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Dangerous Reading

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Neo-conservatives never cease their vigilance against books that are too dangerous for people to read. At times they focus much of their attention on censoring books for children. At other times they direct their attention to books that are so worrisome that these children's teachers and their teachers' teachers must be warned against reading them. The latter warning has now come front and center.

Some of the conservative attacks, though at times bordering on the ludicrous, do reveal the relations among many of the fears that lie behind their public laments and assaults. For example, the strikingly conservative journal *Human Events* recently asked an "expert panel" to compile a list of the "Ten Most Harmful Books" of the 19th and 20th Centuries. At the very top was Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. The next two are equally political, in the usual sense of that term: *Mein Kampf* by Adolph Hitler and the compilation of Mao Zedong's writings, *Quotations from Chairman Mao*.

After that, the list gets even more interesting. In fourth and fifth place are Alfred Kinsey's *The Kinsey Report*, and even more worthy of note to those of us concerned about education's role in developing critically engaged citizens, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Rounding out the list are Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Auguste Comte, *The Course of Positive Philosophy*, Freidrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and finally John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*.

The list is more than a little fascinating. It combines justifiable horror about genocidal and murderous histories, with a defense of structures that lead to truly destructive environmental policies and to powerful class and economic inequalities, a belief that private is good and public is bad, clear distaste for particular forms of science (again partly justifiable given the dangers of overly positivist versions of science), fears of relativism, and a very real concern that women's movements are bad things.

All of this becomes clearer when we look at the books on the panel's honorable mention list. The list is long, but bear with me, since it is quite illuminating: Paul Ehrlich, *The Population*

Bomb, V. I. Lenin, What Is to be Done, Theodore Adorno, The Authoritarian Personality, John Stuart Mills, On Liberty, B. F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity, Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence, Herbert Croley, The Promise of American Life, Charles Darwin, Origin of Species, Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Soviet Communism: A New Civilization, Margaret Mead, Coming of Age in Samoa, Ralph Nader, Unsafe at Any Speed, Simone de Beavoir, Second Sex, Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, Frantz Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, Sigmund Freud, Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Charles Reich, The Greening of America, Club of Rome, The Limits to Growth, and last but certainly not least, Charles Darwin again, his Descent of Man.

One is left nearly breathless by this list. And yet, one also wonders what the criteria for inclusion and exclusion were. Critical analysis of and action on class, gender, and race oppressions are "bad," as is seeing the world through the eyes of the oppressed. Culture is a battleground in which secular humanism is winning. Biblical traditions are better explanations than evolutionary science, something that is more than a little visible in the debates raging over science curricula in the United States. Science itself is to be mistrusted. The introspective methods of psychoanalysis are to be shunned. Environmental and consumer movements are dangerous. And once again, social criticism that comes from the left side of the political spectrum (but not the right) is simply illegitimate.

Yet, once again I wonder about the logic behind all this. For example, if we were to be truly concerned about the histories of murderous conduct that took huge numbers of lives as the "experts" at Human Events seem to be, wouldn't the Bible (or at least certainly some of its uses) merit some consideration? Wasn't it used to justify the mass expulsion, forced conversion, and murder of Jews in many nations? Wasn't it also used to justify such things as slavery with its murderous consequences not only in the Middle Passage but in the "colonies" themselves, the conquest of peoples throughout the world and the building of an empire, apartheid systems within these conquered regions, and so many other atrocities? Isn't a selective reading of this book behind some of the Bush administration and its neo-con allies' unapologetic call for an American empire?

Do not misunderstand me. I am not urging that we see such sacred texts as the Bible as evil. Indeed, all of the horrible practices to which I pointed were condemned on biblical grounds as well. Nor do I in any way wish to disrespect those whose very grounding lies in the sacredness of such texts. Rather, I want to point to the ideological positions behind the Human Events list, to its ultra conservative, authoritarian, and anti-democratic commitments, and how it speaks from a position of historical privilege. In order to understand all this, the key here is not simply the list itself, although there's some fun in that. Rather what counts are the interconnections among these issues. It's all connected, seemingly seamlessly—hit hard at environmentalism, feminism, gay rights, issues of race, and an uncritical defense of "our" economy and a rejection of any other way of thinking about the economy, and an already hard pressed and underfunded education system. Ignore the realities of real people's lives and never lose an opportunity to shift the blame onto others and all will be well.

Gee, you better stop reading this. This too could be dangerous.

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