

I Am Matter, But I Do Not Matter: Alienation and Indoctrination

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Polina Vasineva's essay "Political Alienation in Anti-Democratic Education" is valuable for examining how political alienation is achieved at the individual level via indoctrination which, as she also points out, was synonymous with education in most cases and contexts until the last century.¹ I applaud Vasineva for writing about things that are difficult to write about from a first-hand perspective. Those who experience political alienation in environments like that Vasineva writes about face political pressure to not write or talk about them. Such acts contradict the singular, absurd top-down narratives suggesting national perfection which, as Vasineva notes, help facilitate alienation. While there is this one correct view taught and sanctioned politically as such in authoritarian contexts, expressing something negative about it and the society is an open act of defiance and resistance. It can lead to discursive condemnation if not much, much worse.

This aspect—real, external, material pressure not to articulate that which must not be elaborated in structured, alienating environments—tends to be overlooked by those who focus on the potential of individual intellectual capability in such cases. However, education which functions as alienating indoctrination aims to thwart not exactly the capability to speak or think freely or independently, but the motivation to do so. After all, it teaches that there is one singular, external right answer, as a more hidden curriculum imparts at the same time that there is one right view, "or else." The seriousness of this "or else" is rarely appreciated by those who have not experienced authoritarian environments. Here, the need to develop critical thinking through practicing speech and dialogue freely with others and to achieve a sense of personal agency is in competition with a more basic need for physical safety and survival: for a life free from undue punishment for oneself and loved ones. This fundamental need encourages one to tolerate the logic of a flawed system

ruling their life, other capabilities notwithstanding.

Here, hopelessness, skepticism, and a distaste for the dirty business of politics are not unreasonable lessons learned; they are goals of the system, as Vasineva points out. So, yes, I ought to express myself about the situation, because it is important to my growth and understanding and that of others, but I face risks for doing so. The risks are not explained officially as consequences for speech or acts; according to the system, speech and acts are officially free, so long as you do not engage in harmful acts. (And the system has a simple, absurd explanation for what those acts are.) This situation puts those living under authoritarianism in conflict with those who are oblivious about how it works, who regard it as a mindset rather than a political system. Thus, manifestations of “learned helplessness,” “internalized oppression,” and other forms of silence and skepticism are wrongly framed as personal choices or deficiencies of less virtuous or less capable people. From the perspective of agency, I have the choice to express myself and face possible consequences, or work on improving my life (and that of my loved ones and community) otherwise.

In my context, this can be discussed in terms of teaching students how to write. For their whole lives, my students have learned that right answers come from sanctioned sources. They have learned that democracy is really a lovely idea, there is really, hardly anything wrong with it, but it can simply be a bit messy in practice. (Textbooks show people fighting in voting booths, getting too emotional about things that systems can manage rationally.) Where they grew up, as in Vasineva’s context, the humanities have been significantly undercut in contrast with a positivistic view of science as abstracted empiricism: collecting data for its own sake.² When it comes to history, civics, and morality, there has been and, it is suggested can only be, one single way. There is a right way to support society politically and personally, and there are just shades of gray between doing it right and not doing it right enough—by being silent instead of zealous (or by being overzealous),³ single rather than married,⁴ humanely indoctrinatory (as Vasineva puts it) versus forcefully indoctrinatory, and so on.

My students were taught that there is no “I” in academic writing. An

“I” is but a sign of weakness. As novice researchers, they write as if reporting on something that happened that they were not involved with and about which they have no interest. They were taught that personal interest in their topic amounts to improper bias (which I find darkly amusing, since most of their projects appear to me to be somewhat narcissistic examinations of graduate student experiences “like” their own). My lectures suggesting that they study what matters to them, and that it is neither scientific nor effective to write about “the researcher” or “the author” when they mean themselves, meet with waves of disagreement from the past and the future. Prestigious international journals in my region also demand that authors take “I,” “we,” and “the author” or “authors” out of manuscripts as a matter of formatting and style. Philosophy that does not primarily reiterate traditional texts is framed as, “just personal opinions,” much less valuable than interviewing five of their friends about their challenges as graduate students and reporting what they said from the “view from nowhere.”

Democratic education can be painful in the best of cases, but unlearning indoctrination is probably more painful. What is the point if the system remains the same? Alienation is a reasonable, self-preserving, agentic response to feeling disconnected from an illusory, incredible reality that one cannot rationally, authentically connect with. Like this so-called reality itself, I am thus tolerated as a point of interest, despite not having the right views, because my nationality, my related deficiency of education, and my background preclude me from appreciating the right ways, and because it does not appear to be the case that I am trying to fuel protest or resistance, which are forbidden. But why should my students change their views or practices based on what I say?

I tell my students that it is not one of my goals to indoctrinate them. I partly do this for self-protection. There is official concern with foreign influences and spies.⁵ My act also does two other things. First, it allows students to consider my pedagogy and lessons with an open mind, because they believe I want to help them as individuals and not harm them—either through brainwashing them with American propaganda or by getting them in trouble for participating in something questionable in my classes. Second, it reveals a

silence over what the point of their other education has been if it was not to help them as individuals and as a community.

Then I tell them why it matters to me that they use the word “I” rather than “the researcher,” and why I think it is more biased to feign the view from nowhere than to lay their cards on the table. Then I see their sense of “I” morph from an object into a subject. I note that a research assistant or artificial intelligence can interview people and report the findings. But they can do something different—and they must—within an educational system that recognizes (at least formally and technically) that they are the future, and that they will (at least some of them) eventually participate in the functioning of the society in more active than passive ways.

Where I live, wearing face masks in public was both legally forbidden and required for four years.⁶ Anyone who publicly questions the government’s laws or actions in small or large scale risks being treated firstly with suspicion, as a traitor. In such a context, even taking my class is like an act of resistance. From my side, it can only work if I am tolerated as a sideline diversion; after all, no one is formally against democracy or free speech or international education. As Vasineva powerfully reminds us, democratic values do not disappear in authoritarian contexts, “but remain in the background, becoming an ornament, an illusion devoid of genuine content.” I do more than nothing by continuing to be present and think and express myself albeit in limited ways. It is almost silence, but not quite. Some could say I am merely helping the system function as is. Existentially, I make minor and major decisions each day, hovering around what is officially right versus what is right to myself. I dance somewhat off the beat, as much as any educator who perhaps takes too seriously what others might regard only as empty platitudes about the importance of education for critical thinking and agency. I thank Vasineva for dancing with me.⁷

REFERENCES

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2 For more on this, see Rui Yang, “Riddled with Gaping Wounds: A Methodological Critique of Comparative and International Studies in Education: Views of a Professor,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Comparative Studies in Education*, eds. Larry E. Suter, Emma Smith & Brian D. Denman (pp. 63-78). Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2019.

3 See for example Frank Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

4 For instance, see Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

5 Liz Jackson, *Protesting Education and Identity in Hong Kong*. (London: Routledge, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003130611>

6 Candice Chau, “Hongkongers Wearing Face Masks at Protests Risk Prosecution, Says Government Advisor as Anti-Mask Law Set to Stay,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, March 3, 2023.

7 See also Liz Jackson, “Fifty Shades of Academic Freedom: Beyond a Binary View,” *Philosophy of Education*, 79:1 (2023), 97-111, <https://doi.org/10.47925/79.1.097> ; “Free Speech, False Polarization, and the Paradox of Tolerance,” *Philosophy of Education*, 77:3 (2021), 139-145. <https://doi.org/10.47925/77.3.139>