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TIMES

WHAT THE PAPERS DON'T SAY

What a New Polish Textbook Tells Us About Education's Culture Wars

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A bizarre history book is set to be introduced to Poland's secondary schools – with its reactionary content symbolic of a wider battle for values in global education, says Sian Norris.

As school pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland enjoy the last weeks of the summer break, in Poland, secondary school children will be returning to the classroom with a new textbook that has been criticised for sharing anti-left-wing, homophobic and antisemitic content, as well as bizarre invectives against rock music from the 1960s and 1970s.

'History and Present' is designed to teach Polish pupils about the 20th Century, but appears to spend much of the text railing against the perceived threat of Marxism-Leninism.

While what happens in Poland's classrooms may seem a world away from the whiteboards and school fields of the UK, its introduction into the secondary school system is symbolic of how schools have become the new battleground in the culture wars, with US states banning books and UK politicians condemning 'woke' educational initiatives.

Written by Professor Wojciech Roszkowski, a former MEP for the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) Party, the book features his reflections on so-called 'gender ideology' – a term that emerged from the Vatican in the mid-1990s to describe LGBTIQ and abortion rights. As reported in Polish newspaper Gazeta.Pl, it claims that Nazism was a left-wing movement, as Nazis "based their views on social Darwinism and racism, which were never accepted by the right", while their "methods of political struggle, which went to the point of mass murder, had their origins in utopian concepts of socialists and communists".

As the Polish journalist Wiktoria Beczek puts it: "thus, on page 23, Roszkowski makes it clear – Hitler was a leftist".

Roszkowski rails against IVF, and claims that “atheistic propaganda” comes from “journalists, business people, rock stars, actors and other celebrities”.

Topless sunbathing, ABBA, mini-skirts, the musical Hair, the bands Pink Floyd, the Beatles and the Sex Pistols, and using the term ‘having sex’ instead of ‘making love’ also come under fire.

In fact, the 1960s in general is condemned as bringing about the “beginning of the movement of equating the rights of homosexuals with the rights of a normal family”. The phrase ‘normal family’ appears multiple times in the book.

“The handbook promoted by the Polish Minister of Education is a far-right rant against the modern world,” said Dr Rafal Pankowski from Poland’s NEVER AGAIN Association. “It is interesting and sad to note that a once respectable historian and former MEP of the ECR group has authored this bizarre and extreme condemnation of contemporary culture. Arguably, this case is emblematic of a bigger, global problem: the far-right has increasingly focused on education as a key battlefield in its culture wars against human rights and all kinds of progressive values”.

Professor Roszkowski declined to comment.

Education Wars

Schools have become the frontline in the culture war, not least in the US where organisations like Moms for Liberty and the Heritage Foundation target school board elections in order to fight back against the perceived threats of critical race theory and LGBTIQ-inclusive education.

The focus on school feeds into a growing right-wing preoccupation with children’s and ‘family’ rights in particular, that has links to a conspiracist belief that shadowy, liberal elite forces are seeking to indoctrinate children in progressive ideology – usurping parental authority.

This was one of the key drivers of the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory which sought to ‘Save the Children’ and saw Donald Trump as a “child of the light” who would rescue the family.

The most obvious manifestation of the reactionary agenda in schools is through book bans, with one school district in Texas even banning the Bible. Books exploring issues around race and sexuality are being routinely removed from shelves, including ‘Beloved’ by Nobel-prize winning Toni Morrison, which tells the story of enslaved people in the US. Her book ‘The Bluest Eye’ has also been banned in 12 school districts.

Alongside book bans is Florida’s controversial ‘Don’t Say Gay’ rule, which mirrors so-called gay propaganda laws in Russia and Hungary and the UK’s Section 28 rule which

banned the promotion of homosexuality and “fake family relationships” in schools between 1988 and 2003.

Its champion, Ron DeSantis, is a politician in Trump’s mould who clearly has presidential ambitions. His attacks on inclusive education combined with his hopes for the White House suggest that attacking schools is seen as a vote-winner on the right.

Speaking to PBS when the Don’t Say Gay rule was introduced, lesbian teacher Gretchen Robinson said: “The messaging of this law is horrible. It’s toxic, it’s discriminatory. It targets, very obviously, LGBTQ students, it ‘others’ them, and that is not OK”.

The news of Roszkowski’s controversial textbook came as the US radical-right think tank the Heritage Foundation completed its ‘week of action’ against what it calls the “edu-crats”.

The week included ‘flooding the zone’ with numerous articles about educational choice. This, and a parental rights symposium, form part of its Heritage Action Save Our Schools initiative – a rhetorical flourish that positions children and families as being under attack from nefarious progressive forces.

Heritage Action’s main target is critical race theory – an academic discipline that explores how institutionalised racism operates in society. It has become the new bogeyman in the US and UK culture wars, with former Conservative Party chairman Oliver Dowden telling the Heritage Foundation during his February speech that the UK had made it illegal to teach about white privilege in schools.

Ironically, as in the US, attacks on inclusive and progressive education in the UK have often come from those claiming to champion free speech.

Before remarking that it was now illegal to teach white privilege in the classroom, Dowden said that left-wing, woke ideology was “inimical to freedom”. And yet, when it comes to race and LGBTIQ rights, it is the right that seems keener on bans, and on one-sided views of history.

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