

MEDIA/PUBLISHING

Influential thinkers and writers call out cancel culture

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A Letter on Justice and Open Debate

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The below letter will be appearing in the Letters section of the magazine's October issue. We welcome responses at letters@harper.org

Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we also raise our voices against the second. The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump, who represents a real threat to democracy. But resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting. The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides.

More than one hundred influential authors and thought leaders have signed a letter calling out cancel culture. Image credit: Harper's

By DIANNA DILWORTH

As the world stands up against racism and sexism and other forms of discrimination, some thinkers are concerned that progress could be deterred by cancel culture a rigid way of thinking that prevents respectful democratic differences of opinion.

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Gloria Steinem, Malcolm Gladwell, J.K. Rowling, David Brooks, Margaret Atwood and Salman Rushdie are among more than 100 signatories of a letter published in Harper's Magazine entitled, "[A Letter on Justice and Open Debate](#)."

"The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted," read the letter. "While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty."



Louis Vuitton artistic director Virgil Abloh was called out for venting his frustration on looting on social media. Image credit: Virgil Abloh

Quick responses

Social media has given brands and their employees a megaphone, which is sometimes fired off too quickly. Call-out culture quickly intervenes and brands and consumers often end up having to apologize for their quick responses to real time events.

For example, when the George Floyd protests first began, Virgil Abloh, Louis Vuitton's first African American artistic director for menswear and founder/CEO of Italian fashion house Off-White, had to apologize after expressing his frustration over looting on social media.

Mr. Abloh's friend, Sean Wotherspoon, shared a photo of his Los Angeles vintage sneaker store Round Two after it had been looted.

"This is fked up. You see the passion, blood, sweat and tears Sean puts in for our culture," Mr. Abloh wrote. "This disgusts me. To the kids that ransacked his store and RSVP DTLA, and all our stores in our scene just know, that product staring at you in your home/apartment right now is tainted and a reminder of a person I hope you aren't."

Mr. Abloh's post was seen as tone deaf and he had to apologize and clarify his point of view.

"I apologize that my comments yesterday appeared as if my main concerns are anything other than full solidarity with the movements against police violence, racism and inequality," he wrote.

"Yesterday I spoke about how my stores and stores of friends were looted," he continued. "I apologize that it seemed like my concern for those stores outweighed my concern for our right to protest injustice and express our anger and rage in this moment ([see story](#))."

In the current world, Mr. Abloh was not able to express his frustration without being seen as lacking solidarity with the Black Lives Matter cause. The letter on justice and open debate calls out this kind of challenging scenario.

"It is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought," read the letter in Harper's. "More troubling still, institutional leaders, in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms."



Este Lauder Cos. board member Ronald Lauder was called out for supporting president Donald Trump. Image credit: Estee Lauder

Este Lauder Cos. controversy

Ronald Lauder, director on the board of beauty products giant Este Lauder Companies, has been called out for his support of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Recently, company employees have created a petition on Change.org asking for his removal from the board and gathered nearly 7,000 signatures.

Employees were specifically upset because Mr. Lauder personally donated \$1.75 million to support President Trump. Meanwhile, Este Lauder Cos. only donated \$1 million to the African American community, now deeply aggrieved over repeated police brutality toward the group.

"This total does not match, or exceed Ronald Lauder's personal donations in support of state-sanctioned violence," the petition said ([see story](#)).

While many employees and consumers may disagree with Mr. Lauder's political stance and his support of the president, in a democracy he does have a right to his opinion. Suggesting his removal for supporting the president is an example of this cancel culture that these thinkers are arguing against and protesting.

"Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes," read the letter.

"Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. 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."