

Education for Populism: Systemic Indoctrination and Closed-Mindedness

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WHY TALK ABOUT INDOCTRINATION AGAIN?

The topic of indoctrination was at its greatest focus in the Philosophy of Education in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (for example, Snook, Kazepidis, and others). In the following decades, researchers have returned to this problem many times (for example, Siegel, Callan, Lewin, and others). However, the explicit ultimate consensus on the definition of indoctrination is still a subject to be reached. Despite the breadth of interpretation of the concept, it is still worth exploring. Democratic education worldwide faces threats ranging from simple concerns about the quality of teaching to the complete collapse of the democratic model and the establishment of an authoritarian model, as in Russia, for instance.

In this paper, I won't try to (re)define indoctrination as such. Instead, given the increasing relevance of the topic, I'll focus on functional approaches to the criteria of indoctrination, the adoption of which might be reasonable for evaluating today's educational practices. I won't reinvent the criteria of indoctrination either, but I'll demonstrate that perhaps they should be applied somewhat differently than was previously accepted. I suggest we examine the systemic nature of indoctrination today. To do this, using some examples from modern Russian education, I'll explore the link between indoctrination and closed-mindedness, as well as some of the broader populist narratives, especially the narrative of collective identity.

In this context, Russia's case can be considered one of the most illustrative. The unprecedented decline of democratic education in the country over the past decades has occurred against the backdrop of constant declarations of democratic values and, more importantly, the convincing illusion of using democratic tools in education (like discussions, case studies, developing critical thinking, fostering creativity, and so on). So how confident can we be that

democratic education is safe anywhere else?

Indoctrination is no longer solely a matter of poor teaching. Amid threats democracy faces everywhere, the rise in popularity of far-right politicians, and controversial laws being adopted even in the most established democracies, it's essential to approach the issue more broadly, examining the entire educational institutions, and more than that: non-educational political participation or the encouragement of political alienation as possible forms of indoctrination.

However, it is most important to look at the values behind educational, cultural, and social policies, and only with these insights in mind, analyze both educational and non-educational activities that are democratic in form to determine how democratic their content truly is.

REVISITING CRITERIA OF INDOCTRINATION

The most common way to address indoctrination in academic literature is by identifying three groups of criteria: method, intention, and content. In the 20th century, researchers mainly sought to pinpoint the very presence of indoctrination and determine approaches to diagnosing the problem. An anthology edited by Ivan Snook in 1972, as noted by the editor, focuses on the meaning of the term indoctrination.¹ Still all essays, to some extent, touch upon the three “classic” criteria. This means that indoctrination was defined by analyzing how, what, and why to teach. This trend persisted later on.

However, numerous discussions around the three “original” criteria aimed to highlight their contradictions and—most importantly—their insufficiency for a convincing conclusion on whether we're facing indoctrinative or educative teaching.

It's not enough to talk about content because both indoctrination and educative teaching cannot help conveying certain beliefs; it's not enough to discuss methods since some knowledge in specific situations is transmitted as it is and must be accepted on faith, without critical analysis or broader discussion; it's not enough to discuss teacher's intentions because there can be none. Each of these criteria, at the very least, requires a set of sub-criteria, clarifications, and reservations.

Today I see it much more accurate to use a system of six criteria, adding to the discussion assessment of control, consequences, and basic value orientation. These extended criteria were suggested by the Finnish scholar Tapio Puolimatka back in 1996.² I won't delve into the criterion of control in detail in this paper. However, I can't help but point out that for indoctrinative teaching, as any teaching in general, it's crucial to monitor the effectiveness of the educational (or indoctrinative) process. When diagnosing indoctrination, one should evaluate both forms and intensity of control. According to Puolimatka, in the case of indoctrination, "control is so extensive that it hinders the unfolding of student's act-structure."³

SYSTEMIC INDOCTRINATION AND THE CRITERION OF CONSEQUENCES

The consequences criterion is particularly effective for analyzing those instances of indoctrination where the teacher themselves doesn't want to engage in brainwashing (in other words, doesn't have an intention) but for some reason still does so. One such scenario is possible when the teacher is already indoctrinated themselves. An indoctrinated teacher may sincerely believe they are striving to develop critical thinking, but in fact, they cannot go beyond ideologically prescribed narratives, either in methods or particularly in content. Unintentional indoctrination often takes forms as close as possible to the best examples of educative teaching.

As we see in the case of Russia, within the context of threats to democratic education, unintentional indoctrination, as well as the indirect one, which I will discuss later in this paper, are perhaps the most dangerous since they have the greatest potential of becoming massive and systemic. Isolated episodes of indoctrinative teaching, at least in higher education, do not necessarily result in a statistically significant impact on students, although they should still be avoided.⁴ In this regard, the new disciplines that have been centrally developed and implemented in Russia after the invasion of Ukraine can hardly be expected to significantly change the way students think without the broader context of indoctrination. Nevertheless, they remain more than revealing of the narratives and ideologies promoted by the Russian government.

Educational institutes in Russia lack autonomy in terms of what can be taught and how. The state often dictates the lesson plan in full detail. But even if such detailing doesn't occur, at the very least, specific ministries develop and control implementation of so-called state educational standards that define both the goals and means of education. The courses "Conversations about Important Things" and "Foundations of Russian Statehood" that emerged after the onset of the war with Ukraine are, to varying degrees, taught uniformly across all schools and universities.

Thus, one can say that indoctrination chains are set in motion (for example, ministry–teacher education, and training–teachers–students–...). Indoctrination acquires an avalanche-like character, affecting more and more social groups. This process is part of what I propose to call *systemic indoctrination*. The unintentional nature of indoctrination in these circumstances reduces to a minimum the use of the most primitive brainwashing methods because a teacher often has no indoctrinative intention and believes that they are helping students come to conclusions on their own, despite the fact that those conclusions are predetermined by ideology. The value of alternative viewpoints is diminished even if they reach the person.

Creating conditions for the amplification of unintentional and indirect indoctrination is very beneficial to authoritarian regimes, especially in the context of digitalization and free (or at least relatively free) access to information. Something akin to what semiotics might call a closed mythological world model is created in which any fact can be integrated into the existing narrative without undermining the foundational bases of the model.⁵ This principle can be traced, for example, in the logic of the emergence of cargo cults.

Thus, Puolimatka also writes about the "end product" of indoctrination, namely, a person who is incapable of questioning at least some of their beliefs, even when confronted with evidence that contradicts these beliefs.⁶ The same pattern is captured by Callan and Arena, who refer to the shaping of closed-mindedness as a consequence and outcome of indoctrination.⁷ Moreover, the researchers point out that it's not enough to have no arguments behind one's beliefs; one must have a special emotional investment to protect

their beliefs. Callan and Arena link the fear of losing those beliefs to the fear of losing one's identity.

Already in 1940, at the Symposium on the Totalitarian State, Thomas Woody from the University of Pennsylvania pointed out that one of the distinguishing features of totalitarian education is turning people into "acting creatures who have been deluded into believing that they think."⁸ And although Woody does not use the term "indoctrination" in the text, he effectively points to one of the most significant consequences of systemic indoctrination: indoctrinated individuals not only adopt beliefs pleasing to the indoctrinator, but they also labor under the delusion that their beliefs are the result of free thinking.

Leaving aside the question of whether the current Russian case is an example of totalitarian, rather than authoritarian, education, it's plausible to say that the goal of Russian educational policy in general is not straightforward brainwashing, but precisely the tuning of a system in which any thinking operation can lead exclusively to ideologically "correct" conclusions.

In Russia, the ministerial requirements for the ideological discipline "Foundations of Russian Statehood" explicitly state that the course should promote the development of critical thinking, political participation, objective analysis of political information, and so on.⁹ In other words, it seems to be for everything good and against everything bad. However, one should not forget in which setting the "good" is supposed to be developed.

I would suggest that this principle could potentially be extended to all politically/ideologically framed indoctrination today. In so-called hybrid (in other words, combining features of real and virtual) informational space, it's hard to imagine the efficiency of straightforward indoctrinative practices that don't try to mimic critical thinking and free reasoning. This is especially relevant for higher education.

However, it is incorrect to view systemic indoctrination just as a particularly sophisticated set of pedagogical approaches. This perspective is important, but it's hard to imagine the possibility of creating persuasive algorithms to achieve the necessary goals for an authoritarian (totalitarian?) regime, staying

exclusively within the confines of a school, college, or university class.

Without a broader perspective, indoctrination cannot be called systemic. But what is this perspective? Most likely, it involves the construction of an entire value system of coordinates, the axiological foundation of ideology, which should envelop students from all sides: both in class and, as far as possible, everywhere beyond it.

POPULISM IN EDUCATION AND THE CRITERION OF BASIC VALUE ORIENTATION

Despite the fact that in 1996 Puolimatka was perhaps the first to propose defining the basic value orientation as a separate criterion, he gives it the least attention in his paper. Essentially, in his narrative, it comes down to a teacher's moral stance: "The difference between indoctrination and educative teaching is here defined in terms of moral respect for human dignity."¹⁰ In other words, it's about the agent of education (or indoctrination) embodied by a teacher, and whether they respect the basic rights and freedoms of the student. The question is if a teacher sees direct indoctrination or indirect strategies like political alienation or limiting participation as possible and permissible, or if they aim for conscientious teaching regardless of circumstances. However, keeping in mind the previously described indoctrination chains and the systemic nature of indoctrination, one should ask, who or what should be understood as an agent of education (or indoctrination) in this context?

In that regard, Christopher Martin extends the consideration of indoctrination to the scale of institutions.¹¹ This approach is extremely valuable because it allows for the inclusion of elements previously not encompassed when discussing indoctrination. For instance, it's clear that from the outset of problematizing the topic of indoctrination, the focus of research was on those teachers engaged in brainwashing. The topic then became more complex and began to include mediated indoctrination – those who might not wish to indoctrinate but do so because they themselves are victims of indoctrination. Martin's concept of institutional indoctrination allows us to also consider those who, in the full sense of the word, are not indoctrinated themselves, do not wish

to indoctrinate others, but nonetheless contribute to indoctrination.

Martin himself writes about the conception of institutional indoctrination as follows: “it must capture cases where the individuals working within such institutions may not have the intention to indoctrinate their students but where the institution is nonetheless morally responsible for the resulting indoctrinative effect on an individual’s state of mind.”¹²

In other words, the initiation of indoctrination chains by the state (as in the case of Russia) does not instantly turn all teachers and the entire nation into closed-minded individuals. Otherwise, a paradox would arise in which closed-mindedness is required to already be closed. It’s plausible to say that at the current stage of education in Russia, there are far fewer active indoctrinators (both intentional and unintentional) than those who indoctrinate in an indirect manner.

But why does a teacher working in an organization responsible for indoctrination share some of the responsibility? And why can we refer to this phenomenon precisely as indoctrination? Martin talks about two factors in this context: “The question is whether or not an institution’s having (i) a causal role in (ii) adding to the public sphere’s ‘closed-mindedness.’”¹³

It is matter both of consequences and value orientation. Those whom can be referred to as accomplices in institutional indoctrination effectively contribute to the transformation of certain beliefs (for example, those convenient to the state) into normative ones. Thus, I am aware of a number of cases when teachers of Political Philosophy in Russia prefer to avoid talking to students about pressing issues in general, replacing actual political philosophy with the history of political philosophy. Most of them, of course, are not indoctrinated themselves. However, they do play that very role in the creating a casual environment, in this case, of turning political alienation into something normative.¹⁴ These teachers might not be imposing these beliefs, but at the same time, they don’t offer students any tools which could help them to avoid becoming victims of indoctrination. In other words, they don’t create obstacles to the outcome of closed-mindedness. As Rebecca Taylor notes, indoctrination can be seen as

“a complex system of teaching in which actors with authority contribute to the production *or reinforcement* [emphasis added] of closed-mindedness.”¹⁵

Within the scope of this paper, I won't delve deeply into the typology of the motivation behind this indirect type of indoctrination. I will only note that participation in institutional indoctrination can be significantly facilitated by the legal framework, the fear of repression, and the constructed discourse on politics. This discourse effectively encourages only two options: either ideologically compliant political participation or political alienation. One can assume that political alienation often becomes the reason for personal complicity in institutional (and therefore systemic) indoctrination.

However, it is certain that institutions are not the only responsible party here. Unless we're dealing with an intentionally corrupted school, college, or university—which is rather hard to imagine in practice—it becomes evident that the indoctrination carried out by educational institutions must be embedded within a broader framework of brainwashing efforts undertaken by a government or another entity in power. That means we now have to apply the criterion of basic value orientation not to teachers, not to institutions, but to political forces.

Keeping Russia in mind, it also becomes clear that it's not only about institutions. Indeed, for instance, the “Don't Say Gay” bill in Florida, USA isn't the creation of an institution. Hence, we need to consider some other factors. What are they? Here one shall apply the criterion of basic value orientation not just to teachers, not just to institutions, but to empowered forces as well. Therefore, when we talk about a closed-minded system in Russia, it is important to understand what moral values and guidelines the state aims to embed in its ideology.

I am not going to make an argument about whether Russia today has formed an ideology as such. However, it's plausible to say, that there's at least an attempt to construct an ideology, which means that identifiable ideologemes exist in the discourse. Many of these ideologemes in terms of values being promoted (especially in education) are consistent with the key attributes of populism. These attributes include, for example, anti-pluralism, internal and

external antagonism, collective identity and the collective will of a homogeneous people, the leader's access to this collective will, etc.¹⁶ This is the set of value orientations that urge us to check whether the indoctrination is already in place in this state or area. When the state aspires to nationwide closed-mindedness, the use of populist narratives seems quite "justified." Typically, anti-democratic and potentially *closing-minds* legal norms are introduced intertwined with publicly understood and popular ideas.

These populist narratives turned out to be one of the most exploited by the Russian authorities of the Putin era not only in education and not only in recent years. Over more than 20 years of his rule, the narratives of military patriotism, threats from the "collective West," the unique Russian path, the uniqueness of the Russian nation and so-called Russian spirit, and spiritual bonds have become dominant in Russian informational (and educational!) space. These themes are supplemented by populist ideas about the struggle of civilizations (cultures) and, again, the special place of the so-called Russian identity and Russia itself in this struggle. Thus, for many Russians, the potential deep revision of their indoctrinated beliefs turns out to be directly related to this collective perception of their own identity and, consequently, the fear of losing it.

Level of so-called blind patriotism among Russians (including, of course, many school and university teachers) has been consistently high since the mid-1990s, probably due to post-Soviet (post-imperial) resentment.¹⁷ One would expect the attack on Ukraine to have a sobering effect and lead to a reassessment of these beliefs. However, the majority of Russians found it possible to support the regime's actions. The appeals to collective identity proved to be successful, as evidently demonstrated by the results of a qualitative study conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory on the motives of Russians' approval of the invasion of Ukraine. During in-depth interviews, respondents reproduced nearly all of the major propaganda narratives related to the theme of collective identity.¹⁸

In today's Russia, we see more than a deliberate effort to deploy systemic indoctrination. For this purpose, while ostensibly using democratic teaching tools, the transmission of populist narratives is imposed. For instance, in the

teaching recommendations for the new school course, “Conversations about the Important Things,” the very first objective listed is to cultivate a “Russian identity” among students.”¹⁹ The authors explicitly state that teachers should strive to inculcate certain values in their classrooms. Within the scope of the reference example of the educational materials developed by the federal Ministry of Education for the new mandatory ideological discipline, “Foundations of Russian Statehood,” that speculatively frames humanitarian knowledge in the ideologies of the Putin regime, we can also find a set of both populist narratives and indoctrinative content. In particular, students will:

perceive the history of Russia in its continuous civilizational dimension, reflecting its most significant features, principles, and current orientations; reveal the value-behavioral content of the sense of citizenship and patriotism, inseparable from developed critical thinking, free personal development and ability to judge independently about the current political and cultural context.²⁰

Even from the objectives of the course, one can grasp an attempt at a decorative appeal to the development of critical thinking and independent conclusions amid the transmission of ideas about the uniqueness of civilization, collective identity, and the justification of the war in Ukraine.

I am not suggesting here that education should be completely detached from any engagement with themes of collective identity, or that otherwise it is definitely populism and indoctrination. However, it is necessary to bear in mind exactly how such an identity is supposed to be constituted, and most importantly, whether a complete substitution of individual identity for collective identity is not taking place. The key distinction between education and indoctrination here hinges on whether teachers, or institutions, or governments view the content of local specificities as a fixed set to be adopted by students as is, or as material for their critical reflection. As Krassimir Stojanov points out, in educative teaching students’ identities are shaped not *by* local customs and traditions as such, but by how students themselves reflexively respond to these customs and traditions that they have encountered during socialization.²¹

Of course, the matter cannot be limited solely to narratives of collective identity when discussing systemic indoctrination. The ideological context proves to be decisive for almost all of the humanities, social, political, and cultural studies. To assess (and likely not in full) the extent of the dissemination of ideologically acceptable value orientations in Russian education, it seems to be prominent to analyze the textbook on the “Foundations of Russian Statehood,” published by one of the universities closest to Vladimir Putin’s administration: the Presidential Academy.

The pages of this textbook mention the development of critical thinking and comprehensive analysis of political and social science information, as intended by the ministerial requirements. Yet, the authors explicitly state that history, for example, can and should be modified to meet the needs of the political agenda:

The methods and means of historical policy follow a certain logic. First and foremost, there’s a selection (or invention) of facts that would be convenient in a given historical situation. After that, the massive dissemination of the positions of historical policy begins through, firstly, the education system; secondly, symbolic complexes (architecture, monuments, toponymy); and thirdly, museums and memorial complexes. In a hyper-informational era with access to any information, the ideas promoted by the state historical policy occupy a predominant position in public consciousness simply because all other directions of state policy should rely on them and harmonize with them to avoid social discontent.²²

This example pertains to how history’s interpretation and teaching are perceived in Russia. It is illustrative because it reveals the *systemic* nature of indoctrination the state aspires to. This encompasses the involvement of history, culture, architecture, and space as well as ensuring that all state policies in all areas align to polyphonically deliver ideological information.

CONCLUSION

In the case of populist and far-right political forces in power, the state attempts to incorporate as much systemic indoctrination into education as possible. The speed with which Russian education has moved from open democratic standards, the drive to integrate universities into world science, to the development of an environment of closed-mindedness is the subject of the greatest concern. Russia's case is clear evidence that the notion of indoctrination with regard to issues of populism and complex threats to democratic education worldwide needs to be re-examined.

It's not my intention to imply that the Russian scenario could be fully replicated in established democracies. However, the global trend of evident political polarization, which, among other things, manifests in a certain degree of closed-mindedness towards opposing views, lends weight to legitimate concerns. These concerns specifically pertain to the potential presence of indoctrinative elements in education.

The notion of systemic indoctrination, which I propose for the purpose of charting the variety of authorities' influence on students resulting in closed-mindedness, is not an attempt to redefine indoctrination as such. In this paper, I have outlined possible ways of analyzing educational environment and political settings that might make it possible to detect indoctrination even when none is literally brainwashing teaching. I started from extended criteria of indoctrination, which include, besides content, method and intention, also consequences, basic value orientation and control. These criteria can be applied both to the specific teacher's practice and in broader contexts: to educational institutions and, more broadly, to the state or other entity in power.

Given the idea of the systemic nature of indoctrination and the agent of indoctrination embodied by the state, scholars have a lot to explore in terms of both content criterion and methods criterion. With regard to methods, first of all, the risks lie in the mimicking of critical thinking, the illusion of independent judgments, and so on. Other methods of systemic indoctrination include steering political participation, manipulating the content of humanities, history,

social and political sciences, and so forth.

The intention of the state is mass closed-mindedness. However, intention alone is not enough to define systemic indoctrination because many can strive for it, have content for it, and apply indoctrination methods but still fail to achieve the desired result. In light of this, the criteria of consequences and basic value orientations are needed.

The consequence criterion allows us to assess whether the closed-mindedness truly occurs, what forms it takes, and how it affects the possibility (or impossibility) of free critical thinking operations.

Through the analysis of the basic value orientations of the state as an agent of indoctrination, as well as the value attitudes it tries to instill through educational and non-educational activities, we can get to a conceptual core that allows to determine how much, in terms of content, method, intentions, and consequences, we are dealing with a systemic nature of indoctrination. The main populist beliefs and reference points often serve as a basic value orientation, accompanying systemic indoctrination.

The control criterion, which I did not explore in detail in this paper, is also important. In the case of Russia, control also has a systemic character, including both the legal basis for the implementation of systemic indoctrination and a set of repressive measures.

The concept of systemic indoctrination is designed to encompass the broader context of indoctrinative settings. It relates to the state's targeted policy of establishing a system where conclusions, arguments and judgments inconvenient for the state become nearly impossible.

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