

# Confessions of the Canceled: The Psychology of Cancel Culture

*by Collin May*

**I**n a recent talk I gave at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, I discussed my experience with cancel culture, the techniques it employs, its intellectual background, and its political impact. At the time, I briefly touched on the psychology and social psychology of cancelation. My intention in this essay is to use my own experience with cancelation to take a deeper look at the psychology of cancel culture.

One of the most recurrent themes in cancelation is the effort by the cancelers, and their allies, to obtain a statement of guilt or apology from the target as a means of holding the victim “accountable.” What is also surprisingly recurrent is the target’s eventual willingness to provide such a statement, even though the target may not believe the alleged harm requires an apology. In this regard, the statement or apology is similar to false confessions elicited from suspects in the criminal law context. And as we would expect, the

psychology behind false confessions is broadly applicable to the cancelation scenario.

Before considering the types of false confessions and their implications, I will provide some background on my own cancelation as a case study.

## **A Book Review: Case Study in Cancelation**

My cancelation began the day the Alberta government appointed me Chief of the Alberta Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Between my appointment on May 25, 2022, and my termination on September 15 of the same year, a small but persistent and aggressive coterie of leftist academics, politicians, and activists fervently sought to deplatform me.

The most aggressive and organized attacks came in early July 2022 with the focus on a book review I had penned in 2009, one item in a fairly large body of published work produced over the

years. The book itself was written by renowned historian of the contemporary Middle East, Efraim Karsh, and was published by Yale University Press. Karsh highlighted the historical and political penchant for Islam to manifest itself politically in the imperial caliphate. Unlike many Middle East historians who emphasize colonialism's role in the region, Karsh took a broader historical approach that saw the Muslim world on its own terms recognizing Islam's agency as a political and often militaristic religion.

While there was no comment on my review in 2009, once the opposition Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP) and their allies, including the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) got a hold of it, the accusations flew. The NDP accused my review of being racist, Islamophobic and hate speech. At one point, their "Justice Critic," Irfan Sabir, who had never so much as opened Karsh's book, condemned it as racist in a series of unhinged tweets.

The allegations were absurd and a thorough misreading of the text as other academics, including Karsh himself, would confirm. But in the woke world of today it was enough to scare the weak provincial government as they called on me to meet with the NCCM. Though I did not apologize, I did make a statement attempting to mollify my critics and agreed to meet with other members of the Muslim community. But after a series of events, including instructions from a government "emissary" instructing me not to meet

with certain members of the Muslim community, the NCCM called for my resignation. The Alberta Government blinked, and I was fired.

## A Taxonomy of False Confessions

My cancellation raises a number of questions. The most important for our purposes is: Why did I agree to draft a statement while still refusing to provide the apology that the NCCM wanted as a sign of my contrition?

As noted, the process of obtaining an apology is highly comparable to the false confession that I will discuss here. To describe the types of false confession and the interrogation techniques used to obtain them, I am relying on the research of Dr. Saul Kassin, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

In his work, Kassin identifies three types of false confession. The first, Voluntary False Confessions, are prompted by the internal needs of the confessor. Often attributed to underlying psychological or psychiatric disorders, or from a desire to protect the true perpetrator. These types of confessions rarely have an impact on a criminal proceeding and are usually easy to spot by investigators. Similarly, they have little relevance to the statement or apology in the cancellation scenario.

However, the second and third varieties of false confession, which can prejudice criminal cases, are directly

applicable to cancelation. The second and third types Kassin identifies as the Compliant False Confession and the Persuaded (or Internalized) False Confession. The common element between these forms of false confession is that they are obtained through external pressure, usually an investigator or police officer. The difference between the second and third forms of confession is whether the confessor comes to believe in his guilt.

In the case of a Compliant False Confession, the confessor is subjected to a demanding and relentless interrogation. Depending on the country's criminal system, suggestions can be made to the confessor that misrepresent evidence or events. Additionally, threats can be used or implied as can promises of leniency or termination of the interrogation if a confession is provided. The confessor reaches a breaking point, and even though he knows he is innocent, he will provide a confession, often believing that additional evidence will ultimately exonerate him. The key point here is that the confessor provides the statement while still believing and knowing he is innocent.

Persuaded False Confessions, by contrast, involve an innocent party initially insisting on his innocence but, after stressful interrogation, coming to doubt that innocence by internalizing a sense of unjustified guilt. As Kassin has noted, this third category is counter-intuitive and therefore required some theorization to come up with the psychology to explain it.

Persuaded False Confessions typically involve a vulnerable confessor open to manipulation due to a variety of factors: youth, mental health, sleep deprivation, recent trauma, etc. Often, evidence is controlled or misrepresented by the interrogator to confuse the confessor into a state of cognitive dissonance. While the confessor is initially certain of his innocence, the distortion of evidence causes the vulnerable confessor to begin to doubt his own understanding of events.

A key aspect of the confessor's cognitive dissonance is that he begins to use fragmentary language as his doubt about his innocence grows. The disconnect between his own understanding, which he increasingly sees as subjective and untrustworthy, and the apparently objective evidence provided to him by the interrogator, cries out for resolution in the confessor's mind. This eventually leads to a full-blown confession of guilt complete with the confessor fabricating memories of actions he never committed.

From a legal standpoint, this sort of confession becomes difficult to counter in court as judges, juries, and the media generally cannot differentiate between a false confession and the truth. Typically, the legal system accepts the false confession as true, even insisting on its viability after contradictory evidence undermines the false confession.

In terms of the techniques used to obtain a false confession, Kassin emphasizes American interrogation approaches that involve two elements,

though these are used in many other nations as well. First comes the refusal by the interrogator to accept the confessor's initial denial of innocence, effectively branding the confessor a liar. Second is the minimization technique which Kassin finds in every instance of false confessions elicited under interrogation. This involves downplaying the alleged seriousness of the offense by deflecting the blame from the confessor through externalization. This can include telling the confessor that, though he committed the offence, he is really a good person who was provoked by external circumstances, that there is a valid explanation for his actions, and that all of these externalities will mitigate against his guilt if he just confesses. As Kassin notes, the confessor interprets minimization as leniency, believing that a confession will extract him from the interrogation with little consequence.

Finally, Kassin notes another psychological mechanism that often comes into play with false confessions: the faith most individuals have in the system to protect the innocent. In his research, Kassin looked at accused individuals who waived their Miranda rights in the United States. These are the rights that allow an accused to remain silent. As he found, those who provided false confessions waived these rights far more often than those who were truly guilty. Kassin suggests two reasons for this. Firstly, research has found that most people, especially those who are not prone to criminal behavior, believe in a just world. They believe

that, even though they have confessed, the inherent justice of the legal system and future evidence will confirm their innocence.

Secondly, false confessors rely on what Kassin calls "the illusion of transparency." In other words, the false confessor waives Miranda rights because he believes that telling the truth and lying are transparent to interrogators; that telling the truth will be seen as such and his innocence will be obvious. Both beliefs have the psychological effect of comforting the false confessor but often end up working against him.

## Confessions and Cancellation

In many respects, the false confession scenario is applicable to the statement or apology demanded of the cancellation target. In terms of the interrogation element, this differs to the extent that the false confessor is under the immediate stress of an investigator's private questioning, while the cancellation target is generally subject to a more diffuse and public attack.

To the extent that there is no immediate interrogator, the cancellation target does not have the relentless pressure of questioning. However, this also means that it is far more difficult for the target to assuage his attackers as they arise from a variety of sources and use social media that rapidly expands the field of interrogators. Additionally, pressure can come from employers and even allies to show contrition for allegedly

offensive words. In short, the psychological pressure to make a statement or apology is broader and presents many more angles of attack against the target. In this context, the presumed best vehicle to attempt to quell the multiple sources of anger is the public statement or apology, with the preferred approach being the latter.

In my own situation, I was faced with a request to meet with the NCCM by my employer, the Alberta government. That this was certainly for their own benefit was clear, but as my employer, I trusted, probably incorrectly, that they would not put me in the firing line. At the same time, the ubiquitous demand for an apology, as well as my resignation, came from the NDP's Irfan Sabir and as is generally the case, it was expressed on social media, not in a more private forum, such as a letter to the cabinet minister responsible for my hiring. The goal was obviously to ensure maximum pressure on me. Additionally, a small number of bloggers and academics affiliated with the NDP also attacked my qualifications and sought my removal. Most of these individuals employed a tactic that reflects the interrogation techniques used on the confessor. They misrepresented facts about my past work, about my political affiliations and about the book review I had written. Cribbing specific lines taken out of context from the review, along with the persistent effort to question the academic nature of the review and the book author's credentials, an effort was made to convince the public, if not

me, that I was guilty of Islamophobia and racism.

But given that this was clearly a politically driven effort, the calls by the NDP and their allies mostly fell on deaf ears, even in the media. However, as with the false confessor, I was subjected to a similar form of interrogation through my government-arranged meeting with the NCCM. I initially met with NCCM representatives on July 6 and July 7 by Zoom. During the first meeting, I was asked to explain what I had written and the conversation was amicable but frosty. I was requested to provide a statement with an apology to the Muslim community in Alberta. The meeting engaged many of the tactics used to procure a false confession. In my own mind, I was confident that there was nothing offensive about my book review, a view also conveyed to me by the Alberta government. The review dealt entirely with politics in Muslim-majority countries and was primarily historical. At no point did I reference Muslims as minorities in other countries. Though I wrote nothing to support violence against Muslims, the NCCM explicitly raised the issue of attacks on black Muslim women in Canada more than a decade after my review's publication, as though my writing somehow made me complicit in this violence. This closely mirrors efforts by interrogators to convince confessors, despite their own clear belief and the facts, that they were somehow guilty of an offense.

Ultimately, I refused to provide an apology, but I did pen a statement suggesting I had refined my views based on recent scholarship. I informed the NCCM on July 7 during our second meeting that I would not apologize. At this stage, two things should be considered. Firstly, why did I provide the statement? As with many false confessors, I believed that being fully honest and being truthful would win the day. And in part I believed this because the NCCM used minimization to convince me that a statement would go some distance to satisfying the Muslim community. Secondly, the NCCM, unable to obtain their apology, turned their request against me. In their own statement released on July 7, the NCCM stated that they and the Muslim community would not currently accept an apology. This clearly misrepresented our discussions. I had refused an apology, but in order to control the narrative, the NCCM upped the stakes by giving the impression that I had offered one. By doing so, they attempted to retain control of the situation. My statement was rendered useless as the NCCM and I were locked in an open-ended commitment to engage with the Muslim community in order to obtain their forgiveness on the basis of an apology I was never willing to provide. In this sense, even though I did not provide an apology or confession, the statement I had written and believed the NCCM would honor, was turned into a weapon against me. This closely reflects the minimization tactics used against the false confessor

and relies on the belief that the world is essentially good and that truth-telling is transparent.

As my situation played out, the NCCM went quiet for a few weeks. What they perhaps did not expect was that I would resist the attribution of guilt against me and engage legal counsel who would serve Notices of Defamation on two bloggers and a media outlet. When the NCCM contacted me again in late August 2022 to set up meetings with the Muslim community, I informed them of potential legal action, but confirmed that it was not directed against them.

But a few weeks after this conversation, the NCCM, having recruited a number of Muslim community groups, some of them not independent, made a public statement calling for my termination, citing primarily the alleged fact that I was threatening my critics with a defamation lawsuit. Though this was approved by a senior government official, I was summarily fired. The NCCM, unable to obtain the required apology and without any action directed against them, were still able to control the situation to my eventual detriment.

## Resistance

In my scenario, I provided a statement, but unlike false confessors, I did not apologize. Though many of the interrogation tactics used to obtain a false confession were used against me, I did not go so far as to willingly implicate myself. Or so it would seem.

In general, cancelation targets do acquiesce to the pressure tactics and provide an apology. This happened recently in another Canadian case where British Columbia NDP cabinet minister Selina Robinson apologized for her statement calling the territory on which Israel currently sits a “crappy piece of land” before the agricultural developments undertaken by the Israeli state. Robinson was accused of Islamophobia and racism and promptly apologized. But as with my situation, Robinson was ultimately terminated, and again the request for her demotion came from the NCCM, employing the same ritualized tactics they used against me. In effect, whether one provides simply a statement or an apology, the cancelation tactics tend to win out.

Of note here is the significant similarity to the false confession, especially as regards outcome. With both Ms. Robinson and myself, a coerced statement or apology was provided, as the false confessor does with the confession, believing that it would adequately address the situation. And as with the confessor, our statement/apology did nothing to protect us. We both ended up without a job.

What is also similar between Ms. Robinson and my situation is that we are now both resisting the efforts against us, even if belatedly. Ms. Robinson, who was the only Jewish member of the British Columbia cabinet, has resigned from the NDP caucus citing antisemitism in the caucus and a double standard as regards her apology com-

pared to those made by colleagues who had insulted the Jewish community but retained their cabinet roles.

I have similarly fought back through a wrongful dismissal lawsuit, by writing and speaking about my cancelation, and through a complaint against various politicians lodged with a provincial administrative body that cannot be named due to statutory restrictions. And as if on cue, the respondents to my complaint have used my original statement against me as evidence of something akin to an apology justifying their own public attacks on me.

The similarities with the false confession, both as Compliant Confession and Persuaded Confession, have a great deal to teach us about the psychology of apologies in the cancelation context. The dynamics and techniques used against a cancelation target, as well as the psychological machinations the target endures, are highly comparable to the procurement of the false confession. As with the false confession, our political communities have an interest in preventing the proliferation of the cancelation statement/apology. A key part of combating cancelation is understanding the psychology that entices the cancelation target to provide a statement or apology where one has done nothing or very little to cause offense.

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