Forum Response – Commentary

The hegemony of free speech

Dialogues in Sociology
2025, Vol. 1(2) 165–169

DOI: 10.1177/29768667251357798
journals.sagepub.com/home/dss


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Abstract

Sari Hanafi has written a scolding piece against a so-called crisis of free speech in society and, specifically, in universities. In this response, I comment critically on how Hanafi employs Symbolic Liberalism, cancel culture and identity politics to explore this ostensible free speech tragedy. I conclude by suggesting that free speech is always part of broader battles around hegemony in society, but not in ways often argued for by Hanafi.

Keywords

free speech, cancel culture, identity politics, hegemony, liberal theory, symbolic liberalism

In his article, 'Societal polarization, academic freedom, and the promise of dialogical sociology', Sari Hanafi (2025) contributes towards a more general narrative that claims we are living in a free speech crisis. Scoundrels abound in this tale, but none more so than a dastardly and specious 'identity politics', which is said to be bent on controlling and constraining what we might say in the public sphere. While reports of the near collapse of free speech through 'identity politics' have been around for years (see Fish, 1994: chapter 3), in our contemporary times there has been a noticeable change in the content of this familiar discourse. Nowadays, critics of 'identity politics' take to task the latter's apparent intentions to continuously 'cancel' the words they don't like being uttered in digital and real-world public forums (see Özkirimli, 2023).

Without doubt, Hanafi makes a number of very astute observations and points in his article, especially on Palestine and free speech. But one of his own unique *theoretical* contributions to this latest free speech broadside is, in part, his eye-catching intellectual festoon called 'Symbolic Liberalism' (SL). Defined by Hanafi as being 'classically liberal but politically illiberal', SL seeks 'to impose a hegemonic and deculturized conception of the good at the expense of a plurality of the conception of the good' and by inflating the importance of the 'universality of human rights'. SL asserts that only specific 'identities' should be the focal point for human rights, but it then embeds these rights in Euro-American versions. SL, moreover, tries to 'cancel' voices from digital media and other public spaces that it disagrees with and does so through emotional debate rather than through evidence and reason (see also Hanafi, 2024: 10).

Now, it seems to me that Hanafi's description of SL could apply to liberalism as a whole and not only to SL. Indeed, and as many other critical theorists have claimed (see Hoffman, 1988; Losurdo, 2014;

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Macpherson, 1973; Ramsay, 1997; Wood, 2012), liberal thinkers in their respective works more often than not espouse the positive attributes of values like freedom and equality while, at the same time, subtly excluding many from gaining access to them. That is to say, these thinkers are 'classically liberal, but politically illiberal'. J.S. Mill is instructive here. Mill is more often than not held up as the first modern liberal theorist of free speech (see Mondal, 2025: 30). Four principles guide Mill's defence of the 'liberty of thought and discussion': the need to be aware that our opinions can be fallible; the necessity for the collision of different opinions to establish truths; the elimination of prejudice; and the elimination of dogma. The only interference permissible to free speech is self-protection or the prevention of harm to others (Mill, 1998a: 15).

For all his popular image as a defender of free speech, however, Mill in fact believes that only those who combine liberty with a pursuit of 'higher pleasures' can be seen as worthy devotees of 'thought and discussion'. Grounded in an ability to already develop 'higher faculties' of reason, 'higher pleasures' refer to one's skill to deliberate about the relevance of particular actions that will promote happiness for oneself (Mill, 1998b: 140). 'Lower pleasures', by way of contrast, are associated by Mill with 'custom' and a 'herd mentality'. As I have argued elsewhere (Roberts, 2003), Mill suggests in places it is working-class public spheres which most exemplify a preponderance to entertain 'lower pleasures'. To a large degree, this is because, as Lloyd and Thomas (1998) note, Mill produced his famous musings on free speech at a period of time in British history that had witnessed the first nationally organised socialist political movement, namely Chartism. Importantly, Chartism carved out its own public spheres of free speech in British society, which advocated more inclusive modes of equality, rights and freedoms for ordinary people. It is therefore not unreasonable to argue that his famous tract on 'liberty of thought and discussion' is Mill's way of taming these socialist public spheres; to bring them within the orbit of a more constrained and restrictive liberal public sphere dominated by a peculiar middle-class sense of educated cultivation (Roberts, 2004; see also Passavant, 2003).

When one pieces together the history of liberalism, it is therefore soon apparent that varieties of liberal theory have been, to use Hanafi's own words, 'extremely divisive' in society. From a critical perspective, it is thus unclear what the concept of SL is trying to achieve. Sure, we know that Hanafi claims that 'identity politics' is embedded in SL, and the combination of both for him has been the cause of much discord across public spheres. Hanafi in fact goes further to argue it is 'identity politics' and SL which have been 'extremely divisive' in society, not liberalism per se. But this assertion minimises the acrimonious underbelly of liberal thought and practice highlighted in the previous paragraph. Besides, Hanafi's description of SL sounds fairly similar in parts to contemporary strands of liberal thought, such as deliberative theory, which consciously reproduce a liberal version of 'identity politics' (see Baumeister, 2000; Young, 2000). For what it's worth, I have issues with this liberal take on 'identity politics' (Roberts, 2025), but my point is to question why we need the new concept of SL in the first place to understand free speech when SL seems analogous to well-established liberal alternatives.

There are a number of other dilemmas with the use of SL. Hanafi, for example, makes a somewhat strange claim that those who espouse 'identity politics' problematically favour 'hybrid/tactical' political parties rather than 'traditional right/left parties'. It is unclear, though, why he thinks 'hybrid/tactical parties' are somehow undesirable. As studies show (della Porta et al., 2017), such parties, especially those on the left like Podemos in Spain, can enhance democracy and participation by their willingness to publicly discuss the failures and inequalities of austerity and neoliberalism. In other words, they engage in an emancipatory politics of justice, which one might think Hanafi would welcome. Still, Hanafi thinks that SL and identity politics are also closely related to 'cancel culture' and the censuring of debate, to which we now turn.

Cancel culture and academic freedom

Cancel culture, for Hanafi, signifies 'a high degree of intolerance in debates surrounding political,

cultural, and social issues, in which *taking sides and positions has taken priority over making sound and explanatory arguments*'. Naturally, this initial definition appears to be relatively straightforward. Yet, it in fact problematically accepts the discourse of 'cancel culture' rather than firstly unpacking it sociologically. We subsequently need first to pose what I consider to be more central questions about cancel culture: Why has the term, 'cancel culture', emerged in the public sphere at this point in time? Which groups are employing it and why? Which negative and positive social identities are being constructed in society through the use of 'cancel culture'? (see also Hall, 1994).

To gain some answers, it is instructive to go back to the origins of the term, 'cancel culture'. According to Romano (2019), the term first came to public attention back in 2014 on the US reality TV show, 'Love and Hip Hop: New York'. One cast member said to another: 'You are cancelled'. Soon, this term went viral. It was then appropriated by so-called Black Twitter – a mostly African-American digital culture which also engaged in and/or discussed socio-political activism. Cancel culture was used by this community to critique and publicly shame organisations and celebrities who were perceived to engage in racist and sexist expressions and speech. Unsurprisingly, Black Lives Matter and other progressive social movements became integrally linked to this specific culture. So, 'cancel culture' moved out of the digital sphere into public spaces of activism. 'Public shaming' was now employed, for example, to campaign against perceived racist statues and monuments in city squares (Beech and Jordan, 2021; Frank and Ristic, 2020).

In my view, it is not therefore by chance that after a wave of progressive social movements took centre stage, 'cancel culture' became a point of contention in society and was appropriated by different liberal and right-wing factions as a hegemonic propaganda tool and thus turned against these progressive movements and ideas. Interestingly, and as Franks observes, it is also the very ambiguity of 'cancel culture' as now employed especially by right-wing forces that lends it its potential hegemonic strength. 'The term is used to describe everything from students "feeling queasy" in class to professors being fired for innocuous remarks' (Franks, 2024: 70).

Those who say cancel culture stalks university corridors, of course, provide examples where they can in order to illustrate their claims, as does Hanafi. Repeatedly, however, horror stories of free speech being attacked by 'woke' students are found to be overstated (see Leaker, 2020). To give some more background context here, research by the UK government's Office for Students found that 31,545 speakers or events were approved at English universities in 2020–2021, while only 260 planned events did not go ahead. The proportion of events that did not go ahead was therefore just under 1% (Office for Students, 2023) – hardly an indication of mass cancellations in the UK university sector. Moreover, the UK's annual National Student Survey (NSS) now has a question in it which asks if students were free to express their 'ideas, opinions, and beliefs' during their degree. The first results from this new question in 2023, answered by around 30,000 students, suggested that 86% were free to express their beliefs, with only 3% who claimed they were not 'free at all' (*The Guardian*, 2023). Again, this doesn't indicate a crisis of free speech in universities.

Anyhow, getting bogged down in debates about whether or not so-and-so invited speaker was or was not 'cancelled' from talking at a university takes attention away from the more significant aspects of 'free speech' in higher education. From my own experience in the UK, the students I teach are preoccupied with 'getting by' and trying to earn enough money while studying to pay their high university fees and other daily living costs (see also National Union of Students, 2022), while academics are worried about winning research grants, getting published in 'top' academic journals, being monitored by external neoliberal university targets, or losing their job due to cuts and a funding crisis in the sector (see also Griffin, 2022). In their own way, these social factors, mediated through a neoliberal and financialised state, are more important on people's ability to engage in free speech than the issues highlighted in the hyped-up 'free speech crisis' narrative.

Conclusion

One conclusion I would make is that Hanafi tries to do too much in his article. He throws together too many issues, and it is often then difficult to follow his main arguments. As a result, his sociological analysis of 'free speech', 'identity politics' and 'cancel culture' often come together to act as a 'chaotic conception'. According to Sayer (1992), who draws on Marx (1973: 100), a chaotic conception, 'arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and inessential, thereby "carving up" the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form' (Sayer, 1992: 138). In Hanafi's case, for instance, he arbitrarily lumps together state policies that aim to regulate religious identity, particularly religious identities in the Muslim community, with trans activists who campaign against 'gender-critical' groups. But this is not to compare like with like. Some affinities might be made between these two cases, but they are also distinct topics that raise their own unique concerns and questions. In the case of trans activism, as Judith Butler (2024) has recently and cogently shown, it is crucial to understand the global and very specific socio-historical conjuncture through which a number of different forces have come together to try to create a hegemonic bloc that challenges the gains won over a number of decades by an alliance of progressive movements on gender identity. Simply to say this current struggle is just part of a generic 'identity politics' and 'cancel culture' does a disservice both theoretically and practically to critical thinking on this particular topic.

But this also raises what I think are crucial themes when discussing free speech. In my opinion, free speech is never simply a democratic value that somehow exists in a divine liberal sphere, which is then sometimes corrupted by brutish illiberal politics. To borrow from Stanley Fish (1994), there's no such thing as free speech as a pure liberal value. Free speech is, instead, constantly part of battles and struggles between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups to win support for their specific socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political agendas and projects (Roberts, 2023a; 2025; see also Smith, 2020). Free speech is therefore always mediated through competing hegemonic agendas, narratives and visions in broader strategies to win support from others in society and influence state power (Roberts, 2014; 2023b). Hanafi does recognise this to some extent in his article, but as I have suggested, he also adopts an unhelpful conceptual stance on many current free speech issues.

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Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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