incidents, push the ever-present issue of everyday racism to the top of the news media's agenda" (2020, 3). She notes that the rapid mobilization in digital resistance and accountability practice among otherwise disempowered peoples "[…] compel us to identify who or what defines the disputed concept of the public sphere, who sets the rules of engagement, and thus what is considered 'talking back' to dominant discourses" (2020, 3).

Several of the Harper's letter signatories have been at the centre of this redistribution of attention. They critique cancel culture as a whole, focusing on disproportional punishment and a fear of speaking out as a consequence. Clarke argues that framing cancel culture in this way has found utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position (2020). Accountability feels like being 'cancelled', when you have experienced a world that has enabled you or let you get away with harmful behaviour for so long. The public discussion about cancel culture portrays a battle for attention between those Hunter conceived of as elites – what we have been calling 'privileged' here – and everyone else (Clarke 2020). Here the limitations of the Habermasean public sphere concept become clear, which privileges the elite class and allows no room for alternative and dissenting public, nor acknowledges relations between powerful and disempowered groups (Clarke 2020, 3; Fraser 1990, 77).

The signatories of the Harper letter seem indeed ignorant about these power relations. They write: "We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement." Of course, there is a risk for writers, artists and journalists who depart from the consensus, but this statement seems to render all those participating in cancel culture as more powerful figures than the signatories. Of course, this is not true: it would be absurd to say that bestselling author J.K. Rowling, who signed the letter, is more vulnerable than the trans women who announce her #cancelled on their social platforms. Rowling enjoys a great many privileges that these women do not.

Furthermore, this 'call-out' side of cancel culture can often be seen as an *attempt* to deny a privileged person access. Such an attempt from a trans woman calling out a celebrity like Rowling will often not succeed, since this celebrity's access to the public sphere is enormously privileged. Both the epistemic authority of being a celebrity (Archer *et al.* 2020), as her privilege as a rich, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual abled person play a role in her access to the public sphere. After Rowling was so-called

#cancelled for her transphobic statements, she still has more than fourteen million followers on Twitter. United States Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted in response to the Harper letter: "People who are actually 'cancelled' don't get their thoughts published and amplified in major outlets […]" (2020).

Those that denounce cancel culture as a whole as problematic, might be unaware of the differences in privilege that exist. The Harper letter worries that cancel culture can lead to a 'restriction of debate' (2020), which shows that those signing it might not see that the public debate is already restricted. It is not uncommon for the privileged to believe in a fantasy of equality, while remaining ignorant about the fact that people in reality are not at all regarded or treated as equal. For example, Clarke notes that Black counter-publics are conspicuously absent from the American public imaginary, which holds a lofty vision of newspaper op-ed pages, radio shows, town-hall meetings, and the like as forums of debate where a multiplicity of discursive publics are equally empowered to engage in debate and the free expression of ideas (Clarke 2020, 2). This simply isn't the case, as Clarke rightfully goes on to argue. Similarly, not everyone has equal access to the public sphere. Coming back to the analogy of the rich person complaining that they are being punished by high taxes, this rich person now has the wrong belief that everyone around them is enjoying similar wealth. For a person having this belief, it is only logical to think it is unfair that they have to pay higher taxes than others. When devoid of the reality of power relations, one fails to acknowledge the experiences of those that are less privileged. One might believe that their treatment is punishment, while in fact this is not the case. Similarly, one might write or sign a letter deeming cancel culture as a whole problematic, because they think of it as punishment, while they fail to see the privilege structures involved, and in turn fail to see that cancelling as a tool can be used very differently.

Specifically, in the attention economy, it is not strange that a dominant privileged group is unaware of its dominance. How can a privileged

group view the reality of marginalized groups when such stories don't reach the public debate? Marilyn Frye has called this 'the arrogant eye' (1983). The power to define reality, the power to frame the debate, resides among the elites, writes Hunter (1991). It is easy to remain unaware of this power when you are in a privileged position (cf. Iris Marion Young's *Five Faces of Oppression*, 2011; or Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence*, 2016). Some forms of cancelling can be seen as a cry for attention, since the dominant view can be ignorant of its dominance. Clarke notes that "[…] being cancelled – a designation, it should be noted, usually reserved for celebrities, brands, and otherwise out-of-reach figures – should be read as a last-ditch appeal for justice" (2020, 2). The accusation of cancel culture as a whole being problematic, much like in the Harper's letter, often comes from a dominant privileged perspective that is not used to hearing voices that deviate from this perspective because this perspective has been the default.

Some kinds of cancelling can thus function as a tool for what Sara Ahmed has called the 'distribution of attention' (2016, 216), benefitting intersectional feminist or social justice goals. Cancelling can function as a tool to (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized groups, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere.

Viewing cancel culture in this light, we can see that Radzik's objections do not hold for cancel culture as a whole. Take the disproportionality objection, for example. If we declare a celebrity that has issued racist, misogynist or transphobic comments #cancelled, in an attempt to reduce their privileged ability to issue any other similar statements, would that really be so disproportional? One could suggest that the disproportionality of cancel culture does not lie in reducing one's ability to issue problematic statements, but lies in hate speech or bullying. There is no question that such behaviour is wrong. Pinkston should never have received death threats. But such behaviour is not wrong because it is disproportional to the offense, it is wrong because it is wrong (period). Such behaviour does not need to be part of cancelling.

Secondly, opponents of cancel culture as a whole warn us that cancel culture can have unintended consequences, such as a fear of speaking out (cf. Radzik *et al.*, or the Harper's letter). But when taking privilege into account, we might want to conclude that it would be a good thing for the privileged who take up more space in the public domain, to not just keep taking up space but first listen to less privileged voices that were denied a platform to speak before. Thirdly, the objection of the lack of opportunity to defend yourself does not hold when we take privilege into account. People with privileged access to the public sphere have ample opportunity to defend themselves.

We can now see that for those who have privileged access to the public sphere, and enjoy much attention in this public sphere, cancelling is not always punishment in the way Radzik describes it. Yes, cancelling *can* be problematic, looking at Radzik's objections for social punishment. However, sometimes cancelling is *not* used as a tool for punishment, but as a tool to redistribute attention. Viewing this in the light of equality and social justice, this seems less of a problem.

V. Drawing Implications: The Pinkston Case

We can now draw some implications for the Pinkston case. Was cancelling Pinkston morally permissible? Or should we condemn the behaviour? We cannot view this an 'either/or' case. While we can in theory separate two different kinds of cancelling, this separation quickly becomes blurry when discussing real life examples. Some one-cancellers might have had retributive or ulterior motives, such as virtue-signalling. In such cases cancelling was used as a tool for punishment. Following Radziks objections, we cannot view such cancelling as a moral endeavour. However, we have seen that cancelling was also used as a tool to call out Pinkston's behaviour. This kind of cancelling can be viewed as an attempt to remove her privileged access to the public sphere, her pedestal coming from being a celebrity and international star on the rise. We cannot say that this entire

example of cancel culture was morally good or bad, just as we cannot say cancel culture as a whole is good or bad.

In this particular case we can see how cancelling as a tool can be used to (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives. The trans community did not only (re)claim attention and recognition by calling out Pinkston on social media. The controversy on social media lead to several media outlets portraying the story including voices from the trans community, e.g. the tweets of trans model Philip. On the Dr. Phil show, two Black trans women were invited to speak from their experiences and explain to Pinkston why her comments were considered harmful by more marginalized people. In doing so, the trans community got an opportunity to explain why so many people had called out Pinkston. Journalist and trans activist Ashlee Marie Preston explained to both Pinkston and the people watching at home: "[…] while we do have free speech, a platform is a privilege, it's not a right" (Hermstad 2020). In an attempt to remove Pinkston's pedestal so that she could no longer issue transphobic statements, the trans community was able to turn the event into attention for the trans community instead of focusing on Pinkston's behaviour alone. When having such an approach to cancelling, we see no moral harm in cancelling Pinkston.

However, this was not the only kind of cancelling that took place. As argued above, there is no question that hate speech or bullying is wrong. Using cancelling as a tool to punish someone is morally reprehensible. Furthermore, we should not be too quick in putting Pinkston in the category 'privileged' and in doing so dismiss all Radzik's objections. How privileged is Pinkston really and how disproportional was the reaction to her behaviour? In this light we cannot condone all cancelling behaviour against her. On the one hand she was indeed a supermodel on the rise, with a great following on social media. On the other hand, as a young Black woman working in the beauty industry, her privilege and epistemic authority cannot be compared to the privilege of Rowling or Louis C.K. We can question how much epistemic authority Pinkston really had and

consequently who was calling her out and in what way. Trans model Philip calling Pinkston out is nothing compared to a white cisgender male sending Pinkston death threats. Of course, we do not know whether such a thing has happened (i.e. what the identity was of the people issuing death threats to Pinkston), but we do think it important to make a distinction here.

We cannot separate the hatred Pinkston received from her identity. Kate Manne points out roles and standards of Western society, in which certain categories of people – e.g. women – are considered moral givers (2017). A 'good girl' gives, doesn't ask for anything, is expected to be grateful, owes things to others as opposed to being entitled to something – especially 'moral goods', such as attention, care, sympathy, respect, admiration. In such an environment, she is not entitled to her own opinions or stating them on social media. Manne further explains that we must understand misogyny as a characteristic of such social environments, in which women are susceptible to hostility due to the maintenance of these expectations. Moya Bailey coined the term 'misogynoir' to add the relevance of the woman's colour (2021). Misogynoir describes the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience. Race and gender do not play a role separately, but add up in terms of prejudices and expectations. Consequently, when a young Black woman like Pinkston does not meet these expectations, she receives an amount of hostility that an older, white, male counterpart rarely receives. While we think there is no moral harm in calling Pinkston out on her behaviour and claim attention for the trans community, we still think that the overall hostility against her was disproportional and at least partly can be ascribed to how society treats young Black women.

Furthermore, we want to make a case for allowing room for growth. One could argue that we should consider someone's circumstances and acknowledge they are in a learning process. One could argue that Pinkston is entitled to that opportunity of moral growth. We think Radzik is right in warning us for the lack of understanding for someone's circumstances

that might sometimes show in cancelling. But this does not refute our argument. With removing privileged access, we are not taking this opportunity away from the one-cancelled. Cancelling as a tool to remove one's privileged access, still allows the one-cancelled room for growth. It is the pedestal that matters here. Cancelling as a tool to remove one's privileged access and to redistribute attention, does not mean that we deprive Pinkston of a chance to learn and grow. Calling out does not mean 'shutting someone up forever'. The conversation that aired on the Dr. Phil show could function as an example: it called out Pinkston on her behaviour, reclaimed attention and recognition for marginalized groups while still leaving opportunity for Pinkston to acknowledge her mistakes and move on. The Harper's letter is right that we should refuse a false choice between justice and freedom, because "[…] we need a culture that leaves […] room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes" (2020). But many have interpretated this as cancel culture giving us this false choice, while that does not need to be the case. Some kinds of cancelling *can* work towards justice, when used as a tool to remove one's privileged access to the public sphere, without doing this person harm or denying them a chance to grow.

VI. Cancel Culture: Problematic?

We have showed that cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for different kinds of cancelling. We have suggested that these different kinds of cancelling each have their own moral implications. We agree with critics of cancel culture that some actions within cancel culture are indeed morally reprehensible. We first focused on cancelling as a tool for punishment. Following Radzik's objections to social punishment we have argued that this kind of cancelling is morally reprehensible. But we should not be too quick to condone cancel culture as a whole. Cancelling can also be used as a tool to remove privileged access to the public sphere. In this way cancelling is used as a tool to redistribute attention: it can (re)claim

attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere. Cancel culture as a whole thus cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because it consists of different kinds of cancelling with each their own moral implications. Cancelling as a tool for punishment is reprehensible, but cancelling as a tool for redistributing attention might be less of a problem.

A remaining objection to cancel culture as a whole could be related to the seemingly individual nature of the phenomenon. If cancel culture is aiming at social justice, why does it target individual wrongdoers? Why does it focus on individuals such as Pinkston? Furthermore, Bouvier and Machin worry that social media call-out campaigns run the risk of concealing the nature of the very things that they seek to challenge and certainly miss some of their most pressing features in our societies at this present time (2021, 308). The danger in individualising problematic behaviour is that we miss the wider patterns of which it is a part. Bouvier and Machin worry that it becomes "[…] a disjointed series of public events" (Lentin 2015, 33) and "[…] reduced to a question of individual morality" (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 312; Lentin 2018, 402).

However, using cancelling as a tool to remove someone's privileged access from the public sphere has the notion and acknowledgement of social power structures encapsulated. If cancelling focuses on the individual ulterior motives of the one cancelling, such as moral grandstanding, we think Bouvier and Machin are right to worry. Similarly, if cancelling is focused on individual retribution for the one cancelled, we can ask whether cancelling is ever able to discuss wider problematic patterns. However, as we have showed, not all instances of cancelling need to be viewed in this light.

Furthermore, focusing attention on existing power structures and accompanying harmful behaviour (e.g. Pinkston's transphobic statements) often proves helpful to focus on particular cases. As per the feminist slogan 'the personal is political': systems show in individual action. These

individual actions give us concrete examples. In calling out someone's problematic behaviour, we can point out individual cases as a window into structural problems. Furthermore, focusing on particular cases might make it easier to (re)claim attention: it is easier to get voices heard and get engagement for a particular case than getting this engagement for the overarching systemic problem. It is only through the particular that we can address some major societal issues. The neutral or supposedly impartial narrative has too often turned out to be the narrative of the dominant perspective, in which marginalized groups were given little to no attention. Using cancelling as a tool to redistribute attention focuses on the particular individual to expose and work towards a solution for structural problems.

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