

Plato Banned, American Democracy Threatened

by Nathan Bracher

Not only in Texas, where a professor was ordered to remove Plato from his syllabus, but throughout the United States, ideological dictatorship has begun. It amounts to nothing less than an attack on universities, the freedom of speech, and thought. How is it possible to resist in the face of this onslaught?

Who would imagine one of Plato's writings forbidden by a major university in one of its philosophy classes? But that is exactly what has happened in the United States, at Texas A & M University (TAMU), where I was a French professor from 1986 to 2024. Though doubtless startling to many, this act of censorship by no means sprang up out of nowhere.

The banning of an excerpt of *The Symposium* (in which Aristophanes recounts the myth of the androgynes in order to explain forces driving human love) was in fact just the latest of an entire series of misdeeds resulting from initiatives taken by Texas governor Greg Abbott and the Republicans in the state legislature, who have for years been attempting to muzzle professors and eliminate classes that upset them, particularly when they deal with gender, sexuality, or systemic, structural racism.

A Determination to Crack Down

The push to clamp down on academics and academia has been marked by several incidents. In March 2023, Joy Alonzo, a pharmacy professor, was hit with a temporary suspension, an administrative investigation, and a public reprimand after having been simply accused of criticizing Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick on the matter of handling fentanyl addiction. The daughter of one of Patrick's political allies had attended the lecture and relayed the alleged criticism (which was never substantiated or even specified by the investigation) to her mother, who contacted him. He had only to complain to the chancellor of the Texas A & M System, who immediately demanded that Dr. Alonzo be suspended and investigated.¹

In July of the same year, the TAMU College Arts and Sciences had first enthusiastically hired one of its own former students, Dr. Kathleen McElroy, to come lead the journalism program. But that was not at all to the liking of the Rudder Association, a coalition of former students determined to bring TAMU back to its ultraconservative roots, nor did it please the Board of Regents, whose members are hand-picked by the governor.

Incensed that Dr. McElroy, an African-American, had worked for *The New York Times* and had made a point of bringing more diversity to the professional training and work of journalists, the Rudder Association and the Board of Regents pressured TAMU to modify the contract: what had initially been offered for a period of five years was cut down to a one-year contract allowing Dr. McElroy to be fired from one day to the next, which was of course totally unacceptable, even insulting. She naturally chose to withdraw and return to her chair of journalism at the University of Texas, the other flagship state university, where she also serves as the co-director of the Center for Ethical Leadership in Media.²

Still in July 2023, the Texas Legislature passed a bill requiring all DEI programs and offices to be closed in state universities. But the Texas Republicans didn't stop there. In the wake of Trump's January 20, 2025 executive order proclaiming that the only legally recognized genders would be those biologically determined at birth,

¹ Kate McGee et James Barragán, « Texas A&M suspended professor accused of criticizing Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in lecture », *The Texas Tribune*, 25 July 2023.

² Stephanie Saul, « Texas A&M Celebrated a New Journalism Director. Then Came the Complaints », *The New York Times*, 12 July 2023.

governor Abbott decreed that all state agencies had to align their rules and practices with this exclusive recognition of the only two “valid” sexes.³

Surveillance on all levels

This ostentatious alignment with Trump’s doctrine did not fail to have concrete repercussions on professors and their classes, as dramatically illustrated by the case of professor Melissa McCoul, peremptorily fired in September 2025 following an exchange with a student offended by a session devoted to the question of gender in a literature course. In the video secretly recorded by someone else in the class, one sees her stand up to assert that the subject of non-binary gender was illegal, since Trump had declared that it didn’t exist.⁴

Once Brian Harrison, a Republican state representative known for his anti-LGBTQ+ outbursts, Governor Abbott seized upon the matter, demanding not only that the professor be fired, but also that TAMU president Mark Welsh step down. After following several twists and turns, the controversy ultimately led to Dr. McCoul being summarily dismissed, while the Head of the English Department and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences were removed from their administrative positions.⁵ TAMU President Welsh also found himself pushed to the exit, though with a golden parachute of no less than \$3.5 million.

But that wasn’t really the end of the matter. Shortly after, the boards of regents for all state universities in Texas required every course offered to be subject to a strict review in order to exclude any material not deemed to be in keeping with Trump’s or Abbott’s directives. In short, the measure aimed to eliminate any idea, perspective, or approach dealing with questions of gender and race, under the pretext of legal obligation, even though no law either at the federal or state level prohibits the teaching of such subjects.⁶

The TAMU Board of Regents moreover required every course appearing to promote “the ideology of race or gender” or bearing on questions of sexual orientation

³ Emma Whitford, « [Texas Systems Review Course Descriptions, Syllabi, as Critics Scrutinize Them](#) », 9 October 2025.

⁴ [Here](#) is what was uploaded to X: The tendentious, clearly inflammatory nature of the truncated video and scripted complaint is evident.

⁵ « [Texas A&M fires professor over gender-identity lesson in literature course](#) », NBC News, 10 September 2025).

⁶ Emma Whitford, « Texas Systems Review Course Description », *op. cit.*

or gender to be specifically approved by the university president. In addition, it was expressly forbidden to take up in class any subject that had not been explicitly listed on the course syllabus, which was itself also to be subjected to a strict review.⁷

Kicking Plato out of Ethics

The administrative machinery along with the guidelines for implementing these directives and thus limiting classroom instruction to the subjects deemed acceptable by the current tenant of the Oval Office, along with the governor and Republican legislators of Texas was now ready to enter into action. The results came without delay, most notably striking an excerpt of Plato's *Symposium* from the philosophy course on Contemporary Moral Problems.

Implementing the imposed restrictions and seeing that the passages selected from Plato's *Symposium* dealt with patriarchy, masculinity, and gender, the Head of the Philosophy Department Kristi Sweet gave Professor Martin Petersen an alternative: either remove the excerpt or be assigned to teach a different course. Petersen chose to replace the session on Plato with lectures on academic freedom and the freedom of speech, using press articles dealing precisely with the censorship of Plato in that very course.⁸

The news that one of the foundational Greek philosophers studied by countless generations for some 2500 years had been censored by a major public university stunned much of the world. But Plato's banishment from that classroom was only the tip of the iceberg. At least six other courses were canceled, while some 200 others, whose exact number cannot be determined for lack of accessible information, were subjected to censorship due to fears that scheduled lectures or discussions might raise questions of race and gender. In addition, TAMU announced in late January that its Women's and Gender Studies program, long an integral part of literary study throughout American universities, would be terminated.

Similar restrictions were placed on professors and courses in all public institutions of higher learning in Texas. They were sometimes even stricter, as at

⁷ Nicholas Gutteridge, « Texas A&M system approves policy to restrict faculty from advocating 'race and gender ideology' », *The Texas Tribune*, 13 November 2025.

⁸ Emma Whitford, « Plato Censored as Texas A&M Carries Out Course Review », *Inside Higher Education*, 7 January 2026.

Angelo State University (ASU), where censorship is draconian. At the risk of being fired, ASU professors must not only refrain from any discussion but even any mention of the idea that there might be anything else besides two sexes and two genders, masculine and feminine. Their syllabi must not contain any information on trans persons; they are required to call students by the names officially given them at birth; nor can any LGBTQ+ flags, posters, or emblems can be displayed in their offices.⁹

Elsewhere in the United States

While the larger metropolitan areas such as Houston, Dallas, and Austin are blue, the fact remains that conservatism has long been deeply rooted in Texas. Doubtless entertaining presidential ambitions and in any case always happy to be in the spotlight, Governor Abbott has always taken pride in putting Texas policies at the forefront of culture wars and the brutal crackdown on immigration.

One would be mistaken, however, to see in the preceding examples of ideological dictatorship a largely regional phenomenon. A widespread MAGA attack on universities and their intellectual probings has been launched nationwide. From the very beginning of his second term, Trump and his team have pressured the most prestigious universities, including Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Penn, and Chicago, among others, to put an end to their DEI programs while limiting teaching of DEI principles.¹⁰ Professors in many states have faced sanctions or dismissal either for having touched on controversial topics or for having derided Charlie Kirk, the star activist of the extreme right organization Turning Point USA assassinated on September 10, 2025, at the very moment when the firing of Melissa McCoul followed by the forced resignation of TAMU President Mark Welsh was making the headlines.

In a good number of states as in Texas (which has even created a state agency to field and investigate complaints from not only students, but also anyone in the general public who may find courses or statements not compliant with directives banning the teaching of certain subjects), professors are now required to post syllabi on the Internet in a format rapidly accessible and scannable by common browsers and search engines. Professors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill can now

⁹ « ASU to Put New Transgender Policies in Place », *The Concho Observer*, 19 September 2025.

¹⁰ « Tracking Trump's Crackdown on Higher Education », U. S. News & World Report, 3 October 2025.

be secretly recorded by administrators.¹¹ Many faculty now often feel under surveillance at all times, even in their private life.¹²

The attempt to make thought, speech, and knowledge conform to the norms dictated by the Oval Office is not limited to schools and universities. National parks and museums have been forced to take down or erase any information suspected of diminishing the prestige of the United States or wounding national pride.¹³ Trump's team has also proceeded with drastic cuts in all sorts of scientific research funding,¹⁴ while the agency charged with keeping track of weather has seen its budget greatly reduced, limiting its capacity for research.¹⁵ All references to climate change have had to be removed from government websites and documents.¹⁶ A number of NASA libraries documenting decades of climate research have been closed, making the information inaccessible.¹⁷

Smashing the values of liberal democracy

The onslaught is not only aimed at elite universities and intellectuals. It is intended to shackle public speech and cultural life in general. Take for example what has happened here locally in Little Rock, where the lecture series "Evenings With History," which brings university faculty into direct contact with the general public, was cancelled after the historians having organized it refused to camouflage the lecture dealing with the structural racism of incarceration rates.¹⁸

In a similar vein, Carlotta Walls, one of the famous "Little Rock Nine" having braved the flood of insults, harassments, and threats she encountered and integrated

¹¹ Emma Whitford, « UNC Administrators Can Now Secretly Record Faculty », Inside Higher Education, 11 February 2026.

¹² Vimal Patel, « Professors Are Being Watched : 'We've Never Seen This Much Surveillance' », *The New York Times*, 4 February 2026.

¹³ Kanishka Singh, « Trump reshapes US historical and cultural institutions », Reuters, 30 January 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-reshapes-us-historical-cultural-institutions-2026-01-30/>

¹⁴ Evan Bush, « Trump tried to gut science research funding. Courts and Congress have rebuffed him », NBC News, 4 February 2026).

¹⁵ Dinah Voyles Pulver, « Dramatic budget cuts at NOAA could put weather forecasts in peril, lives in danger », 1 July 2025, *USA Today*.

¹⁶ « Disappearing data - Trump administration removes climate information from government websites », Department of Earth Sciences, Freie Universita et, Berlin, 6 March 2025,

¹⁷ Cody Boteler, « ASA library closure in Maryland the latest in Trump cuts to space research », 1 January 2026, *The Baltimore Banner*.

¹⁸ Austin Gelder, « Lectures on race and history canceled in latest assault on academic freedom in Arkansas », 24 January 2026.

Little Rock's Central High School in 1957 has seen the number of invitations to come speak of her experience drop considerably. Some previously scheduled public appearances have been cancelled in the wake of the MAGA offensive against DEI. A number of other African-American speakers have experienced a similar reduction of engagements.¹⁹

The overall picture is clear: we are dealing with a quasi-totalitarian effort to control not only academic discourse, but also thought, and even the possibility of independent knowledge. The American democracy predicated on open discussion and the unencumbered transmission of ideas and knowledge, as well as the unfettered search for the truth is now in peril. Claiming to fight against a privileged, arrogant elite out of touch with the everyday cares and needs of ordinary people, therefore being irresponsible and even dangerous, since hostile to "American values," Republicans have sought to exploit longstanding currents of anti-intellectualism to the hilt.

Trump goes even further, not only scorning reasoned debate, but making it virtually impossible, responding to criticism with mockery, insults, and vulgarity. As Jonathan Rauch has pointed out, that is part of a coherent strategy aimed at demolishing the norms of public speech in democratic society.²⁰

Resistance?

With the Plato censored, universities gagged, norms of public discourse flouted, American democracy is in grave danger. In the face of this multi-pronged offensive intended to reign in if not definitively shut down all criticism, every voice of protest, what resistance is possible? The answer is not self-evident. The large-scale strikes and demonstrations that could be expected in the French context are not likely to happen or mobilize throngs of people in the United States, and even less so in Texas, at least not outside of college campuses.

While street demonstrations have long been a regular – if at times tumultuous – part of political and ideological struggles in France, such is not the case in the United States, although the 1960s protests against segregation and the war in Viet-Nam

¹⁹ Micah Smith, « Little Rock Nine icon Carlotta Walls LaNier confronts new barriers to sharing her story ».

²⁰ Jonathan Rauch, « Yes, It's Fascism », *The Atlantic*, 25 January 2026.

represent an exception to the rule. School teachers and college faculty are prohibited from collective bargaining in Texas, and in most American cities and states, the general public has little sympathy for university professors so easily caricatured as a privileged elite.

I would not presume to develop any overall strategy or issue any particular watchword. We can nevertheless cite a few significant examples, beginning by the refusal by Professor Barclay Key, chair of the History Department at the University of Arkansas Little Rock, to camouflage the content of the lecture « Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and the Death Penalty in Arkansas and the United States » to avoid the ire of his state's conservative elected officials. When his colleagues in the History Department learned that the university's administration taken down the announcement for the event on the university website, they voted to withdraw their participation. In addition, Dr. Key resigned from his administrative role in protest. I believe that was the right choice.

Some department heads and deans (almost always faculty having moved to a position in university administration) follow the order to exclude texts and topics that might risk clashing with the new rule banning the "ideology of race and gender" or ask their faculty to eliminate theme from their syllabi. But by being a part – even a small, secondary part – of the machinery of censure, one nevertheless participates in censorship and the control of ideas now in force.

The students' role

Other faculty having been subjected to censorship, such as the above-cited Dr. Petersen, have lost no time in bringing it to the attention of their students, all the better to emphasize the importance free speech, unfettered thought, and academic freedom, and to focus on the motives driving the specific exclusion. Some professors at Texas Tech University adopted a similar strategy, giving students a syllabus with "DO NOT READ" in uppercase letters superimposed on page numbers or adding "censored" to indications of initially scheduled class session.²¹

²¹ "Texas Tech struggles with new rules that changed what students learn about race, gender, sexuality", *The Texas Tribune*, February 4, 2026.

For his part, Dr. Leonard Bright of the TAMU Bush School did not hesitate to address the TAMU Board of Regents directly at one of their meetings, stressing the harmful effects of censorship on teaching. His colleague Dr. Petersen also spoke to the Board at the same meeting, explaining how the policy was detrimental to the university's mission and reputation. They didn't stop there. Dr. Bright penned an open letter to students, faculty, and administrators, pointing out that at the very moment when TAMU was commemorating the life and work of Martin Luther King, the policy of censorship was betraying his legacy. Meanwhile, Dr. Petersen gave a number of interviews to the press and media, even writing an op-ed.²²

They were both at the center of an outdoor rally at TAMU's Academic Plaza organized by Dr. Bright: students joined their voices with faculty to protest against the attempt to exercise tight intellectual control at the university.²³ By coming to demonstrate their support for faculty while at the same time underscoring their own desire to have access to unfiltered instruction, students may well be in the best position to mobilize public opinion, beginning of course with their parents.

Navigating the oceans of the contemporary world

University professors would have everything to gain by going beyond the sometimes narrow corridors of academia, and organizing lectures, master classes, round tables, and forums in view of making the general public more aware of the rich resources of scientific and intellectual inquiry. Instead of speaking to each other in specialized domains, they would make their teaching and research more accessible, while at the same time offering opportunities to share in the pleasure of the discovery, learning, and understanding that they pursue in their various fields.

The stakes are high, for the value of college degrees, increasingly assumed to be their monetizable potential, has more and more frequently and insistently been called into question over the last decade. The cost of pursuing higher education has been constantly going up, and the debts accumulated by hundreds of thousands of students having to take out sizeable loans, too often without being able to find a job that would

²² Voir Martin Petersen, « Texas A & M told me not to teach these Plato readings. That's not how you make universities great again », 10 January 2026, *MS Now*.

²³ Taryn Stilson, « 'Education is our right' : Protestors demonstrate for academic freedom », *The Battalion*, 30 January 2026. See also the students' photo-journalism in Steve Carrasco IV et Mateo Aguirre, « GALLERY: Aggies for Academic Freedom Protest », *The Battalion*, 29 January 2026.

pay enough to enable them to liquidate their debt once they have received their diploma. In these circumstances, how could one be surprised that both students and parents should be foremost concerned with pursuing a course of study leading to readily accessible, well-paid employment?

At the same time, a number of humanities courses may have been focused a bit narrowly on topics and approaches stemming from highly specialized research in ways that seem rather narrow and preachy, all of which offers an irresistible target not only to MAGA Republicans, but also to the champions of neo-liberal capitalism. Certainly in the present context it remains crucial not to evacuate discussions that might prove problematic or controversial: one must indeed scrutinize the origins and nature of political power, economic order, and sociocultural institutions one way or another when engaging in literary studies or the social sciences, which will invariably lead to lively debate. But it is also crucial to emphasize that such study has constituted one of the foundations of free societies from their very beginning. We must demonstrate to students and the general public alike the benefits of courses in both the liberal arts and science in terms of navigating the complexities of our rapidly-changing world and of constructing one's own life.

We must do all we can to communicate the passion for learning, the rewards of knowledge, and the pleasure of culture in every sense of the term. The more students, parents, and the general public share these values, the more attempts to impose a stranglehold on universities, faculties, instruction, and human thought in general will provoke strong pushback. That could be the beginning of resistance to the political and cultural bulldozer that Trump and his allies are trying to use to flatten opposition.

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