

MisEducation or MisPolarization? Analysis of Fox News' *The MisEducation of America* Docuseries

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the docuseries *The MisEducation of America* by Fox Nation, hosted by Pete Hegseth, to explore its portrayal of political polarization in the United States. Through an examination of the series' central themes—Fear, Reality, and Patriotism—the paper reveals how the series argues that American Progressives have undermined traditional Western Christian values in education, leading to a deep ideological divide. The series presents a narrative in which the "far-left" has infiltrated public schools, replacing traditional American values with socialist and communist ideologies. This polarization is expressed through fear-mongering, the construction of an alternative reality centered on the preservation of a static divine ideal, and a form of blind patriotism that rejects criticism of American values. The paper discusses how these themes contribute to the broader issue of polarization, highlighting the docuseries' role in reinforcing a conservative perspective on the cultural and political divide in America. Ultimately, the series is used as a lens to understand the ongoing conflict between differing educational and cultural values, illustrating the challenges of overcoming political polarization in the United States.

Keywords: Political polarization; American politics; Alt-right studies; Identity politics; Patriotism; Education; Indoctrination

Introduction

This discussion seeks to explore the answer to the question of: “What does Fox Nation’s ‘Miseducation of America’ series tell us about the political polarization in the United States?”. This essay will approach the analysis and evaluation of the docuseries in three themes: Fear, Reality, and Patriotism. The title of the docuseries analyzed in this essay is ‘The MisEducation of America’. Hosted by Pete Hegseth¹, the docuseries is split into five “parts” each being an episode of approximately 26 minutes long. They are Part 1: Educating for Wisdom, Not Work; Part 2: The Cauldron of Cultural Marxism; Part 3: Captive Classrooms, Captive Minds; Part 4: Target: Western Civilization; Part 5: Our COVID-(16)19 Moment. Each episode builds off the last, to create a line of argument which can be summarized as following how the “Progressives” or the “far-left” of American history have slowly been infiltrating the public school system with ideas of “socialism and communism” to rid America of its “Western Christian *paideia*” and thus, true traditional American values. The official tagline of the series reads: “The Progressive take-over is complete, now it’s time to take it back.”

2. The MisEducation of America

The series first episode sets the basis of the line of argument which is returned to in each subsequent episode by stating that all of Western civilization owes itself to the ancient Greeks, i.e. that of ancient Athens and its democracy. American Progressives “original sin” is “destroying access to America’s original *paideia*” (Part 1). The concept of *paideia* refers roughly to the conceptualization ancient Greeks held of teaching and passing on shared cultural values, philosophies, and *nomos*. Elsner (2013) importantly notes that there is no officially recognized or recorded definition of *paideia* in the Greek or Roman tradition, although the later Roman tradition attempted to define it more in a cultural sense. The understanding that we have of *paideia* now, and the one likely accessible to the contributors on ‘MisEducation of America’, are later conceptualizations by writers Jaeger and Marrou, both writers of the 18th century attempting to fit humanism and explanation back into German post-imperial *kultur* (Elsner 2013). This “apologist” approach and revamp of the ancient world for the harkening to better days is used in ‘MisEducation of America’. The ancient concept of *paideia* is used to justify what is termed a “Western Christian *paideia*”, defined and explained as the Western classical extension of the original seven schools of thought (in Plato’s Academy); Grammar; Logic; Rhetoric; Arithmetic; Geometry; Music; Astronomy, combined with later Christian values of the Holy Roman Empire and teachings of the Bible and of church. The Western Christian *paideia* is extremely important in showing the polarization between what the docuseries argues is the core values and educational merit of Americans, versus what is argued to be implemented by Progressives as an “attack” on American (Christian) liberty, values, and pursuit of happiness. Each subsequent episode thus builds on this idea that the Western Christian *paideia* has been “taken” and “replaced” by an “anti-American *paideia*” (Part 5)

¹ Hegseth, a highschool graduate of Forest Lake Area (public) High School, graduate of Princeton University (BA) and Harvard University (MPP) is a current Fox News media personality. He is a noted supporter of Donald Trump. (IMDb “Pete Hegseth”; Pengelly 2021).

implemented via *indoctrination* of Progressive ideals. The term indoctrination requires some parsing. In the context of education and politics, it has a sinister connotation. As Palmer (1957) notes, it is extremely hard to define one mode or method of indoctrination, and 'MisEducation of America' conveniently does not define the term. It illustrates indoctrination by stating that the Progressives have been indoctrinating children via implementing "Progressive" curriculum, ranging from claims of outright Marxist ideals curated by Howard Zinn, to that the 1619 Project is a fallacy of lies and treason against the country's true values. Again, the true values of Western Christian paideia (besides learned teaching of the Bible) are never clearly defined or explored. There are certain claims made in the docuseries which will be explored in this essay under different themes which I have identified as undercurrents and influences in the docuseries which illustrate polarization in America.

3.1 Fear

"The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next" (Pete Hegseth, Part 2)².

As stated in the quote above, what is taught to children of one generation will be the government of the next as they ascend the halls of power to take the mantle from the previous generation. Hegseth brings up this quote in the context of prohibition laws. Frances Willard was an educator who created a curriculum additive supporting prohibition via teaching children the woes of alcohol in a negative and graphic manner to dissuade alcoholism as well as managed enjoyment. The Prohibition Laws, lasting from 1920 to 1933, were even ratified in the 18th Amendment in 1919. Hegseth attributes this directly to the curriculum introduced by Willard a generation prior (Part 2). This debate invokes an underlying theme which illustrates polarization in America; *fear*. There is the fear projected that without the Bible taught doctrinally in public schools, America's youth are lost. While there is no mention of outright alt-right political fear-based theories such as the "white extinction" (Bhatt 2020), such theories are heavily alluded to in the docuseries by Hegseth along with multiple "brilliant minds" in the field. Fear is also a driving factor of the theory of white extinction, a theory in which white individuals, usually men, fear that "white will be the minority" and that a similar (reversed) situation akin to South African apartheid will become a reality in America, with whites as the oppressed instead of the oppressors (Solomos et al 2020). As illustrated in the works of Neiwert (2017) and Hermansson (2020) the ideas of the alt-right are extremely varied and eclectic mixtures of leaning conservatism to outright far-right calls for violence and extremism.

This palpable fear on display in 'MisEducation of America' regarding the ideas of "elites" and subsequently associated intellectuals (Howard Zinn, Horace Mann, John Dewey, any intellectual of the Frankfurt School tradition, Nikole Hannah-Jones) is striking. Part 5 of the docuseries takes a look at the 1619 Project, a curriculum collection curated by Nikole Hannah-Jones based on the arrival of a ship of 20 Africans to Jamestown in 1619. Again, Praeger offers a passionate appraisal of the 1619 Project by stating, "The 1619 Project is a lie!". Part 5

² The quote is attributed, as stated by Hegseth in the docuseries, to Abraham Lincoln, but there is no official verification of this as historical fact.

further discusses the racial power struggle in America. Kersten is quoted as saying, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as other marginalized people groups beginning to voice concern and want for more opinion in public affairs, "...the power goes to *them*³...controlling a very scary future...". This part of the docuseries illustrates a strikingly explicit sense of fear of losing white majority power ("white extinction") in the social structure of America, or just as aptly put, the loss of structures of white supremacy. Polarization is demonstrated here explicitly in an "us vs them" framework. It is the Progressives (non-white, educated, young people) vs the conservatives (white, Western Christian paideia educated, church-going, Godly). It illustrates how the white conservatives of America truly fear losing any sense of power based on the fear that *they will be treated as they have treated others*.

3.2 Reality

"The Western Christian paideia has always been about progressing in a sense towards the divine ideal, but if you think about it, the divine ideal never changes. So we don't change that much...that's the Western Christian way" (David Goodwin, Part 2).

Progress can be defined and quantified in multiple different ways, much like indoctrination. The "Progressives", or the American left, are called as such by Hegseth and accompanying witnesses to refer to those who believed they were progressing America *past* the Western Christian paideia. Progressives are illustrated as the polarizing opposite of the conservative (Christian) right. The reality that is alluded to in this quote by Goodwin is about the *divine ideal*, i.e living in a Godly manner and in His image. The Progressives are presented as omitting this ideal from the classroom and thus American society, rendering the social ideal to now one of a humanistic man on the same footing as God. The omission of the liberal arts education of the Western Christian paideia is thus leading the entire American society on the "wrong path" of progression as there is no progress towards the (admittedly stagnant) divine ideal. Specifically, they are not referred to as liberals. I argue that this is a purposeful omission, as the Western Christian paideia is argued and presented to be a "traditional" and "classical" way of liberal arts education, something which America is now missing. As self-confessed in the quote by Goodwin, the progress of the Western Christian paideia is static, it does not technically advance a society towards any sort of "utopia"⁴. Stern (2019) refers to a "whitopia", a concept which ironically contrasts with the usage of utopia in 'MisEducation of America' and links in with the identitarian ideal; a white (race) utopia (Hermansson 2020). This warped *reality* of what could be the future of society links to other alt-right deceptions of reality, specifically to that of the "red pill" incel variety. Besides race, the divine ideal and the "traditions" espoused in the Western Christian paideia are linked morals and virtue. This misreading of virtue is directly tied to women, specifically that there must be an education which supports Christian values, or the "original American way" of life (Part 3). There are mirror images of the traditions argued that are now missing in 'MisEducation of America'

³ "Them" is in the explicitly context of Black, brown, and other non-white groups as footage rolls of Black Americans protesting and Asian students standing in solidarity with Black peers at protests.

⁴ "Utopia" is used in the docuseries to refer to the idealization of the world/society voiced by progressive thought.

(including traditional conceptions of gender, Part 4) in incel thought in the “tradwife”, short for “traditional wife”. This concept is of a morally virtuous woman who is not “sexually liberated”, tends to the home, does not work, rears the children and is meek to her partner (Stern 2019). The docuseries is calling implicitly to this “tradwife” role and the biological essentialism which couples the theory. The erasure of traditional American values alters the reality of the American social experience, thus leading Americans down a path of non-righteousness (no knowledge/access to the Bible, Part 3). Reality as a recurrent underlying theme in the docuseries is an important nomer to the polarization of America. The right and the left are literally conceptualizing and living different social realities. Children raised on values of Western Christian paideia are taught to reject values associated with the “anti-American paideia”. The series itself is an ironic example of “not changing that much” as stated by Goodwin. By “not changing that much”, however, conservatives are arguably losing the fight to “win the hearts and minds” of America’s children with the Progressives. The shift to alt-right realities subsequently serves as a shift in the reality that the Western Christian paideia purports, a reality foreign to the ancient Greeks.

3.3 Patriotism

“America was not about throwing out the past and making some kind of utopia. It was staying true to the traditions, but the French Revolution threw out the whole past...they redefined everything...” (Louis Markos, Part 2).

In Part 1, Hegseth states he is concerned about the education of America’s children “as a parent, as a citizen, as a patriot”. This invokes the final implicit theme I identified in the ‘MisEducation of America’ docuseries. Patriotism is a fickle thing, and it has many different types and affective sentiments attached to it. The quote above refers to the success of the American Revolution. Markos argues that the American Revolution was successful because the founders of the United States were not trying to reinvent any part of their history, but were trying to “take back” values they believed were suppressed by the British monarchy. The American Revolution is seen as the supposed advent of patriotism, sentimental attachments to the American nation harken back to the ideals of the Founding Fathers and other conceptions of what would later become the “American dream” (Kunovich 2009; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989). A specific tenet of traditional conceptions of patriotism is to *not* “throw out” the past, but to honor it and be proud of it. There are three categories of patriotism identified in the existing literature: blind, symbolic, and constructive (Parker 2010; Schatz et al 1999). The sentiments communicated in the docuseries; tradition, Christianity, “American values”, capitalism, ethnocentricity, are directly reminiscent of blind patriotism. Blind patriotism is a “rigid and inflexible attachment to country, characterized by unquestioning positive evaluation, staunch allegiance, and intolerance of criticism” (Schatz et al 1999:3). These are also correlated with politically right-leaning individuals (Parker 2010; alongside symbolic patriotism to a lesser degree with it being shared almost equally across the political spectrum). On the other hand, there is constructive patriotism, defined as “an attachment to country characterized by ‘critical loyalty’, questing and criticism of current group practices that are driven by a desire for positive

change” (Schatz et al 1999:3). This is a correlated ideology with more left-leaning individuals. Symbolic patriotism is the non-ideological attachment, characterized by the reverence of specific symbols of nation such as the flag, the national anthem, etc. (Parker 2010). The sentiments espoused in the docuseries relate much more to the conception of blind patriotism, but interestingly symbolic patriotism plays a bit more of a larger role. In Part 2, Hegseth takes watchers on a journey of the history of the Pledge of Allegiance, a national oath in which children repeat to a flag every morning in American schools. The oath goes: **“I pledge allegiance, to the flag, of the United States of America. To the republic, for which it stands, one nation [under God], indivisible, with liberty and justice for all”**. In my own youth, I attended a private school in America. This was separate from the dictation of the federal or state laws, and I still stated the pledge (with “under God” included) every morning under an American flag which hung at the front of the classroom from kindergarten through my leave in the 8th grade (2003-2014). The Pledge is an important symbol of national affection and attachment, yet Hegseth alarmingly (to conservatives) argues that the Pledge was created by Progressive “utopians” (Francis Bellamy) to replace the affective attachment to God with that of a love and attachment to the Nation. Notably, the original version of the Pledge does *not* mention God. This was a later addition by President Eisenhower (Part 2,3). The argument is that this undermines the Western Christian paideia by replacing God with the Nation, which is *not* a divine ideal. Hegseth repeatedly assures viewers that love of flag and nation are still “positive” attributes, but the history of it must be communicated. Patriotism is seemingly a binding sentiment, however in this context it serves to illustrate polarization in America, as well as the indoctrination of America’s youth. When I was in school, I had no knowledge or bearing on the history of the Pledge or really why I was required to repeat it every morning to an inanimate flag. However, this repetition, which Hegseth actually correctly argues, is central to the indoctrination of the youth to believe in the nation, to believe in the state of America above all else and create a sentimental affection for it. Coming from a military town as well, I even get sentimental when I see anything to do with military service, a statue, plaque, etc. thanking servicemen for their sacrifice even though I have no familial attachment to the US armed forces. This is the power of ideals such as patriotism and the associated indoctrination. The core of what patriotism illustrates in regards to polarization is in regards to the “types”. The sentiments in this docuseries are that of *blind* patriotism, unforgiving to those who criticize it and even moreso hostile to those who attack the *symbolic* objects of the country, such as the flag.⁵ In contrast, the contemporary left of America is akin to *constructive* patriotism, disagreeing with the sentiments of the series and blind patriotism, possibly content to varying degrees with hostile acts against symbolic artifacts of the country if they are in the name of voicing frustration with the nation. What is missing in the historical struggle illustrated in the docuseries is that the Progressives still care and love and cherish America. This eternal struggle illustrated by “left vs right”, saying one side wishes to “ruin” the country (Part 5) does nothing to serve either side’s purpose and arguably only pushes further polarization.

⁵ Throughout the series but in Part 4 especially, there are multiple visuals shown of flag burnings.

4. The Mis-Polarization of America

The issue of polarization in America is exemplified starkly in the docuseries the 'MisEducation of America'. It is actually the words of Praeger which summarize the polarization in and out of America's classrooms so well, as it serves no one "to have schools that close the mind and not open them".⁶ Praeger, Goodwin, and Hegseth all express distress that there is no open dialogue in the American education system, alluding to the argued "close-mindedness" of the left politicians of America (Part 1). This polarization and the lack of dialogue are indeed the product of almost over a hundred years of building-up back-and-forth between the "right" and the "left". To conclude this essay, the three main implicit themes of Fear, Reality, and Patriotism all serve to illustrate what the docuseries the 'MisEducation of America' tells us about polarization in America from the viewpoint of the "minority" opinion: the right (Part 1). The polarization is argued to be from fundamentally different views of *paideia* (or its bastardized conceptualization) which fragment and split the ideas of "progress" in American society between left and right, no God and God, humanist ideal and divine ideal. While there is no suggestion for how to resolve polarization for this essay, the 'MisEducation of America' series does let us explore and ruminate on the possibilities of how the Fear, alternative Reality, and differences in Patriotism could be overcome. After all, this docuseries speaks to the future by basing in a conception of the past, so if we are to conclude anything from this docuseries, it is that "classrooms are a crystal ball" (Louis Markos, Part 2).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the "docuseries" The MisEducation of America can arguably be seen as a misnomer in many ways. However, it does speak some truth to the currently reality currently facing American citizens. While there is an issue with education, the main crux of the problem is not being addressed through this docuseries. Arguably, the actual question Fox News should be asking is why did the American education system get to this point in the first place? Education has always been a main political battleground for the hearts and minds of young people in any country, but the casualties in this case are the American youth. With the upcoming 2024 election on the horizon, the future of America's youth and the fight for information will come to a boiling point. While it is outside the scope of this article to offer a solid solution, as an American citizen living abroad and the author of this analysis, I implore educators and students alike to employ critical thinking in their duties as citizens and in their pursuit of knowledge, whether through traditional educational means or otherwise.

⁶ However, this quote is voiced over images of peaceful BLM protests and march footage of Black youth.

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