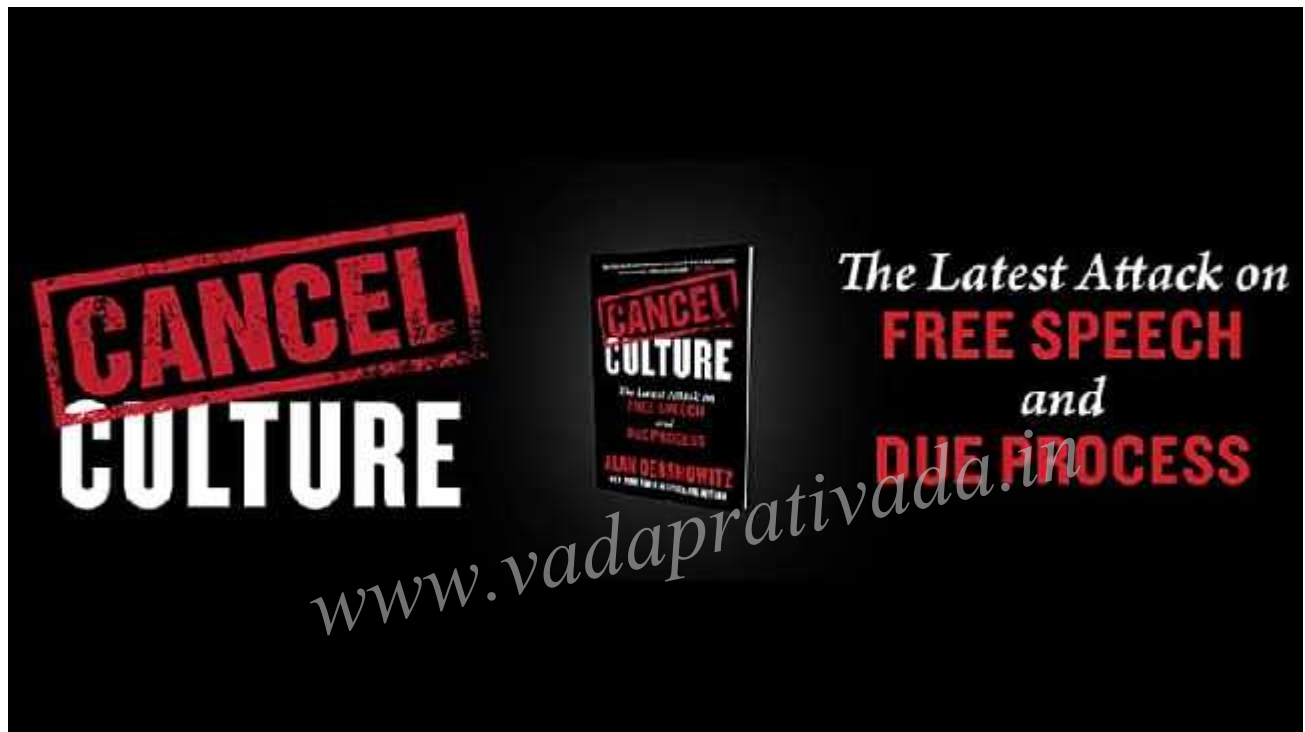


**[Book Review] 'Cancel Culture - The Latest Attack on Free Speech and Due Process'
by Alan Dershowitz**

Prof. Alan Dershowitz was a professor at Harvard Law School from 1964 through 2013 and is also a renowned American lawyer known for his work in constitutional law, American criminal law and civil liberties.



Cancel Culture - The Latest attack on free speech and due process'

Bar & Bench

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By Sridhar Potaraju

The reason for choosing to review this book is to bring the amazing work into limelight in India where the thoughts of the author would resonate with approval of the silent majority who suffer woke activism on streets and social/electronic media.

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The octogenarian author brings out in this book his views on free speech and due process which are the most cherished rights under the American Constitution. While standing for the right to free speech he highlights the need to have due process in a society driven by social media.

The book traces the social context in which 'Cancel Culture' has evolved into what may now be called an unguided missile in the hands of those who are literate but woke in understanding. The following excerpt from the book is quite telling,

"Cancel Culture, though a child of the current woke generation, is an illegitimate descendant of both hard-right McCarthyism and hard left Stalinism."

The author has very candidly called out how a mere accusation of racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Muslim bias, or failure to support Black Lives Matter or the #MeToo movement can destroy reputations ignoring lifelong achievements and accomplishments of the accused.

The book proceeds to draw similarities between the zealots of the current woke generation and the Stalinists and McCarthyites, ideologies which brook no dissent. The know all wokes have no regard for truth, facts or tolerate a contrary opinion for they form their opinions in thin air guided by some toolkit or a random hashtag which may be endorsed by some celebrity with or without consideration.

The idea of "The Truth" is questioned by the author and points to those who choose to disagree being labeled racist, morally inferior, or politically incorrect. The high priests of Cancel Culture are called out by the author by drawing references to several instances in recent memory.

One such instance which gives a glimpse into the effect of Cancel Culture even among people of the same ideology is worth reproducing here.

"Even leftists are sometimes cancelled by those to the left of them, as illustrated by a recent story in The New York Times. Professor Adolph Reed, who is a Black Marxist scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, was invited to speak to the Democratic Socialists of America's New York City chapter. Professor Reed planned on arguing that the left's focus on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Blacks undermined multiracial organizing. Throughout his distinguished career, Professor Reed has argued that race is an overstated concept and that the focus should rather be on class in a deeply unjust society. This position was offensive for some. They argued that Professor Reed's downplaying of racism was "cowardly and cedes power to the racial capitalists."

So the Democratic Socialists of America cancelled his talk. A crowning irony of cancel culture was when 150 public intellectuals, professors, and writers wrote a letter protesting cancel culture and did not include me among the signatories, despite my long history of defending freedom of speech, my extensive publications, and my fifty years as a professor. The only reason I was not asked to sign-while others far less accomplished and well-known were asked-is that I have been cancelled even by those who organized the letter opposing cancel culture."

The author while referring to how *The New York Times* remains outside any accountability despite publishing racist cartoon targeting Jews, modeled on one that appeared in Nazi Germany in 1940, observes:

“Cancel culture picks and chooses whom it targets without even a pretense of objective standards.”

This is a book for everyone who is shocked by the recklessness in social media driven campaigns without any sense of responsibility or accountability towards the one who is at the receiving end of such campaign.

Every society has fair play as an essence of their social discourse while dealing with disagreements except despots/ tyrants like Stalin or Hitler or their likes who would not stop from erasing people and events from history as part of their commitment to their ideology.

The author beautifully summarizes the intolerance towards the right to free speech of others, by the vocal supporters of free speech, in this simple phrase,

“Many among the supporters of cancel culture explicitly advocate freedom of speech “for me but not for thee”.

The need for objectivity and rational thinking while participating in the debates is very succinctly highlighted by the author. It is therefore all the more important for all to resort to objectivity in debates on issues which are bound to draw strong reactions having regard to our Constitutional values and ethos.

Cancel Culture is a contemporary commentary on the times we live in where we see hypocrisy and double standards on issues concerning free speech. One cannot but recall the reactions of some in the electronic and social media when one of them is targeted and contrast with how they react when the person targeted belongs to a group or ideology which they do not approve of.

We Indians are known to be argumentative but our traditional debates had structured references to how a debate is to be conducted by classifying them as Vada, Jalpa, Vitanda etc. A brief introduction to these concepts are easily available in digital world, if one searches for 'debates in ancient India'.

However, these methods of debate are neither discussed much less taught by our Universities and Law Schools for they may have been the earliest victims of “Cancel Culture”, which cancelled anything and everything not approved by the high priests in position of power and influence.

This book is for everyone who values the message more than the language in which it is or the identity of the messenger.

Sridhar Potaraju is an advocate practicing at the Supreme Court of India