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Reactionary education in the USA

Are the American right free-speech warriors battling the ‘woke armies’ of ‘cancel culture’ as they claim? Are they leveraging attacks on ‘political correctness’ to destabilise and undermine truth? We might look not just at what these right-wing claims are but at what they *do*. In my research I explore how the digital right sees itself as ‘speaking post-truth to power’, borrowing the language of critical pedagogy in the service of reaction. The right engages in playful post-truth to support post-war capitalist values – to make suburban living edgy, to make misogyny into rebellion. As the National Rifle Association spokeswoman Dana Loesh explains, conservatism is the new punk rock – and traditionalism is the new postmodernism. As the term ‘civil war II electric boogaloo’ suggests, this is a metapolitical project not just a truth claim. Russian traditionalist Aleksandr Dugin describes the project as a fascist embrace of postmodernism, in the service of attacking liberal modernism but also with the aim of building a new modernity (Sullivan and Fisher-Smith 2020). This is less an attack on truth than an imagined battle between egalitarian and identitarian knowledge, values, societies. I know this conflict intimately; I teach a course on appreciating diversity at a large American public university, but was raised by an identitarian – a believer in ‘white culture’ and white superiority – a woman who supports flat-earth and fascism, biblical gender and biological race.


The right describes itself as an alternative to a nihilist, meaningless modernity, but the meaning they seek to restore is hierarchy, white male supremacy. The Intellectual Dark Web embraces evolutionary psychology in the service of misogyny. Misogynist incels, involuntary celibates, revive phrenology to explain their solitude. Race science is renamed social biology, while Alt-Right women use anthropology to invent ‘white culture’ and Aryan ancestors. Etymology becomes destiny in discourses that show how nation comes from the Latin word for birth. Educators on the right speak of restoration, finding hidden realities, a discursive knitting together of culture and race to remake a nation. The right is not anti-intellectual, just anti-egalitarian.

Reactionary intellectuals say equality is a lie told to you by elites, a faux-populism made possible by a demonisation of higher education – as when millionaire Tucker Carlson calls Republican Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (a former bartender) a totalitarian educated elite on US’s Fox News. These discourses position the university as at once neoliberal and cultural Marxist, training students in corporate HR newspeak. This corporate communism isn’t just far-right idiocy; universities offer a brief introduction to the vocabulary of critique without time for deep analysis of power, corporations offer woke ad campaigns and rainbow capitalism, and neoliberal parties have money for bombs but not student debt. The disconnection of the language of equality from

material conditions for justice empties it of sense (and a left politics) and opens it up to appropriation by the right.

Academic and media discourses often reinforce the right's faux-populist framing as uneducated, 'left-behind' culturally and economically. Media describes flyover states, populated by deplorable racists or working-class heroes, in contrast to coastal educated elites. Aho (1995) argued Idaho racist groups, while better educated than average, may be right-wing because they lacked a rigorous liberal arts education (too many education majors made the right uneducated!). Hochschild (2018) finds reactions to economic anxiety and loss, but she looked for the rural right in Louisiana, not social biologists in Boston. These stories of backward, dumb, right-wing hicks make liberals look smart and make conservatism seem natural. If the right is against education, 'post-truth' must come from the heart – not from billionaire oil magnate sponsored digital propaganda like PragerU, or libertarian homeschools like former congressman Ron Paul's.

As Harding (1991) shows, liberal discourses can obscure and other nationalism. Our discourses can emphasise a link between education and liberalism, casting the right as Cleetus the Slack-Jawed Yokel. Or we may accept at face value their discussions of meaning, framing them as rural left-behinds who represent both a backwardness and an atavistic heartland. Building on the critical reflexivity of ethnography, we might look at how we construct the right; do we conjure up Indiana Jones saving neo-liberal knowledge from the Nazis or Mary Poppins suggesting a spoonful of sugar to help racism go down? What are the consequences of these choices for how we frame the extreme and the mainstream, ignorance and knowledge? Ethnographers are also storytellers, and we might ask: what are the deep stories we are telling about ourselves as well as about the right?

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