



The Right Wages its Own Cancel Culture War

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Lee Fang (LF): Our next guest is Thomas Chatterton Williams. Thomas is a staff writer at The Atlantic. He's the author of several books, including *Self-Portrait in Black and White*. His most recent book, which you can buy now, is *Summer of Our Discontent*, about the 2020 Cultural Revolution and how it reshaped society. Thomas, thanks for joining System Update.

Thomas Chatterton Williams (TCW): It's so nice to be with you, Lee.

LF: Great to see you. Well, could you first just talk a little bit about what motivated you to write this latest book?

TCW: I was thinking about all of the kind of upheaval that we lived through in 2021. And I started writing the proposal then about this moment I thought was a hinge point in which there was a kind of before and after. And the book was originally titled "Nothing Was the Same". And I thought that wokeness, the great awakening, had achieved a kind of lasting victory. And I'm really glad that it took me 18 months beyond the due date to complete the book because I was able to see that there was no such lasting victory in the culture war. And in fact, I was to anticipate by the end of the writing process, the kind of enormous backlash to the great "awakening" that we're living through now. So it started with a kind of critique and frustration with the social justice movement that had really dominated institutions and culture between, say, 2012 and 2023. And it has ended on a note of realizing that that was a moment of excess that began a new moment of what I think looks like even greater excess and authoritarianism.

LF: You write about how this wokeness or whatever you want to call it, really tested our commitment to liberalism, small L liberalism, these kinds of enlightenment ideas. And it's trickled into not just media and political activism, but artistic creativity, into education, into employer-employee relations and certainly policing. Could you talk a little bit about the profound impact of this movement?

TCW: Well, the idea that politics and political disagreements are the only framework through which we can see all of our kind of public and private lives really, I think, gained ground at this moment. I'm really tracking it between, say, like the death of Trayvon Martin and I would say, I really see an end date on it around October 7th, 2023. I think that that was when the culture shifted again and then it was firmly closed with the reelection of Donald Trump. But there was this idea that everything could be reduced, that everything could fit into a neat binary, oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/indigenous, racist/anti-racist and that we could just identify what was morally clear. We could see it clearly and we could force our opponents to see things the way we understand them or we could permanently silence them and drive them from the public sphere. This kind of oversimplified idea of the way that human life works is the great achievement of the woke era and it's really allowed a kind of perverse mirror image of it to either infect the right or to be really cynically utilized by the right. I've just been amazed at what has happened in the past, say, week even, with the kind of open abandonment, a kind of a disagreement with censoriousness, with cancel culture. The right is openly celebrating all that they decried that had been going on for the past 12 years or so.

LF: Let's talk a little bit about that. You recently wrote a short essay commentary for The Atlantic noting that there's this gleeful attempt to fire anyone celebrating or being perceived as celebrating the Charlie Kirk assassination. Many of the people who have been identified in this kind of cancellation campaign are not even celebrating. They're simply saying that they didn't sympathize or agree with Charlie Kirk's viewpoints or that they would not pay homage to him. That's kind of all been clustered together with extremists who are celebrating his death. And you open the piece by pointing out that in February, the very influential conservative activist, Chris Rufo, put down a flag post basically arguing that social media posts, quote, "no longer should be grounds for automatic social and professional annihilation". That was only a few months ago. Now he's leading this campaign or at least among the leaders of this campaign calling for the mass firings of mostly liberals, people on the left and extreme left, based on social media posts. What does that say to you?

TCW: It says to me that the principle was never dearly held, that it was an expedient way of protesting when there was less power available on the right. But once the sword of censorship was available to Rufo and his allies and people in government power now, they didn't have the ability to resist or they didn't want to resist using the weapon. And that piece that I wrote in The Atlantic was actually in reference to something else that had happened before the death of Charlie Kirk. That was about Rufo's campaign to get fired Doreen St. Felix, a staff writer at The New Yorker, because she wrote about Sydney Sweeney in a way that kind of excited the Right. cancel culture always or tends to operate with this desire to identify a kind of transgression and then dig through the wrongdoers past for further evidence of wrong-think or wrong-speak. And so they go back 10 years to when St. Felix is fresh out of college and find kind of stupid and I would say even racist tweets, but that she posted 10 years ago before she was even in her current job. And then there's this kind of online pile-on and campaign to try to force the employer to terminate the wrongdoer's livelihood. So it's just classic textbook cancel culture. And the piece was done and happened to publish right after this truly horrific assassination in Utah. The piece comes out and it's one of those situations

where people look at the headline and they deduce what the piece is about. And so everybody was arguing about the piece including Rufo himself in the context of this new and refreshed call to censor speech around Kirk's assassination, even though that was not something that the piece tackled. But I've been amazed and even today, just before we started talking, Vice President Vance gave a kind of astonishing address while guest hosting Charlie Kirk's program, asking Americans to inform on each other if they hear someone even speaking in a way that seems to celebrate or make light of Kirk's assassination. He's asking Americans to relay that information to those people's employers. It's one of the most hair raising things I've ever heard an elected official say in my lifetime.

LF: You were also part of an effort to kind of champion the principle of free speech in 2020 in the midst of this mass cancel culture of people fired for making the okay symbol that was associated, I think, wrongly with the far right or with white supremacy, people accused of wrong-think in their workplaces and on University campuses. If you look back at the people who associated with this Harper's letter on free speech and some of the kind of affiliated efforts to stand up for this principle, it seems like some of those folks are completely silent now in this kind of campaign of censorship we've seen over the last year. We've seen dozens of student groups shut down on university campuses for criticizing Israel or expressing pro-Palestinian sentiment. We've seen movie cancellations. We've seen people fired from their jobs for posting "Free Palestine" or posting the Palestinian flag. We've seen students who are here lawfully on Green Cards arrested and dragged into vans and put into some of the most draconian ICE facilities in Louisiana and Texas. Some of which – at least one of whom – simply for writing an opinion column calling for nonviolent protests of Israel. And as you mentioned, the Sweeney phenomenon, and now the firings around Kirk. We've seen example after example over the last year and a half of conservative-led cancel culture campaigns or censorship campaigns. Are you concerned that some of the folks who were standing for free speech in 2020 were fair-weather supporters of the principle?

TCW: Very much so. It's actually been astonishing how difficult it is for I think even people of good faith to maintain a kind of consistent position on free expression and viewpoint diversity. It seems to be something that most humans really are not fully in favor of when the rubber hits the road on issues or groups that they particularly care about. That's not to say all – there are many people who have been exemplary. People like George Packer who was one of the leaders of organizing and writing the letter. Yascha Mounk – there are multiple people. I think you and Glenn are people who consistently defend free expression and I can't think of an example of coming down on the side of repression. But it seems that a lot of people always have a kind of point at which they see us as an exception. And my issue is not like that issue. And I've been amazed at how many people identify speaking in a way that might make light of someone's even terrible murder as a line that you can't go beyond with speech. That strikes me as strange. It just came out of thin air, suddenly. Before last week, I had never heard that argument being so widely held. And now all of a sudden that has become the bright line that everybody says a new consensus has to be formed around.

But it's never been the case. I mean, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, there was widespread celebration about that. And there was a widespread, quite callous talk online and in person after Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were killed. I mean on and on and on. George Floyd – there was not unanimous respect paid for the dead after George Floyd. I mean this new notion that is coming from the very highest levels of government that one may not say even offensive things about the dead – it's crazy. And you also mentioned points of vehement disagreement on international affairs when it comes to Israel and Palestine. I mean, I think we should all be very concerned about this and it does seem to me that there's a very small – and smaller than I would have thought a few years ago – group of thought leaders and public intellectuals and academics who are fully committed to viewpoint diversity and free expression the way that organizations like FIRE are. It seems like we don't have many people who are really willing to defend that principle to the end.

LF: It seems like for a lot there's this cycle of revenge dynamic that left us. Certain activists associated with the racial justice movement, whatever you want to call it, there was a sense of betrayal that because of historical grievances that were very real, going back to slavery or Jim Crow and other associated forms of discrimination and oppression in American history, there was the claim that, okay, civil debate is out the window because of what's the point of liberalism or kind of pluralistic consensus building because we didn't experience that in the past. And rather than assert themselves and try to bring us back to these enlightenment ideas around civil discourse, free speech, equality under the law, individualism, the Right is now taking those kind of excesses from the "period of woke" and using it as their own kind of grievance pass, saying, oh, because the left stopped caring about free speech, stopped caring individualism, stopped caring the principle around colorblind viewpoints, now we are kind of affirmed in our own kind of excess, that there's no point in defending liberalism. How do you break out of the cycle and what do you think about this kind of analysis of the cycle?

TCW: I couldn't agree with you more. The pendulum swings and it seems that whenever it swings in the direction of the side that was out of power, there's no real desire to steady it somewhere in the center, somewhere to the left or right of the center. There's an urge to push it as far as it can go. And it's really moved to the right in the past six months, eight months. It swung so hard. And it seems that there's a kind of exuberance in saying that now is not the time for restraint, now is the time for an overcorrection that was long overdue. The foolishness in this kind of thinking, I think, seems evident to me. It's that there can really be no permanent culture war victory. So however long you maintain the pendulum far to the side that you prefer it on, it just guarantees that it will gain more momentum when it swings back the other way and you will eventually reap what you sow. And so I think that somehow the only way to break it is that some consensus on the group that is ascendant has to disavow using this weapon that is now in their hands. And that seems very difficult to do when you have the kind of political leadership that we have. It's not enough that intellectuals, I think, argue this point. You actually have to have some very responsible leadership that actually can get into power. And I don't think that that is possible so long as Donald Trump is the dominant force in American politics. He won't be forever, but whoever succeeds him, they

would have to do quite a lot to change the tone and tenor of this polarization that we're all enthralled to. And I think it will come in the near term.

LF: You're someone who interacts with students. You've been a visiting professor and lecturer at a number of institutions. A lot of the discourse around political violence and just kind of these arguments around free speech and cancel culture centers around universities. Are the students too left-wing? Are they too censorious? Are they too extreme or antisemitic? Are they breeding grounds now for extremism or violence or the celebrations of violence? Could you kind of just sort fact from fiction? When you talk to students, does the discourse, the national discourse fully reflect today's culture on university campuses?

TCW: You know, I really don't think it does. With the caveat that I haven't taught everywhere, I've guest lectured at a dozen colleges and I've taught mostly at one small liberal arts college. So it isn't representative of the whole country. But, you know, I have interacted with a lot of students. And in my experience, students can be quite politicized and they can have a kind of sense of moral righteousness that is probably characteristic of the young. Right? But in my own experience, the real kind of ideological rigidity is much more in administration and faculty than it is with students. You actually run into an enormous amount of group thinking conformity and fear and kind of a hostility towards independent thought among faculty and administration. And you can actually get students, in my experience, much more often to change their minds than you can grown adults whose career incentives rely around not becoming an example. So I actually feel very optimistic whenever I'm in a room full of 18-22 year olds, truly, on any of these campuses. I feel a lot less optimistic sometimes when I have to interact with some of my peers.

END

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