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Adrian Daub, **The Cancel Culture Panic: How an American Obsession Went Global,** Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 224 pp, $18.00 (paperback).

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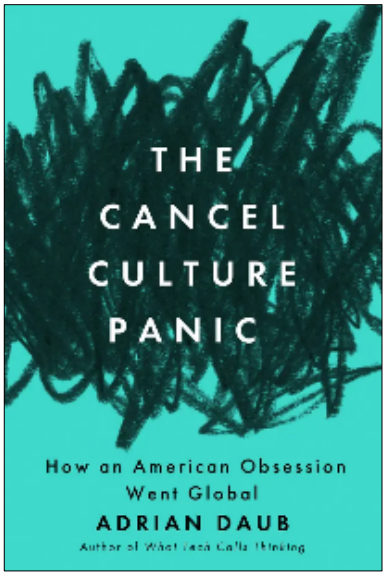

It is far more common for English-language texts about fundamentally U.S. phenomena—like "cancel culture"—to be translated into other languages for foreign audiences than it is for analysis of such phenomena in other languages to be translated into English for U.S. audiences. "Even if translated," adds Adrian Daub, there are aspects of such translations into English that "likely feel a little alien" to U.S. audiences (p. viii). It is therefore to Daub's credit that his own German-language take on cancel culture discourse not only warranted translation into English, but that this translation will likely sound far from alien to anyone vaguely familiar with its subject matter.

It would be inaccurate, however, to call ***The Cancel Culture Panic: How an American Obsession Went Global*** a simple translation of Daub's 2022 book *Cancel Culture Transfer*. Instead, as Daub explains, recent developments required him "to revise, expand, rearrange, and rework pretty much the entire book. This, then, is a book I essentially wrote twice" (p. 187). Ironically, the stated aim of this book about cancel culture that Daub wrote twice is to encourage us to pay less attention to cancel culture—in other words, to "change the subject" (p. ix).

Daub, who is a professor of comparative literature and German studies at Stanford, attempts to do this by presenting a global history—and, helpfully, a substantial *pre*history—of cancel culture discourse. While some chapters are structured chronologically, the book overall is mostly organized around themes such as the ambiguity of "cancel culture" as an observable phenomenon, the cancel culture story as literary genre, and the discourse's relationship to liberal politics. Throughout these chapters, Daub presents a wealth of evidence to support the five central claims he lays out in his introduction: (1) Cancel culture discourse is largely a reiteration of the discourses of previous culture wars against political correctness, wokeness, and identity politics; (2) These discourses constitute what Stanley Cohen calls "moral panics" (p. 3), governing an economy of attention in such a way as to preclude genuine solutions; (3) The term "cancel culture" must be understood in the context of its origins in online spaces—it is, essentially, a meme—and it is used in a way that simultaneously addresses, distorts, and reproduces very real problems with those spaces; (4) Cancel culture discourse inflates marginal anecdotes about isolated events in the United States into a global threat, regardless of distances in space and time; and (5) Cancel culture discourse *outside* the United States is not so much an import as it is the product of local conditions, in addition to prevailing attitudes toward American global influence.

Chapter 1 begins by highlighting the many contradictions in talk about cancel culture, which is fueled through the use and reuse of a wide variety of "tendentiously composed fables" (p. 20). To neutralize the "discursive shock and awe" (p. 41) caused by heavy, indiscriminate shelling with new terminological artillery, Daub traces the origins of "cancel culture" and its forerunners in chapter 2. "Political correctness," for example, was coined as an ironic, self-deprecating term by American communists in the 1930s. In chapters three and four, Daub turns to the central role U.S. college campuses have played in generations of storytellers' stoking of panics, and subsequently the central role these panics have played in generations of right-wing politics. Such panics fit neatly into the gap produced by the paradox of conservatives' simultaneous discomfort and fascination with higher education. However, these two chapters in particular might have benefitted from some additional editing, in part to resolve such apparent contradictions as claiming both that the campus has not changed all that much (p. 64) and that "the face of the average college student, the average college course, and the average curriculum have all changed fundamentally" (p. 73).

As thorough, insightful, and necessary as this book is, it is not without its blind spots. For example, chapter 5 focuses on the techniques employed in the production of cancel culture stories, such as the use of literary devices that simultaneously increase and decrease their complexity, as well as ignoring history to cultivate false nostalgia. But there is a striking irony here: Daub brings up the ongoing student antiwar protests without recognizing the use of these same techniques in a new moral panic over their "antisemitism" and "call for genocide of Jews" (p. 109). Indeed, one-sided narratives are propagated about protesting students, as well as the events motivating their protest, as they are told that these events are too complicated for them to understand and nothing matters that happened before or after "the October 7 attack on Israel" (p. 64). A phenomenon dubbed "the Palestine exception to free speech" on university campuses has been extensively documented (Haaken & Ruth, 2024; Palestine Legal & Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015). Meanwhile, leading scholars, human rights organizations, and intergovernmental agencies affirm that an actual genocide against Palestinians is currently being perpetrated in Gaza—one might say that an entire people is being brutally "cancelled." Daub's inability to perceive this, especially as a German, does not necessarily discredit his study of cancel culture discourse but is nonetheless disappointing.

From the techniques of individual cancel culture stories, Daub turns in chapter 6 to those used in the manufacture of entire moral panics, including the production and recycling of anecdotes by a conservative publishing ecosystem that has existed since the 1950s. It is a feature that surely deserves further attention, but Daub's focus is on following the ideas rather than the money. For those interested in exploring the inner workings of this ecosystem in further detail, there are texts such as Ralph Wilson and Isaac Kamola's (2021) *Free Speech and Koch Money*.

Another weakness of the book is that, although its subtitle promises to describe how this American phenomenon went global, discussions not centered on the United States are most often centered on Europe, especially the author's native Germany. Chapters 7 and 8 in particular are dedicated to cancel culture discourse in other countries, but the first of these (on the United Kingdom, Germany, and France) is significantly longer than the second (on Russia, Turkey, Brazil, and Argentina). In fact, the section on France alone is nearly as long as all of chapter 8.

The book's conclusion tackles a question that looms throughout: Having explored the relationship between these moral panics and conservative politics, why are so many of the people who are fomenting them self-professed liberals? Daub's response to this question contains valuable insights into both the appeal of cancel culture discourse and the fault lines of liberalism, but it possibly also reveals faults in Daub's own thinking. First is that Daub, despite his German origins, makes the common American mistake of assuming liberalism to be on "the other side of the political spectrum" (p. 173) from conservatism. Conversely, understanding these political ideologies as being adjoined, even overlapping, would likely go a long way in helping to explain their shared attraction to moral panics. This perspective also helps make sense of how Daub can describe libertarianism on one page as being aligned with "Christian values of conservatism . . . and anti-communism" (p. 83) and on another as "absolute liberalism" (p. 177).

Finally, Daub cites the fascinating observation that, without the specter of communism, conservatism since the end of the Cold War has instead turned against liberal democracy. Indeed, Republican politicians continue to repurpose well-worn Cold War rhetoric against anything and everything from cancel culture to the Democratic Party to government institutions. But where some might argue that such developments highlight the value of a global counterweight like the Soviet Union, Daub takes this opportunity to suggest that Republicans should instead direct their Cold War rhetoric at modern-day Russia—or, more specifically, at Vladimir Putin. Liberal democracy might have no problem with genocide in Palestine, but "Putin's invasion" of a European country like Ukraine calls for a defense "of the free world" (p. 170).

Although Daub distinguishes between translation and creation, some might argue that translation is intrinsically a creative act, producing with different words meaning that is similar but never quite identical to the original—like a cover version of a song. In much the same way, "cancel culture" appears to have already been translated by culture warriors into even newer moral panics about "critical race theory," "DEI," and, as mentioned above, "antisemitism." Nevertheless, and in spite of its shortcomings, *The Cancel Culture Panic: How an American Obsession Went Global* stands out as an essential text for both academic and general audiences looking to see through the cacophony generated by conservatives and liberals alike around such topics as Internet culture, higher education, and freedom of expression in the United States and abroad.

References

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