Wrestling with Ethical Issues in Studying Illiberalism:
Some Remarks from the U.S. Context

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Abstract

Knowledge production has always been intrinsically correlated to politics and power hierarchy. In the U.S. academic system, producing scholarship on highly polarizing topics such as illiberalism faces specific challenges. Classic ethical and epistemological issues are more difficult to address in a neoliberal framework that pushes for interaction with the policy world and for external fundraising. Moreover, both institutionalized and peer pressures on a normative definition of "liberalism" and its "enemies," which often does not allow for both conservative and leftist interpretations of liberalism, reduces the space for discussion and may push for some spirals of silence to take form. This paper reflects on these challenges on the basis of more than a decade spent at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Keywords: Illiberalism, neoliberalism, spiral of silence, cancel culture, policy, funding, ethics

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The use of the term "illiberalism" has risen steadily over the last decade, both in the political and media landscape, as well as in the scholarly literature, to describe opponents of that which is purported to be "liberalism." For scholars working on highly politicized topics—or even just topics with a parallel life in the policy and media sphere—such as illiberalism, striking the right balance between academic knowledge production and interaction with the broader environment constitutes a significant challenge. In this paper, I reflect on this challenge on the basis of more than a decade spent at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Many of the remarks I make here are specific to the context of D.C., which features a uniquely intense degree of entanglement between academia, policy, and funding. They would not be perceived so acutely by those at other universities detached from the policy weight of the U.S. capital. However, even in this unique context, they effectively reflect the broad ethical challenges associated with working on politicized topics such as illiberalism in a neoliberal academic system.

University and Politics

In producing knowledge on illiberalism, scholarship must navigate American society's acute polarization, especially among its intellectual and political elites. Some U.S. state governors, such as Ron DeSantis in Florida, Brian Kemp in Georgia, and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, have been explicit about the extent to which they want to interfere with educational curricula to set it "in order" with their ideological views.[1] These pressure campaigns are particularly apparent in the context of primary and secondary education, with huge fights currently underway to control school curricula, county school boards, and regulate the books available to pupils.[2] However, they have slowly gained prominence at higher education institutions as well. Some colleagues who work in conservative states have already begun to feel institutional pressures to "tune down" research considered to be too "progressive."

For universities based in Washington, D.C.—which is not a state but rather an administrative entity that is directly dependent on the federal government—for which interacting with federal institutions is part of their DNA, an equilibrium is difficult to find, as the White House and Congress alternate between Democratic and Republican control. Mainstream universities are largely dominated by progressive views and have few contacts with the conservative world—an issue in the context of a national tradition that values bipartisanship. How for instance should universities deal with the criticisms—often expressed by (extremely powerful) boards of trustees—that universities are too one-sided in favor of progressive views and lack well-established relationships with conservative foundations or public intellectuals?

Due to their religious origins, D.C.'s Georgetown and Catholic Universities (Georgetown was founded by Jesuits and still has powerful departments on religious affairs, and Catholic defines itself as "faithfully Catholic"[3]) feature some ideologically conservative departments and faculty, but George Washington University and American University are quite isolated from prominent conservative institutions and figures. The gap between the tradition of bipartisanship and the largely progressive student and faculty population makes finding a potential equilibrium between

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1 Dana Goldstein, "For Republican Governors, Civics Is the Latest Education Battleground," *The New York Times*, November 30, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/us/republican-governors-civics-education.html.

2 Tim Walker, "The Culture War's Impact on Public Schools | NEA," *neaToday*, February 17, 2023, https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/culture-wars-impact-public-schools.

3 Catholic University, "Faithfully Catholic," The Catholic University of America, https://www.catholic.edu/about-us/faithfully-catholic/index.html.

the two political sides of American culture a *tour de force*—one that university administrations have thus far failed to achieve.

At the individual level, scholars face far more issues in this regard than their administration, including the ethical and epistemological issues of how to dialogue with their object of study. By using the adjectives "far-right," "populist," "fascist," "illiberal," "post-liberal," or "conservative," scholars indeed participate in building the image of the movements that they describe, either discrediting them by framing them as radical, violent, or fringe or embracing these movements' self-promoted branding as legitimate political forces. Is it the duty of scholarship to denounce the whitewashing of language and positioning? Alternatively, should scholars work from the point of view of actors themselves while recognizing the risk of euphemization?

Answers to these questions must be given in a broader setting in which threats of physical violence against scholars by far-right actors as well as emotional harm done through hate speech—especially on social media—have come to constitute a worrisomely rising trend.[4] Scholars must also make strategic research decisions in a context of a growing movement in favor of scholar-activism from the progressive side. It is indeed critical for scholars to reflect on their social responsibility and how the knowledge that they acquire and provide can benefit society more broadly, not just their peers and students.[5] Any scholarship on democracy and its challenges may have direct implications for how society frames debates and policy solutions. However, the right to not engage in activism and to refuse to take sides should also be respected.

Peer Pressures and the Risks of "Spirals of Silence"

Another element of this ambivalent landscape relates to peer pressure. Most U.S. campuses are dominated by liberal views (meaning progressive in American terminology; one would use "leftist" in a European context) among both faculty and students. This is the case even in conservative states, with liberal universities functionally segregated from the rest of the state. There are, of course, some major conservative universities (e.g., Liberty University, Regent University, Brigham Young University, Bob Jones University), and there are certainly examples of conservative colleges even in the most liberal states like Massachusetts and New York.

The difference between liberal and conservative universities is that the latter attract almost uniquely conservative faculty and students, so there is genuine ideological affinity with few dissonant voices. In contrast, the former mainly host progressives alongside a minority population of conservative faculty and students. In the case of such liberal universities, a "spiral of silence" pushes conservative voices to conceal their moral beliefs if they do not believe that their views are widely shared by their colleagues or the wider community to which they belong.[6]

This ideological pressure does not come only from peers—it is institutional. Over the last decade, all American universities and a large majority of colleges established DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) departments, which perform the legitimate

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4 See in the special issue Antonia Vaughan, "Success and Harm When Researching the Far Right: Researcher Safety as Epistemic Exclusion," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (2024): 65-74, https://doi.org/10.53483XCOY3570.

5¹⁶ Adrienne L. Massanari, "Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the 'Alt-Right' Gaze," *Social Media + Society* 4 no. 2 (2018): 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118768302.

6 Norris, Pippa. "Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?" *Political Studies* 71, no. 1 (February 1, 2023): 145–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211037023.

and necessary work of developing a culture of inclusion among students, faculty, and staff. While many DEI departments perform a great service in helping university stakeholders with inclusion issues, some have become relatively intrusive in the propagation of their goals, leading to them being perceived as requesting ideological allegiance from scholars.[7] However, the reverse is true in highly conservative states, where the last few years have seen a trend of DEI departments being defunded. This trend is particularly significant in states leading the illiberal fight—such as Florida, Georgia, and Virginia—in the name of fighting against "wokeness," "socialism," and "reverse racism."[8]

The extreme polarization of campuses themselves should also be highlighted here. Many cases of "cancel culture"—with students organizing protests and social media campaigns to damage the reputation of external speakers or professors considered too conservative, racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, etc.—have called the U.S.'s sacred principle of freedom of speech into question.[9] Often, university leadership tends to side with students because they are the ones who are most able to attract media attention and, therefore, those who pose the greatest risk to the institution's reputation, impacting fundraising efforts. However, in recent months, the dynamic has shifted from domestic societal questions to the foreign policy realm with the massive pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli movement among the U.S. youth. In this complex case, university administrations have struggled to strike the right balance between freedom of speech, protection against hatred, and their own reputations and funding biases.

Today, writing on sensitive topics related to the transformation of our ideological world means navigating troubled waters. Scholars rarely make explicit their positionality of departure and tend to consider "liberalism" to be the obvious default model of our societies. This dynamic results in those leaning toward a more conservative reading of society seeing liberalism as going too far toward dismantling the social order and those inclined toward a more leftist view that illiberalism is the hidden child of liberalism's failures finding themselves in dissonance with the mainstream research line. However, they are often the only ones to make explicit their enunciation against the majority-driven trend of liberalism being treated as the obvious normative reference.[10]

All these multifaceted factors may translate into certain people engaging in self-censorship, thinking twice about the vocabulary and terminology that they use, refraining from excessive public visibility, or deciding not to work on certain topics that they consider too polarizing—the few works that we have on the existence of "leftist illiberalism" compared to the extensive body of work on "right-wing illiberalism" reveal faculties' ideological preference for progressive liberalism but also point to the existence of hidden spirals of silence.

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7 On this topic, see the debate between The Chronicle of Higher Education. Randall Kennedy, "Mandatory DEI Statements Are Ideological Pledges of Allegiance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* April 3, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/mandatory-dei-statements-are-ideological-pledges-of-allegiance and Stacy Hawkins, "DEI Statements Are Not About Ideology. They're About Accountability," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* April 19, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/dei-statements-are-not-about-ideology-theyre-about-accountability.

8 The Chronicle of Higher Education, "DEI Legislation Tracker," March 29, 2024. https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts.

9 Patrick M. Garry, "Threats to Academic Freedom in Higher Education," *Society* 60, no. 2 (April 1, 2023): 176–80, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00821-4.

10 Raphael Morisset, "The Paradoxical Sources of Illiberalism: A Synoptic Approach to the Genealogies of Illiberalism," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2024): forthcoming pagination.

The Policy/Academia Entanglement

Another central point of tension that scholars must grapple with is their relationship with the policy world, including decision-making entities (e.g., federal agencies), lobbying/consultancy firms, and think tanks, with which universities which claim a leading research and policy orientation must cooperate and compete. This cooperation/competition scheme is specific to the context of Washington, D.C., even if we find it to a lesser extent at the major government and international affairs schools in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and California (i.e., Berkeley and Stanford). The presence of this scheme obviously depends on the research discipline, with political science, international affairs, and economics most connected to it, which is not the case for other social sciences and even less for the humanities.

In Washington, D.C., the entanglement between academia, think tanks, and decision-making circles is reinforced by everyday proximity and a critical human factor: people move from one realm to another. The "revolving doors" phenomenon, whereby public officials leave decision-making positions upon a change in government for jobs in think tanks, lobbying/consultancy firms, other private-sector actors, and academia, is well-known. It can be celebrated for facilitating fluidity between decision-making circles and knowledge production, but it is also highly problematic: it consolidates lobbying (for instance, one-third of government appointees to the Department of Health and Human Services later leave to take jobs in the private sector),[11] and it introduces political and funding biases into scholarship. Even among the most respected think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "revolving doors" (and its well-known formula: "lose an election, gain a think tank") have contributed to a blurring of the line between research and political lobbying.

Scholars working on policy-related issues thus find themselves in a situation in which they need to cooperate and compete with colleagues coming from the policy world who often stay at a given university for just a few years before returning to state service—and these colleagues have the advantage in terms of both funds and media outreach. In an academic world that increasingly sees value in media visibility, the competition coming from policy practitioners represents a significant challenge for scholars who want to stay out of media hype due to ethical concerns or potential risks.[12]

Producing academic knowledge in a heavily policy-oriented context like Washington, D.C. also entails significant "noise pollution" created by think tanks and the mainstream media, whose outreach capacities dominate the whole city and set the agenda, forcing scholars and university administrations to follow similar trends. This challenge was particularly evident during the Trump candidacy and presidency in 2016–2020. The media reports on Trump-related phenomena were so overinflated, polarized, and emotional that maintaining a scholarly line of analysis (for instance on the sociological factors behind his electoral success, on his links with Russia) was a tremendous challenge.

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11 USC Schaeffer, "Study of 'Revolving Door' in Washington Shows One-Third of HHS Appointees Leave for Industry Jobs," September 5, 2023. https://healthpolicy.usc.edu/article/study-of-revolving-door-in-washington-shows-one-third-of-hhs-appointees-leave-for-industry-jobs/. See also Ella Nilsen, "Capitol Hill's Revolving Door, in One Chart," *Vox*, June 19, 2019. https://www.vox.com/2019/6/19/18683550/capitol-hill-revolving-door-in-one-chart.

12 In this issue, see Vaughan, "Success and Harm When Researching the Far Right."

The lack of reflection coming from think tanks and media organizations—largely dominated by mainstream centrist-liberal perspectives—has obscured the terminological debate. A supposed overlap between liberalism as a national political tradition, liberalism as societal progressivism, liberalism as economic neoliberalism, and liberalism as support for a U.S.-led international order was leading the analysis, with little room left for disentangling these distinct components. Addressing the fact that conservatism, populism, nationalism, and anti-elitism have long been key political traditions in the United States was difficult in such a partisan environment. Moreover, the fact that the mainstream media bears some responsibility for having made Trump such a popular figure—as they benefitted commercially from what has been called the "Trump bump" (the fact that selling negativity and sensationalism is commercially successful[13])—also obscured the discussion and its assumptions.

Fundraising's Impact on Scholarship

Another systemic component of knowledge production is fundraising. Many of the leading research universities in the United States, including the rich Ivy League universities, devote a lot of time, energy, and human resources to securing external funding. While this work is mostly done by specialized departments in charge of relations with foundations, private and corporate donors, and alumni, faculty are also pushed to engage in fundraising efforts for their own research and, sometimes, for their own salary.

The salary of many tenured faculty is only covered for nine months out of every year; the remaining three months need to be funded by internal competition or external funds. One specific category of professors—so-called research professors—function entirely on the euphemism of "soft money," meaning that they need to raise their own salary and that their job contract is linked to this ability to raise funds. In cities like Washington, D.C., the issue of mixing funding sources is more systemic: many fully-funded tenured professors pad their official university salary with funds received for working as consultants for federal agencies. Therefore, they work in two parallel positions and, even disregarding the obvious conflict of interest, they rarely publicly acknowledge how much the consultancy's research agenda influences or overlaps with the university-funded one.

The main foundations known for funding research on international affairs (e.g., Carnegie Corporation of New York, MacArthur Foundation) usually refrain from direct interference in the academic work that they fund and fully respect the intellectual autonomy of their grantees. However, this does not mean that they lack preferences in terms of the work that they want to support. They certainly have agendas, some of which bear a clear conservative outlook (e.g., Koch Brothers, John Templeton Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation), though the majority boast a more neutral, mainstream liberal direction, and some are even imbued with progressivist advocacy (e.g., Open Society Foundations).

Here too, funding requests need to accommodate the broad ideological orientations of the foundations, forcing scholars to clearly identify how their research fits on the U.S. ideological spectrum. Naturally, scholars with conservative views will not apply to Open Society Foundations for funding, and scholars with progressive views will not apply to the Koch Brothers. Some will struggle to find an institutional umbrella

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13 Sergei A. Samoilenko and Andrey Miroshnichenko, "Profiting From the 'Trump Bump': The Effects of Selling Negativity in the Media," In *Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online*, eds. Innocent E. Chiluwa and Sergei A. Samoilenko (IGI Global, 2019), 375–91, https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-8535-0.ch020.

under which to pursue funding at all: neo-Marxist schools of thought, for instance, are present at prominent liberal universities but generally do not fit any foundation's agenda. The neoliberal system may support research with socially progressive goals and even radical ones—but not anti-capitalist sentiments. This is plainly apparent when it comes to climate change and environmental policy: while anti-capitalist work constitutes a substantial segment of the academic literature on this subject, the perspective is almost entirely absent from foundation-supported research.

Another issue that impacts scholarship is the rapidity with which policy-oriented research themes go in and out of fashion. This quick turn-around in policy obsessions has two major impacts on scholarship. First, funding is highly contextual: a lot of money can be suddenly available for a specific topic for a short amount of time, but academics usually need time to develop a new research agenda and then apply for funding. By the time they have built knowledge, the topic may have already gone out of fashion and disappeared from the policy agenda. Therefore, scholars must learn to produce research both when their topic is in the policy spotlight—which usually translates to pressure from the university administration and its outreach department to serve as public experts, commenting every day on television and social media—and when their topic is no longer on the policy radar and goes back to being a mere obscure corner of knowledge production.

Second, the funding available for policy research is rarely ideologically neutral. For example, since the early 2010s, funds made available by federal agencies for knowledge production on illiberalism, far-right movements, disinformation, and conspiracy theories have rarely been intended to study them but rather to "counter" them. Therefore, scholars face the following dilemma: refuse to apply for potentially available funds or accept that they must transform their research to fit the funder's required angle and strategy. Such ethical dilemmas are significant, but they are almost never outwardly discussed. Is scholarship's role to assist state institutions in their policy goals? Do scholars believe their knowledge helps craft better policies and actions? What are scholars' responsibilities in supporting policy goals that may be ethically problematic?

Concluding Remarks

From this brief overview, it is clear that many assumptions on what it means to produce knowledge in the U.S. neoliberal academic context need to be questioned. Both ethical and epistemological issues regarding the definition of our object of research, our own positioning as scholars, as citizens, and even as activists, our mechanisms of producing and circulating knowledge, and the financial and political biases that may interact in these processes need to be explicitly discussed in and become a part of the academic literature itself. These questions are not new to our times or unique to Washington D.C., but the sensitivity of defining that which is "illiberal"—or any other political label—and identifying what "threats" it poses to "liberal democracy" effectively encapsulates the intrinsic overlap between politics and knowledge production.