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# Academic freedom under threat in the USA

In the USA, the “culture wars” are raging. They amount to far more than just rhetoric and are putting academic freedom, democracy and even human lives in danger. Florida’s Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and a network of far-right organisations are at the heart of this attack on liberal democracy. An analysis by **Annika Brockschmidt**

» **C**ulture wars” are not a new phenomenon – the concept was popularised by David Hunter in 1991, in his book “Culture Wars – The Struggle to Define America”. Here, Hunter identified two diametrically opposed impulses in American society: one heading towards “orthodoxy” and the other towards “progressivism”. According to Hunter, the former sets out from the notion that the origins of human institutions and laws are of a transcendental nature, that they cannot be reformed and lie outside the sphere of human influence. This traditionalist view of the world is countered by a progressive one which, as Hunter maintains, centres on the individual and freedom. This focus has also resulted in a realignment of political factions within religious communities – not, as was the case before, along denominational lines, but instead, along the dividing line between orthodoxy and progressivism. This development becomes apparent in the composition of the Religious Right in the USA. Although this movement is frequently defined as synonymous with the White Evangelicals, its composition is significantly more heterodox and above all consists of a coalition of right-wing reactionary White Evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, non-denominational Christians, as well as a few Mormons and orthodox Jews. What unites them is their political goals, which are summarised in the ideology of White Christian Nationalism. White Christian Nationalism statistically correlates with higher approval rates of exercising state power in an authoritarian way, increased resistance to interracial marriage, denial of structural racism, the championing of “traditional”, patriarchal gender roles as well as being in favour of the use of torture and the death penalty. The American Right is waging its “Culture Wars” with a very earthly goal: to forge a society in which predominantly White, Christian, reactionary men dominate the social and political order, as well as those willing to support this power structure.

## Symbolism and morality

The so-called “culture wars” are about who “we” are, they are all about distinction, about the question of who owns cultural and

social symbols and capital, about symbolism and morality. As political scientist Julia Mourão Permoser explains: “Morality controversies hinge upon issues of symbolic importance in the public image of the nation, in its self-definition as a community of values, united not only by chance and territory but by the fact that its citizens share certain core principles. It is this perception that an issue goes to the essence of ‘who we are’ that has given many morality issues a prominent position in today’s value conflicts.”

## The bogeyman of “woke”

The Right has more or less ridden into battle under the banner of topics like abortion, same-sex marriage and prayers in public schools. They have successfully manufactured outrage against concepts such as “political correctness” which they have turned into a left-wing threat to the alleged “Christian” identity of the United States. The debate around these issues about identity, rights and who is allowed to shape and participate in public discourse on these issues has intensified in the USA over the last few decades, as the political Right have ramped up their attacks on human rights. The latest example of a bogeyman conjured up by the Right in the “culture wars” is what right-wingers summarise as “wokeness”. What exactly they mean by “woke” remains unclear – and it has to, because for the Right, “woke” functions as a reactionary catch-all phrase representing everything which upsets White, reactionary, Christian sensibilities. In their view, “wokeness” is best summed up as a racist censorship regime against White people which oppresses those who express opinions which deviate from left-wing orthodoxy (whatever that may be) and forces them to adopt a bigoted form of intolerance under the guise of inclusion. This is yet another case of how concepts of the Left, or in this instance, the Civil Rights Movement and Black culture, are hijacked by the Right, appropriated and used as a rhetorical weapon. The term “woke” originates from African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). It first appeared in the 1920s, and, in its original in-group mode of use, refers to the special state of alertness a Black person has to exist in, in order to survive in a racist society. Over the course of time, White Progressives



appropriated the word and changed its meaning in order to express a general awareness of structural injustices.

### DeSantis is staking everything on the “culture war” to beat Trump

Florida has become one of the epicentres of the Right’s “culture wars” and the Republican Party’s initially creeping, but now galloping authoritarianism. Governor Ron DeSantis has set his sights on the Republican

nomination for the presidency. In order to succeed, he would need to beat Donald Trump, whom he is trailing by around 20 percentage points. So far, DeSantis’ strategy has been to play the “culture wars” card. The reasoning behind this might be that he is probably aware that he can’t match Trump’s charisma and popularity with the MAGA base. So instead of Trump’s showmanship authoritarianism, DeSantis offers legislative authoritarianism. Under his governorship, Florida’s Republican-controlled legislature has passed a number of draconian laws, which indicate that

DeSantis not only tries to copy Trump, but also employs strategies used by illiberal autocrats like Viktor Orbán, President of Hungary. DeSantis’ calculation seems to be to style himself as an even more effective “culture warrior” than Trump and refer to his legislative record as proof. He has even turned “fighting the woke” into the motto for his presidential candidacy, his merchandise sports “Make America Florida” - a promise to the Republican base, and a threat to all those who don’t happen to be White, conservative Christians.

»WE WILL COMPLETELY DEFUND AND BAR CRITICAL RACE THEORY (...) ALL WE TALK ABOUT IS RACE (...) THE WHOLE SHOW: RACE, RACE. WE DON'T TALK ABOUT OUR COUNTRY BEING GREAT ANYMORE«

Donald J. Trump, Republican, US President from 2017 to 2021

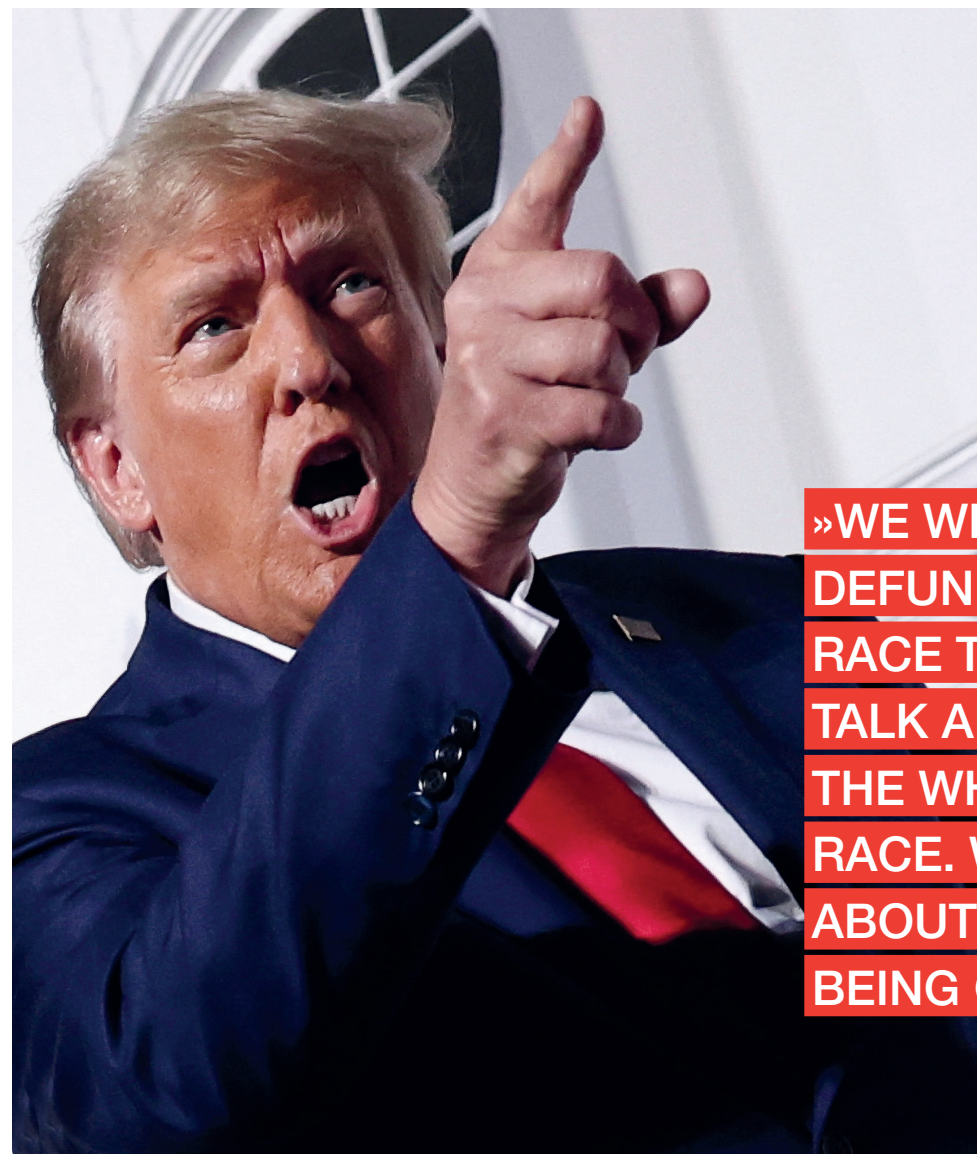


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»WE REJECT WOKE IDEOLOGY. WE FIGHT THE WOKE IN THE LEGISLATURE. WE FIGHT THE WOKE IN THE SCHOOLS. WE FIGHT THE WOKE IN THE CORPORATIONS. WE WILL NEVER, EVER SURRENDER TO THE WOKE MOB«

### Censoring education institutions

The political agenda of the American Right in its culture wars against “wokeness”, consists, above all, of two major areas: direct attacks on the rights of LGBTQ people, and censorship of educational institutions such as schools, universities and libraries. “Ultimately, the woke mind virus is a form of Cultural Marxism,” DeSantis told Fox News - referring openly to an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Even without being explicitly mentioned, the latter is what the Right’s moral panic regarding “wokeness” is based on: the secret, Marxist “re-education” of children, youths and students in the country’s public education sector. According to the Right, this alleged “indoctrination” by “leftist elites” includes a range of topics from racism to history and African American Studies to LGBTQ topics and Gender Studies in general.

### An anti-education crusade

Ron DeSantis is one of the spearheads of the Right’s anti-education crusade, which has had disastrous implications for schools and universities in Florida. The laws passed by the Republican legislature bear fittingly Orwellian names: Republicans in Florida have titled HB 7 the “Individual Freedom Act”, also referred to as the “Stop W.O.K.E Act”. HB 7 forbids teaching staff to address concepts such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), sexism, white and male privilege, and Affirmative Action as well as structural racism in school classes.

Foto: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | Paul Hennessy



This means that history teachers seeking to stick to the historical facts regarding e.g. slavery or the Civil Rights movement would automatically be breaking the law. Another law passed by Republicans in Florida in 2022, which is meant to counter “discrimination of conservatives”, allows students to secretly make recordings of the teaching staff in class in order to then take legal action against teachers and/or the university. HB 233 requires that faculty members and students at Florida’s universities complete an annual “intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity” survey in which they have to state their own political standpoints. This survey is voluntary - for now.

### Critical Race Theory

One integral component of the Right’s struggle against the conjured-up bogeyman of “wokeness” is “CRT”.

Ron DeSantis is an American politician from the Republican Party. He has been Governor of Florida since January 8<sup>th</sup> 2019. He was a member of the United States House of Representatives from 2013 to 2018. He is running for president in the United States in 2024.



**ANOTHER LAW PASSED BY  
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“DISCRIMINATION  
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TEACHING STAFF IN CLASS IN  
ORDER TO THEN TAKE LEGAL  
ACTION AGAINST TEACHERS  
AND/OR THE UNIVERSITY.**

Republicans like DeSantis and Trump claim that “CRT” is taught at schools and teaches children to hate themselves for being White. “CRT” is actually a legal theory taught at the law departments of some universities at graduate level. It emerged following the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement and sets out from the notion that racial discrimination, which has continued to exist, is based on American institutions, for example in criminal prosecution, containing historically established structural racism, which necessitates a radical rethinking of precisely these institutions, since an individual anti-racist approach is insufficient. None of this is taught at primary schools in the USA, but the myth stubbornly persists.

This is because of artificially created moral panic inspired by right-wing activist Christopher Rufo. “We have successfully frozen their brand - ‘critical race theory’ - into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category,” he wrote in Twitter in 2021.

The anti-CRT panic was a response of the Right to the broad support the “Black Lives Matter” movement had enjoyed in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd. Activists like Rufo pettered their instigation of this moral panic on classic right-wing “red-baiting”. Since the McCarthy era, the narrative of a clandestine

communist takeover of elite institutions has been a firm element of the Right’s ideology - and Rufo echoes precisely these roots when he claims that CRT uses “equity” as a camouflage to introduce “Neo-Marxism” at universities. This parrots the old right-wing smear of civil rights and labour movements as Trojan horses for communist ideology in the days of the Cold War.

Even today, this right-wing narrative aims to discredit anti-racist efforts as elitist, racist and indoctrinating. The strategy has proven successful for Republicans. With an election campaign focused on CRT, Glenn Youngkin won the Virginia gubernatorial election in 2021. He succeeded in concealing his reactionary agenda by claiming that he was only campaigning on the issue of “education”. At the same time, the anti-“woke” panic, into which the anti-CRT campaigns are integrated, fits into a long-standing tradition of anti-intellectualism among the American Right, which already turned down universities and institutions of public education as alleged places of secular “indoctrination” decades ago.

#### **Dismissal of teaching staff at Florida’s New College**

Christopher Rufo, in the meantime, has become one of the most important figures in the conservative backlash against academic freedom, inclusion and the fight against structural racism. His influence goes way beyond op-eds. In 2020, following an appearance on Tucker Carlson’s Show, he travelled to D.C. to work on one of Trump’s executive orders which banned diversity training in government institutions. Currently, Rufo is one of Ron DeSantis’ closest allies. He was involved in drawing up the “Stop W.O.K.E. Act” and has become DeSantis’ key champion in the “culture wars”. Florida’s Governor installed Rufo and other political appointees on the board of New College - Florida’s only Liberal Arts College. Since then, under Rufo’s leadership, the new right-wing conservative majority has started to fire teaching staff and ban pronouns in college emails, and has closed down the college’s Diversity Office.

#### **“A blatantly authoritarian attack on higher education”**

In May 2023, DeSantis signed two new higher education bills into law. SB 266 forbids the

state’s higher education institutions to spend government money on programmes supporting “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies or social activism”. Furthermore, all academic programmes may be reviewed by the Government to check whether theories “claiming that systemic racism, sexism, oppression and privileges” are an integral part of the USA can be found in the curriculum - these courses can then be shut down by the government. The American Civil Liberties’ Union in Florida warns that SB 266 “Usurps faculty hiring decisions to the governors’ appointees and allows tenure to be reviewed at any time”. German historian and visiting professor at Georgetown Thomas Zimmer called the higher education law a “blatantly authoritarian attack on higher education” and DeSantis’ “manifestation of his vision for US society a sign of his deeply illiberal, antidemocratic political project”. The ACLU in Florida warned: “This new law targets academic freedom in higher education by placing critical faculty decisions, including hiring and review of tenure, in the hands of political appointees.” The American Historical Association chose harsh words, stating that the law amounted to “the hostile takeover of a federal state’s higher education system”. A further law, HB 931, forbids higher education institutions to require students and staff to sign a commitment to DEI.

#### **The beginning of the end of Florida as a higher education location**

DeSantis’ transformation of the liberal New College into a conservative institution served as a blueprint for “top-down restructuring” of progressive universities, Rufo told the New York Times. It was part of a larger plan for a conservative “starting to reconquer public institutions all over the United States”, Rufo maintained. The disastrous echoes of the above-mentioned laws in Florida can already be observed in other Republican states. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) refers to 57 laws in a total of 23 states which attack academic freedom. The AAUP maintains that the common denominator of these laws implies massive restrictions of any teachings addressing race, gender and sexual orientation, mandates to state the political viewpoints of individuals, cuts in funding for initiatives to promote diversity, equity and inclusion, and ending tenure for teaching staff. The AAUP’s damning verdict is that “The

Florida legislature has passed a series of bills that, taken collectively, constitute a systematic effort to dictate and enforce conformity with a narrow and reactionary political and ideological agenda throughout the state’s higher education system. [...] A key component of this agenda has been an effort to destroy college and university programs that serve minority communities and to banish from classrooms ideas and information about race, gender, and sexual identity that fail to conform to the prejudices of politicians.”

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These laws amount to a disaster for the future and quality of research and teaching in Florida, but their effects are not limited to the Sunshine State. Yale historian and expert on authoritarianism Timothy Snyder wrote in March 2023: “Should Florida’s higher education bill pass into law, Florida will no longer have universities. It will have some buildings where political appointees sit around collecting tax dollars for pretending to do things they can’t do.” Said law was passed - we are witnessing the beginning of the end of Florida as a higher education hub.

#### THE AUTHOR



**Annika Brockschmidt** is a historian, author and journalist. She is an expert on the political and religious Right in the USA and Europe. Her book “America’s Holy Warriors: How the Religious Right Endangers Democracy” was published by Rowohlt in 2021. Annika Brockschmidt’s articles about politics, culture and religion have been published by e.g. “Freitag”, the “Frankfurter Rundschau”, the “Tagesspiegel”, “54books” and “Religion Dispatches”. She runs the literature podcast “Feminist Shelf Control” together with Rebekka Endler, and the podcast “Kreuz und Flagge” on American politics with Lukas Hermsmeier.