

Tory censorship of the school curriculum

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The Department for Education has issued ‘guidance’ for school heads and teachers on what can be taught in Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RHSE) classes (‘Schools in England told not to use material from anti-capitalist groups’, *The Guardian*, 28 September). These classes are the main place for discussion of social, economic and political issues. The guidance forbids the use of materials produced by organisations and authors which are anti-capitalist, which contest social oppressions, or which criticise government policy. Yes, you read that right. Any material substantially critical of contemporary society, at least from the centre and left, is now not allowed in schools. We are now in the same position as countries with overtly authoritarian, borderline fascist, Far Right governments such as Russia, Turkey, Hungary, India and Thailand.

A few initial points about the context. First, readers who are not teachers may think that DfE ‘guidance’ can be safely ignored by heads and teachers. Not so: Ofsted, the schools regulator, can deem schools ‘failing’ if they do not adhere to DfE guidance. Second, as we shall see, the guidance uses a series of categories such as ‘extremist’ which are undefined and whose meaning is highly contested. But this does not render the guidance less dangerous – to the contrary. The interpretation of the guidance is in the hands of Ofsted, a quango answerable only to the government, which can interpret terms as it pleases. Third, the new ‘guidance’ adds to the chilling effect on schools of the Tory Prevent programme, whose ban on discussion of ‘extremist’ material has prevented discussion of anything vaguely connected to Islamic fundamentalism or to ‘Islamic countries’, and led to persecution of many (supposed) Muslim children.

Fourth, on this issue, as so many others (EU trade negotiations, land use planning policy, treatment of asylum seekers...), the government has used the domination of political commentary and people’s thoughts by the pandemic to pursue Far Right policies free of political scrutiny. The teaching unions, faced with the chaos, danger and budgetary meltdown of the schools, hardly have the time and resources to contest the guidance. The Labour front bench, ominously, has so far not spoken on this issue.

The DfE guidance says ‘Schools should not under any circumstances use resources produced by organisations that take extreme political stances...even if the material itself is not extreme... [This includes] a publicly stated desire to abolish or overthrow democracy, capitalism, or to end free and fair elections’. Leaving aside the absurd equation of democracy and capitalism, this passage prohibits anti-capitalism in two modes. First, it prohibits material from organisations or authors which support a complete societal alternative to the capitalist system. This obviously includes socialism, communism, left anarchism, and Marxism; less obviously, it includes the cooperative movement and organisations promoting the ‘social economy’ or Third Sector (not-for-profit enterprises, community business, voluntary provision) to the extent that these organisations wish to completely replace capitalist firms (many of them do). Second, the guidance can be interpreted to prohibit teaching of critiques of major *aspects* of capitalism. For example, Extinction Rebellion, and other ecological campaigns, often point to the central role of corporations in the climate crisis and other ecological disasters. These organisations may not explicitly call for the ‘overthrow of capitalism’; but an Ofsted inspector could well argue that this is implicit in the organisations’ actions and arguments (an interpretation I agree with!). Similarly, many anti-imperialist and anti-racist organisations make connections between imperialism/racism and capitalism. Or again, in the last

two hundred years there have been innumerable critiques of the culture of capitalism for its reduction of all social relations to money, its individualism and selfishness, its contempt for collective good, its fetishism of commodities, its superficiality. This extends from radicals like the Romantic poets, to utopian socialists like Pugin and Ruskin, to the conservative poet T.S.Elliott, to contemporary novelists such as Ali Smith or Jonathan Frantzen. It includes non-Marxist sociologists like Georg Simmel and Richard Sennett.

A critique of an aspect of capitalism does not mean that an organisation or author is anti-capitalist; but anti-capitalism is nevertheless necessary for that critique to be achieved in reality – and Ofsted and head teachers may well see it that way. This part of the guidance therefore prohibits school discussion not only of wholesale alternatives to capitalism but even critiques of its major aspects.

It gets worse. The guidance prohibits material from organisations which promote ‘divisive or victim narratives’. Leaving aside the fact that all political organisations are ‘divisive’ (why else would they exist except to oppose?), what the DfE is clearly referring to here is organisations which oppose social oppressions, whether racism, sexism, homophobia, disablism or anti-poor ideology; the Black Lives Matter movement was doubtless in the DfE’s mind. All movements against social oppression necessarily and rightly picture the oppressed as victims of societal practices and ideologies. If we were not, why would we protest? So now schools are prohibited from using material from any organisation fighting social oppression.

Perhaps most chilling is that the guidance bans ‘presenting information to make unsubstantiated accusations against state institutions’. Since judging an accusation ‘unsubstantiated’ requires interpretation, here in the hands of Ofsted inspectors and headteachers, this effectively prohibits any criticism of the government, local authorities and quangos. (All the more so as such criticisms are ‘divisive’.) Ideologists of capitalist liberalism have long seen the right to criticise the state as the most fundamental liberty; this has now been jettisoned by the Conservatives, as by Far Right governments throughout the world.

To return to the point I made earlier, one might think the guidance is so vague that it will be ignored in the classroom. But Thatcher’s Section 28 prohibition of local authorities ‘presenting homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’, despite its vague and absurd wording, effectively put an end to any discussion of gay and lesbian sexuality in schools for twelve years. Heads and teachers were scared that any discussion of sexuality would stray over the legal boundary, even though no prosecutions were brought under the section. Government policing of schools has been intensified since then. Heads are terrified of negative Ofsted reports, and will clamp down on teaching which could be described as critical of capitalism, society or government.

Starmer and the shadow cabinet must break their silence and demand that this guidance is withdrawn in its entirety.