

**THE POLITICS OF CENSORSHIP IN THE USA: A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF THE CASE OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

By
Lili Leitner

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Supervisor: Professor Erzsébet Strausz

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Abstract

This thesis explores the connection between politics and book censorship in today's USA by analyzing the dynamics and power relations around censorship, and its subsequent effect on everyday people. It achieves this by viewing the issue from the everyday politics of knowledge framework, and inspecting one frequently banned novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. First, I perform a cultural analysis on the contents of the novel, showing the important relevance of the book for audiences. Building on this, I then examine the struggles and dynamics around the book, and aim to expand the political and everyday implications of censorship. The main purpose of this thesis is therefore to signify the dire consequences of knowledge control by power holders, and to contribute to existing literature by adding an International Relations perspective to the subject. The key finding of this thesis is that censoring books like *The Handmaid's Tale* is not only an attempt by state officials for knowledge control, but also an action detrimental for audiences, who are unable to access important, transformative ideas and subjects through these books.

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Introduction

Seemingly non-significant everyday actions, such as reading a book, can become the center of political turmoil. Such is the case in today's United States of America, where as of end of 2022, 1477 individual book bans occurred throughout the school year in dozens of school districts. This marks a 28% increase compared to the previous school year, and averaging at 100 individual titles removed from the curriculum per month (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 5).¹ There has been a rapidly growing list of banned books in schools and libraries in dozens of American states for the last few years. What started out as local movements in as many as 36 states is now moving onto state-level legislatures and state policies, pioneered by government officials and elected lawmakers (Powell 2021). The bans are mostly occurring in Southern states, such as Texas, Florida or South Carolina, and are originating from a vocal minority of parent-led groups as well as state officials. According to PEN America, compared to the previous school year, new laws are in place to censor “ideas” and “materials” in schools as well as books, and the types of topics that are censored have also expanded. Most banned titles include stories and characters of people of color and belonging to the LGBTQI+ community (Meehan and Friedman 2023). Even though this study focuses on the USA, it is worth mentioning that book censorship is currently also a growing problem worldwide, in countries such as Hungary, China or Egypt (The Borgen Project 2022).

This thesis concentrates on one censored title, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale* itself was banned by other countries, such as Portugal and Spain in the 1980s (Mufarech 2022). In the case of the phrases “censorship” and “book ban”, I use the definitions provided by The American Library Association (ALA) and PEN America. The

¹ The whole 2023 report of PEN America can be found here: <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>

ALA defines censorship as “change in the access status of material, based on the content of the work and made by a governing authority or its representatives. Such changes include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age/grade level changes” (American Library Association 2006). Many further definitions have been made, however all of them include the sentiment that one withholds access from another (Oppenheim, Charles, and Smith 2004, 3). Similarly, book ban is defined by PEN America as “any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished” (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 16). These book bans occur when school boards or politicians override the choice of teachers, librarians and school administrators to include a book in the curriculum or the library. Bans may be pending upon investigation, and be temporary or final (Friedman and Johnson 2022).² In the interest of clarity, I use “censorship” and “book ban” interchangeably, to signify the fact that a book has been challenged and unavailable. Similarly, I consider books that are temporarily removed, or their ban is pending upon investigation also as censored and banned, as they are currently not available for readers.

As I will detail in a later chapter, the reasons for banning these books are multifaceted, however most include the claim that the books cover topics of ‘violence’, ‘sexual subjects’, or generally ‘morally corrupt’ ideas, which range from discussions about racism to sexual identity (Friedman and Johnson 2022). Most claims include the fact that parents or officials aim to protect children from ‘harmful’ or ‘corrupt’ subjects (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 1). The growing trend of book censorship in the USA is disconcerting for multiple reasons. As

² The whole 2022 report of PEN America can be found here: <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>

several authors and institutions, such as PEN America, have pointed out, censorship takes away the free choice and freedom of expression of individuals, granted by the First Amendment in the US Constitution (Constitution Annotated, n.d.). Not only is this a cornerstone of democracy, but it is also a pivotal value during school years, where children are likely to come across these ideas and issues for the first time. Depriving them of this is against their right to freedom of speech and is detrimental to their development. Discriminating against titles containing certain characters of color or sexual orientation takes away the chance of individuals to read about people different to themselves. Moreover, for children of color and LGBTQI+ children, censoring these books removes the opportunity to see characters like them represented in literature (Brooks 2022).

Previous studies and news articles have mostly focused on the above-mentioned human rights and free speech aspect of book censorship (e.g. Alter and Harris 2023, Dabhoiwala 2020, Ingram 2019), whereas few have centered the political dynamics and consequences of such measures. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the relationship between politics and literature from an International Relations standpoint, and investigate how political censorship is taking space under the everyday politics of knowledge framework. It explores book censorship in contemporary USA by asking what the political dynamics of censorship are and how they impact the everyday lives of people, providing a new viewpoint to the struggles and power relations around the topic. To achieve this, the study looks at the politics of representation in *The Handmaid's Tale*, one of the most banned titles in the past decades, and connects this to the politics of discourse and practice around the book and around the broader topic of censorship. Therefore, this thesis is aiming to answer the following questions: (1) What are the political dynamics and consequences of censorship in the USA?, and (2) how are some of these dynamics illuminated through *The Handmaid's Tale's* representational practices and the discourses around its ban? Through this, the main purpose of this study of *The Handmaid's*

Tale and book censorship is to provide a discussion on the political relevance and possible detrimental effects of censorship both on people's rights and on their everyday practices, such as obtaining knowledge and ideas.

In order to accomplish this, the first chapter of the thesis provides a brief overview of the current wave of book censorship in the USA, followed by an examination of the politics of censorship connected to the everyday politics of knowledge framework. Continuing this, the second chapter presents an extensive cultural analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on the politics of representation and subjectivity in the novel, and most of all on the connection between knowledge and power. I enlist the work of Michael Shapiro on aesthetic subjects (e.g. Shapiro 2013) and Matt Davies on popular culture and world politics (e.g. Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009). Throughout the whole thesis, I use Michel Foucault's discussions about knowledge, power and discourse (e.g. Hall 1997, Foucault 1980). The third chapter extends the topic of the previous one by examining the real-life struggles and discourses around *The Handmaid's Tale*, and reflecting on the important subjects of the novel through the events surrounding it. By drawing this connection between the struggles in- and outside of the novel, I aim to show how everyday phenomena can become political, and to emphasize the importance of free access to literature. I show that limiting people's access to transformative books is detrimental as it inhibits them from learning about new topics and ideas they could benefit from in their everyday lives.

Chapter One: Politics of censorship

In this section, I briefly summarize the recent wave of book censorship in the USA, showing why, where and how the books are banned, what the catalyst for this wave was, and what types of books are in the center of the bans. Afterwards, I explore the politicization of literature through the lenses of the everyday politics of knowledge framework, and provide a brief overview of the methodology of this study, embedded in the framework.

1.1. Book censorship in the USA

The current wave of book censorship across the USA is not without precedent. The country has a history of book bans, albeit rarely as widespread and large-scale as in recent years. In the 1980s there was an upsurge in censorship in school districts, similarly to the current wave. The most prominent case was in 1982 in a Long Island school district, Island Trees, where a total of 11 books were removed by school boards for being ‘objectionable’ – most of them involved the topics of race and racism (Chavez 2022). A wide range of books were banned, consisting of topics of queer youth, magic, voodoo-ism, and more (PEN America 2016).³ One of the most well-known book series, *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling was the most challenged book series by 2000. Titles such as *It’s Perfectly Normal* by Robie H. Harris, a sex education book for teenagers, or *Heather has two Mommies* by Leslea Newman, one of the first pieces of LGBTQI+ children’s literature are among the most banned books of the past three decades (PEN America 2016).

The main catalyst of the current wave was the pushback against the resurfacing of critical race theory (CRT), which states that racism is a problem of the system, not only the individual, and that underlying patterns of racism are deep-rooted in modern institutions and

³ The whole report is available at: https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PEN_childrens_lit_report_FINAL_online.pdf

laws (Fortin, 2021). The theory reemerged after the murder of George Floyd, and was claimed by Republicans to have appeared in schools, despite the fact that it was not present in school curricula. Soon after, parents in school districts began to express worries that their children brought home books about racism – more specifically, exploring the harmful practices of racism (Powell 2021).

As of 2023, over the past two years (since mid-2020) the debate around CRT, an academic theory, has become a much broader and deeper issue, ultimately resulting in limiting access and even banning dozens of books. At first, parent-led advocacy groups pressured school districts to ban books, sometimes even without reading them (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 9). In the 2022-2023 school year however, new laws have emerged, dictating what types of titles can appear in schools. In 2021, Texas lawmakers passed a legislation which controls how teachers can talk about topics on race and gender (Powell 2021). In Wyoming, a prosecutor considered pressing charges against librarians for allowing titles in their library such as *Sex Is a Funny Word* or *This Book is Gay*. In yet another incident, a bill in Oklahoma was passed in the State Senate to ban school libraries from stocking books about topics of sexual identity, activity or gender identity (Alter and Harris 2023). In Missouri, ‘sexually explicit’ books are now illegal in schools, and those who hold them can be charged with one year of jail time and a 2000\$ fine (Jensen 2022).

As PEN America points out, “the movement to ban books (...) is deeply undemocratic, as it seeks to impose restrictions on all students and families based on the preferences of a few parents (...). The nature of this movement is not one of isolated challenges to books by parents (...); rather, it is an organized effort by advocacy groups and state politicians with the ultimate aim of limiting access to certain stories, perspectives, and information (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 12).” According to a 2022 poll, 70% of parents do not agree with book banning, yet, public schools are facing political pressure from state laws and even threats from vocal

parents, so in many cases the school are more cautious than it would be warranted, and opt for even censoring titles that had not yet been challenged (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 2).

These state legislations and censorship attempts happen only in Republican states, with the most prevalent book bans in Texas, Florida, Missouri, Utah, and South Carolina as of 2023. From July to December 2021, PEN America reported 1,383 instances of book bans, while January to June 2022, 1,149 cases, and July to December 2022, 1,477. The latter concerned 874 unique titles, which featured topics such as violence, mental health and well-being, grief and death, characters of color and themes of race and racism, LGBTQI+ characters, and mentions of abortion and teen pregnancy (Meehan and Friedman 2023). Together, these subject matters indicate that books that are being challenged are those containing diversity in terms of identity, ideas and topics. Many of the authors of these books are also people of color and/or are LGBTQI+, signifying that there is a conscious targeting of these communities (Meehan and Friedman 2023, paragraph 7). The importance of access to books like this cannot be overstated, *especially* in Republican states, where instances of racism and homophobia are even more prevalent than in their Democratic counterparts (Pew Research Center 2021). Encountering books about diverse topics and characters can allow readers to expand their view of the world, to think about issues they normally might not think about, and to grow acceptance of individuals different to them.

The upsurge of book bans is not without challenge from advocates of free speech and free education. According to The Guardian (Milman 2022), students, parents, teachers and librarians have been fighting attempts of censorship, even when going against well-funded rightwing groups and state officials. Associations such as the Banned Books Club have emerged, which are devoted to protecting important books.⁴ Even in schools, students fight

⁴ The website of the Banned Books Club: <https://www.bannedbooksbookclub.com/>

back by creating clubs like The Teen Banned Book Club in Pennsylvania, which provides a free space for everyone to express their ideas (Page 2022). Institutions such as PEN America or the American Library Association oppose censorship by advocating for free speech in literature, and creating columns like Banned Books Week to raise awareness (Banned and Challenged Books 2023).⁵ Nonetheless, the trend of book banning in the USA is increasing, with no sign of stopping in the near future.

1.2. The politics of censorship from the everyday politics of knowledge viewpoint

As previously pointed out, literature has become a subject of politics in the USA. “The politicalization of the topic is what's different than what I’ve seen in the past (Alter and Harris 2023)”, said the chief executive of a book provider company, calling attention to the fact that politicians support one side of ideology and values regarding literature, while aiming to ban access to the other side. This section reviews the literature on the idea of everyday objects and topics becoming political, and why it is important to study them.

There is an abundance of topics, subjects and actors that are not usually included in the discourse around IR, being deemed insignificant in the scope of world politics. This way of thinking however, skews the discourse towards an angle that only considers elites, powerful institutions and structural power (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 278). Furthermore, as Davies and Niemann (2010) explain, one of the most important shortcomings of IR is that it does not allow everyday people to connect the global political transitions and events to their own, everyday lives. Luke Yates (2022) argues that the concept of everyday politics matters because it not only brings back the power to everyday people, but it also offers a direction and a perspective. Associating politics with the everyday life offers a new light thus, according to the author the everyday is not only the object of politics, but also a new perspective on it. The theme

⁵ The Banned Books Week column: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/banned>

of everyday can constitute topics on identity, class, lifestyle, consumption, or forms of power; namely anything that shapes and forms everyday life both in tangible and intangible ways. Even though these topics may seem mundane, they are important because they are a part of every person's life, and therefore they are universal and omnipresent (Yates 2022, 146).

Perhaps the most important aspect of everyday politics perspective is power relations. Guillaume & Huysmans (2019) explain that the everyday politics framework sheds light on how power and domination are not top-down and vertical processes, but instead horizontal, where the larger-scale political decisions and state practices coexist with all the banal, everyday processes. They claim that “domination, legitimacy and power are enacted through constellations of heterogeneous interests in the lives that people live” (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 284). Moreover, Yates (2022) argues that many social theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler or James Scott describe power and domination as something that is continually reproduced, challenged, performed and distributed widely among people, and across social structures and relates closely to daily, everyday life.

Everyday politics also signifies the importance of processes around politics, new ways of political expression, and the politicization of new areas, emerging from the everyday (Yates, 2022). Therefore, it is useful and important to examine book censorship through this new angle, and discover the nuanced processes and dynamics around the topic. Moreover, this framework provides an input into how and why such ‘mundane’ topics as books and reading became politicized and how literature is transformed into something entirely different: a stage for ideological battles. In addition, Davies and Niemann (2010) point out the importance of leisure in IR theory, since it is a central part of daily life for the majority of the population, which brings them the closest to world affairs. By consuming different kinds of media – the paper, television, cinema, novels -, non-professional or non-expert people can engage with politics and the events of the world, and gain access to IR. De Moor talks about ‘the politicisation of

citizens' everyday life choices" (De Moor 2017, 181), which is exactly what happens in the case of book censorship: individuals are no longer free to choose what they want to consume, because of a certain set of ideologies enforced by lawmakers. Thus books, formerly a subject of only the everyday, become a subject of politics.

The argument that leisure activities such as reading books, can give access for everyday people to the stage of world politics (Davies and Niemann 2010, 571), is increasingly true for books that are concerned with political topics, or are set in a context where politics are important for the lives of the characters. Such books can provide a mirror for the real world, help people understand the intricate processes of politics, and provide a perspective, which can shape their orientation towards states, governments or politics in general. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides an excellent example of such a mirror. It is set in a utopian world, with harrowing similarities to contemporary US politics. Moreover, it is one of the most widely banned books over the last decade, therefore the book became more than just a leisurely, everyday reading, but a politicized action. Therefore, the following chapters provide a deeper inspection into how to look at a cultural artifact through the politics of representation, and expand these findings to the real-world struggles around the novel and book censorship in general.

The Handmaid's Tale is so representative of today's USA (and also the USA in the 1980s, when the novel was written) (Armstrong 2018), and its contents are key to understanding why it has been banned for decades. In this thesis, I will perform (1) a cultural analysis on the contents of the novel, and (2) discourse analysis on the dynamics around it. These methodologies are important parts of the research, because through them we can discover the relevance of this novel in the discourse around book banning in contemporary USA, and why it became such a politicized and 'dangerous' piece. Moreover, the analysis will shine a light on the harmful practices of book censorship, and the possible reasons behind it. Lastly, it will provide an insight

into the broader relationship between knowledge and power in the context of the everyday politics framework and book censorship.

First, through the cultural analysis I will explore the world and society within the book, the dangers of ignorance, the different modes of resistance and especially the main characters' persona, which gives readers an insight into the importance of resistance against totalitarian regimes, and the relationship between power and knowledge. I investigate how the author portrays subjectivity through the main character's personality and decisions. Most importantly, I analyze the relation to knowledge, knowledge production and the power of the written word. This last point is especially meaningful in terms of the everyday politics framework, because literature and books may be perceived as mundane, however they can be powerful within the stage of world politics. I bring in existing literature on popular culture and world politics by Matt Davies (2009, 2010) to enrich the theoretical framework and to help us understand the political relevance of fictional characters. The cultural analysis of the world within the novel helps to understand how the book can influence readers, and how it can change the way they view the world around themselves.

While the cultural analysis serves the goal of showing how the representational practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* are important for audiences, the second part of the research aims to demonstrate the politics of book censorship through analyzing the discourses *around* the novel. These two parts are complimentary: while the first presents the subjects of resistance and the power of knowledge through the lenses of the fictional characters, the second mirrors this by detailing how these topics are manifested in the discourses and struggles around the book. The cultural analysis and *The Handmaid's Tale* are in the central part of this thesis, while the analysis of the discourse around the book adds to this by providing a new perspective on book censorship. Therefore, the second part of the research is a natural continuation of the first, expanding its aspects into real life, and reflecting on them through the events that surround the novel. Together,

they serve the purpose of showing the dynamics of censorship in today's USA, providing an understanding for the importance of free access to literature. The next chapter therefore contains the cultural analysis part of the research.

Chapter Two: Politics of representation in *The Handmaids Tale*

2.1. Cultural analysis, IR and popular culture

Michael J. Shapiro is perhaps the most renowned scholar extensively studying the topic of the aesthetic turn in the field of International Relations. In his various works, he describes the phenomenon of the ‘aesthetic turn’ as a shift towards the aesthetics in the discipline of IR in regards to our understanding of the world. He argues that in terms of research and methodology, this turn provides us with new opportunities for trans-disciplinary research. The study of aesthetics, he believes, can link different disciplines together, and integrate sensory and affective experience into our research. He encourages scholars to think, rather than to aim to explain, and to create parallels and invent frameworks to disrupt established knowledge practices, and to challenge accepted ways of understandings (Shapiro 2013). Similarly, Roland Bleiker (2001) argues that the aesthetic approach provides a different means of connecting to complex and ambiguous political topics by emphasizing perception and sensory experience. It can help us understand international politics by engaging with their emotional and embodied dimensions and gives us a more contextual and holistic understanding of them. While for Shapiro aesthetic subjects are the characters in literature who make us think (Shapiro 2013), Bleiker argues for the role of aesthetic subjects, such as literature, to use as tools for political understanding and intervention (Bleiker, 2001). However, they both share the argument that aesthetic subjects, be that characters or books, are important to consider when thinking about world politics.

In terms of aesthetic subjects, Shapiro (2013) defines them as “characters in texts whose movements and actions (...) map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains (Shapiro, 2013: xiv).” He suggests that to think, rather than to explain, means to invent knowledge frames, which give way to imagining alternative worlds and imagined political realities. Importantly, Shapiro quotes Jacques Rancière in explaining his methodological concept, which consists of approaches, which disrupt the general ways of analysis (Shapiro,

2013: xv). As I argue later, one of the pivotal importance of free access in schools and libraries to books, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, is that through them audiences can reimagine the world and adopt new ways of thinking. Similarly, Bleiker (2001) demonstrates that aesthetic subjects are able to challenge traditional narratives and power structure, and offer alternative ways of thinking, as well as provide a voice for marginalized people and communities. This gives power to the readers, and an opportunity to realize ideas they might not access otherwise.

In addition to the role of aesthetic subjects for this research, it is important to briefly examine the importance of popular culture and aesthetic subjects in everyday life. The various works of Matt Davies shed light on the importance of analyzing the everyday life and within that the artefacts of popular culture (e.g. Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009, Davies 2010). He argues that even if everyday problems, such as social reproduction, come up within the field of International Relation, it will be in the terms of a separate level from the everyday, such as diplomatic or governmental affairs. Davies urges for scholars to view world politics through the lenses of everyday experience and practice, to “think about world politics politically (Davies, 2010: 179).” He continues by stating that “any critical approach to world politics and international studies must account for the mediations (...) between different scales and levels of political relations and everyday life and for the ways in which the spaces of IR are produced (Davies, 2010: 180).” Therefore, aesthetic subjects - such as popular cultural artifacts like novels -, and within them the subjectivity of characters can have an important effect on everyday life, and in turn on world politics.

Davies specifies the role of popular culture within IR in his article *Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture–World Politics Continuum* (2010). He argues that popular culture and world politics are viewed as separate, although connected topics. The only role popular culture plays in mainstream IR is around its effect on larger topics in the field, such as state relations or institutions. Davies suggests that it is also important to analyze popular culture

in and of itself, as a site where power is produced. That is, we need to focus on how the everyday topics in popular culture give rise to certain understandings of politics within the consumers of the culture, which later influence the effects on world politics. Davies urges for more focus on how popular culture can shape political possibilities and how it may lead to the production of certain politics, as he claims that “all of these elements contribute to a terrain of ‘exchange’, ‘negotiation’, ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation’ where the construction of the political and the type of politics it engenders are formed (Storey, 2006, pp. 1–12).”

In another piece, Davies (2010) shows the relevance of the everyday subject of work in the international political spheres by analyzing the popular show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He connects the phenomenon of work in the show with work in real life, and analyses Buffy’s character and her construction of self to extend the layers appearing in the show to world politics. He shows how the critique of work on the show can be a representation of the separation of the everyday and international politics in IR. I use a similar approach to analyze different layers of subjectivity in the character of Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and show why the banning of the book could prove detrimental. More specifically, I investigate the topics of defiance, ignorance and knowledge in the novel, and discuss why these topics could provide important revelation for audiences, which could alter the way they view world politics and the everyday.

2.2. Short synopsis

The Handmaid’s Tale is a fictional dystopian novel, written by Margaret Atwood and published in 1985. It tells the story of the central character, Offred’s life in the country Gilead through a span of several months. The novel is set in the late 80s or early 90s, in the former Boston. Gilead is a totalitarian, patriarchal, theonomic state, which overthrew the United States government some years before the story begins. The book jumps back and forth in time, describing the slow but steady way the new norms, principles and ideas infiltrated the society and their everyday

lives, and how the new government took over every aspect of these lives. Due to various reasons, most people are barren and unable to reproduce. Using this as a reasoning, the new government takes control of and oppresses women to an extent where they are no longer allowed to read or write, have their own possessions or jobs. Women are divided into different groups or castes: the wives of officers, the servants, and the handmaids. The latter group is deemed to still be able to reproduce and they serve as surrogates to the high-ranking officers. They undergo frequent, ritualized intercourse by the officers, and their sole purpose is to get pregnant and bear children to the officers and their wives. The handmaids can no longer keep their own name, but they take on the name of their masters, with the 'of' preposition before the name, to signify power relations between them and the officers (the main character is therefore called Offred).

The political system in *The Handmaid's Tale* is best described as a patriarchal, right-wing, fundamentalist Christian theocracy with totalitarian politics, repressive rules and laws and a strictly hierarchical, caste-like society (Stillman and Johnson, 1994, Beauchamp, 2009). The Gilead leaders', and the Gilead society's highest priority is reproduction – but only the reproduction of white, Christian, heterosexual individuals. After abducting power from the former USA government, the new leadership rewrote history, completely took over television broadcasting, forbade books (except for sacred texts, only for men to read) and newspapers. Moreover, they created a spy-network which reported suspicious activities of citizens, and publicly displayed hung bodies of those who did not follow the rules. Resistance to the system was practically impossible: the citizens' every move was being watched, and the neighbors and colleagues spied on each other. The next section provides a deeper look into some aspects of the novel and a cultural analysis of these subjects.

2.3. Subjectivity in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Building on the work of Davies (e.g. 2009, 2010) and Shapiro (e.g. 2013), I aim to show the importance of everyday phenomena in world politics, and how power relations can affect them. More specifically, I explore how a fictional piece of popular culture, i.e. a novel, can shed light on important everyday political matters mainstream IR may not consider, in accordance with the aesthetic turn in IR. While analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale*, I show how power can be observed through different interactions in fictional stories and through fictional characters – or aesthetic subjects – , and why it is important to pay attention to this. I argue that popular culture, and within that, books can reflect the realities of everyday life and can open the eyes of the audience to political processes and power relations they might not realize, in accordance with Shapiro's (2013) thinking. Similar to how Davies (2010) centered his piece around the phenomenon of work and the main character's subjectivity in relation to work, I also center the analysis on three main topics. In a more general sense, I explore the abilities, subjective features, decisions, and self-formation of the main character itself, and what they can tell us about the relationship between knowledge and power both in the novel and in real life. More precisely, I examine the topics of ignorance, resistance, and knowledge in the novel. I connect this with what the audience can realize when reading the novel - about their own (lack of) power, resistance, ignorance, and the importance of knowledge. Therefore, I aim to show why it is pivotal for audiences to have access to books such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, and why banning these books is a harmful practice.

The reason for choosing these three topics of the book is that they are the most suitable for giving us answers to the question of this study on how the representational practices in *The Handmaid's Tale* shed light on the political dynamics of censorship in the USA. Therefore, the reason for the chosen topics is threefold: they connect to the previously discussed phenomenon of the aesthetic subjects, they resonate with today's USA politics, and they signify on the

importance of free access to literature. More specifically, these complex subject formations are potentially able to move the readers out of traditional ways of thinking. They offer a transgressive, transformational experience, which makes the audience think outside of the box, and potentially transform their approach to reality. Therefore, they provide a reason for why *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important piece of popular culture, which needs to be available for everyday people. Lastly, since these topics are representative of the politics of the contemporary USA – such as censorship and resistance against knowledge control - , they may also be the reason for the continuous censorship of the book. This is further explained in the next chapter, where I revisit these topics in the light of the events surrounding the novel.

The character of Offred is a rich subject to investigate, as the study of subjectivity in the light of the aesthetic turn may shed light on the political importance and aesthetic potential of this character. She is not nearly a perfect human, and therefore when we examine her choices, decisions, thoughts, it is easy to understand and relate to them. She is constructed as ordinary as can be – she has many faults, led an unremarkable life before the events of the novel -, however she stands out in an important way. In a world where creativity, resistance, even thinking is prohibited, she still has the ability to be a reflexive subject, to reflect on her own ignorance, to show resistance in her own ways, and to access and create knowledge and important thoughts.

She creates multiple selves and identities in a society where women are deprived of their individuality and their agency is severely restricted. This is represented in the following quote, which demonstrates her self-formation. The character often has to wait long, uneventful hours alone, in silence, and she uses these hours to create her selves and the story she is telling the readers of the book.

“I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.” (Atwood 1985, 66)

She creatively creates and maintains a sense of self even when she is reduced to be only a vessel for reproductive purposes. Her multiple selves include her past, ‘mundane’ self, her handmaid self, and her own private persona in the present. In the many quiet moments of her life she interrogates, forms and maintains these selves, and through her narration, these selves survive and tell her story (Atwood 1985). In the following sections, I introduce the three aspects of Offred’s character journey, which all give an insight into the importance and relevance of the novel. I examine three aspects of her character journey, which are pivotal in understanding the relationship between power and knowledge, and what the book can teach audiences about the politics around knowledge control and censorship.

2.3.1. Ignorance

As mentioned above, one of the main values of Offred is her reflexivity. When reminiscing about her past self, she reflects on what she could not reflect before, and give a modality on what happened. Her ability to do this lifts her out from the other characters, and teaches important lessons on ignorance and its dangers. This is shown in her narration on how the new regime slowly took over prior to the events of the novel, noting that even though they were aware of the changes, they chose to ignore them.

“But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantly: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it.” (Atwood 1985, 42)

Offred details how ignorance was in fact a choice, perhaps for a peace of mind or as an easier road. She is shown as a somewhat complacent subject in the novel, perhaps representative of most everyday people. She details how she was not unaware of the signs that surrounded the early days of the new political system. She saw the first steps towards the totalitarian regime; she clearly recalls these throughout the novel. For instance, she specifically discusses an event

in the past, where she found out that women were periodically kidnapped or killed in her vicinity, however she chose to ignore this, and move on with her life.

“We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories.” (Atwood 1985, 42)

She and her friends believed the events around them are apart from them and will not affect them. Offred later laments on the fact that her ignorance – and that of thousands of others – may have allowed for the rise of the oppressive system. However, her act of reflection on ignorance is already a form of resistance, as she realizes her past mistakes, and teaches the readers how to do better. It shows readers that ignorance gives way to harmful practices, and the value of standing up against these practices before it is too late.

2.3.2. *Resistance*

Perhaps one of the most worthwhile topics of the book for readers is the forms of resistance against the totalitarian system, which is also an important subject when considering the everyday politics of knowledge. According to Yates (2022), the perspective of everyday politics in IR provides a way not only to examine topics of daily life, but also areas such as domination, power, inequality or actorhood. He adds that “everyday forms of collective action are quite widely understood to be something that is done when the opportunities of political action are constrained (Yates 2022, 160)”. Moreover, Yates (2022) argues that the everyday dynamics of power have important relevance politically, in ways of civil society, mobilization and resistance, and affecting political activities such as boycotts or even revolutions. Guillaume (2011) states that IR have identified the locus of global resistance outside of the state, meaning that groups or individuals mobilize and move against or for a cause associated to injustice, exploitation or inequality. Therefore, the author argues that resistance in these instances occurs in an international public stage, but is done by everyday people or groups. When the resistance

is not in a global, but a local sphere, Guillaume claims that it is done by usually anonymous actors “struggling against the effects of globalized political economies and hegemonic discourses” (Guillaume 2011, 460). As shown in the quote below, Offred also contemplates this issue often, debating the acts of resistance she could undertake, and the risks and rewards they might involve.

“I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, than at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia.” (Atwood 1985, 185)

As Stillman and Johnson (1994) show, *The Handmaid's Tale* sheds light on what is required to fight regimes and powers, and to build a strong sense of self, which is the foundation towards a freer society. Offred is a complex example in the novel, since on the surface her decisions are futile in the pursuit to achieve change. This is shown in her lack of defiance in the beginning of the book, and her ultimately useless acts of resistance throughout lead to no change. Moreover, as discussed above, Offred was complacent and ignored the signs of threatening changes around her. As the authors argue, “as the corrupted United States was gradually transformed into Gilead, she committed the ultimate collusion of doing nothing or, more accurately, of being so concerned with her immediate personal life that she ignored events outside her immediate sphere” (Stillman and Johnson 1994, 81). When she did start to resist the new regime, she did so in meaningless and counter-productive ways. When offered the chance, she did not choose to participate in the organized resistance movement. She established illegal affairs and took illegal actions that did not support the overall goal of defiance against the system.

As a contrast, Stillman and Johnson (1994) argue that her mother and her best friend, Moira, are two characters who demonstrated the correct behaviors of resistance. They did not comply with societal standards, they built their selves separate from outside expectations, and they collaborated with others in order to realize change. This is shown in a

quote where she recalls her decisions around the start of the regime change, when she did not attend the protests that followed the new decisions the regime was taking.

“I didn’t go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her.” (Atwood 1985, 125)

Unlike Offred, her mother and Moira frequently went to protests, they fought for women’s freedom even as the new power was starting to take over and doing so became increasingly dangerous. Stillman and Johnson (1994) conclude that the two women did what Offred should have done: to act with others in meaningful ways of resistance. Even though they failed, and the Gilead government was thriving for centuries afterwards, the authors argue that this was only for the lack of enough allies.

Even though other characters show seemingly more useful behaviors, Offred’s actions are still, if not more significant in terms of resistance. As discussed before, her main strength lies in her ability to reflect on her mistakes and her character. She acknowledges her shortcomings during the past events of the novel, and she realizes that what she did was an active ignorance of the growing dangers around her. Moreover, she constructs and maintains her own selves, which is in itself an act of resistance, although without sharing this publicly, it does not grow into collective behavior (Hansot 1994). Even so, it is an important first step towards change. Another form of her resistance is through language and narration, as it is elaborated later. Through reflecting on her past and present experiences, Offred asserts her individuality and builds up her self, therefore making the act of storytelling a certain form of resistance (Staels 1995, 464). Therefore, even though her actions are not significant in terms of immediate change, they are still pivotal parts when considering the subject of resistance. When reading the book, the audience can realize the power that lies within reflection and changing one’s thought patterns and views, as well as sharing one’s realizations with others and spreading knowledge among each other.

2.3.3. Knowledge

Power and knowledge are intricately intertwined subjects. In his article, Daniel Innerarity (2013) argues that in current societies new forms of power are rooted in information and knowledge. Those who are in control of knowledge have the ability to exercise control over others, and the dominance of knowledge has a danger of undermining democracy. Knowledge itself can also be governed through knowledge, therefore constructing the ‘truth’, which becomes the mainstream knowledge (Innerarity, 2013). Similarly, as discussed later, Michel Foucault details the inherent connection between knowledge, discourse and power (Hall 1997). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, knowledge is strictly governed, and is not accessible by the most of society. This is shown in the quotes below, which include Offred’s pondering about knowledge control in the totalitarian regime.

“Knowing was a temptation. What you don't know won't tempt you.” (Atwood 1985, 136)
“When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting.” (Atwood 1985, 212)

The power of knowledge is one of the paramount parts of the novel. Except for the highest-ranking officers, people are forbidden from reading or writing. This is especially true for women, to the extent where they cannot even possess pillows with words embroidered on them. Offred suffers greatly from this, frequently discussing how much she yearns for knowledge. She elaborates this in the quote below, where she details her need for perspective in a one-dimensional reality.

“What I need is perspective. The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface. Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed up against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bedsheet, the molecules of the face.” (Atwood 1985, 99)

Later on in the novel, Offred makes an arrangement with her Commander, where she entertains him by playing Scrabble together. Even this is a forbidden act, and Offred relishes in the opportunity to see the words on the board and to be able to write and read. Afterwards, the

Commander pleases Offred by giving her forbidden magazines from the past, and as the quote below shows, she cherishes these moments.

“On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation.” (Atwood 1985, 129)

She suffers greatly from the lack of access to information and feels powerless without it. This is an important parallel to the fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* is so often banned: just as power is taken away from Offred, as she has no access to any written word, power is also taken from audiences, who would choose to read the novel. The consequences on the everyday life of Offred are well demonstrated in the book. She is frustrated and upset, yet she is unable to do anything in order to improve her situation – except for the brief, illegal meetings with the Commander. Even though the leisure activity of reading can be viewed as something mundane, it evidently holds a great importance in the life of Offred, and by extension the readers of the novel.

In another point connecting to knowledge, David Allen (1996) discusses that knowledge is never a neutral phenomenon, but rather a product of politics, supporting existing power structures (Allen 1996, 96). This is demonstrated well in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where any and all information came directly from the top of the totalitarian regime, and later turned out to be constructed and far from reality. Similarly, as further explained in the next chapter, by banning *The Handmaid's Tale*, state officials control the available knowledge to audiences, and therefore also support their own power by banning ideas, which could undermine it. Ironically, *The Handmaid's Tale* gives a harsh critique of the political appropriation of knowledge and books, of ideological interventions in everyday matters such as reading, and of government-controlled knowledge production – the same phenomena that can be observed in the USA, the country where the novel is set.

Lastly, an important aspect to this subject is the language in the novel, which closely connects to knowledge, as language and discourse creates and passes on knowledge. As Staels

(1995) discusses, language is also an essential tool of oppression in the novel's society, used by the regime to exercise control over its people. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, language is extremely regulated, to the extent which certain words are banned, and new vocabulary is added, limiting, and controlling the thoughts and acts of the subjects (Staels 1995, 458). However, in another act of resistance, Offred defies these rules in her narration. The entire novel is a recollection of her memories and experiences in the regime. Offred records her words on a tape recorder in hopes of someone to hear it one day, which serves the purpose of disseminating knowledge and benefiting those who hear it and helps in the survival of language. As indicated previously, this also serves as an important lesson for audiences, showing that distributing knowledge instead of remaining silent is a powerful tool of resistance.

In the next section I employ discourse analysis to explore the topics of knowledge control and resistance in relation to the power dynamics outside the novel, and juxtapose them with the elements of knowledge control and resistance within the novel. I therefore extend this chapter in the next one, viewing its contents through the struggles around the book, and aim to find an answer to why the novel is so often banned, and what consequences its banning may have.

Chapter 3: The politics of discourse around *The Handmaid's Tale*

This chapter aims to explore the different discourses around the novel and delve into their political significance. It connects the previous chapter – the main character's negotiations and reflections - with the struggles and dynamics around the book in the real world. Examining this gives us an opportunity to realize what is political in this novel, and further explore the politics of censorship through *The Handmaid's Tale*. Therefore, it also provides a space for theorizing about the deeper reasons behind banning the book ever since its publishing. For this, I enlist Michel Foucault's work about the connection between knowledge, discourse and power, and examine it from the everyday politics' point of view.

Foucault, according to Stuart Hall (1997), viewed discourse as more than just a linguistic phenomenon, he instead concentrated on how different practices generate knowledge and meaning. Discourse, for him was statements representing knowledge, not just language but also practice, which defines and builds up the topic. Most importantly, discourse conducts how an object can be talked about, how ideas are used, what are the acceptable ways to talk about the object, and what other ways are restricted or limited. Foucault argues that the 'institutional apparatus', which is the proverbial possessor of power, supported by knowledge. Therefore, knowledge and power are inherently interconnected, and those who possess the power can control, skew or even diminish knowledge, through controlling the discourse (Hall 1997).

Next, I give a summary of the dynamics around *The Handmaid's Tale* since its release, including various scientific discourses and news articles it inspired. Afterwards, I return to the contents of the previous chapter, as well as to Foucault's work, and examine how knowledge, power, and resistance connect in- and outside the novel, and what it provides to the topic of book censorship.

3.1. Brief overview of the discourses and political dynamics around the book

The Handmaid's Tale was published in 1985 and became an instant success among both audiences and critics. It received several awards, including the Arthur. C. Clarke Award, and since its release has been assigned in literature classes, made into a series, had a sequel, and became a symbol for various causes. It has however also been feared, hated, and banned (Hesse, 2017).

The novel was created amid the feminist free-choice struggles of the end of the Cold War, the rise of the New Christian Right movements, the emergence of *Roe v Wade*, and a new wave of racist tendencies in the US (Sethna 2020, Armstrong 2018). This explains many of the themes in the book, including the stripping of reproduction rights from women and the strong role of Christianity in the new regime. These themes are also among the reason the book has been banned so often throughout the last decades. Indeed, it was among the top 100 banned books of the decade in the 1990s and the 2000s, according to the American Library Association (Hesse 2017). As Crook (2019) mentions, a superficial reading of the book may suggest that its widespread censoring is due to its explicit sexual content only, however in reality the discourse around the book is far more complex and runs much deeper.

Even only in the span of the last two decades, the book has been censored and banned for various reasons in multiple states. In the interest of conciseness, I will list a few representative cases, collected on the website of Marshall Libraries in 2022, to provide a general idea about the topic. In 2007, a group of parents, students and teachers appealed to the school board in a Texan school district to ban the book. In 2013, the novel was challenged in two high schools in North Carolina for being ‘sexually explicit, violently graphic and morally corrupt’. Additionally, some parents declared the book ‘detrimental to Christian values’. In 2020, a Georgian high-school student’s mother forbade him to read the book, and wanted it removed from the school because of ‘porn and gore and cursing’. She also orchestrated prayer circles

outside while a committee discussed the book – which was ultimately retained in the school (Marshall Libraries 2022). In 2022, Georgia passed a so-called ‘book-banning’ law, providing a smooth process for banning books in Georgian schools (Yates 2023). During the hearings for this, *The Handmaid’s Tale* was one of the main books singled out by parents as ‘garbage’ and ‘obscene’ (Yates 2023). Lastly, as of the beginning of 2023, the novel was banned in 9 school districts in the following states: Texas, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, Georgia; the graphic book version of the book was banned in additional 4 school districts. The reasons for these bans are not always published, however Texas schools claimed that the reasons for their ban include: “profanity, overly sexual tones, being anti-Christian, featuring LGBTQ+ protagonists, and being overall morally corrupt” (Reilly 2022).

3.1.1. Margaret Atwood’s take on book bans

Margaret Atwood, the author of *The Handmaid’s Tale* did not remain silent on the continuous censorship of her novel. As mentioned in the Introduction, PEN America is an international NGO, working against book censorship and advocating for free speech. Atwood partnered up with the organization and with her publisher Penguin Random House in 2022 to create a special, ‘unburnable’ version of the novel (Pengelly 2022). The copy of the book is made to withstand even fire, which was demonstrated by a video where Atwood blows a flamethrower on it to try and destroy it. The unburnable book was auctioned off in New York, to raise money against censorship measures and to raise awareness about the current wave of book bans in American education and libraries. All the proceeds of the auction went to support PEN America in fighting censorship (PEN America 2022).

3.1.2. *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the news and scientific discourses

The Handmaid’s Tale has inspired an abundance of discourse in the form of literature following its release. Not only have there been hundreds of scientific articles written on the topics and

ideas of the novel, but it has also appeared in the news increasingly in the last few years. Scholars have been discussing the book in various ways: either analyzing its contents or using it as an example or parallel to explore real world topics. Many of these articles explore the role of feminism in the book (Callaway 2008), as well as female identity (Mirzayee 2019), and gender relations and equality (Kiss 2020). Others analyze the political regime and dynamics within the book (Beauchamp 2009), the totalitarian system and its power structures (Stillman and Johnson 1994). Still others focus on examining the similarities between the politics of the novel and contemporary USA, especially the Trump-regime (Zubia 2020). Overall, nearly every topic of the book and their real-life significance has been discussed by scholars, showing the impact of the novel and its many layers.

Outside of the scientific world, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been increasingly appearing in the news. Firstly, nearly every article and news piece, which reported on the current wave of book censorship in the USA has featured the novel as an example, or even put it in the title, such as: “‘Handmaid's Tale,’ ‘Girls Who Code’ and Other Books Just Banned in the U.S.” (Mayer 2022). This shows that the book is so well-known by the audiences that it is chosen as an eye-opening example regarding book bans, as well as the fact that it is routinely banned throughout the years. Secondly, *The Handmaid's Tale* has most often appeared in news sources as an example to current events in the real world. Articles, such as “Iowa: A testing ground for *The Handmaid's Tale*-like policies” (Murillo 2023), or “*The Handmaid's Tale* could become reality in the US (...)” (Oppenheim 2021) appeared as soon as measurements such as the abortion-ban appeared in the country. Many articles warned that reality is getting harrowingly close to the contents of the book (e.g. “‘*The Handmaid's Tale*’ Is Urgently Relevant. Again.” (Garber 2021). Lastly, multiple news reports (e.g. Hamedy 2017, Hauser 2017) added to the discourse around the book when covering various protests and demonstrations involving costumes and signs from the novel, which are discussed later on in the chapter.

3.2. Resonance between the facets of subjectivity and the struggles around the book

As discussed above, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been framed as 'morally corrupt', 'anti-religious' and 'anti-Christian', 'LGBTQ' and many more. Here I briefly discuss some of these framings of the book and juxtapose them with the contents and themes of the novel.

According to Crook (2019), many Christians found the novel offensive, and even as an attack on their religion. The fact that the author included quotes from the Bible next to the themes of forced pregnancy and the negative treatment of women is viewed by the religious community as misuse of the text (Crook, 2019). However, this interpretation of the novel, which led to many of its bans, is only a superficial one. In fact, even Margaret Atwood herself addressed this topic, stating that the novel is not against Christianity or religion, but instead it is showing how religion can be misused when it is mixed with politics, and the impact it has. The foreword of the book, written by the author claims: "The book is not 'antireligion'. It is against the use of religion as a front for tyranny; which is a different thing altogether" (Atwood 1985, 14).

As far as the LGBTQI+ framing of the book goes, it is true that it has one queer character, the best friend of the main character. She is often mentioned throughout the book, however her sexual orientation is only brought up on two-three occasions and plays no significant role in the events of the book, or in her character. It is interesting that this is one of the reasons parents and administrators provided to ban the novel, since it is barely mentioned in the contents. As mentioned in the first chapter, this reasoning to censor books is routinely given in the last few years, which affects dozens of novels with queer characters and topics. This is of course part of a larger discussion; therefore, I will not go into much detail in this thesis. However, it is worth mentioning that removing these books from library and school shelves pushes forward the following discourse: that these topics and characters are dangerous, sinful, or unfit. Not only does this send a harmful and archaic message for very easily affected

youths, but it also removes the possibility for queer youth to access books written about characters who are like themselves.

In the next sections, I discuss more about the connection between knowledge, power, and discourse, and relate it back to the topics of the novel, especially the layers of resistance and knowledge, explored in the previous chapter.

3.2.1. *Knowledge and Power*

As previously discussed, Foucault argued that knowledge is a form of power, in a way that it is power which decides if the knowledge is applied or not, and in what circumstances. It gives a certain authority to knowledge, which makes that knowledge the ‘truth’ – and in turn it actually becomes the truth. When knowledge is used to regulate others, it also involves limiting and conducting practices. Power as a discourse in Foucault’s view “sustains a regime of truth” (Hall 1997, 79).

When examining the phenomenon of book censorship, it is important to discuss the power relations and the power of discourse around it. As explained in the previous chapters, it is state officials and lawmakers who ultimately make the decision to suspend or ban a book from libraries and school library shelves, as well as school curricula. By this action, they prove Foucault’s point that their power shapes the discourse as well as knowledge. More specifically, by banning *The Handmaid’s Tale*, they limit or diminish the knowledge it possesses from the audience, which would potentially have read it. As briefly mentioned in the first chapter of this study, Guillaume and Huysmans (2019) argue that power is represented in the various interest in the everyday lives of people. Considering this argument, power is taken away from people who would otherwise been interested in the contents and ideas of the book and would have gained power by reading it – much as it happened in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

By banning the novel, lawmakers also provide the discourse that the book is harmful, corrupting, detrimental to religious values, etc. This action of banning the novel shapes the

knowledge about it as well as removing the knowledge that could be learnt from it. This already makes *The Handmaid's Tale* political, regardless of whether its contents are political or not. From the everyday politics' point of view, the action of banning the novel directly impacts the everyday lives of people. They lose access to the book, and therefore do not read it, and do not have the opportunity to transform their existing knowledge and gain a different way of viewing the world around them. On an additional note, these power measures may prove counterproductive in some cases, as they could spark more interest and curiosity in the novel, possibly inspiring individuals to circumvent the ban and gain access to it from another state, or virtually.

Connecting back to Offred's story in the novel, there is an interesting parallel between the events of current reality and the events in the book, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. At the time the novel is set, the totalitarian regime had removed all access to books for most citizens and has complete control over the information these citizens receive. From Offred's reflections, we learn that the prelude of this was the process of banning (and even burning) certain kinds of literature. Just like in contemporary USA, those who held the power in *The Handmaid's Tale* first selected which books are appropriate and which ones are corrupt or harmful in their view. They removed the free choice and access of readers, and sent a clear message about which topics, characters and ideas are acceptable, and which need to be rooted out of the discourse. This process escalated into a complete control over all knowledge and discourse, creating new 'truths' in the society. The novel gives a clear opportunity to see the dangers censorship and knowledge politics, and to realize the consequences of the politicization of literature and the everyday lives of people – the same process that has been happening with *The Handmaid's Tale* and many other pieces of literature.

In the next section, I revisit the topic of resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* and juxtapose it with the actions of resistance in reality around the novel.

3.2.2. *Resistance and protests*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the topic of resistance is deeply important in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Many different aspects and modes of resistance are explored through the characters, and mainly through Offred. Most importantly, her reflexivity and her narration are of pivotal importance both for the novel and for a broader discussion on resistance. As the above section highlights, the book sparked many different strands of discourse. In this passage, I summarize the protests and demonstrations inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as the more everyday political aspects of resistance connected to the novel.

Firstly, especially during Donald Trump's presidency, protesters were regularly seen wearing the emblematic red and white handmaid costumes, symbolizing the message that the country is moving frighteningly close to the reality of the novel (Armstrong, 2018). These protesters appeared in demonstrations concentrating on fighting against gender discrimination, abortion bans and infringement of civil rights (Hauser 2017). In 2017, a group of 30 women wore the costume at a protest in front of the US Capitol to stand up against the proposed health care bill, which would have, among other things, defund Planned Parenthood (Hamedy 2017). In Ohio in the same year, red-robed activist sat silently to oppose a bill aimed to ban the most frequent abortion method (Hauser 2017). In 2020, demonstrators in handmaid costumes gathered at the Supreme Court to protest the confirmation of Amy Coney Barret, a reportedly pro-life figure (Michallon 2020). Moreover, various protests, mostly around the recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade* featured signs with texts such as "*The Handmaid's Tale* wasn't meant to be a how-to manual!" (Jones 2017), "Make Margaret Atwood fiction again" (Jansen 2017) or "This episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* sucks." (Daily Kos 2021). The red robes and the posters have therefore become the symbol of solidarity between women and standing up for human rights (Hauser 2017).

Secondly, recent years have featured an upsurge of online resistance using quotes and memes featuring *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel became a popular culture symbol on the everyday politics level, especially for Anti-Trump and feminist voices. Social media responses, memes, tweets have used quotes and images from the book to stand up for political issues. Many feature a picture of four handmaids looking at each other morosely, with the caption “Yes. I know. But I just didn’t like Biden.” (Troy 2020), ominously hinting at what will happen if Trump is elected in 2024. Others go against republican politicians and lawmakers, such as a meme with the caption: “Did you enjoy *The Handmaid's Tale*? Amy Coney Barret wants you to enjoy it, 24/7, every day for the rest of your life” (Comics & Memes 2020). Still others inspire citizens to vote at the 2018 mid-term elections with a picture of a seemingly modern, everyday woman on one side and Offred on the other, stating “Me voting in 2016. Vs. Me if we don’t vote in 2018” (@Ioislane 2018). Other forms of resistance involved the famous phrase from the book *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (Don’t let the bastards grind you down), tattooed on many women’s bodies (Bradley 2017). These commentaries were even featured in newspapers such as the BBC or The New York Times, making the discourse even larger, and creating a united front against the Trump-administration (Marghitu and Moore Johnson 2018).

3.2.3. Why is *The Handmaid's Tale* being banned?

The previous sections covered the various reasons authorities and involved actors provided for the ban of the novel, however it is important to go one step further, and tease out the possible underlying causes of the book’s continuous censorship, and its possible implications.

The readers of the novel are able to view topics such as censorship, power and resistance from a different perspective. It provides a realization that reflexivity is just as, if not more important on the journey of resisting oppressive powers than the more traditional acts of resistance, such as going to marches and protests. They do so by reading Offred reminisce about her past life, and the actions she did not take even when she realized the looming dangers around

her. She acknowledges her ignorance, and pinpoints that this, combined with most other people's ignorance, gave way to the totalitarian regime of Gilead. Readers of the novel have the opportunity to think about different, less obvious methods of resistance, and transform their thinking about the subject. Moreover, they realize that sharing this reflexivity, as Offred did, is the way for the resistance to spread and become part of the discourse. This also provides an important message on the topic of book bans: that spreading knowledge and discourse is a beneficial way of mobilizing the thoughts of others, and sharing new and important ways of practicing. Censorship essentially inhibits this and bans the dissemination of the knowledge and ideas, which books contain. Just like in Offred's case, the act of censorship dictates what information is accessible, and what ideas are 'wrong', which inherently limits audiences' opportunity to gain perspective – the very thing Offred so often craves.

Therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* teaches readers the way to become more reflexive with a deeper transformation, to acknowledge one's past ignorance, and think of a more nuanced form of resistance. That way, reflexivity can become an important resource to one's self-creation and to everyday, small forms of resistance, which may ultimately become powerful enough to challenge existing discourses and power structures. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a new view of current events through the negotiations and character journey of Offred, and that is one of the ways in which the novel becomes political. This also suggests that there may exist deeper reasons for the continuous banning of the book. The main character is able to show thoughts and behaviors that are extremely important in terms of resistance, however they are dangerous from the point of view of those who hold power. She provides an example of a journey and transformation that, once audiences access it, can become threatening for a regime which tries to control knowledge and discourse to match its own ideas and politics. *The Handmaid's Tale* is generally banned in Republican states with a strong tendency towards pro-life, traditional, Christian, and anti-LGBTQI+ ideas (Silver and van Kessel 2021, Crary 2023,

Wilkinson 2023), which are all the cornerstones of the Gileadean regime. The book that shows audiences the importance of realizing harmful legislations – such as censorship - around them and teaches them about the power of reflexivity in resisting oppressive regimes based on the same values as the states which ban it. Lastly, the novel gives an opportunity for readers to engage with the topics of world politics, as the everyday politics framework suggests (Yates 2022). This can be by simply reading about the politics in the book itself, using quotes for demonstration signs, or viewing the politics around them through the lenses of the novel. Therefore, banning *The Handmaid's Tale* is in the best interest of the states that do so if they wish to avoid their citizens to learn how to oppose their regime. It is, however, hardly in the interest of the everyday people.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored the politics of book censorship from the International Relations point of view. I concentrated on the everyday politics of knowledge framework, which signifies the importance of analyzing seemingly mundane subjects in the world for their political importance in large-scale processes. I provided an overview of the current wave of book bans in the USA, which started from 2020 and has gained significant growth both in scope and depth in the past years. I showed that an increasing amount of books are removed from school and library shelves, first based on parental complains, however lately also following state legislations. These books are mostly focusing on diverse topics and characters, mainly people of color and LGBTQI+ people.

I have pointed out several reasons why it is paramount not to ban books, especially novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, and novels, which show a wide array of diverse topics and characters. Firstly, from the human rights perspective it directly goes against the First Amendment of citizens in the USA, and the right of free speech and free choice of citizens worldwide. Second, according to Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children belonging to a minority group are protected to practice their traditions and culture (Urrieta and Machado-Casas 2013). Thirdly, it takes away the freedom of students to choose what topics to engage with and learn about. Lastly, as mentioned before, prohibiting access to books about LGBTQI+ characters and people of color, it stigmatizes these topics and trains children at a young age to view people and topics like this with bias (Fanetti 2020, Page 2020).

In my analysis, I focused on one widely banned novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. I first explored the areas of subjectivity in the novel, and showed how the audiences can learn new ways of thinking through the negotiations and self-making of the main character. Most importantly, I found that the character provides audiences with crucial insights about the

significance of reflection as a form of resistance, and the detrimental effects of using power to control discourse and knowledge. I expanded these ideas in the second part of my analysis, which focused on the politics of discourse through examining the discourse around *The Handmaid's Tale*. I reflected on the cultural analysis of the novel through the real life events happening around it. I showed how the book is routinely banned for various reasons, including it being 'morally corrupt' (Reilly 2022). The pivotal finding of this analysis was that just like in the novel, power holders in the USA used their influence to control knowledge by removing the book from libraries and schools, and by shaping the discourse. They did so by calling the book inappropriate and corrupt, and even banning it from large audiences. By extension, they aimed to limit access to the *ideas* in the book, and to prevent audiences from learning through Offred's struggles.

Therefore, this thesis added to the many reasons why free access to literature is important, and why using power to shape knowledge can be harmful. It did so not from the human rights perspective, which was previously discussed by many (e.g. Alter and Harris 2023, Dabhoiwala 2020, Ingram 2019), but from the International Relations perspective, more specifically the everyday politics point of view. This thesis is thus able to offer a new angle on the politics of censorship, and hopefully a strong argument against such measures. *The Handmaid's Tale* is hauntingly relevant in our current reality, not just in the USA but world-wide. Controlling knowledge and discourse, limiting free speech and punishing individual choice takes the world a big step closer to the world depicted in the novel. And, if Offred taught us one thing, it is the crucial importance of being aware, standing up and resisting before it is too late.

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