

Cancel Culture: ‘Woke’, Yes – but Not ‘Woke’ Enough?

Denis Postle

I recently had a very rich if alarming educational experience... – a shocking encounter with Social Justice Theory.

Michel Bauwens, a long-standing colleague, originated the P2P (Peer-to-Peer) Foundation,¹ and since 2008 has curated and moderated its platform of Facebook conversations devoted to the commons, plus world-wide travel promoting their potential for a transition from capitalism and markets. He recently suffered a massive reputational attack.

The P2P Facebook forums introduction begins:

Welcome to the pluralistic and multi-perspectival forum to discuss all things P2P and commons!

P2P stands for open contributory systems where people are working together on a shared resource, which are called commons. Think of free software, open and shared design, but also cooperative car-sharing, renewable energy coops and the like. We share and discuss links that exemplify the emergence of that modality in our society, in all domains of life.²

A significant number of the participants in the P2P Foundation Facebook forums became unhappy with Michel Bauwens’ holding to this commitment to diversity. Failing to secure the exclusion of topics and contributions that they perceived as offensive, they branched to a separate grouping that issued a Public Letter of Dissociation,³ coupled with steps which ensured that a third of the worldwide network of allies who previously invited Michel up to a hundred times a year to give talks and attend meetings, ceased to invite him, crashing his income.

It started innocently enough, as he says: ‘In August 2018, I shared two texts by Jordan

Peterson on the P2P Foundation platforms that I curate; texts that I found interesting, without agreeing with them.’⁴

Jordan Peterson is a Canadian psychologist, writer and cultural critic; a critic of issues such as postmodernism, feminism, ‘white privilege’, transgender rights, ‘cultural appropriation’ and ecologism.

Sharing these two texts by Jordan Peterson sent me into a wokestorm. Some of the people leading this attack against me were professors, P2P contributors and even friends. There was no defence. Any attempt to counter the accusations of the identity politics warriors who attacked me was dismissed as a response from someone with ‘white privilege’, from an ‘old white man’, and thus an affirmation of my inherent racism and sexism. So I had no right to speak ‘because of my [white] skin colour’.⁵

Disagreements about how a network is managed or curated are commonplace; the P2P Foundation had 15,000 members in five forums,⁶ and splitting is a frequent-enough way of navigating such conflicts. But a public denunciation, an ‘assassination’ of Michel’s reputation and his livelihood?...

Why am I so interested in this? My share of the trauma of the attack on Michel has taken a couple of weeks to settle. I felt hurt because the P2P foundation has long contributed a valuable perspective on the Independent Practitioners Network (IPN),⁷ a grouping of UK psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors and related occupations that I belong to; I was one of the founders, and 25 years later I’m still a participant.

I learned from the P2P forums that IPN's non-hierarchical, decentralised 'power-with' governance was a 'commons', providing a big-picture perspective on what we were doing, and why it mattered. Might two decades of IPN commons experience offer some insight into the group dynamics of the P2P Network rift, and, as I later realised from these enquiries, the importance of IPN as an oral culture?

IPN has taught us that sustained commoning entails some resolution in participants of significant distressed learning in their personal history, whether traumatic or conditioned, and especially if it involves prescriptive authority, or undue deference. Otherwise, the flow of shared experience and decision-making become distorted by participants whose history leads them to chase privilege and dominance, or embrace subordination, or 'free-riding', or apathy.

In addition, our IPN implementation of commoning has shown that equality isn't enough: there needs to be 'equivalence', based on sustained contributions that build reputation, a tolerance of hierarchies of experience and standpoint, and, along with this, the immediate confrontation of open or inadvertent coercion, or claims of privilege.

How does this relate to Michel Bauwens' cancellation experience, and why might it have gone the way it has? I first heard about the attack on Michel from his account of it, 'How I ended up in a woke storm',⁸ which outlines the scale of the dissent that was being expressed by people quitting the P2P Network, and the emotional and material scale of the damage. A relative sent me the out-group's letter of disassociation with its signatories and the basis of their complaint, a huge appendix of P2P network email exchanges – *only* email exchanges, no face-to-face or group Skype/Zoom interaction.

The shock of reading this (and I have read all of it) was palpable – an act of violence, the 'de-platforming' of a previously highly valued

colleague, and acting to prevent his invited public appearances around the world. It was 'Cancel culture' on the doorstep.

While there were some sharp exchanges among the emails, I didn't come across abuse from Michel, or anything that would provoke a crisis in a facilitated Humanistic Psychology group. What there *did* seem to be was an insistence that some political, or politicised, topics, opinions and people were intolerable, and must be excluded, in contradiction to P2P policy and Michel's curation, both of which were explicitly devoted to diversity.

What struck me was less the often notably dubious quality of the topics and opinions that were being identified as problematic, and more evidently, the imperious righteousness of the demands that they had to be excluded, as though Peterson et al. were selling asbestos. Here were people apparently devoted to ending oppression, i.e. domination and exploitation, who were behaving as oppressors, not just removing themselves but killing the host.

Trying to understand this personal human tragedy has turned out to be tricky; other examples emerged,⁹ and enquiries into this intense local dispute grew to have much wider ramifications. Detailing Michel's cancellation shape-shifted towards a case study, with multiple proposals about what had occurred. The first candidate that intuition offered was that what had happened seemed to be an instance of the unconscious 'normalisation' of dominance, a notion that had emerged from my own campaigning and related activism in UK psycho-politics.

Many (most?) therapy clients bring to their sessions some version of past or present oppression, i.e. domination, coercion or discrimination. Despite this, the UK professional therapy organisations tend to be strongly hierarchical, market-competitive organisations with tightly policed boundaries that were (and still are) trying to take therapy into State control, i.e. to legitimise their

dominance. IPN and many allied practitioners opposed this huge incongruence, and participation in this opposition led me to research the extent to which domination seems to be an unacknowledged thread within human priorities. I began to see a ‘culture of domination’ that is tolerated, or actively embraced, as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’.

As evidence for this assertion you can browse my collection of visual instances of this generic culture,¹⁰ or view a video.¹¹

And a mea culpa: it took some painful reorganisation of my interpersonal style to let go of my skilled capacity, after two decades as a film director, to ‘run the show’ and, literally, ‘call the shots’. The move from running a film crew to being in and facilitating co-operative groups¹² was challenging, but I had some generous help. And it came with a price, eventually giving up film-making.

This decades-long experience of commons participation and research into the extent to which domination appears baked into us, like egg in a cake, suggested that the dissenters from Michel’s P2P commitment to diversity, to including a place for contrarian views, was an instance of unaware domination.

Another line of enquiry was to check how far Michel might be culpable. Was any of the ‘letter of dissociation’ justified? I read it all, a list of named supporters, a text and dozens of email exchanges. There did seem to be some impatience and frustration with how Michel, in recent years both curator and moderator of the P2P network Facebook forums,¹³ dealt with criticism and graduated sanctions for trolling, such as ad hominem attacks, but I didn’t see evidence of abuse from him.

The central objection was that it occasionally included items and topics that the objectors perceived as being politically so offensive as to require exclusion. Michel and P2P’s commitment to diverse voices was claimed to be harmful; as though there was a ‘true faith’ that had to be protected from disrespect, challenge

or even, perhaps, blasphemy, and that merited the destruction of Michel’s reputation.

But how come this dramatic disagreement around what matters in the human condition led to such a violent outcome? – as though the scale of Michel’s alleged transgressions had been criminal, fraud, embezzlement or assault? Why did the dissenters refuse to talk with, or meet, Michel? And aside from this, why had so many of his erstwhile supportive international institutions bought into the cancellation? As I later began to understand, perhaps there was something to be feared that ensured group and institutional compliance around the globe.

While I have not been a daily follower of the P2P network conversations, I eventually picked up that at the heart of the dispute, there did seem to have been an emergence of a ‘true faith’ which demanded stringent compliance, locally a form of intellectual terrorism.

My second-hand hurt drove enquiries into this collision of paradigms, and they showed that the transgressions that mattered, such as objections to any presence of Jordan Peterson, appeared to be of ‘articles of faith’ that belonged to an academic/activist movement, called ‘Social Justice Theory’.¹⁴ I read *Cynical Theory* by James Lindsay,¹⁵ a severely critical description of the movement, but one which gave a detailed account of it.

Some 3000 pages later, and more from other sources, I had a much better sense of what had happened to Michel, and why it might matter to the rest of us. I also learned that for Social Justice Theory adherents, even having given attention to the Lindsay book here, let alone to Jordan Peterson, would likely lead to disqualification and dismissal.

Social Justice Theory scholarship and activism hold that racism and the suffering of black, coloured and marginal groups are due to the ways in which white male supremacy is structured in current societies. You might expect that the voices of these groups should be equally privileged, along with equity, access,

participation and rights – actually, no: Social Justice activists want to privilege, via the ‘progressive stack’¹⁶ with its plus or minus points, and which puts ‘white’ people at the end of the line; old white male is minus three, old white jew, is minus 2 etc.... black, lesbian, fat, differentially-abled is plus 4; Social Justice Theory calls for active discrimination of present generations to compensate for privilege in past generations.

Alongside this, Social Justice Theory appeared to derive from essential and familiar original lines of enquiry: that objectivity is impossible; that knowledge is a construct of power; that societies consist of systems of power and privilege which need to be deconstructed. As Lindsay tells it:

...this view was made actionable in the applied phase in the 1980s and 1990s, which saw postmodernism fragment into postcolonial Theory, queer Theory, critical race Theory, intersectional feminism, disability studies, and fat studies. Subsequently, especially since 2010, these postmodern ideas have become fully concretized in the combined intersectional Social Justice scholarship and activism and have begun to take root in the public consciousness as allegedly factual descriptions of the workings of knowledge, power, and human social relations.

... the belief that society is structured of specific but largely invisible identity-based systems of power and privilege that construct knowledge via ways of talking about things is now considered by social justice scholars and activists to be an objectively true statement about the organizing principle of society.

A moral person aware of The Truth According to Social Justice must serve its metanarrative by actively asserting a Theoretical view of how the world works and how it ought to work instead.

Social Justice scholarship does not merely present the postmodern knowledge principle – that objective truth does not exist and knowledge is socially constructed and a product of culture – and the postmodern

political principle – society is constructed through knowledge by language and discourses, designed to keep the dominant in power over the oppressed. It treats them as The Truth, tolerates no dissent, and expects everyone to agree or be ‘cancelled’.

Except for the final sentence in this excerpt, ‘yes’ to all that; but overall, what Lindsay describes resembles an evangelical religion, albeit based on necessary and benign purposes, but where its missionaries study what people do and say, and check whether there are transgressions of a catechism that merit enforcement of compliance and excommunication; a religion where love appears to be absent. Lindsay continued with an outline of how cancellation can occur:

If enough activists have adopted enough Theory in the institution by the time the incident occurs – and there will always be an incident eventually as even a misunderstanding or faux pas will qualify – Theory will consume the institution. If it folds, it deserved it because it was systemically bigoted in the first place.

In an instance of this group dynamic, a subgroup of the P2P Network devoted to Social Justice Theory appears to have identified Michel as an ‘enemy’, i.e. someone to be destroyed.

Paradoxically, what Social Justice Theory seeks to attend to did seem familiar, and even essential.

Postcolonial Theory draws attention to imperial exploitation and the atrocities of slavery; the extent to which the underlying wealth of cities such as Bristol, Glasgow and Brussels derives from appalling suffering and white privilege.

Under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British government had agreed to pay twenty million pounds, the equivalent of 40 per cent of its annual budget, to compensate plantation

owners, and absentee investors, for the loss of their human property.¹⁷

More locally, some of us became aware of the parallel expropriation of commons in the UK; by 1800, there had been over 2,000 parliamentary bills that gave landowners the right to enclose commons and wastelands, leading to huge amounts of destitution.

Queer Theory was new to me, but it turned out to be active scepticism of categorisation, and how this defines what counts (often literally) as ‘normal’. Queer theory seeks to blur the boundaries between oppressive categories of sex (male and female), gender (masculine and feminine), and sexuality (straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual), which has been immensely liberating for many people; and for young persons this seems to increasingly means being diligent in exploring the options open to them. A local version of queer theory, long familiar to many of us, has been critiques of the oppressive quality of the psychiatric categories of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.¹⁸

Critical Race Theory¹⁹ began in the USA as the critical study of law and race. It developed to claim that race is a social construct that emerged as a way to maintain and justify white supremacy; that biological stories of differences which are social and cultural were being used to perpetuate the oppression of racial minorities, especially African Americans. And that the way economic, legal and political systems function, plus the language that is used, merit confrontation. ‘Yes’ to that also. However, as of mid-2021, eight US states have banned the teaching of Critical Race Theory in public schools.

Intersectionality²⁰ draws attention to the way in which everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – how the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class and gender create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. All of this

intersectionality needs to be acknowledged and honoured. A familiar notion for most therapists.

Disability studies, and fat studies open up exploration of how, given that objectivity is impossible, specialised knowledges based on lived experience need to be honoured, and the language which defines them deconstructed, so as to expose oppression. ‘Yes’ again, especially if it includes the incongruities and privilege of psychiatry.

But there seemed to be an element (or two) missing from both Lindsay’s account of Social Justice Theory and the P2P network assailants’ cancellation. Resisting injustice in the street entails showing up, being there, enacting some form of embodied confrontation with the oppressor or their agents. At least as expressed in the action against Michel, where was the feeling, the heart, the compassion, the body in Social Justice Theory?

People suffering from oppression can undoubtedly experience extreme urgency of need; but could this combination of intensity and urgency be being unhelpfully mirrored (via projection) by people in activist roles such as Social Justice Theory? Might guilt due to white privilege be contributing to the intensity and heartlessness driving the P2P cancellation? To put it another way, was the urgency of Social Justice Theory’s focus of support for the oppressed being reflected (again via projection) in the oppression of someone who refused to demonstrate that they shared their urgency; who didn’t subscribe to the Social Justice Theory Catechism?

This review of the background to Michel’s cancellation so far amounts to three propositions:

- That the core issues of Social Justice Theory were familiar and have a place in my therapeutic practice and that of colleagues.
- Secondly, that these valuable perspectives on the human condition seemed to have

become crystallised into a form of theology, inhabited by scholars and activists, that was primarily an academic, professorial, university and internet culture.

• Lastly, that over-zealous opposition to domination behaviour can reverse into mirroring it. Jung called this ‘enantiodromia’ – the tendency for opposites to reverse. Constructing and circulating a letter of disassociation, more accurately a denunciation, of Michel Bauwens, with many pages of claims of his alleged errors, entailed a lot of work for someone. Someone with a very urgent personal need to correct an error of faith? Urgency which, deconstructed, not only justifies a dominant act of oppression; a lack of compassion for a pre-loved colleague; but which reproduces the domination they claimed to be challenging?

A regretful withdrawal seems to have been impossible – spelling out what was no longer supportable and sadly acknowledging the qualities of their previous relationship, but without the international de-platforming. ‘Woke’, but not ‘woke’ enough?

As a preliminary conclusion, this might seem to be complete. But getting to this point opened up a wider 2021 context that seems relevant to anyone who engages with, or works with, the human condition.

How might the medium of the P2P network, as distinguished from its messaging, have contributed to this crisis?

The medium of the P2P network is the internet. There is also the sub-medium of Facebook conversations, which we will come to. This dispute opened up for me enquiries which suggested that the extent to which the exponential growth and reach of the internet as a medium has affected the balance between orality and literacy.²¹

Large sections of the global population don’t read or write, but their oral culture is now facilitated by the internet (and this includes

many people with modest education, who mostly read and write fragments of text), embracing audio-visual or phone chat, and for whom conveying a thought or an idea orally may better match the speed and intensity of urban life than does writing.

What might this tell us about the P2P debacle? Michel Bauwens’ P2P curation sustains the pre-internet ethos of literacy, a key feature of which is diversity; an oral, internet-savvy Social Justice tribe, its intensity and righteousness brewed up by Facebook algorithms favouring conflict, seeking censorship that would compromise the diversity of the P2P forum; and when its demands fail, it broadcasts a ‘cancellation’ in the form of an assault.

Alongside this, and just as important as a framing of Michel’s cancellation, is McLuhan’s anticipation of the internet medium as a ‘...cosmic membrane that has been snapped round the globe by the electric dilation of our various senses’.²²

The ‘global village’ continues to be a familiar notion, but less familiar, perhaps, is McLuhan’s 1962 take on it, that total involvement with one another is likely to breed conflict and terror. So unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence and superimposed co-existence.... Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time²³ – a prescient anticipation of recent decades that have been notable for an increase in ‘terror’, both perceived and inflicted, plus an increase in the intensity of tribalism.

This is the milieu that Facebook and the P2P Foundation (and the rest of us) inhabit. There is the internet as an open-minded enquiring ‘liberal’ literate milieu, an ‘attention power grid’ that is brilliant for facilitating intellectual and informational enquiry; seeking better ways to shape life and work than those dictated by capital; threaded through it is an internet with an

oral, tribal focus; who belongs to the tribe? Who speaks its language?

What does seem to have been emerging generally, and locally in Michel's cancellation, is several centuries of the domination of literacy being usurped by an oral politics. Brexit, for example. Ex-president Trump's twitter orality made the US literate media, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* etc., seem obsolete almost overnight (along with convincing a significantly oral sector of the US electorate that the 2020 Presidential election was stolen).

But to return to Michel, Facebook and McLuhan: here I have to declare attitude, because Facebook seems to me like conversations conducted through a key hole in a door and, very frequently, through a second keyhole, being read on a smartphone. As McLuhan²⁴ pointed out, for all their utility, all human technology extensions such as Facebook (and reading and writing), as an alternative to face-to-face chat, entail amputations of human capacity. With internet text conversations such as Facebook, the nuances of 'presence', body language, affect, breathing, eye contact and aural tone go missing and, with them, most of our capacity for catharsis, to catalyse and empathise.

Is it possible that the levels of intensity and urgency in this P2P Network dispute could have been resolved via face-to-face meetings? Michel insists that they were refused. So far as the nuances of physical presence are missing from Facebook, such a resolution looks to be way beyond its capacity as a medium.

At least in our local example, Social Justice Theory activists preoccupied with checking whether the language is compliant with the catechism of a theology suggests that the movement's apparent basis in the devaluation of objectivity was cosmetic. As though its origins in postmodernism had been forgotten.

Recently, refurbishing one of the films I made decades ago about high-energy particle physics²⁵ reminded me of its historic demotion of 'objectivity'; of the establishment of all matter as being pinched-up points in space, and depending on what you use to look, either a thing or a wave. Didn't the postmodern dissolution of objectivity follow, or build on, this? Appreciating that 'truth'²⁶ and 'facts' are creations of literacy or numeracy mirrors this core discovery of high-energy physics very well.

A huge opening in consciousness but, sadly, with an accompanying shadow. Only a short step away is the Trumpian oral dissolution of truth and, revealed by the Covid pandemic, a loss of faith in literate, numerate scientific and medical truthiness, that has led to anti-vax resistance.

For truth to have become fluid in these ways (it has) and as the pandemic, the 'war on terror' and the increasingly in-your-face uncertainty of climate heating sinks in, it seems likely that for many, especially young people, this psychic threat is generating a background of fear and anxiety.²⁷ Might this, in parallel, be unawarely adding urgency to Social Justice Theory activism, and driving this local 'mobbing'?²⁸ The creation of an unperson, a life's work sacrificed to still a pervasive panic?

Notes and References

- 1 P2PFoundation; see <https://tinyurl.com/vc9ymmcf> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 2 P2PFoundation, 'Welcome'; see <https://tinyurl.com/jmt3zkc7> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 3 Public Letter of Dissociation, available at <https://tinyurl.com/f564pxmv> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 4 M. Bauwens, 'How I ended up in a woke storm', available at <https://tinyurl.com/t6kb2pvf>; English translation at <https://tinyurl.com/cbexbyh7> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 5 See note 4.
- 6 P2P Public Forum, see <https://tinyurl.com/22jck6bw> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 7 Independent Practitioners Network (IPN), see <https://ipnetwork.org.uk/> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 8 See note 4.

- 9 H. Steel, *Book Fair Statement*, see <https://tinyurl.com/mnwk9tnm> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 10 D. Postle, Photo album: 'Culture of Domination', see <https://tinyurl.com/m9e5j964> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 11 D. Postle, video, 'Domination', 2018, episode 4 of *Messages from the Blue Planet*; available at <https://tinyurl.com/rr56ezbw> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 12 D. Postle, video, *The Nuclear State*, 2012; available at <https://tinyurl.com/nhu22n5c> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 13 The Dutch and Belgian P2P Foundations are autonomous non-profit organisations that have done EU-funded research; Michel Bauwens has no executive role in them.
- 14 Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, 'Social Justice Scholarship and Thought', Chapter 8 of their *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – And Why this Harms Everybody*, Pitchstone Publ., Durham, NC, 2021, p. 18, Kindle edition.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 'Progressive stack'; see <https://tinyurl.com/3x275n68> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 17 Sam Knight, 'Britain's idyllic country houses reveal a darker history', *The New Yorker*, 16 August 2021; available at <https://tinyurl.com/ycfa8csf> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 18 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of psychiatric disorders 'DSM-5'; available at <https://tinyurl.com/ye276bxx> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 19 'The basic tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) include that racism and disparate racial outcomes are the result of complex, changing, and often subtle social and institutional dynamics, rather than explicit and intentional prejudices in individuals. CRT scholars view race and white supremacy as an intersectional social construct, which serves to uphold the interests of white people at the expense of marginalized communities.'; Wikipedia, at <https://tinyurl.com/2pspn763> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 20 B. Taylor, 'Intersectionality 101: what is it and why is it important?', *Womankind Worldwide*, 24 November 2019; available at <https://tinyurl.com/exzbbwmb> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 21 Gutenberg's introduction of printing and reading and writing eventually made the previous oral tradition obsolete; the internet appears to be reversing this.
- 22 Khalid M. Easa, 'Marshall McLuhan's Understanding media: the extensions of man', December 2019; available at <https://tinyurl.com/2pvmmnub> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 D. Postle, video *Shadows of Bliss*, 1972–2021), Horizon, BBC; available at <https://tinyurl.com/kvjywdrc> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 26 Note 14, p. 97; 'Power works like this, for Foucault, "not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another".'
- 27 G. Thunberg, 'I want you to panic...' in D. Postle, video, *The Climate Tsunami*, 2020, available at <https://tinyurl.com/kmp3t6sn> (accessed 18 October 2021).
- 28 I arrived at this notion of sacrifice via intuition; Michel pointed me to Rene Girard's Christian theology, which sees such sacrifice as an essential, if dysfunctional, way of containing violence. See also David Cayley (ed.), *The Ideas of Rene Girard: An Anthropology of Religion and Violence*, indep. publ., Kindle edition.

About the contributor



Denis Postle: Eight years of art school, concluded with the Royal College of Art. Twenty years of directing broadcast documentary films morphed into Humanistic Psychology, initially via co-counselling and co-operative enquiry, deeply influenced by Anne Dickson and John Heron, and later co-running four years of Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP) facilitator training at the University of Surrey. Resistance to the occlusion of this self-directed experiential learning tradition by professionalised therapy trainings led to co-founding of the Independent Practitioners Network. Latterly I became a European, with a home and a wife in Brussels, a practice settled as 'human condition work' and a return to media production. Contact: <http://denis.postle.net>; wlr@postle.net.