Review of: "Support for Campus Censorship"

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I endorse the article's implied suggestion that authoritarianism is not the privilege of this or that position on the ideological spectrum. All political positions include authoritarian versions, even those that define themselves (at least nominally) against authoritarianism. What is more, anti-authoritarian self-identification might at times disguise profoundly authoritarian leanings. Take, for example, the Russian-born writer Ayn Rand and her cult, for whom it is an article of faith that most social ills can be traced back to parasitical sectors of society (the majority) impeding on the creative impulses of geniuses (the minority). I bring them up because, like the liberals sampled for this study, "objectivists" (small "o" intended) are often referred to as "liberals", albeit obviously of a very different streak. Recently, there has been growing scholarly interest in the authoritarian tendencies of what passes for "woke" since at least the mid-2010s. (One popular misconception is that woke is a leftist position — see Neiman 2023.) To propose, therefore, that liberals might support policies that are authoritarian is not new. The real question concerns the conditions under which nominally liberal, left-wing, right-wing, etc., authoritarians are able to exercise influence over whatever institutions they are involved with.

The focus of the article is the tendency to censor speech that one finds harmful or otherwise reprehensible in a campus setting. The three-country study was conducted with the objective to assess the impact of political leanings on censoriousness — and the authors find the latter significantly more pronounced in the case of liberals. While I disagree with the bulk of the conclusions, let me state first why I think that it is indeed possible that among Western publics, those who by some scholarly acceptable definition pass as liberals are *currently* more likely to prefer censorship than are non-liberals.

From the mid-2010s through the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine, Western *establishment* liberals have been increasingly calling for censoring or outright criminalizing speech that they find harmful. The vote in favor of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as president of the US, both in 2016, can be seen as turning points in this regard. From then on, the idea that free speech in the Internet era is a liability because it allows less educated sectors to compromise the well-meaning efforts of enlightened elites begins to take hold. At its core, nothing new here: in the first half of the 20th century, establishment liberals like Walter Lippmann (1998) and Edward Bernays (2004) had for the same reason argued against *actual* democracy. What differentiates recent establishment liberal discourse on the "hazards" of free speech from its antecedents is the legislative push: Not content with the performance of the public relations industry to frame public opinion, early 21st century liberal elites turn to legal innovations to stifle speech that they abhor. (The EU's Digital Services Act, in effect since 2022, includes several provisions to that end.) Their views justifying such restrictions have been percolating to parts of the electorate for whom

distancing themselves from "populism" functions as a marker of social standing. It is therefore possible that in a survey setting, this subclass will be more likely to give responses favoring censorship on a number of issues than are sectors not receptive to the underlying rationale. Specifically with regard to liberals among the public, the question is whether there emerges a critical mass of a censorious subclass that squeezes out those liberals who are opposed to the legislative push.

Based on their findings, the authors argue that this is indeed the case, at least among the three publics surveyed. I have doubts, as outlined below.

First and foremost, researchers should take care to ensure that the meaning of whatever category they set out to compare is consistent across the populations studied. By assuming that the "liberal" label has a uniform meaning in the US, the UK, and Hungary, this study fails to meet this most basic of standards in cross-cultural research. An elaboration would take up a whole paper, so below I will only mention the fundamentals.

The meaning of a symbol is context-specific, i.e., it emerges out of practices by a given population at a given stage in history. In this study, respondents' ideological leanings are established with reference to a self-reported position "on a 7-point scale from Very liberal to Very conservative" (12), which the authors present as "a common measure of self-identified political ideology" (ibid.). But this is anything but a common measure in cross-cultural political analysis. "Liberal" has a whole different connotation in the US than it does in other national contexts — it surely stands as one pole of political conflicts. On virtually all relevant issues, the US public sphere (and, by implication, party competition) is polarized between, on the one hand, "conservative," and, on the other, "liberal" positions. In contrast, political conflicts in Europe use the "left v. right" polarization as a reference. ("Left v. right" also appears in the US context but typically in expert commentary and much less in discourse that the wider public is able to make sense of.) Even within the US, "liberal" has multiple connotations: positions as far away from each other as Mainstream Democrats (especially among the power elite) friendly to corporate interests and progressive leftists (a subclass of whom are opposed to capitalism) are included in this category. In Europe, the former would qualify as right-of-center, and the latter as left and even radical left. In Europe, parties branding themselves as liberal typically do not implement policies that the electorate identifies as leftist — especially in terms of welfare, monetary and fiscal policies, defense. This is to say that a significant portion of respondents selecting the "Very liberal" end of the 7-point scale in the US sample may in fact be well to the left of those selecting the same position in the UK and Hungarian samples. To say then, as the authors do, that "[l]iberals are more averse to inequality and more protective of relatively low-status groups compared to Conservatives" (35) is extrapolating the US template to other national contexts where the naming(s) of political conflicts are significantly different. In all, the Liberal-Moderate-Conservative typology that is adequate for the US context is certainly inadequate for a cross-cultural study involving non-US, especially European, samples. It takes more meticulous work to bring together subclasses of various national electorates under labels that are verifiably meaningful.

Let me stress that this issue concerns not just some secondary or additional element: This article is about the behavior of liberals regarding censorship. Given the heterogeneity of meanings behind the categories used to capture political ideology, the multivariate analyses where the related scale is used do not have the comparative values assumed here.

(For an overview of the issues with scales and categories in cross-cultural research, see Davidov et al. 2011; Davidov et al. 2014; Johnson 2015.)

There are other issues with conceptualization and measurement that I will only mention in passing. Self-reported position on a scale is certainly not actual ideology — the latter is a latent construct that can be measured based on a variety of measures (batteries of questions). To propose that "[m]ost modern Western societies explicitly endorse human equality for all their citizenry regardless of gender, race, or religion" (5) is equating official declarations with the state of affairs. (Judging from an abundance of empirical studies of discrimination among said publics — societies, as per the quote —, the reality is far from endorsement.) Or the suggestion that "norms about free speech have been a sacred part of Western civilization for hundreds of years" (39) is an unwarranted generalization in the light of legal checks on speech still in place in many Western nations — see for instance libel laws in the UK, France, or the current criminalization of Palestine-related activism, especially in Germany.

Overall, the article's framing of the issue and conclusion is aligned with the kind of moral panicking that the authors criticize. To repeat, I am open to the suggestion that there is growing acceptance (or at least accommodation) of censorship among Western publics. But "[s]ounding a tocsin about creeping censoriousness in the West" (39) is certainly not warranted based on *these* findings. Given the difficulties with measurement equivalence in cross-cultural studies, tendencies toward censoriousness among different national publics may be too difficult to compare meaningfully. A more productive approach, then, would be to compare recent developments in national legislations aimed at censorship — the EU's Digital Services Act, cited above, is a case in point. As I am writing this review, the EU's Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, is threatening X (formerly Twitter) with legal action over the latter's plans to livestream an interview with US presidential candidate Donald Trump also to audiences in Europe. This and multiple similar attempts, supported by power elites and increasingly relying on legislative innovations, are more impactful in terms of censorship than the attitudes unpacked in this article.

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