

Book reviews

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Sigal R Ben-Porath, *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2023. 208 pp. ISBN: 9780226823805, \$20.00 (pbk)

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Some of the most vexing issues in ethics revolve around tradeoffs between fundamental values such as individual rights and the greater good, privacy and security, freedom and equality. In contemporary politics, there is perhaps no better example of such a tradeoff than the one underlying the current conflicts that have roiled college campuses: the tradeoff between the value of freedom of expression on the one hand, and the values of inclusion, belonging, and social harmony on the other. Universities ought to host fierce debate and foster unfettered intellectual exploration. Yet in an increasingly diverse and polarizing society, we also want universities to be as inclusive and welcoming as possible – we want all members of the campus community to flourish. Since speech itself can powerfully exclude, we seem at a loss when it comes to reconciling these competing values. What is so compelling about Sigal Ben-Porath’s new book *Cancel Wars* is her meticulous, and largely successful, attempt to smooth out the apparent tension between them. She demonstrates that free speech and inclusion may not be so conflictual as we might have thought.

Her project is rooted in the particularly democratic role she envisions for universities in the wider context of society. She announces on the first page that ‘colleges are laboratories in which democracy is learned, practiced, and enhanced’ (p. 1). Colleges and universities play this role in two key ways. First, they produce and disseminate the shared knowledge foundational for building policy and navigating governance in a complex world. Politics needs a commonly understood reality to operate successfully. Second, universities ‘seed democratic habits and practices’ by fostering the interactions necessary for building trust and mutual understanding across diverse individuals (p. 1). These dual functions are vital in our polarized times, Ben-Porath observes in chapter 1. We seem no longer to know what or whom to trust, but universities are well-positioned to help.

In chapter 2, Ben-Porath considers, and ultimately rejects, three commonly proposed avenues for establishing a shared epistemic foundation for democracy. We cannot rely on (1) a clear delineation of fact from opinion, on (2) well-defined groups of experts and technocrats, nor on (3) public faith in institutional reliability. Rather, Ben-Porath

compellingly argues that the democratic project of universities is both an intellectual and a *social* endeavor. Networks of trust and shared knowledge result when the typical mechanisms of inquiry – exchange of ideas, expertise, research – are paired with social complements – friendship, discussions across difference, civic engagement with the wider community. The book recommends a number of concrete steps universities can take to cultivate these important social connections. Universities need to earn and maintain the trust of the public ‘through responsiveness to the critiques raised against them’ (p. 37) and by ‘taking responsibility for enacting and communicating their commitment to truth’ (pp. 49–50). Indeed, consider how marginalized a commitment to truth seems among all the ways universities advertise themselves today. Now maybe more than ever, we need to curate a better public image for universities, not least through an active resistance to the politicization of research. *Cancel Wars* proves a highly practical, yet theoretically informative, tool for the task.

In chapter 3, Ben-Porath takes up the complex relationship between harm and speech. The recent tendency to equate harmful speech with violence should be opposed: if we want to sort out these issues carefully, we have to have clear, morally accurate terminology (pp. 62–63). At the same time, we should recognize that speech can be deeply harmful, depriving individuals of safe, supportive workplaces or school communities (p. 64). How can universities identify truly problematic speech when it is often based on subjective reports? First, not all cases of harm constitute wrongdoing (p. 67). This distinction informs the criteria Ben-Porath recommends for responding to complaints of harmful speech. She advises against lists of forbidden words (pp. 74–75) as well as a reliance on civility (pp. 83–84), since both fail to take into account the nuances of context. Instead, she argues that complaints can be better arbitrated by investigating the speaker’s intentions and identity, their audience, and the pedagogical justification for the speech (pp. 78–83).

Here is where Ben-Porath helpfully begins easing the apparent tension between the value of free speech and the value of inclusion. First, she points out that free inquiry suffers to the extent that it fails to invite as diverse a set of perspectives as possible (pp. 64–66). We are all intellectually impoverished when certain groups or individuals choose not to join the conversation. Thus, inclusion can promote free speech and inquiry, fostering more vibrant intellectual exchange. Conversely, free speech, in the form of a healthy exchange of ideas, can itself serve as a means of inclusion (p. 76). Censorship, after all, is straightforwardly exclusive. And frank, open discussion about hard issues can build, rather than block, trust. With all this in mind, we need to establish university norms and practices that ‘rehumanize ideological opponents’ (p. 86), that provide ‘structured forms of engagement’ (p. 87), and that focus less on punishment and more on reconciliation. Although the book feels a bit meandering at times, promising insights for harmonizing free speech and inclusion such as these are abundant throughout, even if they could have been knit into a tighter and more stepwise argument.

The two final chapters further analyze the practical sides of this issue. Ben-Porath suggests that much of the conflict we see on campuses may be due to the fact that students are entirely unprepared for an atmosphere of free inquiry, since they experience nothing of the sort in prior schooling. K-12 teachers are often disincentivized from bringing controversial political issues into the classroom, and student speech has been

curtailed by court cases in the name of preventing a disruptive learning environment (pp. 92–95). This is clearly part of the problem.

The concrete recommendations in the final chapter are perhaps the most illuminating and practically useful part of the book. Here, Ben-Porath offers detailed guidance for students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Students need to be willing to collaborate across identity groups, and administrators can incentivize this collaboration by sponsoring social events between groups typically at odds (p. 151). Campus events can employ ‘free speech observers’, individuals trained in university speech policies who can intervene when necessary to ensure the speech rights of all relevant parties are honored, protestors and speakers alike (pp. 145–146). Faculty can be more deliberate about courting controversy in the classroom, constructing lesson plans with more care and attention to the issues (pp. 147–151). Her tips are applicable, actionable, and ethically wise.

The bottom line is that we find ourselves in a world historic crisis of distrust, disinformation, and polarization. *Cancel Wars* is the kind of book we need to help manage that crisis. Ben-Porath makes a strong case that the university should serve as a beacon in these troubling times – a facilitator of knowledge, speech, inclusion, and trust.

Lauren Bialystok and Lisa M. F. Andersen, *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2022. 232 pp. ISBN 9780226822181, \$25 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Emily Y. Tran, *University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA*

In *Touchy Subject*, the final volume in the History and Philosophy of Education series from the University of Chicago Press, philosopher Lauren Bialystok and historian Lisa M. F. Andersen examine past and present disputes over school-based sex education in the United States. In popular perception, sex education is fundamentally controversial, characterized by an irreconcilable conflict between conservative proponents of Abstinence-Only Until Marriage Education and liberal advocates for Comprehensive Sex Education. Bialystok and Andersen assert that this dichotomy distorts our understanding of the sex education landscape by obscuring ‘precious common ground’ – for instance, the shared goal that sex education reduce teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual violence – and diverting attention from other perhaps unexpected areas of contestation (p. 3). The history and philosophy of sex education, they argue, demonstrate that school-based sex education has not and cannot be a ‘static slate of facts’ but is rather ‘inescapably contextual’ and responsive to time and place (p. 4). Moreover, philosophical inquiry offers guidance for how to navigate disagreement and set the boundaries of what should or should not be up for debate in sex education practice. Ultimately, Bialystok and Andersen propose Democratic Humanistic Sexuality Education as a new framework for sex education curricula within and beyond classroom walls.

The opening chapters of *Touchy Subject* take an episodic approach to the history of sex education. The first chapter examines the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century emergence of classroom-based sex education. In the age of the independent and