The Experts Somehow Overlooked Authoritarians on the Left

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Many psychologists wrongly assumed that coercive attitudes exist only among conservatives.

By Sally Satel

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About the author: Sally Satel is a psychiatrist, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and the co-author of *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience*. She is a visiting professor at the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University.

Donald Trump's rise to power generated a flood of media coverage and academic research on authoritarianism—or at least the kind of authoritarianism that exists on the political right. Over the past several years, some researchers have theorized that Trump couldn't have won in 2016 without support from Americans who deplore political compromise and want leaders to rule with a strong hand. Although right-wing authoritarianism is well documented, social psychologists do not all agree that a leftist version even exists. In February 2020, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology held a symposium called "Is Left-Wing Authoritarianism Real? Evidence on Both Sides of the Debate."

An ambitious new study on the subject by the Emory University researcher Thomas H. Costello and five colleagues should settle the question. It proposes a rigorous new measure of antidemocratic attitudes on the left. And, by drawing on a survey of 7,258 adults, Costello's team firmly establishes that such attitudes exist on both sides of the American electorate. (One co-author on the paper, I

should note, was Costello's adviser, the late Scott Lilienfeld—with whom I wrote a 2013 book and numerous articles.) Intriguingly, the researchers found some common traits between left-wing and right-wing authoritarians, including a "preference for social uniformity, prejudice towards different others, willingness to wield group authority to coerce behavior, cognitive rigidity, aggression and punitiveness towards perceived enemies, outsized concern for hierarchy, and moral absolutism."

Published last month in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the Costello team's paper is persuasive, to the point that you have to wonder: How could past researchers have overlooked left-wing authoritarianism for so long? "For 70 years, the lore in the social sciences has been that authoritarianism was to be found exclusively on the political right," the Rutgers University social psychologist Lee Jussim, who wasn't involved in the new study, told me in an email. In the 1950 book *The Authoritarian Personality*, an inquiry into the psychological makeup of people strongly drawn to autocratic rule and repressive politics, the German-born scholar Theodor W. Adorno and three other psychologists measured people along dimensions such as conformity to societal norms, rigid thinking, and sexual repression. And they concluded that "the authoritarian type of human"—the kind of person whose enthusiastic support allows someone like Hitler to exercise power—was found only among conservatives. In the mid-1990s, the influential Canadian psychologist Bob Altemeyer described left-wing authoritarianism as "the Loch Ness Monster of political psychology—an occasional shadow, but no monster. " Subsequently, other psychologists reached the same conclusion.

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The Trump era likely deepened psychology's conventional wisdom that authoritarians are almost always conservatives; the insurrection at the Capitol earlier this year showed the urgency of understanding the phenomenon. And yet calls to de-platform controversial speakers and online campaigns to get people fired for heterodox views suggest that a commitment to open democratic norms is eroding, at least in some quarters, on the left. Much further along the authoritarian continuum, people purporting to be antiracist or antifascist protesters have set fires and committed other acts of violence since the summer of 2020. These acts stop short of, say, the 1970s bombing campaign by the far-left Weather Underground, but surely call the prevailing wisdom into doubt. (Supporters of revolutionary regimes overseas have demonstrated even more clearly that some people on the left try to get their way through intimidation and force.)

But one reason left-wing authoritarianism barely shows up in social-psychology research is that most academic experts in the field are based at institutions where prevailing attitudes are far to the left of society as a whole. Scholars who personally support the left's social vision—such as redistributing income, countering racism, and more—may simply be slow to identify authoritarianism among people with similar goals.

One doesn't need to believe that left-wing authoritarians are as numerous or as threatening as their right-wing counterparts to grasp that both phenomena are a problem. While liberals—both inside and outside of academia—may derive some comfort from believing that left-wing authoritarianism doesn't exist, that fiction ignores a significant source of instability and polarization in our politics and society.

In the research that led to *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and his colleagues developed an "F-scale" to measure fascist attitudes; Altemeyer later drew on that research to create a scale measuring right-wing authoritarianism by assessing certain personality traits—including feelings of

aggression, willingness to submit to authority, and a quality that he called "conventionalism"—not strictly related to a subject's political conservatism. Altemeyer's right-wing authoritarian (RWA) scale remains "the gold standard for conceptualizing and evaluating all kinds of authoritarianism," Costello told me. But when Altemeyer later turned his attention to left-wing authoritarianism (LWA), he erroneously assumed it would be identical to the right-wing variety. His LWA scale barely identified any subjects. He either had set the threshold too high or was measuring the wrong attitudes.

Costello and his colleagues started fresh. They developed what eventually became a list of 39 statements capturing sentiments such as "We need to replace the established order by any means necessary" and "I should have the right not to be exposed to offensive views." Subjects were asked to score the statements on a scale of 1 to 7. They showed a trait that the researchers described as "anti-hierarchical aggression" by agreeing strongly that "If I could remake society, I would put people who currently have the most privilege at the bottom." By agreeing with statements such as "Getting rid of inequality is more important than protecting the so-called 'right' to free speech," they showed an attitude called "top-down censorship." And they showed what the research team called "anti-conventionalism" by endorsing statements such as "I cannot imagine myself becoming friends with a political conservative."

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Costello and his colleagues administered their new LWA index and Altemeyer's original RWA scale. Some differences emerged between left-wing and right-wing authoritarians; the former were more open to new experiences and more receptive to science than the latter, for example. Yet the new research documents a large overlap in authoritarian structure—a "shared psychological core," as the authors put it—between high scorers on their new LWA index and Altemeyer's original RWA scale, which they also administered. The authoritarian mentality, whether on the far left or far right, the authors conclude, exerts "powerful pressures to maintain discipline among members, advocate aggressive and censorious means of stifling opposition, [and] believe in top-down absolutist leadership."

Perhaps the most compelling insight emerged from trying to separate subjects' political ideology from authoritarianism. They found that your ideology—whether you're a progressive or a Trumpist—is a secondary matter. Whether your values and beliefs are authoritarian or not is more fundamental. "Psychologically speaking, authoritarianism comes first," Costello told me.

I asked Costello whether left-wing and right-wing authoritarians exist in equal proportions. "It is hard to know the ratio," he said, making clear that a subject's receptivity to authoritarianism falls on a continuum, like other personality characteristics or even height, so using hard-and-fast categories (authoritarian versus nonauthoritarian) can be tricky. "Still, some preliminary work shows the ratio is about the same if you average across the globe," he said. In the U.S., though, Costello hypothesizes that right-wing authoritarians outnumber left-wing ones by roughly three to one. Other researchers have concluded that the number of strident conservatives in the U.S. far exceeds the number of strident progressives and that American conservatives express more authoritarian attitudes than their counterparts in Britain, Australia, or Canada.

That psychologists have been slow to acknowledge the existence of left-wing authoritarians at all is "puzzling," Costello and his colleagues write. But here, I would argue, is where the pronounced leftward orientation of researchers in social psychology comes in. "Academic psychology once had

considerable political diversity, but has lost nearly all of it in the last 50 years," according to a comprehensive 2014 review. Universities have long tilted to the left, but that tendency has deepened as education has become ever more highly correlated with political ideology. Whatever its origin, this political imbalance makes truth-seeking harder. Studies have repeatedly shown that investigators' sociopolitical views influence the questions they ask. What's more, ideologically concordant reviewers are more likely to rate abstracts and papers highly if the findings comport withISTEX their own beliefs, all else being equal.

Ideological blind spots can indeed affect researchers with a strongly conservative or merely right-of-center outlook, but there just aren't enough of them to matter. If academic psychology had more viewpoint diversity, the political biases that distort researchers' work would all counterbalance one another. In American universities today, those biases generally point in the same direction. In psychology, the belief that only conservatives can be authoritarians, and that therefore only conservative authoritarians warrant serious study, has proved self-reinforcing over the course of decades.

As both left- and right-wing autocracies metastasize around the globe—a "pandemic of global authoritarianism" that has "persisted and deepened" over the past 15 years, in the words of the Stanford sociologist Larry Diamond—and as the speed of radicalization of recruits has hastened, the modest cadre of researchers interested in the subject will likely grow. By recasting left-wing authoritarianism in more specific terms—anti-hierarchical aggression, top-down censorship, and anti-conventionalism—Costello and his colleagues offer other researchers and the general public a new vocabulary for discussing antidemocratic attitudes on that side of the political spectrum.

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The other virtue of the Costello team's work is its status as a sobering demonstration of how social psychology's dominant ideological orientation has constrained the scope of inquiry. "The dominant view of RWA as the 'gold standard' of authoritarianism writ large is not merely an influential theoretical framework or a historical quirk," the authors write. "It limits the questions we ask as scientists [and] the types of theories we use to interpret our results." For many years, what was perfectly obvious to many outside the field—that extremist mindsets exist on both ends of the political spectrum—was at best downplayed by the majority of social psychologists. An ideological monoculture within the discipline has damaged our collective understanding of political psychology—and, by extension, American politics.

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