Funding the Future

The far-right fear education

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Far-right politicians from Trump to Orban to UK ministers are following the same authoritarian script: attack universities, control curricula, ban ideas that challenge power. As a political economist and ex-university professor, I explain why education is at the heart of democracy — and why ignorance is tyranny's greatest ally.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aziz8pfh9BY?si=1DLGCJ6UsQhv93b3

This is the audio version:

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This is the transcript:

Far-right politicians, including Donald Trump, are staging attacks on education all over the world.

We're seeing this in the USA. Donald Trump has most particularly picked on Harvard University, but plenty of others are also subject to his attack, and it's ongoing.

We may not be hearing about it in the UK, but time after time I am, because I'm monitoring this, partly because I'm an ex-university professor, a retired university professor, but also because where the US goes, the UK often follows both culturally and politically. And what we are seeing from far-right politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are direct attacks on higher education that are an absolute assault on democracy.

This matters. As a political economist, I see dangerous patterns emerging. In particular, I see those with power trying to remove the right to a rounded education from ordinary people. Why are they doing that? For one, very simple and very straightforward reason, and that is that they feel threatened.

Ordinary people who can question what they're doing, who can question their assault on democracy, who can question their use of force, and who can question the fact that they're even promoting things like genocide, are a threat to the power base of the right-wing and their agenda.

The authoritarian playbook is literally being seen in use here. We've seen it with Viktor Orban in Hungary. He subdued the military. Then he subdued the courts. Then he came for the media. And after that, he tried to oppress education.

Trump is doing the same, literally following the same steps, and higher education is now in his firing line. Universities nurture critical, questioning citizens, and that's the last thing that authoritarians like Victor Orban in Hungary and Donald Trump in the USA want, but the threat is here in the UK too.

We are seeing growing narratives about overseas students, with the implication being made that they are to blame for 'Broken Britain', even though there's absolutely no substance to that. We're seeing ministers attacking so-called lefty academics, and who are demanding that right-wing ideas be taught in universities as if they never were, because to create balance, of course, a range of ideas are taught at universities.

In particular, we are seeing UK ministers talking about slashing funding for the arts and humanities, and universities are closing courses as a consequence because those types of course do, in particular, encourage critical thinking, and critical thinking threatens power.

And we are seeing very clear guidance being issued to try to restrict the right to campus protest, which is something that has always been a part of the student experience.

Students are angry. If you're not angry at 20, when will you be?

If you are not an idealist at 20, have you got any chance of understanding what idealism might ever be?

And they're doing this because they're claiming that students are showing political bias, as they should. Whether that be left or right, doesn't matter. They have the right to show bias.

And this is dangerous because right across the spectrum, politicians are demanding that conservative ideas be put on university curricula. These aren't normal ideas. These are extreme ideas.

Ideas about white supremacy, for example, because critical race theory is now being criticized.

Ideas that suggest slavery wasn't so bad after all, and ideas about Empire, as if it was justified.

Ideas about evangelical Christian thinking as if it is a norm, when it clearly isn't.

And demands are made for things like 'patriotic' history to be taught, which supports this idea that we have the right to dictate to the rest of the world.

There's nothing in this that is about fairness.

There's nothing in this that is actually about critical thinking.

This is about the claim to superiority, and it's about a right to shape knowledge to pursue the claim to power.

And this isn't just happening in universities. We're seeing it creeping down. Universities are being underfunded in the UK, but so too are schools, and so too is the demand being made of schools that they will teach in accordance with these curricula as well.

The attempt is to close minds to possibilities from the earliest possible age.

In the USA, that's being seen by the closure of the federal education department. And it's being seen by changes to individual state curricula as well.

Here we see the same sort of thing happening with regard to changes being demanded of the history curriculum.

The desire in all this is to create ignorance, and ignorance is the bedrock of tyranny.

That's why I'm speaking out. Knowledge as power is precisely what the right-wing fear. They fear the power that knowledge brings. As a political economist, I know that informed people challenge rigged systems. That's what I taught people to do, and I will continue to write and speak to defend education as the cornerstone of not just democracy, but the well-being of people who need to understand and challenge the society in which they live, so that well-being is improved.

In the past, slaveholders banned reading. Fascists burned books. Autocrats have closed universities. Totalitarian states have dictated precisely what may be taught.

I believe in democracy.

I believe in free, open, secure societies, and to get them, we must defend education because wherever democracy dies, ignorance marched first.

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, **here**.

This video was inspired by the work of Robert Reich on this issue in the USA, where the onslaught is further down the line - but we are following.