

Review of *On Censorship: A Public Librarian Examines Cancel Culture in the US*

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ABSTRACT: Review of LaRue, James. *On Censorship: A Public Librarian Examines Cancel Culture in the US*. Wheat Ridge, CO: Fulcrum Publishing. 2023. Ebook version, 81 pages. ISBN 9781682754580.

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Early last year, staff writer Luke Savage penned an article for *Jacobin*, the title of which underscores an important point that is sometimes missing from the contemporary discourse around censorship: “Conservatives Are Banning Books in America, Not Liberals” (2023). He argues that while there have been book challenges from the Left – “most often because [the titles in question] contain racist language or imagery” – we need to put these into proper perspective: “organizations like the [American Library Association] and [PEN America] who monitor book challenges and censorship are absolutely categorical that such examples are dwarfed by those originating from the Right” (Savage, 2023). Savage goes on to observe that there are those who nonetheless spend a disproportionate amount of time focused on challenges from “progressive activists or oversensitive college students” when the real threat is from “organized conservative groups” trying to restrict access to books about race, gender, and sexuality (2023).

Only a few months after this piece was published, Barack Obama became the most glaring example of the tendency it describes. In a widely read open letter to America’s librarians, the former U.S. President discusses challenges from the Right and the Left together, as if they are equally a problem, stating: “Either way, the impulse seems to be to silence, rather than engage, rebut, learn from or seek to understand views that don’t fit our own” (Obama, 2023). Nowhere does Obama highlight the disparity between these challenges, let alone contextualize them. By contrast, ALA President Emily Drabinski has taken pains to do just that, situating challenges from the Right within the singular, “four decades or more” history of their “structural attacks” on “public institutions” (2022). Likewise, any serious treatment of the current wave of censorship attempts would do well to take the time to think through challenges from the Left and the Right, drawing out their differences and avoiding false equivalencies.

So, how does James LaRue’s *On Censorship: A Public Librarian Examines Cancel Culture in the US* measure up in terms of its critical analysis? The short answer is “not very well.” On the one hand, this is more or less by design: *On Censorship* is a collection of thoughts and reflections from someone with ample, direct experience responding to library material challenges by the book. LaRue was formerly the executive director of both the ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom and the Freedom to Read Foundation, as well as director of the Douglas County (Colorado) Public Library District, where he personally dealt with over 250 challenges. So, this title is, in effect, an apologia for the mainstream principles and procedures that have historically guided public libraries around these debates. And, of course, that has its place.

On the other hand, though, this devotion to status quo thinking means that the book is prone to using the standard tropes and talking points as crutches and cudgels when careful, deliberative thought would be most constructive. Nowhere is this clearer than in how *On Censorship* discusses all kinds of challenges together in the abstract, flattening very real power differentials in the process. Much like Obama, LaRue repeatedly suggests that “whether the challenges come from the right or the left... at either extreme, they agree” (p. 35). And while his own “theory of librarianship” (p. 34) does make the requisite acknowledgement that “in the U.S., overwhelmingly, challenges come from the political or religious right,” it nonetheless arrives at the conclusion that both sides “seek to erode the explicit institutional mission of the library and replace it with something else: the advancement of their own agendas” (p. 35).

But does this hold up under even the slightest scrutiny? In almost every recent example of a challenge from the Right, where parents' rights groups funded by dark money seek to rid school libraries of anything they deem to be "pornographic" or "Critical Race Theory," it certainly does seem like the end goal is the destruction of the library as we know it. However, to take one prominent example from the Left, the Toronto Public Library's decision to rent a meeting space to an anti-trans speaker in 2019 was challenged by the library workers' union, among many others (Toronto Public Library Workers Union Local 4948, 2019). Should we really characterize one side of this civic and intra-professional disagreement over what a library's commitment to inclusion and safety should look like as an attempt to undermine and supplant the whole institution? That seems wrongheaded at best, and misleadingly unfair at worst.

LaRue goes even further later, drawing heavily on conservative author Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951). He sees the book's central argument as being especially applicable to our contemporary discourse around "cancel culture": "those at the outer edges of a continuum (far political left, far political right) have more in common with each other than they do with the many people in the middle" (p. 51). Endorsing such a view betrays a centrist's unexamined overconfidence in his ideological priors. Moreover, it is incredibly offensive not just to those on the radical Left but also to reality – as if there *are* any marked similarities between, say, Angela Y. Davis and Richard B. Spencer, or the Progressive Librarians Guild and Moms for Liberty. And to add insult to injury, it is very unclear what, if any, research went into *On Censorship*'s brief, critical history of the social responsibilities movement in librarianship (p. 38-41). As noted elsewhere, some key organizations and points on the timeline are conspicuously absent from LaRue's telling (Hudson, 2021; McCook, 2021). In addition, the book's only mention of the ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table manages to get its name wrong (p. 39).

While *On Censorship* does have its moments – for instance, the section "Does Anything Go?: The 'Harmful to Minors' Argument" (p. 25-6) is particularly pithy and well argued – their effects are largely undone by the book's overarching theoretical framework. It obfuscates the kinds of asymmetric power relations that should be front and center in any meaningful rumination on censorship in 2024, and continually steers things away from substantive engagement with good-faith criticisms of intellectual freedom maximalism. And even when LaRue does recognize significant tensions with other professional imperatives, such as social responsibility, the default solution is always to reject any give-and-take and obstinately plow ahead. By way of illustration, he tries to evade big questions about whether an uncompromising stance on intellectual freedom can sometimes "suppress" social justice by insisting flatly that the former "defends" the latter and leaving it at that, without doing the work of building an airtight case for this position (p. 64)

"Intellectual open-mindedness means that sometimes you have to be willing to seriously investigate a surprising opinion," LaRue writes at one point (p. 60). But it has to be a two-way street, otherwise this is just something one says when they want to cop out of their part in a difficult conversation. Intellectual freedom absolutists cannot just tell everyone else to model intellectual open-mindedness and not do it themselves – they have to set an example too. And some have: the famous "Swan-Peattie debate" at the ALA's 1988 conference is a great example of two champions of intellectual freedom and social responsibility, respectively, having a thoroughgoing dialogue in this very spirit (2012). It is to its significant detriment that *On*

Censorship fails in this regard, taking an approach that is more “do as I say” than “do as I do.”

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