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ARTICLE

(What) Does the American Right Think?

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Abstract

This article considers the ongoing culture wars in American higher education as an occasion to think about the durability of xenophobic worldviews. Straining against the notion that right-wing politics is fueled primarily by the resentments of those left behind by decades of inequality under neoliberalism, it suggests that xenophobia derives its durability from philosophical commitments that materialist and culturalist analyses fail to fully understand. It draws out the implications of taking such commitments seriously through an interpretation of US Vice President J. D. Vance's narrative of his conversion to Catholicism.

Keywords: education; mediation; reality; worldview; xenophobia

Since at least the 1960s, higher education has been a primary theater of culture wars in America. As Roderick Ferguson argued in his by now landmark work, the establishment of departments and fields for the study of gender, ethnicity, and race was, among other things, a way of capturing and the subversive ferment of the social movements of that era by institutionalizing them.[1] The resulting diversification of curricula and objects of research in the human and social sciences was challenged from the very beginning by those from the left as well as the right of the political spectrum who shared a distaste for "identity" or "cultural" politics. If the left took issue with new social movements sacrificing a capacious politics grounded in class interests, the right bemoaned the widening of intellectual horizons as an attack on Western civilization and values.

Today, the pages of venerated publications like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* continue to be roiled by debates about universities (and their purported left-wing bias) as the engines of all bad and divisive ideas.[2] This hand-wringing about the erosion of civil discourse and academic cancel culture is striking in a context where—beginning with Governors like Ron DeSantis in Florida and Greg Abbott in Texas—the state has increasingly deployed its power to discipline institutions of higher education in the name of intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity. In this brief intervention, I want to suggest that this phenomenon—of censoring free inquiry in order to safeguard intellectual freedoms—reveals something fundamental about right-

[1] Ferguson 2012.
[2] Baiocchi 2026; Huddleston 2025; Thomason and Lee 2026.

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wing politics, its intellectual protocols, and its ability to present partisan interests as matters of general civic concern.

Few contributors to debates about the "excesses" of higher education point out that critics who take the university to task for censoring free inquiry and debate seldom do so because they are looking for a conversation. The idea of freedom at stake in right-wing defenses of free thinking is justified not through conferences and journal essays but by the law and state power. This obvious fact passes largely without comment because although right-wing thought mainly holds because it legitimizes a political project more than it makes a convincing intellectual case, its intellectual yearnings are not external or subsidiary to its desire for political power. This is why Peter Thiel invokes René Girard to justify his theocratic politics, and why Curtis Yarvin dresses up his desire for authoritarianism in the garb of historical and philosophical critique.[3]

The widespread tendency of considering right-wing politics as an expression of economic misery and alienation underestimates its intellectual commitments.[4] As history shows, welfare states and progressive policies cannot eradicate the appeal of right-wing politics because its xenophobic commitments are remarkably resistant to historical and sociological critique. Far from merely giving disenchanted people *something to do*, the right offers its followers a comprehensive *worldview*, a picture of reality that is internally coherent and consistent despite its apparent surface hypocrisies.[5] My characterization of this politics as "xenophobic" derives less from the term's commonsense meaning as antiforeign than the specific use Adrian Piper makes of it. Piper understands xenophobia as a homogenizing philosophical orientation encompassing a range of discriminatory attitudes (racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, etc.), which diminish the fullness and singularity of peoples and cultures that threaten one's self-conception and coherence.[6] This aspect of self-protection gives rationalizations of xenophobia an existential charge, making xenophobes resistant to data that can alter a carefully orchestrated sense of self and internal stability.

To begin assessing this existential meaning-making dimension of right-wing thought, it is important to understand that its stickiness and resilience stem from the fact that it does not derive legitimacy from history or society. Though xenophobia is articulated in the form of a civilizational or cultural injury that can be historicized—immigrant influx, "de-Christianization," white working class alienation—its commitments are metaphysical not historical. Metaphysical antagonism turns on the idea that different cultures and civilizations are *categorically* and *ontologically* opposed and cannot coexist except in a state of permanent war.[7] Since philosophies of difference so singularly focused on reconstituting the political and social order cannot survive prosaic times, xenophobic thinkers quickly realize their intellectual legitimacy is tied to political power. As such, xenophobic reason clears intellectual ground to purge and *purify* the political community. Taking this constitutive aspect of xenophobia seriously reveals that beneath the frenetic, haphazard, and contradictory surface of right-wing politics lies an infrastructure of thought united by fundamental assumptions about society.

[3] Marchese 2025; Reade 2025.
[4] Ahmari 2023; Hochschild 2016; Williams 2025.
[5] Arendt 2024, 451.
[6] Piper 1997, 49.
[7] Chandler 2013, 20–30, 2022, 154.

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1. Education

It should come as no surprise that such assumptions find a perennial enemy in education. For if xenophobic habits of mind and body are learned, then education, as Piper argues, has the potential to undo those learnings.[8] It can do so because, at its best, education amounts to an openness to learning with and through the thinking and work of others. Teaching and learning are not necessarily hierarchical processes, but they are inherently exercises in building trust and the responsible uses of power. Education is not just about getting the facts right but developing the capacities to make judgments and decisions about fact and value *in every instance* where they arise. An education worth its name teaches the proper use of concepts, not *which concepts* are the most proper to use. In this sense, to become educated is as much to enter into knowledge as it is to accept the limits of what one can—or needs to—know. The latter requires admitting other people into one's concept of what it is to become educated. To do this is also to admit self-doubt, that is the capacity to question one's own judgements and decisions by relying on the knowledge of others. This is the wager of a robust culture of education where knowledge is a collective good. In a healthy society, everyone does not need to know everything.

Seen this way, we can say that right-wing thought and politics in America is expressed as a fear of mediation and heterogeneity, both of which are considered destructive to the integrity and coherence of the individual. Not coincidentally, as Manisha Sinha's recent work shows, this fear of mediation came forcefully to the fore during the period of Reconstruction when "state governments—propelled by and building on the efforts of freedpeople, abolitionists, and the Freedman's Bureau—established the first extensive public school system in the South."[9] At least since then, such phobia has politically manifested as the defense of regional power against what Sinha calls projects of "interracial democracy."[10]

While the assertion against interracial democracy today is doubtless propelled by a viral online culture, it should be said that the world *before post-truth* did not hold because of a collective investment in fact and evidence. Modern authority, which spoke the language of scientific expertise, did not convert publics to evidentiary cultures. Rather, it relegated *reactionary* thought to the fringes of or outside the public. This was liberalism's solution via the ideology of tolerance, which privatized social antagonisms without working through them.[11] In this sense, the point of mass media—a quintessential invention of the 20th century—was not to offer ideological coherence, but to provide coordinates of a shared reality members of a society could dispute, while relegating speech that purely deformed public discourse to the peripheries of the information ecosystem. In the words of Neil Postman: "Social institutions are concerned with the *meaning* of information and can be quite rigorous in enforcing standards of admission."[12] It is a signal achievement of right-wing politics to have destroyed this regulatory function of institutions as "censorship" while giving the lie to the idea that any thought or opinion is worth expressing, that any question is worth asking.

One example that the modern consensus has frayed comes from the surge of interest in "just asking questions" and "doing your own research" about any and every topic under the sun—a condition in which everyone becomes an overnight expert in myriad subjects, from the

[8] Piper 1997. See also: Outlaw 2012.
[9] Sinha 2024, 149–50.
[10] On regional power, see: Cowie 2022.
[11] Brown 2008; Mamdani 2020.
[12] Postman 1992, 73.

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science of vaccines and the history of fascism to the geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz. These practices point less to a rigorous culture of public inquiry than an anxiety about one's knowledge of the world being mediated by other people and institutions. The onslaught of disinformation, then, does not indicate a sudden collapse of faith in facts so much as the erosion of the authority of a worldview legitimized by the ideology of scientific expertise. Coined in the image of science and expertise, all modern forms of power (liberal and illiberal alike) saw the world as a problem that knowledge could solve. It is the ruins of this arrangement we are left to make sense of today.

2. Mediation

We can see these themes and their place in the architecture of xenophobic reason at work in a reflective 2020 essay US Vice President J. D. Vance wrote on his conversion to Catholicism.[13] Threaded by autobiographical stories explaining his journey, the text inhabits precisely the space I've been trying to draw out. One of the stories he relates is from his time as a student at the Ohio State University, where Vance had to read about a philosophical debate on the nature of belief. One participant in the debate, Basil Mitchell, related a parable about a Soldier in an occupied territory, who is convinced by a Stranger that he—the Stranger—is the leader of the resistance. The Stranger is seen sometimes helping the resistance; at others, he is seen handing partisans over to the police. Still, the Soldier's faith is steadfast. Vance cites Mitchell at length:

> Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, 'Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?' But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test ... [He] does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition 'The Stranger is on our side.' This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognizes that the Stranger's ambiguous behavior does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.
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> (unpaginated)

Mitchell, Vance summarizes, "articulated a faith that I had never encountered personally. Doubt was unacceptable." Vance admits he was unable to shake off the parable, which revealed to him a new way of thinking about belief—just riposte to the common atheist quip: *how can there be so much horror in the world if there is a God?*

What kind of trial does the Soldier's faith endure? Crucially, the parable is also an analogy: the Stranger represents God; the Soldier, a believer. In other words, the faith in question is not the kind one places in other people. The Soldier cannot fail his trial of faith as long as he accepts the Stranger's claim to leading the resistance—*irrespective of the evidence of his senses and the opinions of his fellow soldiers*. The stakes of the situation are not low. There is a war against an occupying force. But the Soldier would sooner take the word of a Stranger with no connection to his context over the troubled observations of those who have put their bodies on the line alongside him. A Stranger who does not suggest divinity is merely a *strange person*: an immigrant, a refugee, a generic other whose claims to belonging may be questioned at any time. The structure of the Soldier's faith depends, therefore, on the Stranger being something other, something more than a person. And so we begin to see how his faith is not historical but closer to metaphysical: his commitment is *not* to the Stranger's (inconsistent, contradictory)

[13] Vance 2020.

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actions but to the *character* he has assessed as true. This assessment is his and his alone. And this truth can only hold by eliminating doubt from belief, by remaining impervious to the evidence of the empirical world.

Note how closed, how internal the scene is: the Soldier's view of the truth is determined purely by a conviction within him, a conviction unaffected by his world or the views and opinions of those around him. Although he lives in society, and although wars are fought, in one way or another, in defense of some idea of society, the Soldier's life—perhaps his existence wholesale—is quarantined from other people. The trial of his faith does not require the endorsement of society, and the authority so secured does not derive its legitimacy from society. (We can mark, further, how this way of thinking contains the signature of the theological right's pining for an "American Caesar" who will rule over society while taking no part in it).

The kind of faith the Stranger demands makes the *problem* of knowing and being with others irrelevant. For Vance, the Stranger does not raise a question about knowledge; *he provides evidence of faith*. He does so by eliminating doubt from belief. The Soldier does not need to accept the limits of what he can know about the Stranger because in unquestioningly accepting his authority; the Soldier cedes all claims on knowing. To trust, one need not know. Or, to know anything one only need trust oneself. The commitment Vance demands is, therefore, centered fully on oneself, on one's ability to authorize the grounds of their own thoughts, to confirm their own hermetic processes of thinking as examples of reasonableness, of reasoning about the world.

If the process of thinking freely demands, at a minimum, an ability to question the assumptions informing one's claims, then this kind of faith—faith politicized to serve power, freed from the burdens of generosity and doubt—can only lead to a dogmatic form of thinking that mimics the protocols of free inquiry without openness to any of its contingencies: of premises failing, conclusions remaining inconclusive, and answers arriving from the places one least expects. The point is not that thinking and faith are opposed to each other. In its thoughtful registers faith can be more than open (perhaps even more open than secularism) to thinking without guarantees. But, as Vance puts it, faith cannot sustain doubt when it becomes an instrument of politics, when its primary objective is to ground the believer in the certitude of their positions. Aspirations to think in this key flourish by erasing other people from the story of one's coming into knowledge.

I insist on referring to such commitments as philosophical because they form the building blocks of a worldview. As I said in the introduction to this article, the stakes of a politics grounded in xenophobic worldviews are not to be found in materialism or culture. More than an economic or cultural politics, philosophical commitments are structural principles offering an orientation that gives the world coherence and durability. While the worlds erected by such philosophies appear contradictory and paradoxical from the outside, they provide a consistency to reality for those inside them. Cultural politics—and their representatives, like J. D. Vance—change over time. Philosophical commitments are more recalcitrant. And so, while progressives and liberals clamor for an antidote to the right by reducing all politics to a matter of policy preferences, they miss that no policy can undo the resilience of a worldview animated by a conviction in metaphysical antagonisms. Perhaps the greatest achievement of xenophobic thought, then, lies in its ability to convince society that no conviction is worth having in a transactional world dominated by strategic maneuvers—even though a conviction impervious to empirical reality is precisely what makes xenophobic reason endure.

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