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*When words destroy lives,
cancel culture, despite its
earlier good intentions,
becomes violent.*

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Speaker

**Prof. Umut
Özkırımlı**

Senior Research Fellow at IBEI

How cancel culture turned violent

Prof. Özkırmı on power struggles in social movements

We are excited to announce that Prof. Umut Özkırmı will speak about “cancel culture” at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.

Prof. Umut Özkırmı

Prof. Umut Özkırmı is a senior research fellow at IBEI (Barcelona), specialised in nationalism, identity politics and social movements. He is teaching courses like Identity, Politics, and Culture Wars and Islam and Politics. His latest book is “Cancelled: The Left Way from Woke”. Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference, came across his book when scanning the bookstore for books on cancel culture dynamics.

What made you interested in cancel culture?

“Only when I myself became the subject of a defamation campaign by a fellow researcher in Sweden, and later the Turkish government, my theoretical mind got interested in the dynamics beyond my own individual case. I’m a generalist that defines patterns within social movements and their developmental stages.”

How would you define “cancel culture” or “wokism”?

“Typical about cancel culture is that you believe there is some injustice or power asymmetry. To fight this, you may choose to boycott the perceived perpetrator. That’s what social movements did in the past, and still do today, i.e. boycott big companies. However, the same dynamic later targeted individuals. What used to be a social ostracization technique by the reactionary right (remember, witch hunts were part of the Inquisition arsenal), was adopted by the left in the 21st century. Take the case of #MeToo for example, which began as a local initiative for helping victims of domestic and sexual abuse. This then evolved to the hashtag movement #Metoo, on social media. It obviously helped us get rid of monstrous people like Harvey Weinstein. But once the beast of cancelling was let free, it got out of control. This culture allows people to destroy others who they perceive as perpetrators. It does not allow for redemption or apologies. If words are violence, then cancel culture definitely is. Because it can get you sacked or condemn you to social death. There have been cases where people have been attacked based on false allegations. Even when the allegations are not true, the social media treat them as if they are. So, to sum up, I’d say, cancel culture has become about symbolically destroying a person’s career – and their life.”

What made cancel culture which started peacefully turn into something more violent?

“The worst thing about being cancelled is that, when you are ostracized, even if everything is found to be false eventually, the person in question generally remains cancelled. Also the question of who is the perpetrator and who is the victim... The movement has gone too far in that it focused on power instead of the injustice that it initially fought against. And once a social movement turns its focus on power, then, in the end, you do not get justice. This is the problem with current social justice activism. A ‘rainbow coalition’ of diverse groups cannot succeed without committing themselves to equality and justice.

What is the result of cancel culture taking things too far?

“Eventually, the victims will continue to be victims. Who will in the end suffer from it? The people the cancellers were trying to protect? If you turn this into a power game, you don’t get justice for the ones you have been fighting for. Why not? Because, when the inevitable right-wing backlash comes, it goes for the real victims, immigrants, dissenters, racial and sexual minorities, you name it.”

Cancel culture thus seems to revolve around power struggles?

“Yes. It is important to realise, however, that, the way I define it, victimhood can be as problematic as perpetrating. Because it is based on the same dynamic: our perceptions of power and powerlessness. Someone who always claims to be the victim, makes the other, who is presumed to hold the power, ‘a perpetrator’. Thus victimhood is also socially constructed. If the victim card is played to yearn for power, we get into serious trouble. Let’s not forget after all that ‘today’s victim is tomorrow’s perpetrator’ and vice versa. Let me quote the famous American writer James Baldwin: ‘The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he or she has become a threat. Instead of claiming the mantle of victimhood, we need to fight back. Those imprisoned unfairly never give up. Where does the new evidence that exculpates them come from?’

Despite good initial intentions, by making it about power, instead of equality and justice, the left shoots itself and the victims they seek to defend, in the foot.

What is your position on the use of violence in social movements?

“My position has always been very clear. I think we should be rejecting violence at all costs. Whether you are on the left or on the right, this should be our starting point. I thus hold onto the principle of non-violence. Let me return to the case of James Baldwin. Baldwin, who was a lifelong pacifist, became more supportive of violence later in his life. He saw how black leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcom X got killed by white supremacists. In one of his last interviews, he said he wasn’t sure about non-violence anymore. I believe that we can find our way back to peaceful civil resistance on the left. We can, and should, abandon right-wing witch hunt techniques.”

What makes cancel culture relevant for Europe’s debates?

“I am concerned how entitled middle classes and the intelligentsia have become. In Europe, we took our freedom for guaranteed and granted. And we thought we were safe. We were thinking that our institutions are so strong that we internalised democracy. Yet, the complacency that emerged now works against us. It was always the others that were suffering, right? Not us. And then we wonder why a party with connections with underground Nazi movement ‘suddenly’ gets over 20% of the votes in Germany? It is powerful men like Trump, Musk, and Putin, who capitalise on people’s feelings of loss, by setting themselves up as representatives of the victims. They say immigrants and other countries are taking advantage of us. This results in tribalism. And it leads to destructive competition.”

Europe’s complacency, taking its freedoms and dominance for granted, makes us now feel like victims. Will this wake us up to the suffering of those we suppressed for centuries, without any repercussions?

*When words are perceived as violence, then
cancel culture itself is a violent movement.*

*Prof. Umut Özkirimli
Speaker EPC2025*

Online articles

- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *Can the Left Take Back Identity Politics?* In History News Network.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *Luxury politics and the narcissistic left: Commodification with a woke twist.* In The Critic.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *The Left's Way Back From Woke.* Blogpost on Sublationmag.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *Cancel culture in academia: Umut Özkirimli in conversation with Laura Favaro.* In The Critic.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *Long-read: The left's dangerous embrace of cancel culture.* In Spiked.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *Academia's cancel culture distracts from the right's free-speech abuses.* In Times Higher Education.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *The renegade progressives: Has the University discovered freedom of speech?* In The Critic.
- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *The Mainstream and the far-Right.* Blogpost on Sublationmag.
- Özkirimli, U. (2019). *The Catalan crisis is key to the rise of the Spanish far right.* The Guardian
- Özkirimli, U. (2017). *How to Liquidate a People? Academic Freedom in Turkey and Beyond.* Globalizations, 14 (6).

Recommended books

- Özkirimli, U. (2023). *Cancelled: the left way from woke.* Cambridge: Polity press.
- Özkirimli, U. (2010) *Nationalism in the Troubled Triangle: Cyprus, Greece and Turkey (with Ayhan Aktar and Niyazi Kızılyürek).* Edited volume, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Özkirimli, U. (2008) *Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey (with Spyros A. Sofos).* London: Hurst & Co.

Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarisation, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

JOIN THIS UNIQUE EXPERIENCE