

Florida Republicans attack sociology

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In a continuation of the far-right attack on democratic rights in the American school system, Florida's public universities and college systems voted in January to remove introductory sociology as a core course in the state's public higher education curriculum. This class will no longer fulfill a social science requirement at institutions serving around 430,000 students. Thousands of people who would have taken a class on the principles of the discipline and the research methods it employs in order to meet specific graduation requirements can no longer do so.

In his remarks explaining the university and college systems' decision, Florida Commissioner of Higher Education Manny Diaz Jr. sought to justify the state's actions by taking advantage of the widespread presence of racialism and identity politics in the discipline of sociology. "Sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course for students," he said. "Florida's higher education system will focus on preparing students for high-demand, high-wage jobs, not woke ideology," added Diaz. Simultaneous to the announcement regarding introductory sociology, the state banned the use of public funds on campuses to support diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programming.

The action by the administration of far-right Republican Governor Ron DeSantis is an assault on freedom of thought. Responding to the attack on their discipline in a public statement, the the American Sociological Association declared "the politicization of education" to be "a dangerous practice for democracy."

The decision by Florida's university and college system lays the groundwork for ultimately "canceling" sociology as a subject matter in public education across the state and throughout the country. If one follows the logic of Diaz's remarks, the discipline as a whole is

dangerous. The same can be said about all the social sciences, as well as the humanities. Already, departments and courses in these fields are being axed around the country, with higher education leaders from both parties having determined them to be irrelevant to training a productive workforce.

The change in the status of introductory sociology courses in Florida will result in a dramatic fall in the number of students taking the class. Many programs and majors—not just the social sciences—have historically required students to complete a first-year sociology course. This includes fields like health and medicine, whose practitioners view an introduction to the field as valuable in terms of exposing students to a systematic approach to understanding human populations. Thus, the move will have a major impact on course enrollment numbers, full-time faculty positions and adjunct and part-time employment. The state government's decision is not just about suppressing the teaching of sociology, but about terrorizing educators—across all disciplines—over their jobs.

By justifying this latest attack on higher education as a strike against "woke" ideology, Diaz is articulating the agenda and methods of the Republican Party in Florida and elsewhere. On the one hand, it seeks to whip up anti-democratic social forces, from the police to arch-reactionary Christian fundamentalists, who hate anything that might lead to criticism of capitalist society or foster a scientific approach to understanding social problems, including phenomena like the rise of fascism.

On the other hand, it tries to channel, in a right-wing direction, popular disgust over the endless prattling on within privileged layers of academia about one or another aspect of someone's personhood, in which invariably "White workers" and "White men" are identified as the source of oppression.

The discipline of sociology is highly vulnerable along a number of fronts.

At its best, students taking introductory courses in this subject will gain exposure to data and analyses of some of the most fundamental aspects of modern reality. They generally learn something about social inequality, the nuts and bolts of a capitalist social structure, the ways in which socialization integrates people into the unequal world into which they are born, the power of institutions like the educational system or the media to shape popular thinking, the character of the criminal justice system, the changing nature of the contemporary family and so forth.

There are few aspects of the human experience for which there is not a sub-field of sociology. Many of the topics covered in the discipline speak directly to social problems, particularly those facing the youth, who confront the task of having to sort through all the complexities and difficulties of the society in which they find themselves.

And despite the phony leftism that became a hallmark of the discipline beginning in the 1960s, Karl Marx is considered a founding theorist in sociology classes. Marxism is almost uniformly included in the curriculum of an introductory class, albeit at its most basic level and quite frequently distorted. In addition, scientific approaches to gathering and considering evidence are also generally taught in first-year courses. Students are encouraged to examine data, statistics, findings and conclusions—or at least some of them—carefully.

To the extent that the above are done well and with intellectual honesty and objectivity, the far right finds the discipline of sociology threatening. These forces prey upon ignorance, backwardness, demoralization and appeals to violence.

At the same time, however, the field has become vulnerable to a right-wing attack because it has been overtaken to a significant extent by the worst stupidities of postmodernism, racialism, feminism and myriad forms of identity politics. In a manifestation of the anti-Marxism that has permeated sociology from its earliest days, the discipline has now turned to race, gender and sexuality to assault Marx's discovery of the class origins of oppression in capitalist society.

There is a great deal of harping on about “White privilege” and patriarchy in introductory sociology

courses. These conceptions are usually not taught as ideas with social origins that must be critically analyzed but as a sort of new religion about which a student ought not to pose a challenging question lest they fall afoul of condemnation, more or less severe, more or less overt, as an “oppressor.”

Sociology, and the social sciences more broadly, are thus a bastion of Democratic Party and pseudo-left politics on the campuses. They lend an intellectual cover to those layers of the ruling class that perceive the stoking of divisions on the basis of race and gender as the best way to prop up capitalism and hold onto power. The right wing, tilting towards fascism as the more effective method to achieve the same outcome, attacks them and tries to tap into popular anger over the efforts of liberalism to offload onto a layer of the working class—“Whitemen”—its decades-long attack on living standards.

The assault on sociology in Florida is the latest in a series of decisions by the administration of far-right Republican Governor Ron DeSantis attacking freedom of speech and thought on campuses. In October, he ordered the dissolution of the campus club Students for Justice in Palestine.

The “Don't Say Gay” and “Stop WOKE” acts passed by Florida's Republican-dominated legislature in 2022 and 2023 have banned the teaching of curriculum in public schools dealing with struggles for racial and gender equality, as well as issues related to human sexuality. Far-right groups like Moms for Liberty have been given carte blanche to hound school systems into submission on the basis of “parents' rights” legislation, such that educators have been pulling Shakespeare from their lesson plans and issuing apologies for showing students images of Michelangelo's greatest works.



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