

Characterizing and Countering Organized Social Indoctrination

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In “Education for Populism: Systemic Indoctrination and Closed-Mindedness,” Fedor Korochkin examines the type of indoctrination that is illustrated paradigmatically by what the current populist Russian leadership is doing to the Russian population.¹ The most general aim of Korochkin’s paper is to shift our attention to this type of systemic indoctrination and to its significance, in comparison to that of small-scale indoctrination which has attracted more attention in philosophy of education, paradigmatically initiated independently by one teacher.

Whereas Korochkin names the type of indoctrination upon which his paper focuses “systemic,” I will name it “Organized Social Indoctrination”—hereafter, “OSI”—mainly in order to distinguish this type of indoctrination from the type of indoctrination that is initiated by a particular school, independently from the intentions of higher (political) authorities. The latter type of indoctrination is discussed in works by Rebecca Taylor—who already uses the term “system-based” (somewhat differently from Korochkin)—and Christopher Marin.² Korochkin clearly wishes to focus on larger-scale indoctrination. But “OSI” should be understood as implementable also via schools, and via education more broadly.

I think we should all agree with Korochkin that OSI is a phenomenon that deserves much more attention than can be found in the current literature on indoctrination. Korochkin proceeds to take initial steps in illuminating the structure of OSI by applying Tapio Puolimatka’s criteria of indoctrination.³ Some philosophers might wonder whether some of these criteria are conceptually necessary or sufficient for OSI, but defending such conceptual claims is not one of the aims of Korochkin’s paper. Instead, Korochkin suggests that Puolimatka’s criteria would be useful for understanding, assessing, and ultimately coping with OSI.

I believe that in order to make progress in this particular mission, it would be beneficial to demarcate “OSI” by agreeing on certain conceptual requirements. Without any conceptual requirements on “OSI,” future academic works that continue Korochkin’s project might end up talking past each other, failing to focus on the same phenomenon. Adopting conceptual requirements on “OSI” would (1) help social scientists identify empirical methods for studying OSI, (2) provide moral philosophers an initial basis for evaluating moral claims about particular instantiations of OSI, and (3) perhaps even provide an initial basis for formulating wise counter-measures: policies, legislation, and objectives for social activists. Building on these pragmatic considerations, I propose some initial conceptual requirements on “OSI” in the following two sections below. The last section closes with a brief comment on counter-OSI education, drawing on my own research.

CLOSED-MINDEDNESS IS CONCEPTUALLY NECESSARY

My first proposed conceptual requirement on “OSI” is the anticipated emergence (or maintenance) of *closed-mindedness among the population* of the relevant polity, society or community. Some of Korochkin’s text suggests that he accepts this requirement. Korochkin treats closed-mindedness as falling under Puolimatka’s “consequence” criterion (which seems identical to the “outcome” criterion, pace Korochkin).

I suggest two pragmatic reasons for accepting my proposed requirement. The first is normative (moral or political): in my view, it is the anticipated closed-mindedness which makes OSI most worrisome. Consider instantiations of indoctrinative intentions or methods that do *not* seem somewhat likely to result in any closed-mindedness. What is the urgency or moral importance of researching them? Only by adopting anticipated closed-mindedness as a conceptually necessary feature of “OSI” can we justify the urgency and the great importance of allocating more resources to researching it.

The second reason for this conceptual requirement is that it provides a starting point for empirical research on OSI. For this purpose, additional conceptual work is needed, ultimately specifying empirical features of the relevant

type of closed-mindedness, to allow social scientists to construct empirical tests for evaluating its presence and magnitude. In my view, such conceptual work should be based on the same pragmatic considerations that I have been appealing to. I leave this further conceptual work for future research.

THE CONCEPTUALLY NECESSARY CAUSE

The task of evaluating, preventing and coping with closed-mindedness is very broad. It seems productive to devise separate specialized research programs (in the social sciences as well as in philosophical normative inquiries) for particular types of closed-mindedness, some of which are distinguished by their causes. In particular, when one such causal factor is systematic manipulation or coercion by the political or religious authorities, the phenomenon calls for more specific empirical methods and counter-measures. This line of reasoning leads me to suggest (in line with the spirit of Korochkin's paper) restricting the notion of "OSI" to cases where *one of the causes of the anticipated closed-mindedness in the population is intentional measures that we would classify as manipulative or coercive, taken by the authorities systematically for the purpose of influencing the views of the population.*

I think that this second proposed requirement on "OSI" is supported by pragmatic reasons that are similar to the ones that I mentioned in the previous section. I acknowledge that fully specifying and defending this proposed requirement calls for additional work, and I do not even rule out that there is a better alternative formulation. In this paper I will only address one alternative: to further narrow down the intended purpose to something like "mass closed-mindedness" (a term that can be found in Korochkin's paper). It seems to me that this alternative restricts the phenomenon too much, for there could be cases where the authorities do not see any *closed-mindedness* (not even merely in the "*de re*" sense, under some other description) as one of their goals—and yet their willingness to deploy measures that we would classify as manipulative or coercive would systematically *cause* closed-mindedness. I think that the difference between such cases and ones where the authorities explicitly aim at closed-mindedness is insignificant, insofar as we focus on the empirical methods to study them, the relevant dangers,⁴ and the practical counter-measures that they call for. For this pragmatic reason I formulated my second conceptual

requirement in a broader manner.

My second proposed conceptual requirement on “OSI” includes elements that fall under Puolimatka’s criteria of “content,” “control,” “intention,” and “basic value orientation.” I take the last term to include all the basic elements in the evaluative system of the relevant person, including beliefs, commitments, policies, plans, goals, values, ideals and the like. This brings me to my final remark, which draws on my own related philosophical research.

THIN NORMATIVE IDEALS TO COUNTER ORGANIZED SOCIAL INDOCTRINATION

One implication of OSI to educational theory is the importance of characterizing the *basic value orientation* that would be best for *countering* OSI. Critical thinking would clearly help. But proper cultivation of critical thinking partly requires, as I argued elsewhere, the cultivation of thin normative ideals such as “doing what’s right,” “promoting the good,” or “leading a good life.” Whereas many epistemic, moral, and prudential goals could recommend critical thinking in particular types of situations, only thin normative ideals have a chance to reliably recommend and properly regulate critical thinking whenever it is called for, and in proportion to the importance of doing so under the given circumstances.⁵

Importantly, Korochkin’s examples from the Russian educational system show that merely listing “critical thinking” and other liberal values as educational goals, and even pursuing some versions of them, may be insufficient for avoiding OSI. The same applies to thin normative ideals. Relatedly, elsewhere I argued that thin normative ideals should be cultivated in a way that avoids their analytic reduction to any substantive normative view, including one that the indoctrinating authorities strive to inculcate.⁶ For example, the assumption that *leading a good life* requires some collective identity should not be treated as an analytic truth. Teachers should challenge this analytic reduction by raising counter intuitions; using, for instance, a (hypothetical) case of a person who is not attached to any collective identity, is committed to the universal promotion of humanity, and is successful and satisfied with her efforts to do so, as

well as with the rest of her life. Students who disagree could legitimately raise counter-arguments, possibly invoking contrary intuitions. But trying to settle the matter merely on the basis of a trivial analytic truth would exhibit a lack of commitment to *leading a good life* as a genuinely thin normative ideal.

Accordingly, I propose that proper education against OSI should include the proper cultivation of a thin normative ideal. This should be complemented by other educational measures, such as cultivating the skills for considering views and possible choices open-mindedly and critically.

REFERENCES

- 1 Fedor Korochkin, “Education for Populism: Systemic Indoctrination and Closed-Mindedness,” *Philosophy of Education*, Vol 80, Issue 1 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.47925/80.1.063>
- 2 Rebecca M. Taylor, “Indoctrination and social context: A system-based approach to identifying the threat of indoctrination and the responsibilities of educators.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51.1 (2017): 38–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12180>; Christopher Martin, “Educational Institutions and Indoctrination”, *Educational Theory*, Vol. 73, Issue 2 (2023): 204–222, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12574>.
- 3 Tapio Puolimatka, “The Concept of Indoctrination”, *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1996): 109–134.
- 4 One of the greatest dangers concerning the manipulation and coercion in OSI is the same one that I highlighted in: Ron Aboodi, “What’s Wrong with Manipulation in Education?” *Philosophy of Education* 77:2 (2021): 66–80, <https://doi.org/10.47925/77.2.066>
- 5 For my argument and a detailed explanation of “thin normative ideals” see: Ron Aboodi, “Critical Thinking, Thin Ideals, and Irreducibly Normative Deliberation.” *Philosophy of Education* (forthcoming).
- 6 “Critical Thinking, Thin Ideals, and Irreducibly Normative Deliberation,” section 4.