

Book Review

Six Conversations We're Scared to Have (2025)

Deborah Frances-White, ISBN: 9780349015811, Virago, 368 pages, £20.00

Review by Anna Marta Sveisbergaⁱ

My initial impression was that “Six Conversations We're Scared to Have” is yet another self-help book in world that already feels saturated with endless advice on how to improve yourself. When I saw that it was written by Deborah Frances-White, the author of the Guilty Feminist podcast, I was intrigued. As a casual listener of the Guilty Feminist podcast, I have enjoyed how it manages to reflect with humour and compassion on the contradictions and complexity of trying to live a feminist life while being conditioned by and existing in a patriarchal society.

In “Six Conversations” Frances-White sets out to explore the current polarised political climate and the reasons why the right has been more successful than the left in securing power and furthering their agenda. From examination of interpersonal dynamics, attitudes towards historical figures, gender, comedy and free speech, cancel culture and future activism, she brings the reader towards re-examination of the limits of their affective and cognitive empathy and the impact it has on the world. Her observations are grounded in historical and current socio-political research and her own personal experience. This book responds to the distress of the left in Global North countries, as we watch one right wing government after another rise to power and roll back hard-won civil liberties and environmental policies. Frances-White observes the opportunistic approach of the right, as they take any alliance and champion any cause that can give them access to wider decision-making power. She contrasts this with the puritanical attitude that often exists in leftist communities, where ideological disagreements can lead to severance of relationships.

Her analysis of the cultishness that can occur among leftists is a necessary examination. In the first chapter Frances-White recounts her experience in Jehovah's Witnesses, which included rigid in-group and out-group designation, acceptance of any new teachings issued by the “Watchtower” as indisputable truth, the practice of shunning people who disagreed, and the strong incentive to belong at any cost. She describes how people on the left can exhibit the same group behaviours that cult followers would. She observes how the left has created a high control environment whereby relating to people with more conservative views, disagreeing,

making mistakes, and going at a different pace or direction of learning is met with exclusion, public shaming and cancelling, leading to people being afraid of participating and voicing their opinions. Frances-White observes increasingly puritanical attitudes that are not examined but taken from social media influencers and infographics as ordained and indisputable truths.

This book counters these tendencies by inviting the reader to confront black and white thinking and consider the toleration of complexity and ambivalence (past and present) as an important learning process. Some of her examples left me bristling, as I felt the limits of my own cognitive empathy being challenged and stretched. One case study that Frances-White offers is of George Bernard Shaw, a playwright of late 19th, early 20th centuries, who actively fought for women's rights, animal welfare, inter-racial marriage, ending poverty, recognition of homosexuality as natural - all of which are still relevant today. While ahead of his time and a prominent leader towards establishing greater social equity, he was also an enthusiastic eugenicist, who believed that people who were considered unfit should be sterilised or killed. However, Frances-White invites us to exercise our ability to sit with discomfort and complexity and apply cognitive empathy to appreciate the historical context. Furthermore, she asks us to analyse our own complicity in harmful practices including eugenics (via purchasing goods made by modern day slave labour who are targets of eugenics practices). This is by no means an easy task and require active effort towards forming our individual opinions and beliefs. Frances-White's goal is for us to engage in an active conversation with one another and make space for disagreement, rather than take any opinions as pre-ordained truths.

My only caution is that the book risks feeding into right-wing narratives of leftist 'snowflakes', who lose their cool at the first contact with a heated debate. Whilst I agree that the left could be more strategic when it comes to building alliances and communities, I can also see that if the left were to fully emulate the opportunistic nature of the right, we would run the risk of losing sight of our values and significantly dilute our policies to appeal to centrists. There are no hard and fast rules for maintaining integrity while being open to change, and we will make mistakes in our attempts, but that ultimately is the challenge that Frances-White invites us to embrace. Other books that speak to this tension are Dean Spade's "Love in a F*cked-Up World", Arianne Shahvisi's "Arguing for a Better World", and Hannah Proctor's "Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat".

I would say this book is an essential read for our increasingly polarised and dogmatic minds – it is a breath of fresh air, as it gives room for conversation, disagreement, and genuine learning. It is profoundly hopeful and engaged in the effort to mobilise and unite the left, empowering work across differences, as we strive towards our common goals of greater equity and sustainability.

ⁱ **The author**

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