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The culture-war trap

American conservative politicians have increased their efforts to ban books on sexual and racial identity, echoing left-wing arguments about inclusion

The United States is in the midst of a book-banning frenzy. According to PEN America, 1,648 books were prohibited in public schools across the country between July 2021 and June 2022. That number is expected to increase this year as conservative politicians and organisations step up efforts to censor works dealing with sexual and racial identity.

Republican-controlled states like Florida and Utah have cracked down on school libraries in recent months, banning titles that address racial as well as gender and sexual issues, such as Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* and Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir*. In parts of Florida, schools have been instructed to limit access to books on race and diversity, and they have been warned that teachers sharing so-called 'obscene and pornographic materials' with students could face five years in prison. In South Carolina, Governor Henry McMaster pointed to Kobabe's book, which won the American Library Association's Alex Award for young adult literature in 2020, as an example of 'obscene and pornographic materials'.

What is interesting, however, is how much left-wing and right-wing intolerance have in common.

Today's book bans are largely driven by right-wing populist politicians and parent groups claiming to protect wholesome, family-oriented Christian communities from the decadence of urban America. As such, a children's book featuring LGBTQ+ characters falls under their definition of pornography.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a likely presidential contender, is arguably the leading advocate of state censorship and modern-day book bans. Last month, DeSantis and his allies in the state's House of Representatives introduced a new bill that would prohibit universities and colleges from supporting campus activities that 'espouse diversity, equity and inclusion or critical race theory rhetoric'. The bill also seeks to remove critical race theory, gender studies and intersectionality, as well as

any ‘derivative major or minor of these belief systems’, from academic curricula.

Right-wing mimicry of left-wing jargon

But even though there are fewer calls from left-wing progressives to ban books, they, too, can be intolerant of literature that offends them. Such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have been removed from some school reading lists because they contain racial slurs and might ‘marginalise’ certain readers.

To be sure, the right-wing crackdown on academic freedom is more dangerous than the left’s literary allergies. What is interesting, however, is how much left-wing and right-wing intolerance have in common. Right-wing populists like DeSantis tend to mimic progressive rhetoric about ‘inclusivity’ and ‘sensitivity’ in the classroom. White students, they claim, must be shielded from learning about slavery or the role of white supremacy in American history because it might upset them and make them feel guilty.

Progressives who want to stop teaching *Huckleberry Finn* in schools or demand that words like ‘fat’ be taken out of Roald Dahl’s children’s books follow the same logic. They, too, do not want children to feel offended or ‘unwelcome’. Their idea of education is akin to therapy: its purpose is to make children feel good about themselves, rather than to learn how to absorb information and think for themselves.

This is not to suggest that threats from the left to students’ access to books are as serious as those coming from the far right.

Right-wing mimicry of left-wing jargon can be viewed as a form of bad-faith payback. After all, the driving force behind conservative puritanism in the US has always been fundamentalism, not inclusion. But religious dogmatism is intimately linked to the fear of being offended. The controversy that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 is a case in point. In addition to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s fatwa calling for the author’s death, Christian conservatives condemned Rushdie for mocking religion. Some on the left, though they did not belong to any religion, still criticised Rushdie for offending millions of Muslims.

Christian puritans do not oppose books about gay topics just because the Bible forbids homosexuality, but also (and perhaps primarily) because it

violates what they believe to be the natural order. This is not so different from the sentiments of thousands of people who recently signed a letter protesting the coverage of transgender issues in the *New York Times*. Signatories were upset by the fact that some articles assumed that the question of gender might not be scientifically settled. One, by the columnist Pamela Paul defending J.K. Rowling, caused particular offense. Rowling does not hate people who have transitioned from one sex to another, but she does not believe that being a woman, or a man, is simply a matter of choice.

Progressives who call for the banning of Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (which are also denounced by right-wing zealots for promoting witchcraft) do not on the whole do so for religious reasons. Again, they talk about unwelcoming workplaces, marginalisation, insensitivity and so on. But they are often as dogmatic as religious believers. They are convinced that someone born with male genitals is a woman if he/she says so. To doubt this conviction, as Rowling does, violates their view of nature.

Democrats, and other progressive parties in the Western world, would be well advised to concentrate less on hurt feelings and more on voters' economic and political interests.

This is not to suggest that threats from the left to students' access to books are as serious as those coming from the far right. Unlike extreme right-wing parties, including today's Republican Party, left-of-centre politicians do not generally call for state-enforced legal bans. Nevertheless, some progressive rhetoric is playing into the hands of the populist right.

Bereft of a coherent economic platform, the GOP (Grand Old Party) has gone all in on the US culture wars. But given that appeals by religious and social conservatives tend to gain more purchase on voters than dogmatic positions on racial and sexual identities, this is not a war the left is likely to win. Democrats, and other progressive parties in the Western world, would be well advised to concentrate less on hurt feelings and more on voters' economic and political interests.

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