



The Ambivalence of the Liberal-Illiberal Dynamic

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Abstract

This essay discusses the democratic ambivalences of situations when researchers or academic institutions have to decide whom to provide a platform, where to draw red lines even at the expense of freedom of speech, whether to hide certain information, and how to label “illiberal” actors in academic pieces—questions which reflect also one’s position within academia. The article draws on the experience with the unexpected performance of an academic roundtable discussion in the East German city of Frankfurt (Oder) planned to be about weekly local street protests, which eventually was joined by the street protesters themselves. During the pandemic, these marches contested covid restrictions. With the onset of the Russian war on Ukraine, they had transformed into protests against high energy costs, in support of Putin, and against the German government. This type of protest movement resembles a typical expression of contemporary illiberalism: an ideologically heterogeneous milieu from far-right to politically conservative, if not leftist-minded people, who unite a skepticism towards the democratic state, the rejection of public media, and an affinity for conspiracy theories. The German context is particularly challenging as these “Monday demonstrations” prevailing in East Germany entail a reference to the freedom and democracy claims of the 1989 revolution, and reveal unequal conditions between East and West.

Keywords: East Germany, pro-Russian street protests, freedom, rights, platforming, engaged scholarship

On a Monday evening in October 2022, just before the winter term at European University Viadrina at Frankfurt (an der Oder, as opposed to Frankfurt am Main) started, more than 2,000 people marched through the city of 57,000 inhabitants, located an hour East of Berlin and connected through a bridge with Slubice, its Polish (until 1945, German) border town. With John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" resounding through the main streets, people with posters could be heard calling for peace, blaming the German government and the Green Party in particular for causing the energy crisis. Other posters defended Putin against NATO. Some were holding Russian flags, others a banner with Picasso's white pigeon. One flag combined the pattern of the German and the Russian flags; a reminiscence of the Soviet-East German Friendship flag from the times of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The people wore casual jackets, and there were families with strollers—apparently just ordinary people.¹

Frankfurt (Oder) is the first German city Ukrainian refugees pass through when coming by train through Poland. Shortly after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, the city and local volunteers had established an impressive humanitarian aid infrastructure, while housing was provided as well.² Through long-established contacts of Viadrina with Ukrainian academic institutions, moreover, many Ukrainian students as well as researchers found a safe place in Frankfurt. But how safe can one feel as a Ukrainian refugee when Russian flags are waving in the streets? Street protests in response to the energy crisis or against coronavirus restrictions took place in other parts of Europe as well, such as in France, Italy, or Great Britain.³ The German case is particular at least for two reasons: first, these protest marches were more numerous in the Eastern part of Germany that before 1989 was under a Communist regime,⁴ and second, they connect to the legacy of the revolutionary moment of pro-democratic demonstrations against the GDR regime at the end of 1980s.

The university has been avoiding taking a position on these still ongoing protests, in which Russian flags are waving in the streets. Against this background, and in reflection of the experience with the unexpected holding of an academic roundtable discussion in East German Frankfurt, the essay discusses the ambivalence within liberal-democratic thinking regarding the amount of room researchers should or should not give to actors which would, despite their heterogeneity, be considered as far-right or illiberal because of their connections to far-right parties or movements. The roundtable discussion, which was planned to be about the weekly local street protests, was eventually joined by the street protesters themselves.

1 Peggy Lohse, "Montagsdemos¹ in Frankfurt an der Oder: Irgendwie dagegen," *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*, October 26, 2022, <https://taz.de/Montagsdemos-in-Frankfurt-an-der-Oder/15894970/>.

2 Juliane Kirsch, "Das war auch ein bisschen blinder Aktionismus, weil man so gerne helfen wollte," *Antenne Brandenburg*, March 03, 2023, <https://www.rbb24.de/studiofrankfurt/panorama/2023/03/ukraine-krieg-flucht-frankfurt-oder-ersthilfe-bahnhof.html>.

3 Susannah Savage, "Protests over Food and Fuel Surged in 2022—the Biggest were in Europe," *Politico*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/energy-crisis-food-and-fuel-protests-surged-in-2022-the-biggest-were-in-europe/#:~:text=Researchers%20have%20defined%20an%20unprecedented,by%20the%20war%20in%20Ukraine>.

4 "East" or "East German" refers here to the four federal states (*Bundesländer*) of Brandenburg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Mecklenburg-Pomerania of present-day Germany, which until German reunification in 1990 belonged to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Frankfurt (Oder) is a town in Brandenburg along the border with Poland. When historical usage intended, the text will refer explicitly to the GDR.

The Case of the Monday Demonstrations

The Monday night demonstrations in October 2022 were the largest, but neither the first nor the last of such protest marches in Frankfurt (Oder). Such *Montagsdemonstrationen* originated in 1989, when East German civil rights activists marched together every Monday to protest against the GDR regime, first in Leipzig (the capital of Saxony), and then in other cities. “We are the people!” they chanted, until the Communist dictatorship ended in 1989.⁵

In 2004, in response to the introduction of another stage of labor market reforms, Monday demonstrations were organized in many parts of East Germany.⁶ The causes of the protests could be found in the unresolved problems of the post-1989 transformations, and in the lack of economic prospects for the East’s future. This may be the reason why these protests brought far more demonstrators into the streets of the East than in the West.⁷ In October 2014, the new protest movement Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes: PEGIDA) in East German Saxony revived the revolutionary legacy of Monday demonstrations once again. For the first time, however, people marched with a clear xenophobic message against German immigration and asylum policies through the streets of Dresden.⁸

In 2020, during the pandemic, one could hear the “We are the people”⁹ slogan again, when Monday demonstrations or marches became popular also in Western Germany. Protesters attacked the government for its restrictive covid-19 politics that included a hard lockdown, with school and shop closures as well as mandatory masking on public transportation. Much has been written about these new protest alliances, where anti-vaxxer, esoteric, or anthroposophically-minded¹⁰ people marched together with members of the fringe movement to reinstate monarchy (known as the *Reichsbürger*), members of the Identitarian movement, or the far-right party known as the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland: AfD).¹¹ In Frankfurt (Oder), as in other parts, these anti-covid restriction Monday demonstrations with their heterogenous protest scene have never really ceased. The Russian attack on Ukraine, with its energy-policy fallout, however, gave the movement a new boost.¹² As a signal against contemporary appropriation of the *Montagsdemo* legacy, in October 2022, in Leipzig, inhabitants hung banners from churches that were at the

5 “Vor 30 Jahren: Die erste Montagsdemonstration,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BPB) (blog), August 29, 2019, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/295940/vor-30-jahren-die-erste-montagsdemonstration/>.

6 Explain, briefly, what (Hartz IV) is.

7 “Protests in East Germany,” German History in Documents and Images (website), August 22, 2004, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3110.

8 “15.000 Anhänger der Pegida protestieren in Dresden,” Zeit Online, December 16, 2014, https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2014-12/pegida-demonstration-dresden-islam?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.

9 Andrew Curry, “‘We Are the People,’ A Peaceful Revolution in Leipzig,” Spiegel International, October 9, 2009, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/we-are-the-people-a-peaceful-revolution-in-leipzig-a-654137.html>.

10 This is an ideology developed by Rudolf Steiner that combines natural healing with spirituality.

11 Paulina Fröhlich, Florian Ranft, and Erik Vollmann: “Mir rechts Bürger: Analyse der Montagsdemonstrationen in Chemnitz und Gera im Winter 2022/23,” Bertelsmannstiftung Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie 33, https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Studie_Mir_rechts_Buerger_Montagsdemonstrationen_Progressives-Zentrum.pdf

12 Rieke Wiemann, “Studie über Montagsdemonstrationen: Russlandverständnis und Grünenhass“, *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*, March 1, 2023, <https://taz.de/Studie-ueber-Montagsdemonstrationen/!5919384/>.

heart of the Communist-era protests, reading: “2022 is not 1989—we’re not living in a dictatorship.”¹³

Taking Up Positions

“Green fascist!”—as my colleague, a professor of sociology, was greeted when looking from his office window down onto a noisy crowd. Evening courses were disturbed when the protest march passed back and forth in front of the main university building. As a political scientist raised in Berlin, I am interested in local developments and in illiberal politics. At the beginning, I approached this disturbing situation more in my role as an individual researcher with the duty to transfer knowledge to a broader public, and planned to organize a roundtable discussion about the protests to better understand what was going on here in East Brandenburg. We briefly discussed how such an endeavor could create an asymmetric power situation in which “we experts” would talk about “them,” the “illiberal-minded protesters.” In conclusion, however, we considered it normal academic practice not to invite activists to sit on a roundtable with experts.

Another colleague, arguing as a private politically-sensitive person who belongs to a public academic institution, was bewildered about the silence of our president and about the silent acceptance among us, the community of individual researchers united in the publicly-voiced unconditional condemnation of Russia’s attack on Ukraine. The university, my colleague argued, should issue a public statement guaranteeing a safe place for its students, for Ukrainians, as well as people of color. She did not agree with the dean and the president, who called for the respect for freedom of speech as one of the central liberal principles. Doesn’t a university have, especially in such a particular and here present situation of Ukrainian trauma due to Russian aggression, the duty or authority to intervene—with a public statement, or even by calling for a ban area following the idea of “safe spaces”?¹⁴ This political question has not been internally discussed yet, despite the fact that the demonstrations continue—every Monday evening. We realized the obvious, that one’s perspectives can differ depending on the position or role one has. As a representative of a public institution, one acts differently than as an individual researcher with academic habits and the potential to create a knowledge gap with non-academics. As politically engaged individual, one may have a clear understanding of where to draw a red line. In reality, however, these positions are even difficult to discern in a university setting.

The Ambivalence of the Liberal-Illiberal Dynamic

From a social science perspective, the Monday demonstrations represent an interesting case study for researching what my colleague Oliver Hidalgo and I had called “the ambivalences of democracy.”¹⁵ At the center stands the idea that neither democracy nor liberal projects are free of illiberal elements. Liberal principles such as freedom and rights always find a counterpart that can turn towards an illiberal direction if one side gets overemphasized. The meaning of “illiberal” that applies also

13 Kate Connolly, “‘Angry Winter’: Germany’s Monday Night Protests Unite Far-Right and Left.” *Guardian*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/07/angry-winter-germanys-monday-night-protests-unite-far-right-and-left>.

14 Asli Telli Aydemir, “No Platforming: Safe Campus and Ambivalent Twists on Freedom of Speech,” *Navigationen - Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften* 19, no. 2 (2019): 107–120, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13821>.

15 Anja Hennig and Oliver Hidalgo, “The Ambivalences of Democracy: Religion and Illiberal Politics,” in *Illiberal Politics and Religion in Europe and Beyond: Concepts, Actors, and Identity Narratives*, edited by Anja Hennig and Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann (Frankfurt/New York: Campus/University of Chicago Press, 2021), 46.

to the case study is linked here to an opposition or misuse of political liberal freedom and equality principles. The protesters (or some of them) can be considered illiberal because they tend to claim freedom rights for one side only, which in reality implies intolerance of the right to dissent, the support of Putin as a warlord or the aggressive defamation of members of the governing elite. The relationship between the liberal and illiberal is, thus, dynamic and actor-centric. Do we protect individual freedom or the freedom of a group? A pure majoritarian approach to freedom would restrict the individual one. An authoritarian overemphasis of individual rights leads to what is perceived as leftist illiberalism.¹⁶ In this vein, to ban those protesters from walking along the University building would violate their right to freedom of assembly and of expression, but may help Ukrainian students feel safer and free to decide where to go.

Looking from liberal democracy theories under the conditions of cultural pluralization, the question is to what extent a democracy should tolerate the intolerant.¹⁷ With Stepan's Twin Toleration, the solution seems simple: the freedom of one group ends where it threatens the freedom of others.¹⁸ It follows the human rights approach to freedom of speech and expression for individuals and groups. Article 10 of the Human Rights Convention protects one's right to hold one's own opinions and to express them freely without government interference. An authority may be allowed to restrict your freedom of expression only if, for example, someone expresses views that encourage racial or religious hatred. However, the relevant public authority must show that the restriction is appropriate.¹⁹

A more rigid approach that only recently is seen increasingly also in Germany, concerns the practice among students of "no platform," a policy instituted by the British National Union of Students (NUS) in the 1970s. It allowed students to withhold space and funds from fascist or racist groups and speakers and to disinvite them if invited by certain student groups or encourage protest to prevent them from speaking on campus.²⁰ Over time, the NUS's targeted campaign was applied to a wider range of speakers, espousing a variety of unpopular views, including racist, anti-Semitic, misogynistic, Islamophobic, and transphobic views—a practice also established at colleges and universities in the U.S. and in Australia.²¹

Debates about "no platform" and free speech at universities nowadays often overlap with discussions on academic freedom, especially in the context of cases of academics known for espoused racist science or racist statements.²² However, similar to the gray areas entered into by our protesters, not every anti-pluralist

16 Hennig and Hidalgo, "The Ambivalence of Democracy," 46; Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (June 2022), 303-327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

17 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813245>; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198290918.01.0001>.

18 Alfred C. Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations,'" *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (October 2000): 37-57. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2000.0088>.

19 "Article 10: Freedom of Expression," Equality and Human Rights Commission, June 3, 2021, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/human-rights-act/article-10-freedom-expression>.

20 Evan Smith, "No Platform: A History of Anti-Fascism, Universities and the Limits of Freedom of Speech," (London: Routledge, 2020), 3.

21 Aydemir, "No Platforming."

22 Smith, "No Platform," 12, 14; Anja Hennig, "Political Genderphobia in Europe: Accounting for Right-Wing Political-Religious Alliances against Gender-Sensitive Education Reforms since 2012," *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, no. 2 (2018): 193-219.

perspective is automatically racist or visible as such. Aydemir brings the liberal-illiberal ambivalence of the “no platform” practice to the point: the “No platform” movement’s supporters “seem to flout liberal ideals of tolerance, pluralism, and open public discourse.” Unlike the situation in the 1970s with the former British far-right National Front as the main enemy, critiques now consider no-platforming also a way “to suppress credible positions that are widely accepted by reasonable, sincere, and informed people.” While Aydemir agrees that “some practitioners of no platforming expressly would reject liberal ideals,” she also refers to the ambivalences of liberalism through “its focus on individual negative liberty, its insistence on a distinction between the public and private realms, and its idealization of the public square as a place of reasoned deliberation.” From this point of view, “no platforming might be seen as an organized mode of resistance to the abuse of liberal ideals for oppressive ends.”²³

The liberal-illiberal dynamic became even more complex as actors from the far right and conservative academic or political scene now make their own free speech, academic freedom, or autonomy claims, a weaponization of liberal principles with the potential to disguise its illiberal intention.²⁴ In the case of Monday demonstrations already during the pandemic, it is the quest for freedom and sovereignty, prominently proclaimed in Thüringen, where the outstanding far-right politician Bernd Höcke²⁵ leads the AfD.²⁶ Coming back to the Monday demonstrators, one can argue that liberal rights do not automatically imply that they have a right to speak at a university, while the AfD as an elected party has a right to appear in public broadcasting. In conclusion, the existence of liberal principles such as academic freedom, free speech, or freedom of assembly, does not prevent one from individually or as part of an academic institution defining red lines and dealing with potential consequences of implementing them.

East German Particularities

West Germans on average still earn more for the same work and many will inherit real estate. In the context of crisis, the *Guardian* concludes that “the cost-of-living crisis” has driven the agenda, “with Germans in the east having been hit disproportionately hard by rising prices, owing to having lower wages, smaller pensions and less long-term accumulated wealth—whether property, inheritance or investments—than those in western Germany.” In this light, protesters who have urged “the government to repair and reopen the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Russia,” are concerned about inflation, which is at its highest level in 70 years, and about the war in Ukraine, to which they believe Germany should not be contributing weapons.²⁷

The quest for autonomy or self-determination can be also read as resistance to top-town state decisions such as mask-wearing rules during the pandemic or sanctions on Russia as punishment for its invasion of Ukraine.²⁸ The dilemma of that ambivalence is that most concerns about the social and economic effects of the war are legitimate

²³ Aydemir, “No Platforming,” 10.

²⁴ Smith, *No Platform*, 3.

²⁵ Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021 Freistaat Thüringen, https://verfassungsschutz.thueringen.de/fileadmin/Verfassungsschutz/VSB_2021.pdf.

²⁶ Lisa Wudy, Anna Hönig, and Uwe Kelm, “Hauptsache Protest: Was Demonstranten in Thüringen fordern,” Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (broadcast station), Thüringen, September 13, 2022, <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/thueringen/demos-protest-politik-energiekrise-ukrainekrieg-corona-100.html>.

²⁷ Connolly, “‘Angry winter.’”

²⁸ Connolly.

and comprehensible; however, the coalition of actors, their support of a dictator, and their freedom quest against the state, are problematic from a liberal-democratic point of view.

In the case of Frankfurt (Oder), as with other East German universities, the academic elite is with few exceptions of West German origin and/or lives in Berlin. Most students and academic workers, moreover, commute from Berlin to Frankfurt, and are therefore on the way back home, when Monday protests start. It is an asymmetric relationship between the university and parts of the city,²⁹ a situation which could be also interpreted through the lens of post-colonialism. In this vein, the remainder of this essay takes the mentioned roundtable event as an example to elaborate four patterns of ambivalence of such a liberal-illiberal dynamic, and to discuss how these can impact academic research and a researcher's positionality.

Four Lessons from a Roundtable Discussion with Monday Protesters

The roundtable discussion was scheduled for a Wednesday evening. During the Monday protest two days before, the organizers encouraged fellow protesters to join our discussion. Since nobody could foresee what would go on, the university administration asked us to elaborate a security concept and to enforce our "house rules."³⁰ The panel consisted of a professor of history and expert on Russian propaganda and the current war situation, a master's-degree student completing her thesis about anti-covid-restriction protests in a city nearby, and the head of the local Democracy Learning program sponsored by the German government. An invited journalist and expert on radical-right networks in the region of Brandenburg was announced as a panelist but resigned two hours before because he had to join a TV talk on mass house searches by the police against *Reichsbürger* accused of planning a *putsch* in Germany, which had astonishingly happened on that same day.³¹

Our discussion at the roundtable went well. I only had to prevent two people from individually filming the event. The situation became emotional only when the floor was opened to the audience. Interestingly, only speakers from the protest scene (about 30 to 40 people) made comments, some of them impolite and politically difficult to accept (the defense of Putin was a dominant theme). At the same time, this unusual event had provided room for conversation with two usually separated groups. Several protesters even remained for informal talks afterwards. Could this be the beginning of a beautiful friendship? Not really, since the marches with Russian flags continued, local anti-march activists got attacked, and we as organizers did not agree on a follow-up event that would address the protest milieu.

What are the lessons to be learned? I find four interrelated patterns of ambivalence noteworthy which might be relevant also for other case studies: The first concerns again the public space one should give or limit to those who present a vision of reality that differs from the common liberal-democratic sense. The second point refers to the unintended practice or danger of self-censorship that may even function as a strategy to prevent unpleasant encounters. The third point addresses the question

29 In more generalized terms, we can speak of an urban-rural or center-periphery divide that exists also in many other parts of the world.

30 These house rules stipulate that we as university members can decide what cannot be done. An example was an individual recording of the event that was transmitted via livestream. Moreover, in the case of an attempted heckler's veto we would have called the security officer to escort such a person outside the building or to call the police, all of which was stated prior to the start of the event.

31 Florian Fade, "Was nach der Razzia kommt," *Tagesschau*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/wdr/trazzia-reichsbuerger-111.html>.

of public education for such environments, and the role of academia. The final aspect addresses the academic practice of using prefigurative concepts to categorize something as illiberal or right-wing. To what extent does the search for right-wing/illiberal elements narrow the focus too much and exclude other facets of a policy or an actor? Are there alternatives?

No-Platforming or Representation Losers?

The first point has at least two facets. One concerns a question fiercely discussed in German politics and public media: whether (in the case of politics the “firewall debate”) it is legitimate for a democratic party to cooperate with AfD representatives at the municipal level and whether it is legitimate to provide AfD representatives a platform on public broadcast stations or talk shows. How much public space and, thus, possibilities to influence people on public broadcast platforms, should representatives from a right-wing nationalist party that got more votes than the threshold of 5% and entered the parliament get?³² The ambivalence is here between the social duty to represent the variety of society and the danger of normalizing illiberal utterance as well as a self-victimization following the populist friend-enemy narrative of “we the normal people” versus “those above us, the elite.”³³ The German public media, which tries to represent a range of views from across the political spectrum, is often considered such an elite project. Studies show that trust in the media in Germany—including public broadcasting—remains high, but the number of people who say that the media does not represent social diversity (or their own opinions and values) is surprisingly high.³⁴ A second facet deals with the aforementioned freedom of speech and expression principle, and is partly regulated by law if it comes to hate speech or Holocaust denial. But there exists a gray area in between the radical margins if one thinks of conspiracy narratives.

We had the Great Reset idea expressed in the audience, a term which emerged during the World Economic Forum 2020 in Davos, Switzerland, expressing ideas about how to transform the post-pandemic economy to make it sustainable and to foster more social participation.³⁵ This idea went viral on the global anti-covid-restriction protest scene, which generated the “baseless statements that the Great Reset is a strategic part of a grand conspiracy by the global elite, who somehow planned and managed the covid-19 pandemic. In this narrative, lockdown restrictions were introduced not to curb the spread of the virus, but to deliberately bring about economic collapse and a socialist world government, albeit run for the benefit of powerful capitalists.”³⁶

Another person began his talk stating that we all would know that our media system is “synchronized” (*Gleichgeschaltete Presse*), a term used to describe the process of

³² “Thüringen / AfD, CDU und die Diskussion um die Brandmauer,” *Deutschlandfunk*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/brandmauer-cdu-afd-politik-100.html>.

³³ For an analysis of the discursive strategies of right-wing populists, see Ruth Wodak, *The Policy of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073>.

³⁴ Wolfgang Schulz, “Müssen ARD und ZDF in ihre Talkshows AfD-Politiker einladen?” *Legal Tribune Online (LTO)*, July 2, 2023, <https://www.lto.de/recht/hintergruende/h/afd-politiker-maischberger-illner-afd-talkshows/>; Hansjörg Friedrich Müller, “Mit der AfD reden, nicht nur über sie: Eine Talkshow sorgt für Empörung in Deutschland,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/mit-der-afd-reden-nicht-nur-ueber-sie-eine-talkshow-sorgt-fuer-empoeerung-in-deutschland-ld.1493029>.

³⁵ “Great Reset,” Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/glosaareintraege/DE/G/great-reset.html>

³⁶ “What Is the Great Reset—and How Did It Get Hijacked by Conspiracy Theories?” BBC, June 24, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-57532368>.

complete Nazification in Germany also by creating a conformist media regime.³⁷ Did he cross a red line of what can be publicly said? My colleague quickly interrupted him to clarify that *Gleichschaltung* would not be an accurate description of today's German media system. The speaker went on to defend Russia against the alleged Western pressure created by NATO enlargement.

We were confronted with opinions or worldviews which, in this setting, were not directly harmful but which, in light of the chronology of the Russian war against Ukraine, we felt were hardly acceptable. Our livestream registered an hour of similar statements. Usually, we publish recorded events. This time, however, our dean was hesitating because of the ambivalent "gray area." Freedom of speech was not an argument anymore. According to the legal office, the question of publishing the video would be less an ethical than a political issue: namely, whether the university wants to be associated with such statements or not. The president was also hesitating and, thus, the link remained unpublished.

One conclusion is that we have to be prepared for the probability of such ambivalent situations, such gray areas and their proximity to subjective red lines that may be contested, and which require decisions about limiting the scope of free speech. Another conclusion is: whom should we as individual academics provide a platform and whom should we not, even at the risk of limiting freedom of speech? Is the university campus the right place for bridging gaps between the hierarchically-structured liberal-academic and non-academic groups? And how much room for maneuver does a university representative have? These questions lead to the interrelated subject of self-censorship.

The Danger of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is a very strong concept for the case discussed here. Unlike with attacks, for example, on gender studies,³⁸ there was no external pressure not to say or to write something that one would otherwise do. I refer to a more subtle fear: the anticipation of potential consequences if something is said or written. Our master's student on the roundtable was anxious about publishing the name of the city where she was researching anti-coronavirus-restrictions protests. A relative of hers has a house in the area and he did not want to be associated with someone researching anti-covid-restrictions protest marches in the neighborhood. We amended our press release accordingly, but I felt discomfort with her indirect pressure. And I felt ambivalent about accepting her perspective on the limited scope of her freedom but also aware about the anxiety these protesters can cause.

Another situation was less subtle. In preparation for the roundtable, I had a talk with the then-absent expert on far-right regional networks about his insights on Frankfurt (Oder). He had told me that far-right forces would be deeply involved in keeping these Monday demonstrations going. Moreover, he sees the city community in danger of being captured by these actors, who are not, as in the 1990s during the "baseball-bat years,"³⁹ recognizable as neo-Nazis or hooligans. He described the current scene as one of smart people, who would increasingly get in relevant positions or gain

37 "Gleichschaltung: Coordinating the Nazi State", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, January 23, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/gleichschaltung-coordinating-the-nazi-state>.

38 Elżbieta Klimek-Dominiak, "Gender Studies and Women's Equality as Orwellian 'Thought Crimes'? The Threat of Self-Censorship and Polish Academic Autobiographical Resistance," *Biography*, 42, no. 4 (2019): 784–811, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0078>.

39 David Begrich, "Baseballschlägerjahre in Ostdeutschland: Sie waren nie weg," *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*, December 2, 2019, <https://taz.de/Baseballschlaegerjahre-in-Ostdeutschland/15642847/>.

properties. Without his expertise⁴⁰ at the table, I avoided mentioning the existence or relevance of far-right actors. Interestingly enough, the almost complete absence of this topic seemed to have avoided aggressive encounters. At the same time, I felt like I had addressed only half the truth.

The ambivalence of self-censorship is that it may be more often than not an unintended strategy to facilitate communication between the non-like-minded. Such an approach, however, goes hand in hand with self-restricting one's right to freedom of speech and, depending on the audience, with simultaneously tolerating insulting comments. Doing an interview with a far-right person for research purposes, one certainly should carefully hold back certain information and try to create a friendly atmosphere and even play with gender roles. In such a situation the researcher is the *regisseur*. Trickier are unintended situations in which verbal attacks are possible.

Engaged Scholarship?

The third ambivalence of the liberal-illiberal dynamic relates to the more practical, but also political, question of whether a university should provide resources, or whether academic teachers should attempt and are able to engage with people who rely on what we call disinformation,⁴¹ who reject public media and institutions and are skeptical towards the democratic state. Viadrina has a well-established center for conflict research and management, which weeks earlier had invited Ukrainian students to talk about their unexpected encounters with the Monday protests. When one of the conflict-management experts, our history professor from the panel, and I suggested organizing a follow-up workshop about the Ukraine-Russia conflict that explicitly addresses the protest scene, university representatives rejected the idea. We were to concentrate on doing research and not on public education. A more general counter-argument relied on the conviction that the targeted group would neither come nor accept the truth about the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Both scenarios were quite probable. But is this reason enough not to try? We had elaborated a more bottom-up-oriented workshop concept to engage with the views of the protesters. However, under the usual conditions of limited time and financial resources, we did not further engage.

A small group of local counter-activists, among them a Russian and two Ukrainian students, were so brave as to confront the protesters with Dadaistic interventions during the protest marches. Slogans such as "We want more sunshine for the city," or "cheese is better than ham" were emblazoned on their banners. "We try to get a few followers away from these protests by involving them in a talk and telling them our stories."⁴² The small group of academic Monday demonstrations observers told us that they found a few people who entered into discussion with them and who may have changed their views because of such a respectful conversation. However, a few Mondays later in early 2023, when this small group lay down in the street to block the march in front of the university building, other protesters pushed them aggressively away and the police had to intervene.

40 Olaf Sundermeyer, "Von Rechten organisierte Proteste finden Anschluss an die gesellschaftliche Mitte," *rbb24*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.rbb24.de/studiofrankfurt/politik/2022/09/brandenburg-proteste-energiekrise-rechtsextreme-demos.html>.

41 "Factsheet 4: Types of Misinformation and Disinformation," United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Factsheet-4.pdf>.

42 "Gegenprotest auf der 'Montagsdemo' in Frankfurt," *Oderwelle*, October 24, 2022, <https://oderwelle.de/gegenprotest-auf-der-montagsdemo-in-frankfurt-oder/>.

Given the fact that social inequality, nationalism or gender-, trans-, and homophobia are rising, partly with active networks in universities and transnational institutions, the praxis of scholar-activism is more and more widespread. It is one way to blend rigorous scholarship with committed action that includes research, social activism, teaching-mentorship and policymaking. One goal among others is to make academia a welcoming place for all, also for marginalized communities. This idea is more narrowly grasped by the concept of “engaged scholarship” which encompasses a wide range of research that seeks to impact communities outside academia. Over time it now refers to “virtually any interaction that occurs between communication scholars and those outside the academy and doesn’t necessarily have to have a focus on social justice or address the needs of marginalized groups.”⁴³ Unlike scholar-activism engaged scholarship does not require direct engagement with participants throughout the research process and is not necessarily social justice-oriented.⁴⁴ This debate on scholar-activism cannot be deepened here; suffice to show that ideas about the duty and scope of research and of universities are in times of various crises shifting. However, even if a scholar is committed to engage with certain social groups beyond considering them a research object, the question remains whether groups with links to the far right should be invited. The last pattern of the liberal-illiberal ambivalence approaches the question of how to approach illiberal scenes from a different point of departure.

Avoiding Labeling “Illiberals”?

At a certain point during the roundtable discussion, one person from the protest milieu blamed the absent expert on far-right networks for “always call[ing] us Nazis. But what actually is a Nazi?” she asked to then conclude: “Not me.” This was obviously an exaggeration as the addressed expert, for protesters a public enemy,⁴⁵ would use less placative concepts to refer to far-right networks involved in the Monday demonstrations. One professor with an outstanding expertise on comparative research on the radical right remembers how in the 1990s and early 2000 in Frankfurt (Oder), radical and visually identifiable neo-Nazis were beating up people and sometimes also disturbing academic events.⁴⁶ Today, fortunately, the violent scene is small, but Frankfurt (Oder) has, as does East Brandenburg in general, one of the highest shares of AfD voters (24%) in Germany.⁴⁷ A book on extreme parties in Brandenburg illustrates the right-wing potential in the region.⁴⁸

In academic research, we are trained to provide conceptual clarifications that speak to the respective literature in the field. In anti-gender or radical right research, such

43 Jennifer Richter, Flóra Faragó, Beth Blue Swadeber, Denisse Roca-Servat, and Kimberly A. Eversman, “Tempred Radicalism and Intersectionality: Scholar Activism in the Neoliberal University,” *Social Issues* 76, no. 4 (2020), 1015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/josi.12401>.

44 Jennifer Richter, Flóra Faragó, Beth Blue Swadeber, Denisse Roca-Servat, and Kimberly A. Eversman, “Tempred Radicalism and Intersectionality: Scholar Activism in the Neoliberal University,” *Social Issues* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1016/1015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/josi.12401>.

45 The regional public broadcast station rbb had organized a roundtable discussion where the public was invited to talk with representatives from all parties, the AfD included, and the mentioned expert. He had almost no chance to complete a sentence as the crowd was shouting at him.

46 Jacqueline Westermann, “Studierende der Viadrina wollen Aufarbeitung rassistischer Angriffe in den 90ern,” *Märkische Oderzeitung* (MOZ), June 24, 2022, <https://www.moz.de/lokales/frankfurt-oder/europa-universitaet-frankfurt-oder-studierende-der-viadrina-wollen-aufarbeitung-rassistischer-angriffe-in-den-90ern-65124133.html>

47 Take, for instance, the city of Görlitz in the Saxon border region: the AfD won 35.6% of the vote there in the 2021 federal elections. Die Bundeswahlleiterin: Bundestagswahl 2021, Görlitz; <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99/land-14/wahlkreis-157.html>.

48 Christoph Schulze and Gideon Botsch, *Rechtsparteien in Brandenburg: Zwischen Wahlalternative und Neonazismus, 1990–2020* (Berlin: be.bra Verlag, 2021).

concepts usually do not match the self-understanding of those actors who we are investigating. In interviews with representatives from illiberal milieus (e.g., anti-gender activists), we even would avoid addressing them directly as right-wing or illiberal. For a journal publication, however, the evaluation of the content of their utterances would probably lead to a conceptual systematization as “right-wing” or “illiberal.” At the same time, and we experienced this during the talk, our academic labels for those who are targeted are perceived more often than not as being turned into an attack.

Actors do exist who openly pursue an illiberal agenda by striving to influence politics and society against minority protection, individual freedom, pluralism, etc. In radical-right research one would refer to “the margins” within a society. If we do not call illiberals by their name and analyze conditions and effects of their agency, we fail; at the same time, however, we help them and their followers to self-victimize as persecuted by liberals.

Most difficult, however, is to investigate actors in the gray area between “the illiberal margins” and “the political center” such as substantial parts of these Monday protesters or followers of far-right driving forces. The organized far right is explicitly targeting that gray area, which may be more open to receiving and disseminating disinformation. Recent literature refers to the danger of normalization of far-right discourse.⁴⁹ To me it remains an open question whether one should consider people with respective views simply as far-right or illiberal, or whether one should avoid such pre-configurative concepts and refer to what is observable (political campaigns, rhetoric, narratives, policy proposals) without labeling and condemning it.

A recent German study presenting data from interviews with Monday protesters concludes that they would share “a different understanding of democracy.”⁵⁰ Is that euphemistic or a helpful attempt to better understand these people? The differentiation between types of democracies is not new. Fareed Zacharias coined in 1998 in contrast to liberal democracy the concept of illiberal democracy⁵¹ that Victor Orban had applied to refer to his own—clearly different—understanding of a democracy that objects central principles of political and cultural liberalism.⁵²

Raj Kollmorgen - and this links back to the previous question about engaged scholarship and with whom to engage - a German sociologist with distinguished expertise on the societal effects of post-communist transformations in Eastern Germany calls for a better dialogue and appreciation of different views on democracy resulting from partly painful post-communist transformation experiences. With regard to the increase of protests movements (climate, anti-Covid, social justice, energy), he proposes to think about new institutional forms of democratic representation which includes more actors than political parties only.⁵³ Another recent study on mass radicalization by Julia Ebner, which results from undercover

49 Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*; Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

50 <https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/publication/mir-reichs-buerger/>.

51 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997): 22–43.

52 András L. Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315168005>.

53 Henry Bernhard, “Soziologie: Wir müssen die demokratischen Institutionen sinnvoll ergänzen, ” *Deutschlandfunk*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/wehrhafte-demokratie-raj-kollmorgen-ueber-fehlende-akzeptanz-demokr-prozesse-dlf-f5099164-100.html>.

research in the most radical digital communication bubbles such as incels, concludes that humaneness is the only meaningful way to engage with these milieus.⁵⁴

For some such tolerant and emphatic approach may downplay how liberal democracies are under siege now. Moreover, it is challenging to engage with views hostile to the democratic constitutionality of the state of various facets. From a normative or ethical point of view, it may have some political impact to recognize such “different views” as relevant and to include them into one’s conceptual work beyond the labels of far-right, right-wing or illiberalism. Whether such recognition of “other understandings of democracy” paves the way to a “normalization” of illiberal worldviews or to an inclusive discourse,⁵⁵ may depend among others on the governance of discursive hierarchies.

Conclusion: Dealing with the Illiberal-Liberal Dynamic

In conclusion, researchers and representatives of academic institutions should be both sensitive and investigative regarding signs of anti-state positions, and open to dialog with a constant discussion about where to draw red lines and how to respond if they are crossed. “No platform” per se is not a solution. Individual researchers should be attentive towards self-censorship or respective subtle fears and simultaneously defend the value of freedom of speech. The different political cultures in different countries may confine the limits of what can be said in different ways. Due to the Nazi past, in German public institutions, forums tend to be quite limited. Due to the Communist legacy, social and geopolitical inequalities continue to shape the public discourse in unequal ways and foster a West German academic elitist perception of East German deviancy, upholding West Germany as the norm.⁵⁶

At the same time, the academic field is increasingly under pressure from those who consider certain truths as lies and threats or who do not accept the idea of freedom of inquiry. This requires sensitive strategies for how to react—as an individual researcher, as a university, as a private person. The concepts of scholar activism or engaged scholarship legitimate academic activities beyond teaching, researching, or consulting. The final conclusion is ambivalent: on the one hand, most potential for positive change seems a more sensitive approach towards labels and attempts to engage with certain illiberal ideas accepting them also as contribution to the public discourse; on the other hand, however, there is the danger of providing a platform for or legitimating certain positions that are hostile to the democratic constitutionality of the state or discriminatory.

54 Julia Ebner, *Massenradikalisierung: Wie die Mitte Extremisten zum Opfer fällt* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2023). <https://www.suhrkamp.de/buch/julia-ebner-massenradikalisierung-t-9783518473146>.

55 Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

56 Dirk Oschmann, *Der Osten: eine westdeutsche Erfindung: Wie die Konstruktion des Ostens unsere Gesellschaft spaltet* (Berlin: Ulstein, 2023).