

“Cancel Culture” and Its Perils

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Cancel culture or “call out culture” has been variously described as a way of holding institutions and people accountable, as the cultural boycott of offensive works and their authors, and as the ostracism of contemporary hated figures. As a form of public denunciation, as I prefer to see it, there is no question that it is a legitimate, and an indispensable tool of a vibrant democratic culture, especially as it allows the powerless to redress the abuses and the offensive behavior directed at them by powerful public figures.

It is by publicly calling out powerful and influential figures that, when successful, forces them to face the consequences of their denigrating behavior, which may lead to their resigning from their influential jobs in the public or private sectors, and in some cases notably those involving sexual harassment and rape, may subject them to civil and/or criminal charges and lead to their serving time in jail.

Even a hard-line opponent of “cancel culture” like the retired Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, has, in spite of characterizing cancel culture as wrong, bad, dangerous and vicious speech, acknowledged that “[it] is itself an expression of free speech.” (Alan Dershowitz, *Cancel Culture, The Latest Attack on Free Speech and Due Process*, Hot Books, 2020, 29).

As free speech, the democratic denunciations of cancel culture must be differentiated, however, from the McCarthyite Cold War vicious attacks whereby the state and a large part of “civil society” organizations repudiated and trampled on the livelihood and individual rights of a Communist and radical political minority which only a few years earlier had been considered a quasi-legitimate part of American society and which had a significant influence on the country’s cultural and political life. Even less should those denunciations be confused with the “*actos de repudio*” (repudiation acts) in Cuba, where gangs of people organized by the repressive organs of the one-party state gather in front of the homes of oppositionists throwing stones and screaming insults and slogans to intimidate and prevent those critics from actively opposing the government. Cancel culture provides a public voice to groups in society that normally do not have it, thus widening their right to free expression to redress the balance of power. McCarthyite attacks and accusations and the repudiation acts in Cuba reinforce the state’s power and destroy the right to free expression and association.

As a mechanism to redress the balance of power, the development of cancel culture has been aided by rapid technological change which has produced an open social media that has provided a public platform for the previously unheard to spread their views. Yet, the most important elements of “cancel culture” are quite old and long preceded the Internet. They are part and parcel of, for example, the militant tradition of the labor movement, like picketing the homes of employers to expose their exploitative practices to neighbors who might not have even known the picketed persons’ occupation or business, or consumer boycotts that have effectively used word of mouth techniques to spread the word.

Yet, “cancel culture” in present-day United States has emerged as a particular phenomenon on its own right, as a form of ideological and political warfare that has developed especially as a result of the breakdown of the polite exchanges that to a substantial extent dominated U.S. electoral politics for a long time in most parts of the country. For even though open racist name-calling continued to exist for many years in the political life of the southern United States, along with a coded language in the rest of the country that was not any less racist in terms of its intended message, there was a shared understanding among the political players of both parties about what was accepted political language. That understanding did not only apply to language, but also more substantively to overall conduct. Compare Al Gore’s prompt concession to George W. Bush despite the very strong case Gore had to question the validity of Bush’s election in the year 2000, with Donald Trump’s refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 election without any evidence to support his claim.

The momentous breakdown of the ostensibly polite party competition and the acceptable language used by Republican and Democratic candidates alike has so far reached one of its highest peaks with Donald Trump’s explicit, profound and very publicly expressed contempt for Mexican undocumented immigrants, women, and even physically challenged journalists. Impacted, and in a sense provoked, by this Trumpian political climate of offensive speech and oppressive behavior, particularly in the areas of gender, race and ethnicity, the victims have been, in turn, reacting and hitting back by calling out and denouncing and boycotting him and his prominent supporters. This new cultural climate extended to include political protests that did not directly involve Trump.

This new climate has become so intense that, for example, in the face of possible consumer boycotts, major retailers have taken the initiative to stop selling certain products in advance of consumer action. The case of Mike Lindell, the CEO of the My Pillow company offers a clear illustration of this dynamics: As someone who had become a public personality by virtue of his commercials promoting the sale of his product, Lindell openly supported Trump and his false claim that he had won the 2020 presidential election. He then complained that his company had been dropped by almost 20 retailers.

Lindell went on the warpath to discredit the boycott claiming it violated his right to free speech. This was clearly a specious argument. Mike Lindell has the individual right to speak on behalf of whatever person or causes he chooses. However, his exercise of free speech is, unlike that of many powerless right-wing individuals, inexorably combined with the power and resources he has as the owner of a company to advertise and propagate his Trumpian politics. Therefore, he—along with other individuals with economic and political power—has no right to expect from people who disagree with him (and by extension, with the role that his company plays in furthering his politics) to buy his products and contribute to his wealth which will end up benefitting their political opponents. In any case, if the boycott of Lindell’s products is an example of “cancel culture” as claimed for example by *The Washington Times*, the right-wing “Moonie” publication. (2/16/2021) that speaks well and enhances rather than detract from the democratic credentials of that culture.

The Lindell case also illustrates the nature of cancel culture as part of what sociologist James Davison Hunter called, in 1991, the “culture wars” of America. At that time, he used the term to

describe the fight that was then occurring throughout the US over abortion, gay rights, and religion in public schools. But then, in a 2021 interview with *Politico* ('How the "Culture War" Could Break Democracy,' May 20, 2021), he argued that the "culture wars" had gone beyond issues of family and culture and had expanded to include all aspects of the public, political life of the country, such as immigration and voting rights. In that process, the cultural conflict that had been taking place primarily within the middle class had expanded, under the influence of Donald Trump's presidency and his 2016 and 2020 electoral campaigns, to include sections of the white working class. According to Davison Hunter, the people participating in these culture wars from the right supporting Trump have been increasingly rooting their position on the right-wing white Americans' fear of extinction. In fact, this seems to be a growing concern among those people as indicated by the growth among them of the white racist and anti-immigrant "great replacement theory" postulating that a supposedly white and Jewish elite is conspiring to replace the white population with Muslims and other immigrants and people of color.

Cancel culture, however, is not historically limited to the present United States. As a democratic tool it has an indispensable role to play in even the most democratic society. Suppose for a moment that a socialist democracy has been established in the United States with worker control of workplaces as the single most important form of local democracy. Majority rule would determine what, how and when to do in the workplace in the process of carrying out the goals and directives of national democratic planning. But part of the minority who lost the vote, instead of going along with the majority and try to prevail the next time, might try to boycott the majority decision by, for example, refusing to work, thereby endangering the economic welfare of everyone in the workplace. How should a just and solidary majority respond? The behavior involved is certainly not criminal and therefore does not warrant the intervention of the judicial authorities. Another alternative would be to have the workers' council fire the boycotting workers. But that would endanger not only the latter's financial security but that of their dependents. Yet another alternative could be to have them tried by their co-workers for having violated the most elementary norms of democracy, solidarity, and mutual respect for the rest of the workforce by refusing to do work (thus becoming parasites of the rest of the workers) and then sentence them to being ostracized at work. This "calling out" measure has been part of the labor movement tradition in England where it is known as "being sent to Coventry," and was historically applied especially to strikebreakers. While the measure may seem harsh it would, in a crucial way, fit the nature of the offending act. As the boycotters ignore the majority, the majority responds radically ignoring and isolating them.

The limitations of American "cancel culture."

While on principle "cancel culture" as a democratic public denunciation is a necessary element of a vibrant and democratic life from below, the way in which it is implemented is affected by the political culture prevailing in various sectors of the American liberal and left milieu. The historical weakness of the American left, partly founded on the absence of a strong left socialist tradition for most of the country's history, has considerably diminished its ability to think in political terms—like how to get from where people are at, to where they could be, with what allies and social forces—and has led instead, to address political issues in terms of personal and individual shock and indignation.

Shock and indignation are surely indispensable requisites for engaging in protest, but by themselves do not lead to an effective fight against injustice. To do that, it is necessary to develop protest organizations that act based on a wide and long-range view of the whole society that will inform their political demands, strategy and tactics. This is especially important in non-revolutionary periods, when the crucial question is what demands can help to advance and radicalize the politics and consciousness of people, including those who have already been politically active and acquired some political experience, such as the politicized sections of the Black and other specially oppressed communities.

The weakness of the political socialist tradition has also contributed to other problems in the political culture of segments of the US liberal and radical milieus that impair, and in fact detract from, the effectivity of cancel culture as a tool for social justice. Some of them are illustrated in the case of the San Francisco Board of Education that decided, in January 2021, to remove Abraham Lincoln's name from one of its schools as a symbolic way to redress what the Board claimed was his role in the 1862 execution of 38 Dakota men. The removal was part of an overall decision to rename a total of 44 schools for similarly symbolic reasons.

Nobody would deny that symbolic politics are important, especially when it involves the elimination of offensive terms, such as the disappearance of the deservedly infamous N word, from acceptable public discourse. Shortly afterward (approximately from 1966 to 1968), the term Negro was replaced by the more militant use of the term Black. For the most part this reflected in a very significant way the changing relation of forces between Blacks and whites in the U.S. as a result of the increased mobilization and growing political and cultural power of Black people.

As important have been symbolic policies involving the removal of monuments honoring outright and clearcut oppressors, which have promoted the dignity, self-confidence, sentiments of vindication and pride among the oppressed, as in the cases of the 202 Confederate monuments and symbols, unambiguously representative of a reactionary racist past, that have been brought down since the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 (as reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center). But removing monuments honoring the Confederacy is very different from removing the name of Abraham Lincoln from a school, whatever the merits of Board's accusation against him. Unlike the confederate generals whose monuments and symbols were removed, Abraham Lincoln has more than a few things that can be said in his favor. That is why controversy regarding this historical figure is bound to develop, including substantial disagreement even within the Black community itself. The controversy and reexamination of Lincoln's actions has been taking place for many years: historians have publicly debated his record for a very long time and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future. But the main question here is whether settling Lincoln's balance sheet as a matter of *public policy* in an all-out public fight is the sort of controversy that American social movements should aim for.

There are times when division and disagreement strain the relationship among potential progressive alliances—like the relationship between Blacks, and people of Asian and Latin American origin in the case of affirmative action policies—may be unavoidable and even welcome. But is such division politically productive on behalf of some symbolic politics? Isn't there a sense of political proportion missing when we try to remove the name of Lincoln from a school? Is it the right time to propose or do that when there are other non-symbolic, substantive, and burning issues on the agenda, as the San Francisco Board of Education was facing at that same moment?

These are key political considerations that seemed to have been absent from the progressive radical Board political decision-making process. The Board had previously appointed a panel of community leaders to submit its recommendations as to how many of the school names should be changed. However, that panel did not include any historians, an issue that became very important when the media criticized the panel for making several historical errors such as when it claimed that the Paul Revere's Penobscot expedition had something to do with the colonization of Native lands, the reason given by the panel to propose removing his name from a school. Faced with mounting public criticism, the Board leadership retreated and tried to change the subject away from the elimination of Lincoln and other names because of their alleged crimes and misdeeds, giving instead entirely different and more benign reasons to remove the 44 names. Thus, Gabriela López, the then Board's President, told Isaac Chotiner, a *New Yorker* staff writer,

"Lincoln isn't going away, but our school district is taking this opportunity to highlight someone

else, highlight someone who normally isn't acknowledged but has contributed to the progress of people of color, or the progress of the community that we are serving in San Francisco." (Isaac Chotiner, "How San Francisco Renamed Its Schools," *The New Yorker*, February 6, 2021)

At about the same time, Ms. López, reflecting her change of mind, placed the school renaming plan on hold claiming that the debate over the renaming plan had been "distracting" and that the board would now be focused on reopening the schools safely as the number of coronavirus cases subside, at the same time announcing that "we will not be taking valuable time from our board agenda to discuss this [renaming of the schools], as we need to prioritize reopening."

It is clear that the Board was facing much more important and difficult substantive issues than renaming its schools that included not only re-opening them after their closing on account of the COVID pandemic, but also re-defining the academic criteria for entering an elite school, specifically the elite Lowell High School, and dealing with the public response, especially that of the Asian American community, to that change. With the purpose of making Lowell more representative of the communities it served, the Board had proposed to replace the old academic criteria with a lottery, not only gaining the enmity of the many Asian-American parents in the area, but also eliminating the notion of special education for the more academically advanced students (an issue that was not present in New York City, for example, where Mayor De Blasio's failed proposal to change the admission criteria to the city's elite public high-schools was to eliminate the very unfair one-day test and replace it with the sort of longer term academic criteria, such as grade point average, that were being discarded in San Francisco).

It is very hard to imagine how, under then existing political conditions, the San Francisco School Board would have had any political capital and even time to spend in renaming nothing less than 44 schools—especially when it often involved far less than clear cut cases—when it had at the same time to convince parents and the people of San Francisco, particularly those of Asian background, that a meritocratic education, even if it was being conducted in only one high-school, was not compatible with what a democratic public education should be about. Most difficult of all would have been to convince most of the Asian-American community that on balance they had far more to gain than to lose from affirmative action in such areas as employment and housing for example, than what they may have seen as a loss in a reduced admission to one academically advanced high school. In this context, more repeated and emphatic pronouncements, and actions against the growing anti-Asian racism—as well as against the continuing anti-Black and anti-Latin American racism— would have enhanced the Board's credibility with that community. But all of this would have required clear political thinking, in terms of priorities, including the necessity of principled alliances among oppressed groups, and a sense of proportion that the Board of Education lacked.

Thus, it did not take long before the frustrations caused by the renaming-the-schools fiasco, the pandemic and by the proposed admission changes for Lowell High School led to a recall election in which López, in addition to two other Board members, were ousted from their positions with more than 70 percent of the voters (but with approximately only a 25 percent turnout) casting their ballots to recall the three board members. Central to the election's outcome was the unusually large number of Chinese Americans who turned out to vote. (Thomas Fuller, "In Landslide, San Francisco Forces Out 3 Board of Education Members," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2022).

At the beginning of April, 2022, the new board voted to suspend the plan to rename a third of the city's public schools. In addition, in June of the same year, the new board rescinded, by a narrow margin of 4 to 3, a previous decision by the old Board that had received less national attention, but which nevertheless had very important implications. In the 1930s, a Communist painter named Victor Arnautoff, who had been Diego Rivera's assistant, painted several murals for George Washington High School as part of the Depression Era Work Progress Administration (WPA). One of

those murals, located near the school's entrance, depicted George Washington and visibly included Black African slaves and one dead native American as an open and clear denunciation of the Founding Fathers shameful politics towards slavery and the white genocide of Native Americans.

One could have expected the right-wing denouncers of critical race theory to have made a big fuss over the politics of this mural. Yet, the attack on Arnautoff's WPA painting came instead from some parents who claimed that the mural's images of death and slavery created a hostile environment in school and that they wanted to protect their high school age sons and daughters from that, and for that reason they wanted the painting eliminated (From the way the complaint sounded, one might have thought that the students to be "protected" were young children instead of the fourteen- to seventeen-year-old adolescents attending that high school.) In fact, the arguments wielded by the complaining parents echoed the tenets of the doctrine of positive thinking that recommends focusing on the positive and avoid negative, critical thoughts with the implicit message that emotional distress is somehow avoidable and unnecessary for personal growth, and of neoliberal thought that sees education, at the high-school and college levels, as an investment of time, effort, and ever increasing amounts of money from which students are to derive a pleasurable experience. (See my "A Socialist Approach to Free Speech," *Jacobin* (2/27/2017).

Opposed to this view, is the position that holds that education, especially after grammar school, is aimed at exposing young people to a wide specter of ideas that challenge their certainties, such as those regarding class, gender and race —the very thing that Arnautoff's mural sought to do—that might irremediably involve an uncomfortable experience for many of them. Profoundly blind to Arnautoff's political message, let alone to the implications of the Board's actions for artistic freedom and free speech, the Board headed by Gabriela López voted to remove the painting in 2019. As indicated above, the old Board's decision was rescinded by the newly elected Board in 2022. It did so after the Washington High School Alumni Association sued to prevent the painting's removal and a judge stipulated that according to the law, it was necessary to conduct an "environmental review" before anything was done to the mural. Although the new Board's decision can still be reverted in the future, this seems to have brought the mural dispute to an end. (Zachary Small, "San Francisco School Board Reverses Vote on Mural Removal," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2022).

The Right-Wing Political Counteroffensive

Threatened by the increasing left and liberal cultural offensive, which prominently includes the activities of "cancel culture" (although as we shall see by no means limited to it), the American right and extreme right have mounted a political and cultural counteroffensive of their own. To accomplish that, they have taken the road of legal and political coercion through state power, the very entity they have completely rejected and sought to dismantle when it comes to improving the life and welfare of most Americans. It is thus that, according to an *Education Week* analysis of April 1, 2022, bills have been introduced in nothing less than 42 states since January 2012 to restrict the teaching of critical race theory and limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism. Fifteen states have already introduced those bans and restrictions either through legislation or other avenues such as executive action. Most of those bills have forbidden the teaching of "divisive concepts" such as white people having an unconscious bias against Black people, or that the United States is a fundamentally racist country. A proposed bill in New Hampshire, for example, would ban teachers from advocating "any doctrine or theory promoting a negative account or representation of the founding and history of the United States of America." It is striking that the same right-wing politicians that have very publicly decried the teaching of what they call "politically correct" ideas as indoctrination are doing the same thing they so ardently denounced and, even worse, they are doing it by bringing in the coercive power of the state to impose their views on the students and teachers. Unsurprisingly, liberal, and left-wing opponents of these new right-wing laws have already filed lawsuits in states like Oklahoma and New Hampshire on the solid grounds that the laws deprive

teachers of free-speech and equal protection rights. (Sarah Schwartz, "Map: Where Critical Race Theory is Under Attack," *Education Week*, April 1, 2022).

Not to be left behind, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a potential Republican successor to Donald Trump as Republican leader and presidential candidate, signed in April 2022 the Parental Rights in Education Act, which bans instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade and stipulates that instructions in older grades must be age appropriate, a law that was branded by its opponents as "Don't Say Gay." De Santis has also used his supposed defense of "parental rights" to fight local school mask mandates for students. In addition, his administration has conducted a veritable witch-hunt even against math textbooks that have been rejected for their supposed "indoctrination" of ideas supposedly irrelevant to the teaching of mathematics. Another Florida law, known as the "Stop Woke Act," limits teaching on race and racism, including prohibiting instruction that would compel students to feel responsibility, guilt or anguish for what other members of their race did in the past. This witch hunt atmosphere has extended even to Florida's public universities where tenured professors have been subjected to new, unprecedented reviews to further limit their autonomy and job security. (Patricia Mazzei, "How DeSantis Transformed Florida's Political Identity," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2022 and Sarah Mervosh, "Back to School in De Santis's Florida, as Teachers Look Over Their Shoulders," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2022.)

The new laws approved by the right-wing legislatures and supported by governors of the same political persuasion clearly pursue an immediate electoral goal: to mobilize, with the help of the right-wing media, their electoral base to reclaim the control of the U.S. Congress, increase even further their control of state legislatures in the 2022 midterm elections, and go on to regain the presidency in the 2024 general elections. At a deeper level, the clearly coercive and anti-democratic nature of the laws approved by so many states confirm that, although that might not have been the explicit purpose of the right-wing legislators, the American right wing sees education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, not as a process aimed at encouraging rational thought and action and the democratic self-determination of the students, but as indoctrination into the sacred beliefs that ensure the permanence of ideological orthodoxy in the United States as an indispensable tool to reinforce the social and economic status quo.

It is important to point out that the right-wing offensive has had an impact beyond its own ranks and milieux, and has influenced mainstream Establishment figures, American and non-American. Thus, for example, in early 2022, the "liberal" Pope Francis criticized "cancel culture," arguing that "under the guise of defending diversity [it] ends up canceling all sense of identity, with the risk of silencing positions that defend a respectful and balanced understanding of various sensibilities." Later that year, "moderate" Democrat Andrew Cuomo, the former Governor of New York, blamed his forced resignation as Governor of New York on the "cancel culture" that he claimed has taken hold of the Democratic Party and the country as a whole. According to the former governor of New York, "twitter and newspaper headlines have replaced judge and jury." Since Cuomo could not credibly claim that he was forced to resign because of his political actions as Governor, he defended himself against the many women who accused him of sexual harassment and molestation, by focusing on his own *identity* as a man who is "old fashioned and out of touch" and consequently unable to keep up with shifting generational norms. (Luis Ferré-Sadurni, "Cuomo Re-emerges and Blames 'Cancel Culture' for His Fall," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2022).

But there is one aspect of left and liberal culture that has helped the right-wing offensive. That involves the way in which some segments of the progressive forces conduct their campaigns, namely their smug, self-righteous and morally elitist attitude, and the language they use to be understood only by those "initiated" in their ideology and practices. This has allowed the right to disguise and divert attention from the real problems of oppression and exploitation in the US exposed by the left

and progressive world and turn the table on them by labeling their opposition to, for example racism and sexism, as “political correctness” or, more recently, as “wokeness.” This is the way in which the political right has been taking advantage of, and appealing to, the real American realities of extreme individualism, celebration of success, lack of solidarity with the oppressed, and the relative isolation of white protesters from society to bolster and increase their own reactionary political forces particularly among the many who don’t even really know or have even met and conversed with a liberal, much less with a leftist.

Just as a matter of record: As Lance Selfa pointed out in 2015, the campaign against “political correctness” (PC) was consciously developed by the Right in the late 1980s and early 1990s to more effectively combat liberalism and the left. Before then, the term “political correctness” was part of the language of the left. At that time, Selfa noted, the term took on a number of meanings referring to such things as the adoption of “an ‘orthodox’ position on all political questions, and to conforming one’s personal and interpersonal behavior to one’s political ideals.” But as the New Left movements declined, the term adopted a more ironic tone as more skeptical activists poked fun at what appeared to be their comrades’ overly dogmatic stances. However, Selfa insists, “the term PC was definitely *not* used, as it is today, to excuse racist or sexist behavior” that is, to poke fun at or ridicule people for being staunch anti-racists or anti-sexists. (Lance Selfa, “The Crusade Against ‘Political Correctness’” *Socialist Worker*, December 8, 2015.)

It would be foolish and bad politics to deny or ignore the above-mentioned flaws just because the Right has used them to discredit the liberal and left causes and their work on that account. For they are real and it is something that is within our purview to understand and to change. Among the many reasons for its existence is the strong American tradition of self-righteous individualism and the moral elitism—i.e. we are “better” human beings than you because we “understand” what good and bad is and you don’t—that has also roots in American reform movements.

Although the American political scene has become significantly more favorable to liberalism and the left since the 1960s, and the forces of American socialism have significantly grown in the last several years, the socialist left, particularly the white socialist left, continue to face, outside of the mostly coastal big cities and university campuses, an indifferent if not hostile political climate. (It is no accident that a right-wing, racist and anti-democratic demagogue such as Donald Trump got 46.9% of the popular vote in the 2020 general elections. In that election, a record two thirds of eligible voters cast ballots, which marked a 7% increase in turnout since 2016.)

But there are indications that the current political situation may be more open to left-wing possibilities. For example, in 2019, a Gallup Poll found that 43 percent of respondents (and 58 percent among those 18 to 34 years old) thought that socialism would be a good thing for the country. While most of these people probably thought of “socialism” as an expanded and generous welfare state, it does point to the possibility of left change, as seen in the fact that millions of people of color and whites, in the largest demonstrations in U.S. history, marched under the banner of “Black Lives Matter” in hundreds of towns and cities in the spring of 2020.

It would be comforting to think that Hillary Clinton’s elitist reference to Trump supporters in 2016 as a “basket of deplorables” was an expression of her neoliberal, “moderate” Democratic Party politics. More likely, it was more a social expression of the elitism of a white middle class and highly educated Yale Law School graduate than of her specifically neoliberal political views, although the latter is obviously related to the former.

The development of a mass base for racist, misogynist, and anti-immigrant Trumpism in white America may have reinforced the understandable perception that most of the American people may be hostile or at least indifferent to the radical message and is not interested in any kind of political

dialogue with it. That the latter is precisely the kind of situation in which many young leftists and especially white liberals, may in practice come to agree with Hilary Clinton, however much they dislike her—that millions of Americans are politically hopeless “deplorables”—and have come to see themselves as holding the monopoly of intelligence and moral virtue. Many of these people delude themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, into assuming that the degree of individual “smartness” and formal education determines peoples’ politics ignoring the enormous weight of social factors such as personal experiences with oppression or the lack of those experiences, racial membership and social class, occupation, and even religious affiliation. Instead of relying on self-serving illusions, we may start by considering what may be peculiar about us, at least in terms of what we do and how we live, that affects other people’s perception of who we are, and reexamine the content, style, and presentation of our political message.

Editor’s Note: This article was edited to correct the first name of the former New York governor.