

FORUM

Politics of security

Against security

Protectionism and what's left of politics

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Abstract: The specter of security is haunting politics. In “north” and “south,” on left and right, security is replacing neoliberalism as a dominant political logic. Despite a wealth of securitization studies, we have not yet fully grasped this shift and its political ramifications. Here we consider security’s rise to dominance in three contexts: first, the “postsocialist transition” in Latvia and the demise of Soviet socialism, which facilitated the wider neoliberal takeover; second, Swedish social democracy, which soon succumbed; and third, Anglo-Saxon university culture, where many of the resultant political struggles have played out. In all cases, a form of security “protectionism” stepped in as a solution to neoliberal malaise: yet in practice it has offered an even more far-reaching shift in power relations than neoliberalism before it.

Keywords: Latvia, neoliberalism, postsocialism, protectionism, security, safety, Sweden

In spring 2024, a jarring image spread on social media feeds: a security staffer in full fatigues and helmet—some posters thought he was a sniper—was spotted atop the student “health and wellness” building of the University of California San Diego. The crackdown on Gaza protests had begun in earnest. Its motivation was strangely in keeping with the wider aim on campus, represented by the wellness center itself and articulated since the pandemic as putting “health, wellbeing and safety at the forefront.” For a while, left-liberal activism, here and elsewhere on university campuses, aimed at ensuring everyone felt safe and included. Campuses were to be “safe spaces” or, at least, everyone was to have a safe space somewhere. However, now

it was the left-liberal activism itself that had become an “unacceptable safety and security hazard,” in the words of the chancellor.¹ Universities’ safety-first culture had circled back in the shape of hard security.

A security paradigm is haunting our politics and upending old ideological divides. Events since the spring of 2024—on campuses and in warzones—are emblematic of a historical shift to a security footing.² The watchword is shifting from the neoliberal “freedom” to protectionist safety and security. Safety culture on the left (broadly understood), a mix of concern with individualized wellbeing and category-based inclusivity, is met by security culture on the right, best known as armed protection of what one’s



got, from property to privilege. As on the San Diego campus, the two are increasingly jostling on the same rooftop over whose safety, and which kind of security measure, is to take precedence.

Security is not just reshaping the political arena. It is also reframing subjectivity and redefining what it means to be a political subject. Despite the hopes of the left in recent decades, what emerged in response to neoliberalism was not so much a revolutionary multitude as an array of anxious subjects in search of protection. With politics as therapy, harm increasingly set the grounds from which to speak. This has reinforced security as a political logic or paradigm.

The campus “sniper” illustrates the difficulty in challenging this paradigm: for how can one object to safety, other than—as students and faculty ended up doing—by arguing that the security presence is making everyone less secure? True, voices on the left have frequently called out blatant and violent forms of securitization, whether in militarized policing, counterterrorism, or border security. But they have also been oblivious to their own agency in entrenching the security paradigm by making safety and harm the terrain upon which political struggles take place. Our provocation in this article is that the left has been using one element of a hegemonic logic of security (that of safety) against another (that of securitization). Security, seen as a distinct political logic, brings together “protectionist” instincts and practices across the political spectrum in a way that tends towards escalation—a process encapsulated, perhaps, in the freeze-frame of the “sniper” atop the wellness building. If this feels like a harmful collapse of justified safety measures into the most violent of security operations, then the labor of parsing them out again should be an analytically and politically generative exercise.

Our argument is that the neoliberal rationality of government—a familiar object of critique for the left—has been replaced by a protectionist one that, similarly to the neoliberal logic in the past, permeates most spheres of life. Literature on securitization that emerged in the late stages of neoliberalism was a partial diagnosis of this

shift, but it did not yet realize the full extent of this new logic and its multiple forms.³ But the problem goes deeper. While leftist critique struggled with capture and cooptation by neoliberal logics, it still managed to find external vantage points from which to speak. Security is proving much harder to escape, embedded as it is in various ideational strands across the political spectrum, and in highly varied institutional mechanisms from university bureaucracies to activist campaigns, and from everyday life to the machinery of state. Largely embracing protectionism and safety as a supreme value, the left has been complicit in its inexorable rise.⁴

For the purpose of introducing—and debating—this paradigm shift, this article offers an eclectic genealogy of the historical trajectory towards security protectionism. To do so, we go back to an earlier paradigmatic shift—from a political model of progress shared across Cold War and postcolonial divides towards the neoliberal embrace of freedom in the immediate post-Cold War period. The rise of (neo)liberal freedom, contrary to what we often tend to assume, was in the postsocialist states tied up with rising nationalism, which in other words is not a new answer to neoliberal malaise. Drawing on our own biographies and ethnographies, we look at how two rival models of progress met their demise in the 1990s: Soviet socialism in Latvia and social democracy in Sweden. In Latvia, neoliberal dispossession was the price the post-Soviet elites were willing to pay for national freedom. In contrast, Sweden succumbed first to neoliberalism and then to nationalism. At the end of history, with no better future to strive for, security emerged as the answer to the challenges thrown up by both.

Security, neoliberalism, and nationalism are hard to disentangle. Indeed, the idea of security’s subservience to neoliberal power formations is a mainstay of critical security studies. Similarly, securitization is often linked with nationalism’s innate drive to identify threats everywhere. But security is more than a business or a servant of an existing power formation. Like freedom before it, it is becoming the very battleground

of politics itself: the arena, not the game. No longer simply the domain of the hard right and the military-industrial complex—though both of those are doing very well indeed—it frames agendas across the political spectrum and across the world, from Xi Jinping’s “comprehensive national security” to Indian and Russian security ethnonationalism, and from Republican wall-builders to UK Labour’s “securonomics.”

As with neoliberalism and nationalism, security is operative across scale, from geopolitics through to intimate spaces. In its softer protectionist guise, it is the nonnegotiable heart of bureaucracies today, including in universities where faculty and students are stripped of agency and voice in the name of protection. Thus, branching out from big politics and the Baltic, we move to examine the post-Cold War institutional politics of protectionism across the Euro-Atlantic world. In universities, a key prism for wider shifts, we see a fundamental feature of our security landscape at play: the strong individual and category-based *desire* for protection and security that on some deeper level is shared among groups as far apart as leftwing students and rightwing vigilantes. Understanding this emotive bedrock is fundamental if we wish to challenge the security paradigm. Security protectionism is an incredibly powerful new logic of power insofar as it ideologizes and operationalizes a rather basic (and understandable) human instinct to protect oneself from danger. As a result, an unwitting protectionist collusion is emerging between “progressives” bereft of progress and the political right. This has prepared the ground for a security takeover in which the dangers are increasingly everywhere.

Building the roof: From freedom to security

On a dark stage in an underground bar in Kyiv in May 2024, a Ukrainian cover band has just finished a song. The lead singer wipes his sweaty brow and announces in English: “I wanted to introduce the biggest friend of Ukraine. . . [his

voice rises]. . . Antony Blinken!” Blinken climbs up on the stage, takes a red electric guitar, and speaks into the microphone: “Listen, I know this is a really, really difficult time. Your soldiers, your citizens, particularly in the northeast, near Kharkiv, are suffering tremendously. But they need to know, you need to know, the United States is with you, so much of the world is with you. And they are fighting not just for Ukraine, but for the free world. And the free world is with you, too.” Blinken steps back from the microphone and sings like Neil Young did in 1989: “Keep on rockin’ in the free world...” The audience roars along.⁵ Perhaps neither they, nor Blinken, reflected on the line about the woman with a baby near the free world’s garbage can, or on the fact that Young wrote the song as a criticism of George H. W. Bush’s America. Young’s “free world” riffed about a world of dispossession and freedom; Blinken’s “free world” is set on a stage of dispossession and security. Young’s is a *cri de coeur* mocking Bush’s pretensions while also holding out some hope of genuine progress in a land falling laughably short of its ideals; Blinken’s, bereft of protest or progress or irony, is at most that “kinder, gentler/Machine gun hand” that the song itself ironizes.

In the late socialist sphere, Young’s angry and hopeful freedom once beckoned. While the United States led the fight against the Soviet Union, freedom was on the lips of many Soviet citizens, who did not see themselves as Soviet, but rather as Latvians, Estonians, or simply as individuals. The struggle for personal and national freedom was acute. Soon, it was delivering.

In Latvia, where Dace grew up, the 1990s were dizzying, full of opportunity and danger. Most of Dace’s peers, the generation that embarked upon the 1990s as recent high school graduates, remember this as a time when they did things they never thought they would do or would never have done had they known better (for example, fresh out of college, Dace worked for a Latvian company that tried to sell snake venom and roasted nuts in the United States—an absurd and unsuccessful enterprise). Prevailing despite dangers that they did not

fully understand, they embodied the no-holds-barred sensibility of the times—the sense of creating the world anew.

Over the course of the 1990s, both freedom and danger became institutionalized. One of the first new “institutions” to emerge across the post-Soviet space was the *krysha* (“roof”), namely clusters of men with guns who offered security to businesses. All businesses were to have a *krysha*, lest they were raided by someone else’s *krysha*. The state was still supposed to protect citizens from criminal networks, but it did not have the resources to do that and, moreover, the same “violent entrepreneurs” (Volkov 2002) seemed to work both for the state and for *krysha*—indeed, some of them were former KGB agents re-hatting into the protection market.

If racketeering was becoming institutionalized as security, freedom was institutionalized as neoliberalism. Contrary to the popular belief that neoliberalism was about self-regulating markets, Quinn Slobodian (2018: 2) has shown that “the neoliberal project focused on designing institutions—not to liberate markets but to encase them, to inoculate capitalism against the threat of democracy.” This was not only the case in the postsocialist East, whose most extreme case was the rapacious economy of Russia under Boris Yeltsin. In South America, markets had some years previously been “liberated” at gunpoint (Klein 2008). In Western Europe, democracy clearly persisted, yet political choices were becoming increasingly constrained as the neoliberal settlement bedded in. Left thinkers were quick to critique this settlement, to the point where “neoliberal” was being reduced to a routine term of denunciation (Collier 2011). While doing so, many failed to notice that neoliberalism, as Wendy Brown (2003) argued, had become the dominant rationality of government, with market values permeating all spheres of life, from economics to politics to social work, and a variety of spaces, from corporate boardrooms to faculty lounges to kitchens. This created a seeming paradox, whereby the staunchest academic critics of neoliberal politics simultaneously required their colleagues or

subordinates to be entrepreneurial, responsible, efficient, and profit-oriented. There seemed to be no alternative.

“Freedom” nevertheless remained—and remains—a worthy goal. The spread of political freedom, especially, was a fundamental benefit brought by the end of the Cold War that the left has often taken too lightly. However, almost instantly this freedom was packaged into a particular version of post-Cold War liberalism that came with a series of reeducation efforts (Dzenovska 2018). Moreover, on the capitalist frontiers of the 1990s, a specific neoliberal version of freedom brought a radical destabilization in which entrepreneurs of security and those pillaging state assets could make large fortunes. Relatedly, it also came with a great degree of dispossession.

Besides large-scale privatizations, deindustrialization soon followed the fall of the Soviet Union. In Latvia this was understood, incidentally, to be partly a “decolonizing” move that helped the country step out of the shadow of late Soviet modernity. As the dizzying freedom and dispossession of the 1990s stabilized into more lasting structures, so did the government’s message to its citizens: stop expecting things from the state and become responsible and entrepreneurial.⁶ All former collective farm and factory workers were to learn the ropes of business and engage in feverish entrepreneurial activity that was going to propel Latvia into the neoliberal future. When the prosperous future would come was not clear. But it was clear that if everyone did business hard, it would eventually come, in the manner of the millenarian hopes gathering around the edges of capitalism at this time (Guyer 2007). If the 1990s freedom had been, as Janis Joplin sang, “just another word for nothing left to lose,” the freedom of the 2000s was a neoliberal bundle of responsibilities and opportunities and a sacred national value that demanded personal sacrifice (Ozoliņa 2019). Indeed, nationalism kept stepping up when neoliberal dispossession became too hard to handle. As the Latvian government instructed its citizens amid the 2008 financial crisis: one

must tighten one's belt in the name of national freedom.

Twenty years later, it's not clear whether the promises of freedom—national or neoliberal or both—have been delivered. On the one hand, there is panic in the public sphere about why Latvia is doing worse on various economic indicators than most other European Union member states. On the other hand, economists say that general living standards have gone up, and that unemployment is low. Rather than a definitive conclusion about life in conditions of freedom, it would be more accurate to say that, for quite a few, life has indeed become better, while many others have had to seek work and social mobility abroad—thus improving employment figures by removing themselves from the equation.⁷ Freedom's paths, in other words, have very frequently led outside Latvia itself.

However, lately public discourse has changed fundamentally. Instead of neoliberalizing, it has become securitizing. The major threat is external, namely Russia. There is without a doubt good reason to be afraid of Russian aggression and devastating war. But it is equally important to note how, like neoliberal governmentality twenty years ago, the security logic permeates every sphere of life, from cyberspace to the kitchen. Today, few care whether the former factory and collective farm workers remaining in the emptying towns and villages are entrepreneurial as long as they are not Putin's fifth column and therefore a security threat. Even the former factory workers themselves have begun to think that the only way to bring back life to their emptying rural places of residence is through new military structures (for example, a NATO base) and a war economy (Dzenovska et al. 2023; Dzenovska 2024). Security has become the end of politics and the promise of the future.

In the early post-Cold War years, the “end of history” narrative prevailed across the east and west of Europe. Liberal democracy and capitalism had won, and the task now was to fine-tune the functioning of the victorious system rather than strive for revolutionary change. That was the first transformation of the future. Progress

was still present, but it meant something else: no longer the monolithic building of a collective future but a quest for particular kinds of freedom under open skies. In postsocialist contexts, it meant the Western present. It meant reaching the living standards of Sweden, for example, or the rural–urban population distribution of France. The future was someone else's present. Yet there were also signs that the opportunities and dangers unleashed by boundless liberty would require a complement. That complement—that roof—was security.

Erecting the wall: Security's moving frontlines

On the postsocialist frontier of capitalism, the 1990s brought an incipient proliferation of security entrepreneurs in politics and on the streets. That decade also saw the frontier between core capitalist economies and their southern neighbors become heavily securitized. New walls sprung up just as the Berlin wall came down. As on the eastern front, these security structures policed the boundaries of the neoliberal settlement. At the US-Mexico border, new barriers were erected to ensure that people did not flow as freely as capital and goods—at a time when those very capital and commodity flows were impoverishing Mexican farmers and setting many on the road to the borderline *maquiladora* factories or to US farmlands (Holmes 2013). In the European Union, the first border barriers appeared at Spain's North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In the absence of political agreement on how to manage migration into the European “free market,” the consensual solution became border security (Andersson 2014).

These were early portents of the security paradigm. As cross-border enemies have proliferated, the border wall has become a key security space of our times. Thus, what began as a border fence on Latvia's borders with Russia and Belarus—meant to fend off migrants not as impoverished workers or desperate refugees, but as instruments in “hybrid warfare”—has

transformed into a militarized zone of anti-tank obstacles. Moreover, the kind of hard security once reserved for the frontiers has travelled into the heartland of liberal democracies. One stark example is that old progressive model across the sea from Latvia: Sweden.

In the postwar boom years, the “million-homes programme”—built across Sweden at record speed—was emblematic of the Social Democrats’ model of progress. The idea was that new salubrious neighborhoods would instill *trygghet*, the Swedish word for a sense of shared social security (Andersson 2009). The plan did not fully succeed. But the dream of a “people’s home,” which the Social Democrats had once appropriated from the nationalist right, was at least managing to bring a previously deeply unequal nation under the same roof.

Progress cast in concrete started to crumble amid Sweden’s transformation from a social democratic experiment into a neoliberal one. A center-right government launched a “free-choice revolution” in 1991. Political and economic liberalism combined in this project. Borders should be wide open for trade, capital, and people. Everything that could be privatized, was. Social systems were no longer a public investment but a cost. Instead, “invest in yourself” became the motto. The Social Democrats, who had lost their composure after the assassination of the prime minister, Olof Palme, and a national monetary crisis, found their inner entrepreneurs and agreed (Östberg 2024). The “Swedish model” was given a complete makeover, but under the sparkly new mascara she was a different creature altogether.

In the country’s increasingly segregated suburbs, the makeup was wearing off already by the early 2000s. The million-homes projects ended up becoming holding sites for refugees with nowhere else to go, thanks in large part to free-choice policies on refugee settlement. Segregation worsened amid the parallel free-choice revolution in Sweden’s radically privatized state-funded school system. In one of the old million-homes suburbs, Ruben’s old secondary school closed due to a lack of “customers.” Here and

elsewhere, state authorities withdrew, too. In the vacuum, something similar to the *krysha* emerged: criminal networks providing their own structures of security and insecurity—the violent entrepreneurs of the new Sweden.

The differences with *krysha* are important to note. Sweden remained an unusually strong state, which if anything made the emergence of organized crime more puzzling. But it had also gone further than most countries in embracing Milton Friedman’s free-choice mantra and sell-off of public assets. It was a consistent neoliberal move towards openness and choice in all domains, reinforced by the virtues propagated by political liberalism (Hamilton 2024).

For a long time, the (neo)liberal settlement held: few political voices, except in the ethnonationalist Sweden Democrats (SD)—a party with roots in neo-Nazi and white-supremacist milieus—had much to say against the freedoms of the new Swedish model, and their only gripe was migration. Today, however, a conservative governing coalition dependent upon SD has conducted a sharp turn towards securitization even as the building blocks of outsourced public services remain. A longstanding politics of formal neutrality has been abandoned in favor of rapid NATO accession, rearmament, and a far-reaching US military agreement. Police drones hover above the segregated suburbs while “security zones” for frisking without suspicion are staged on the streets. The government is promising a record spree of prison-building, the new architecture for an age of security, while pushing large-scale deportation campaigns. For all the continuities, the ballooning prison estate and surveillance operations symbolize a remarkable shift over the span of barely four decades: from a model of progress to one of freedom, and on to an increasingly nationalist security on both internal and external fronts. And it remains motivated—and supported by large parts of the electorate—as a quest for more *trygghet* or safety in a context where old political models have failed.

In contrast to Latvia—where leftovers of the idea of progress could still be seen in the attach-

ment of one's future to the West's present—in Western Europe, Sweden included, progress was increasingly framed not as a future to strive for, but as a culprit of the present's ills. Monolithic social-democratic progress had hamstrung people's freedoms as consumers or as citizens, charged liberals. It was in the name of progress that livelihoods and identities had been destroyed, conservatives argued. Progress was entangled with a violent history of colonialism and racism, added the left. The future that modern subjects and states were producing in the name of progress was *not* really progress, they all alleged, but disaster: poverty, environmental destruction, wars, and more. This was in itself not a new point—critiques of modernity are as old as modernity.⁸ But this time, the criticism came without any idea of what to do about the multiple disasters. There are no promises of a future of equality, shared prosperity, and emancipation. Instead, the future has started looking more like a battlefield with each new crisis. In this moment, security steps into the void. Like the *krysha* and the border fences, it stalls and inhibits the emergence of new political futures. It does so by instituting hard security in the form of “roofs” and walls and drones. And it does so, too, in the softer guise of protectionism, and through the cultivation of the endangered subjects of security. To see this more clearly, let us return one more time to the socialist period.

Security states, endangered subjects

The Cold War was a time of repressive totalitarian apparatuses, of the CIA and the NSC, of proxy wars and Mutually Assured Destruction. However, in harnessing security to the state, it was also unique. In many ways, as Mark Duffield presciently argued some time ago, we have since the 1990s returned from the “world of states” to a securitized “world of peoples” resonant with pre-Cold War and colonial times (Duffield 2001).

Consider, again, the socialist sphere, where the state was concerned with two major dan-

gers: the external enemy in the form of imperial capitalists and the internal enemy in its shifting guises from kulaks to nationalists to dissidents. The intensity of perceived danger shifted over time and across space, with the internal enemy of the early Soviet period giving way to the external one for the late Soviet generations. Nevertheless, the KGB did run an intricate system of informing to fight the enemy within until the very last days of the Soviet Union. Both of these threats were wedded to an ideological project and harnessed to the state. Neither was primarily articulated as a matter of personal or communal safety, but rather as a threat to the state and the polity. This did not make the security apparatus any less repressive—often, quite the opposite—but it did allow for spaces of intimacy and critique to be conserved even within authoritarian and totalitarian environments. Jokes and winks were a part of life. The danger was when this private discourse transgressed the threshold into the public domain.

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, “national security affect” was also being actively cultivated, along with a new infrastructure for a security state of unprecedented proportions (Masco 2014). Again, security was wedded to an ideological struggle and harnessed to the state. In the McCarthy era, wrongthink could get you into deep trouble. The nuclear imagination was rife with nightmares. But if you stayed out of the ideological fray, “security” would leave you alone.

The end of the Cold War shifted security in fundamental ways towards the human. No longer was security simply the concern of states; it involved, in Foucault's sense, the nurturing of human life and the defense of society. In some ways, this was a welcome development: states could no longer ignore “human security” (to deploy that 1990s notion) as easily. But at the same time, the humanization of security allowed for a more insidious securitization and surveillance of daily life.

In late socialism, everyday life proceeded without particular considerations of safety and security. Children played with dangerous things,

like sticks, stones, and sharp objects; people rode bikes without helmets, climbed heights, and entered dangerous buildings. Young children stayed at home alone and went to school unsupervised. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, it was not all that different. By contrast, today, risk management “for our safety and security” has become firmly embedded in late liberalism, to an extent even Ulrich Beck would have struggled to comprehend.

The UK is emblematic, as we will soon see in the university sphere. Incidentally, Dace first encountered late liberal forms of safety management when she arrived in the UK, as an official at the Latvian embassy informally advised her not to leave her seven-year-old daughter at home alone while she went to the shops. Apparently, this was common among Latvian migrants and there was palpable concern that such actions might be reported by vigilant neighbors. Subjectively, this kind of everyday “caring” can be experienced as more intrusive than its more repressive national security counterparts. Incidentally, in the securitized Swedish suburbs, parents are much more worried about neighbors submitting a “report of concern” to the social services than about the police drones or stop-and-frisk zones.

We do not seek to draw simple comparisons between authoritarian and “safetyist” surveillance. But what we do want to highlight is how the latter works not in service of an ideological goal, but rather in service of an ostensibly endangered—and danger-generating—subject.⁹ This threat mindset, applied to vulnerable human life, has much broader applicability than an ideological state security apparatus on its own. For instance, it has transformed border security into a field that selectively coopts humanitarian discourse, practices, and institutions: migrants must be stopped before they endanger themselves, justifying a range of repressive technologies as well as extensive NGO programming (Andersson 2014; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018). It has also transformed public health. Without dwelling on the pandemic, it is notable how “health security,” lockdowns, and unprecedented

levels of surveillance soon became the favored solution worldwide, all in the name of “keeping people safe,” especially the most “vulnerable” (Green 2021).

We do not wish to minimize the risk to life in these contexts and many others besides. But as a rule, vulnerability, safety, and security are defined in narrow ways that tend to enable more security, more surveillance, and more “protectionism” without necessarily addressing the underlying risks. Often, rather, security has worsened these while adding further risks and dangers of its own.

To some iconoclastic thinkers across left and right, the protectionist tendency is ushering us into a new period of undemocratic security and control comparable to the totalitarian states of the twentieth century (Gray 2024; Agamben 2014). The reason we have kept returning to the socialist past, however, is because we want to complicate the perceived overlap between post-liberal security protectionism and the totalitarian security of the Cold War. We are not simply facing a totalitarian rerun, as conservative-adjacent thinkers and the liberal resistance against Donald Trump seem to agree. Unlike in the Cold War ideological battle over different models of progress, today we see a much more intimate justification of security politics and practice through the formation of “endangered subjects”—subjects who are simultaneously endangered and a potential danger to others—in a process that fundamentally requires all our involvement. This soft security, we argue, sits under the same umbrella as the hard security we have already traced in Latvia, Sweden, and elsewhere. Together, hard and soft security are increasingly stifling democratic debate, enabling more surveillance, and limiting or distorting political options, especially for the left.

We return, then, to our central puzzle: much of the left’s silence about this shift, analytically as much as politically. How is it that the left, broadly speaking, saw neoliberalism as an all-permeating danger to political and social lives, but does not see security this way? Our answer is that, since the wall-building decade of the 1990s, progressive politics has entered into

an uncanny alliance with the security paradigm insofar as it, too, is increasingly concerned with protectionism in the name of safety or security—even if left and right tend to disagree on who or what is to be secured and how. To see this collusion or converge at closer quarters, let us turn to an area that has acted as prism and catalyst of many of these changes: the university.

School of harm management

An urgent administrative missive recently arrived into one of our university inboxes. “*Safety precautions and advice for Lone Working in the Department*,” read the title of the email, which admonished staff members to “tell your friends or colleagues you will be working alone, and check in with them at set times—and let them know when you are leaving.” “USE COMMON SENSE,” it admonished. “Do you trust your surroundings? Have you ever felt unsafe there before? Can you deal with the unexpected?”

At first glance, it seems we are today increasingly unable to “deal with the unexpected”—to the point where simply going into the office seems to require the risk appetite of Indiana Jones. However, the problem is more serious than that: we have been actively trained to *expect* threats and dangers lurking everywhere. In the lone working office (emptied in part due to “stay safe” policies since the pandemic), WET FLOORS signs and variations of “see it, say it, sorted” mingle in the corridors, making threats seem blurry, trivial, and urgent all at once. But the threat is not just out there: it is also us. We ourselves are not just in harms’ way: we are simultaneously the source of harm, whether as carriers of a virus, of dangerous ideas, or of potential aggression in need of regulation.

A few years before her diagnosis of neoliberal governmentality, Wendy Brown (1995) had charted the growth of this safety culture in her book *States of Injury*. Brown noted how, amid their critique of free markets and wars waged in the name of liberty, progressive American circles were steering clear of claims on “freedom,”

which the right could then plausibly claim as its own. Instead of a transformative political project, the left was left with a “politics of injury.” As Brown saw it, claims-making through an injured identity obscured class politics based on a promise of emancipatory freedom. Instead of confronting the state and powerful institutions, as classically leftist thinkers would have advocated, this claims-making turned those injured into supplicants for protection vis-à-vis these institutions.

The politics of injury was soon being bolstered by a progressive turn to identity in lieu of class. It would require another article properly to assess identity politics (and identitarianism) in relation to protectionism and power: suffice to say here that even sympathetic voices are increasingly concerned about its “capture” or its consequences.¹⁰ What is very clear is that the wider turn to identity on both “left” and “right” has been spurring a growing rush for “safety” and calls for some kind of category-based border enforcement across the political spectrum.

We do not seek to adjudicate which harms are more “real” and genuine than others—other than to note that the distance between *feeling* and *being* unsafe has been drastically blurred and eroded, resulting inter alia in an escalation of claims. What we can pronounce on, however, are the consequences of a turn to injury and insecurity on the small-‘I’ liberal space of our academic institutions and other public arenas.

One crucial problem is that proliferating administrative regulations have met, and fed, an escalating demand for safety. Consider how research has been framed as a highly dangerous enterprise—so dangerous it now requires reams of pages of ethics and travel risk approvals before even interviewing, say, a Google representative about their extensive surveillance activities (which require no such form-filling). As academics, we ourselves run these committees. The trend is much wider than academia: no-go zones and harm management policies have reshaped fields as far apart as the humanitarian sector and border policing in recent decades (Andersson 2019; Duffield 2018). In all these

sectors, employees themselves have often played a large role in pushing for more harm management. What distinguishes academia are two factors: on the one hand, our sector's unique role in the pursuit of truth and robust democratic debate; and, on the other, our own involvement in the intellectual defense of protectionism.

Not just research but teaching and the wider academic environment are increasingly framed as rife with danger. "Trigger warnings," reporting protocols and other harm-management measures are now routinely presented as "best practices" and even promoted by various ranking quangos (such measures will also be important in the "research culture" element of the UK's next REF academic assessment exercise). Protectionist bureaucracy has become self-propelling. Once universities discovered that harm management could be useful in their marketing, the administration found yet more reason to expand, and especially so at fee-paying private universities in the United States. Meanwhile, the self-referential nature of harm discourse has radically expanded the dynamic that Brown (1995) once challenged, as she questioned the recourse to the arbiter of the state or paternalistic authority—for today, there is often no arbiter to be had. Instead of serving as an "objective" adjudicator, administrative power increasingly facilitates subjective claims to harmfulness.

While the management of "vulnerability" may be an integral neoliberal concern, and the harm management industry a key part of the university's profitability calculations, the distinction with neoliberalism is nevertheless important on the levels of both the subject and the state. If neoliberalism ultimately aimed to responsabilize individuals, then the protectionist security paradigm treats individuals as not properly able to assess their own and others' safety and security risks. While protectionism feeds on the managerial kind of authority at the heart of the neoliberal project (Slobodian 2018), it also fuels an increasingly pronounced shift towards handing a vast array of authorities—from states to employers—the role of protector of subjects unable to protect themselves.

In our experience, the various dimensions of security we have encountered so far in and outside universities—from securitization to safetyism—frequently intersect in daily practice. On any given day, a faculty member may be asked to indicate whether they have seen their international students, thus participating in monitoring their compliance with visa conditions; fill out complex "risk assessments" for their travel from Oxford to London; and participate in a discussion about how certain conversations are not to be had in the classroom because of student safety concerns.

If we look back up at our wider political conversation, we can see these elements replicated from embattled borderlands to parliaments. Safety and security concerns have become the predominant discursive formation of our times, the language of politics and governance and their contestation. How has this come to be? What has happened to the subject—and to ourselves as *subjects*—of politics? Would Brown's critique of a progressive/academic politics of injury as obscuring class politics even be possible, or listened to, today? And where does this protectionist culture leave the small-'t' liberal fundaments of universities, without which they are not able to operate as generators of new thoughts and robust debate?

In progressive quarters of academia, it has become exceedingly hard to air questions about safety culture, since doing so may itself be seen as harmful and dangerous. Yet, if it was not for the freedoms offered to universities to dissent and explore uncomfortable ideas, the very bedrock of critical theory that underlines post-liberal progressivism would hardly have been able to develop in the way it did. As Kenan Malik (2024: np) reminds us, "[i]t is always those fighting for social change who are most harmed by the imposition of censorship."

There's no lost golden age. Ideological paranoias enabled mass state repression in the Cold War. Subsequently, the shallow "freedom" of the Cold War transition was frequently deployed to silence political criticism. But "freedom" could not shut down free debate as effectively as secu-

rity rationales, especially once these rationales became shared across the political spectrum, were baked into institutional harm management, and engaged us all as endangered subjects in need of protection. We are seeing the consequences today in a resurgent nationalist right, as the Trump administration deploys “safety” discourse—and the harm management bureaucracy—as it cracks down hard on academic freedom and campus free speech. The lesson should have been learned: once harmed identity starts overriding existing freedoms and politics itself, it is those with the largest identities who will tend to “win.”

Meanwhile, on the left, what has been lost in the turn to harm management is not only any claim on freedom; given the collapse of material and immaterial harms into one danger vortex, also lost is the focus on material dispossession, violence, and inequality that historically defined it. Universities themselves illustrate the shift. For all the talk of inclusion, Oxbridge and even more so the Ivy League are today bastions of entrenched inequality. Student fees are turning the public good of higher education into a private gain for the wealthy—with the top 1 percent of income earners sending almost as many students to Harvard as the poorest 60 percent. The compromised names of long-deceased donors may be removed from lecture halls and libraries, but the laundering of material dispossession through the philanthropic system is thriving, with money from arms industry brokers, predatory asset-manager landlords, and assorted oligarchs freely flowing into university coffers. Advanced armaments and security research is proceeding through increasing academic-corporate synergies, feeding directly into the most violent of security operations. When students protested the Gaza onslaught in the spring of 2024, we saw in our opening vignette how hard security and soft harm management met. At Columbia (tuition cost: \$71,000), teaching moved online as in the pandemic (for safety reasons), and Palestinian flag emojis were required to be removed from student profiles in Zoom meetings as they were ostensibly causing “trauma re-

actions.”¹¹ Wealthy protesting students, in turn, themselves spoke back to the harsh policing in the language of harm—before the new Trump administration moved in with hard securitization, deployed ostensibly for a protectionist purpose and sending a deep and enduring chill through the whole university system.

At the heart of the security paradigm is a shift in the balance of power that surpasses the neoliberal frame. In the university, as in many other workplaces, power has moved from professionals to bureaucrats in the name of security or safety, while enabling state incursions of a kind unimaginable barely a decade ago. On wider political level, we see a similar shift as a security logic defines the parameters of what is politically possible or desirable, in a more repressive fashion than how “freedom” once organized the political arena. In the university, we also see the security paradigm’s subjective dimension in full bloom. Instead of building trust-based relations between students and staff, the “soft securitization” of university life has brought increased micromanagement while students and staff anxiously surveil one another for signs of transgression.¹² Meanwhile, there are now benefits aplenty in presenting oneself as the injured, harmed, or endangered subjects we are constantly invited to become—especially as such an injured identity may also protect against accusations of being harmful oneself. In this context, it is easy to see how a desire for protection swiftly comes simultaneously to define and denude politics.

Back to the future

The transnational genealogy of security’s rise that we have traced remains incomplete and eclectic, but it is enough, we think, to put one central problem on the table: the malaise of the left in the face of security. Rather than contest this political logic, progressive politics has come to involve some combination of heavily policed identity politics and bureaucratic protectionism. Tactically, this has tended to generate a “popu-

list” backlash outside universities, while offering limited political traction. Strategically and intellectually, it has also increasingly left the critique of power and the formulation of alternatives for the taking by fringe and right-wing political movements.

Meanwhile, the left that is concerned with political economy, critique of capitalism and empire, and whatever is left of class politics, is confined to ever smaller spaces. In its stifling of debate, protectionism has been a large and often unacknowledged contributor to this shift. It is very hard to counter the security paradigm since it connects the overarching sense that the future is a threat with people’s everyday (and even instinctual) fears. Who would not want their children to be safe and their streets secure? Who wants to be held responsible for someone slipping on a wet floor while working alone in the office? Who wants to harm somebody’s existence? Protectionism is the perfect placating mechanism, whether at the borders or inside institutions. “We are here to make you safe,” says the state, the university, the military, and the new right, as do liberal and progressive groups. How is one to say, “no, this is a false premise”—especially as doing so means having the protectionist ire turned on oneself?

Of course, we can follow protesters or reformers in seeking more diverse and productive forms of safety or security. Protectionist thinking, however, leads us into a trap. Even when masquerading as “radical,” security tends towards repression. We can easily think of counter-movements historically that have been turned into total or authoritarian institutions in their own right, including in the Soviet sphere. The protectionist logic we have sketched here has given this a perverse twist, in that those who manage to advocate for—or inhabit the subject position of—absolute harm virtually get carte blanche for some form of repression.

We see the consequences play out today in ways that are scrambling political coordinates. The liberal foundations of universities, for one, have been undermined by calls for safety at all costs. This trend started with the regulation of

autonomous research and teaching deemed harmful to specific identities, before leading to right-wing book bans, “lawfare,” and campus crackdowns on critics and protesters of Israel’s flattening of Gaza—which itself is shredding any kind of safety for starved and bombarded Palestinians.

The left must overcome its complicity with the security paradigm. In the public sphere, those who have tried to gain back a critical, materialist edge have coated their language in almost ritualistic nods to protectionism: from Nancy Fraser (2023) on the various aggrieved parties to capitalism, to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2019) update to *Empire*, and Naomi Klein’s (2024) ambivalence with her own “shock doctrine” in the context of COVID-19 security, we find more of a frustrated impasse than a way forward. Listening with curiosity to dissenters and discontents across the political spectrum—rather than condemning them—may be a good first step out of this predicament. Critics may find new friends in unexpected quarters. For the political left, meanwhile, it is a simple matter of survival to reach all those it has lost.

Once we step out of the safe space, we may see a wider set of political possibilities. For progressive politics, in our view, the way back to the future must involve asserting a freedom that embraces a critical analysis of power. Our protectionist obsession is making us unfree and it is eroding the liberal freedoms of our institutions and our public sphere—freedoms which we have too long taken for granted or criticized as a liberal ruse. Now it seems that a reworked version of freedom is necessary to at least halt the further slip into security. Politically, we also need a reworked version of the liberal–left alliance—one centered on freedom rather than on the security paradigm. It should be possible to liberate freedom from its historical baggage of neoliberalism and injury—not in the abstract, but concretely and in a principled way. This means respecting the freedom of opponents and dissidents as much as reviving the quest for an *emancipatory* freedom proper to the left; the kind of freedom Brown was circling round in

the 1990s, and which the left unconvincingly left behind at that time.

The shift must also involve returning to material reality (see Don Kalb's call, 2025). It is the dispossession and disappearance of material safeguards—whether in the “new Europe,” in social democratic Sweden, post-Thatcher UK, or in less economically privileged parts of the world—that has fueled security's rise as an impostor standing in the way of genuine human protection. And it's the lack of such protective nets, in turn, that has made freedom such a fraught and dangerous object in our hardening age of security.

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Notes

1. “An Update from Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla,” *San Diego Today*, 5 May 2024.
2. For context, most of this article was drafted in the years preceding the second Trump administration and before the devastation of Gaza following the 2023 Hamas attack.
3. The post-Foucauldian security literature is too vast to cite in any detail. More recently, one important link between this literature and the authoritarian and “protectionist” tendencies we discuss here came through Toby Green's (2021) left critique of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. This is a familiar challenge. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2002) suggested that theorists and activists deploying a politics of difference ended up being “outflanked by the strategies of power.” For, in the globalizing corporate culture of the 2000s, “Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference.” In other words, critics were unaware of their own complicity with power that increasingly governed through difference. Something similar, we suggest, is occurring today with security.
5. “Antony Blinken plays Rockin’ in the Free World in Kyiv bar—video,” *The Guardian*, 15 May 2024.
6. Counterintuitively, however, Yurchak (2002) has argued that the late Soviet generation had been very entrepreneurial.
7. For an overview of how life became better at the same time as it became worse, see Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021.
8. Progress has of course been subject to extensive leftist critique, from Walter Benjamin and beyond, as well as to repeated attempts to rescue it. See, e.g., Allen (2016).
9. One of the first academics to discuss this doubleness in relation to security and risk was Aradau (2004). See also Dzenovska (2017).
10. See, e.g., Táíwò (2002). For the stronger argument that identity politics was always, to a very significant extent, “captured” and compromised, see, e.g., Wildermuth (2023) or al-Gharbi (2024).
11. Malik (2024) discusses this case, based on Leonard (2024).
12. This has significantly worsened during the second Trump administration: see, e.g., student reflections by Alex Bronzini-Vender, “At Harvard and Elsewhere, the New Campus Orthodoxy Is Even More Stifling,” *The New York Times*, 29 December 2025.

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