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Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction

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There is a rich literature on what went wrong with liberalism, from the seminal *The Light that Failed* by Ivan Kravtsev and Stephen Holmes (Kravtsev and Holmes 2020) to Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018), more explicitly anti-/post-liberal. In the midst of debates between those who claim we need to enter post-liberalism, those who think liberalism should genuinely reform, and those who assert that liberalism is fine and that its enemies are limited to authoritarian populist leaders and their constituencies who have been brainwashed by foreign propaganda and covert fascists, the term "illiberal(ism)" has flourished.

"Illiberalism" is an emerging concept in political science and political philosophy. So far, it offers only a loose definition of its object and remains to be tested by different disciplines and approaches. It is a moving target for several reasons: 1) It is *a concept based on the negative*, and therefore depends on the meaning given to its antithesis, liberalism, in different cultural settings; 2) It is used *both by scholars* to describe the phenomenon they study, as well as *by experts and political actors* as a normative descriptor to either reject or praise some political movements, ideologies, and policies; 3) It is accused of providing a *smokescreen for authoritarian regimes*; and 4) It competes with other, better-studied concepts such as populism.

The Concept's Semantic Space

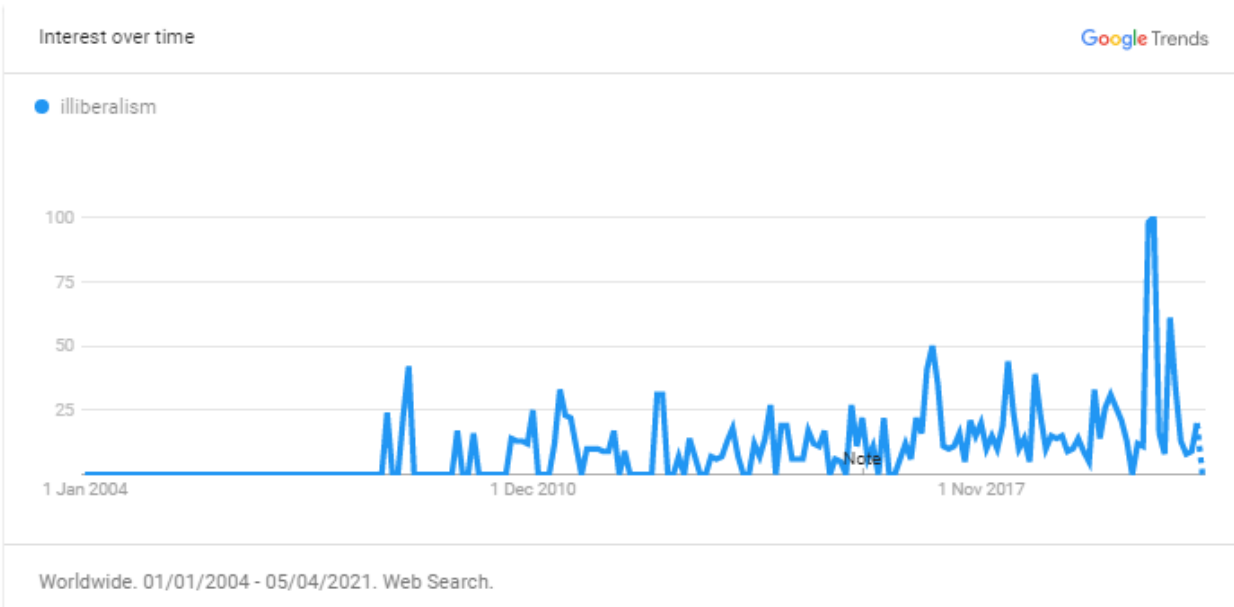
The term "illiberal" is operationalized in three distinct semantic spaces: the policy/think tank world, the political sphere, and academic fields.

Think Tank and Media Usage

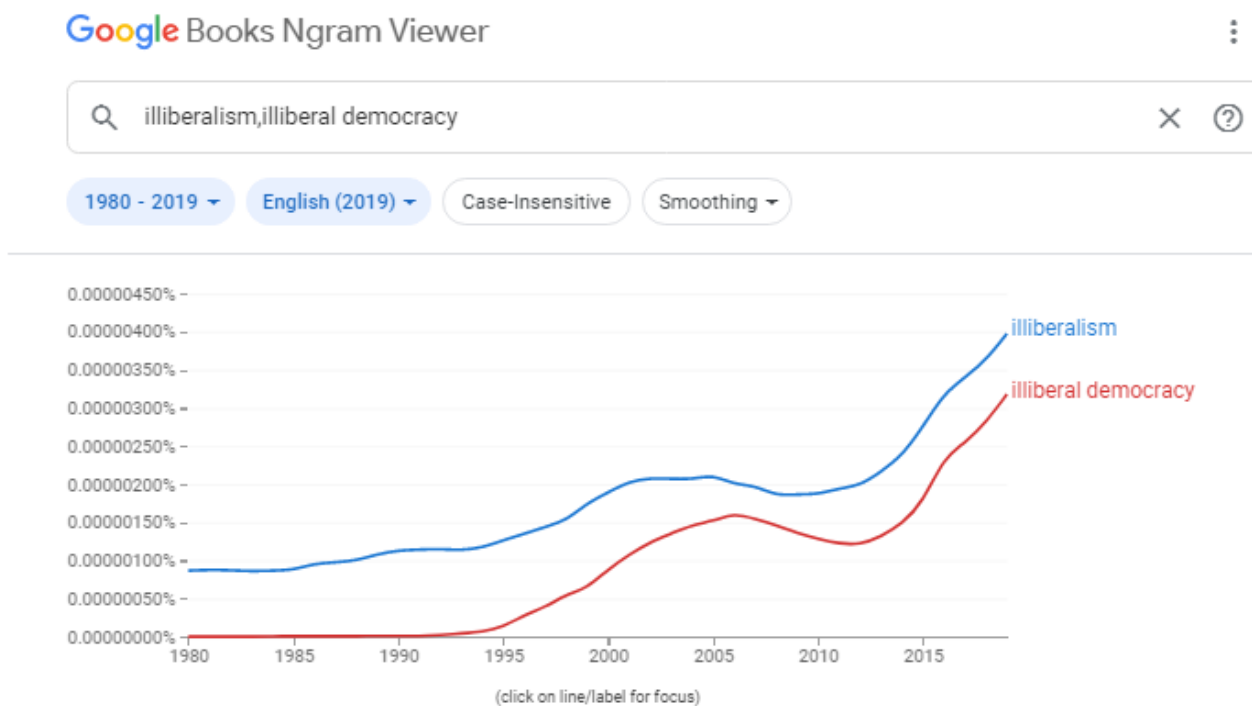
The adjective "illiberal" was first employed by Fareed Zakaria in his famous 1997 *Foreign Affairs* piece on illiberal democracies, which preceded his book *The Future of Freedom* (2003). At a time when many still believed in a Fukuyama-style "end of history" and thought that liberal democracy and market economy were victorious, Zakaria warned that some regimes (especially in Latin America) might organize elections and thus nominally qualify as democracies, but do not respect liberal principles such as pluralism, individual freedoms, or checks and balances (Zakaria 2007). Zakaria concluded by inviting international institutions and the United States to focus on promoting *liberalization* but not *democratization*: the first, he said, would result in the second, while the reverse might not work.

Zakaria's statements elicited a rich discussion. Some challenged his dissociation between democracy and liberalism: Marc Plattner (1998), for instance, contended that there is no democracy without liberalism. Others questioned his conception that there was an ongoing *rise* in illiberal democracy: Jørgen Møller (2008), as well as criticizing Zakaria's unidimensional definition of democracy and his use of the Freedom House index, demonstrated that "illiberal democracies" represented a very stable share of all "electoral democracies" in the period between 1990 and 1997.

Since Zakaria first crafted the term, the adjective "illiberal" has been widely used in policy circles, especially in think tank reports as well as in the media.



Google Trends from 2004 to present for the term “illiberalism”



Google Ngram data on the frequency of appearance of the terms “illiberalism” and “illiberal democracy” from 1980 to 2019

It achieved buzzword status around Donald Trump's election in 2016. The term is now deployed by mainstream think tanks in a very normative way, as a catch-all category for those politicians, parties, and countries that challenge liberalism *and* U.S. supremacy on the international scene (see, for instance, Polyakova et al. 2019; Main 2021, Simonyi 2020). It has thus become the reverse of the “democratic optimism” of the 1990s, but shares some of the same assumptions: namely, that democracy in the restricted sense of free and fair elections brings liberal values to a society, economic prosperity for all, and a foreign policy favorable to the United States. In this context, “illiberal” can only be understood as a deviation from the norm that has to be dismissed and fought against.

The fact that this think tank literature rarely differentiates between political, cultural, and economic liberalisms or between democracy, a market economy, and—in the case of the post-socialist space—NATO expansion, and that it considers liberal values to be almost synonymous with pro-U.S. foreign policy, heavily circumscribes the analytical value of this use of the concept.

Political Usage

In a fascinating turn of events, the term “illiberal” was appropriated by Hungary's Prime Minister, Victor Orbán, in his 2014 Băile Tuşnad speech. He advanced the agenda of building an “illiberal state”—a formulation borrowed from one of his advisors, Gyula Tellér—within the European Union. Orbán referred to Singapore, China, Russia, and Turkey as evidence that economic growth does not need to follow the classic, Western-centric liberal parliamentary model. Since then, he has regularly presented China and the so-called “Asian model” (more than Russia or Turkey) as his main inspiration.

Orbán's use of the concept stemmed from the assumption that liberalism promotes individual selfishness and rootless cosmopolitanism, creating a society of atomized and multicultural citizens who claim rights without accepting any duties to the national community and the state (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021). To address this problem, he proposed a “work-based” society—in which work determines the worth of the individual—combined with majoritarianism and a strong conservative-values agenda (Bíró-Nagy 2017; Wilkin 2018). In its Orbánian version, illiberalism is the answer to the failure of liberalism as implemented during the previous two decades by elites accused of being disconnected from the “real” nation. Yet if it refutes political and cultural illiberalism, it often adheres to neoliberal norms that call for austerity, an open economy to attract foreign investment, lowering taxes, and reducing public spending.

One precursor to Orbán's use of the term “illiberal” is the notion of “sovereign democracy” promoted by Vladislav Surkov, then-Deputy Chief of Staff of the Russian Presidential Administration, in 2006 (Makarychev 2008; Kortukov 2020). The “sovereign democracy” notion claims the autonomy of nation-state from external pressures—in that case it was used to denounce normative pressures from the West in the context of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Russia's then-forthcoming legislative elections of 2007. (Sakwa 2008; Bovt 2008). Yet the two terms do not entirely overlap: Surkov's “sovereignty” did not explicitly name liberalism as its key opponent and did not imply a conservative agenda in terms of values.

Orbán can thus claim the paternity of the term as used by politicians, to the point that he has been seen by some as an “innovative ideologist” (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021) even if his theoretical embrace of the term remains very contextual. In 2018-2019, during tensions with the European Union and his party's (Fidesz) suspension by the European People's Party due to rule-of-law

concerns, Orbán tried to recraft the term by defining it as “a democracy based on the nation state, or better, on Christian values” (EPP-European People’s Party 2019). This insistence on Christian values is part of an effort to create a common language with mainstream conservative movements and to anchor his illiberal turn into a broader ideological agenda of traditional values in the face of a supposedly morally corrupt liberalism focused on the rights of sexual and ethnic minorities. Russian President Vladimir Putin soon joined him, declaring in an interview to the *Financial Times* that liberalism has become “obsolete” and has “outlived its purpose” (see Barber, Foy, and Barker 2019). Nonetheless, Russian officials never used the term “illiberal,” preferring terminologies such as those around conservatism and traditional values (Laruelle 2020).

Academic Usage

The academic literature has long avoided the concept of “illiberal.” There are several reasons for this. First, Zakaria’s notion of “illiberal democracy” has been criticized as an oxymoron (Halmai 2019; Müller 2016; Bozóki 2017). Political scientists prefer more classical notions such as “hybrid regimes” (Levitsky and Way 2011), “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2003), “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo 2016), “de-democratization” (Bogaards 2018), or “populist authoritarianism” (Sadurski 2019).

Yet some of these notions are also problematic, especially because they understand *illiberal* as *undemocratic*. They describe practices of power centered around hierarchy, authority, obedience, and conformity, but which may lack the ideological component observed in illiberal polities. The concept of hybrid regimes, for instance, has been long used for the post-socialist space or for some developing countries but implicitly implies a transitological framework —these regimes are hybrid because they are transiting from an authoritarian framework to a potentially democratic one (Menocal, Fritz and Rakner 2008). This does not explain why illiberal movements also grow in established, non-“hybrid” democracies.

Populism (and its derivatives, national-populism or ethnopopulism [see Vachudova 2020]) is a better fit, as it covers both ideology (even if this coverage is “thin”) and the practice of power. However, it does not capture quite the same phenomenon as illiberalism and excludes cases of illiberal leadership that are not populist (Vladimir Putin for instance) and of populist movement who are not illiberal (the “leftist” populism or the technocentric ones like ANO in Czechia). To this complexity should be added the fact that some illiberal movements have strong elitist tendencies and seek to replace the “bad” elite with a new illiberal elite instead of relying on the classic populist demagogue-type.

From “Illiberal” to “Illiberalism”

More recently, another line of research has developed that no longer uses “illiberal” as an adjective but instead employs its noun form, “illiberalism,” to describe a coherent, even if fluid, new ideological trend. This transformation into a noun offers several advantages:

1. It makes it possible to move away from criticisms about the impossibility of a democracy being illiberal by no longer using the combined formulation of “illiberal democracy;”

2. It defines better its object of study by focusing on the ideological component—a reaction to liberalism—without confusing this with institutional/constitutional assumptions about authoritarian political regimes.

Illiberalism, then, can be defined as a new ideological family bound together in an oppositional position vis-à-vis liberalism. This ideological family combines four key features:

- It has emerged over the past two or three decades in countries with past experience of liberalism;
- It updates classically conservative views (the primacy of the nation, religion, gender relations, and more broadly the belief that human beings have ontological features that cannot be entirely socially constructs);
- It draws some inspiration—in varying degrees—from far-right ideologies (such as the belief in metapolitics) and therefore takes more rebellious (and populist) positions than status-quo-oriented classical conservatism;
- It advances a critique/rebuttal of some elements of political liberalism, such as trust in institutions and minority rights;

This definition makes it possible to dissociate illiberalism from classical forms of national conservatism (the pre-Trump Republican Party in the US or the Christian Democrats in Germany) that respect liberal democracy and are strongly constitutionalist, as well as from authoritarianism or “hybrid” regimes that describe the way power is practiced but do not specify a particular ideology.

Illiberal movements and theoreticians explicitly identify liberalism as their enemy (Deneen 2018, and for more literary versions, see Houellebecq *Soumission* 2015, Legutko 2020 *Why I Am Not a Liberal*). They denounce, to varying degrees, what Yascha Mounk (2018) has termed “undemocratic liberalism,” i.e. minoritarian technocratic liberalism or the political, economic, and cultural liberalism embodied by supranational institutions, globalization, multiculturalism, and minority-rights protections.

Illiberal movements do not necessarily make up a coherent ideology; rather, they represent an interconnected set of values that come together in country-specific patterns. In different settings, illiberals stress different issues, with some emphasizing Christian roots, others chiefly fomenting xenophobia against migrants, and still others trumpeting anti-genderism and defense of the traditional family.

Even if the concept of illiberalism does not make assumptions about regime structure, it seems to often merge with a call to restore national sovereignty in various spheres:

- Internationally, by rejecting supranational and multilateral institutions in favor of the nation-state;
- Politically, by defending majoritarianism and direct communication between the people and the leader without any intermediary institutions;
- Economically, by denouncing neoliberal orthodoxy and promoting protectionism at the nation-state level (while at the same time, when in power, implementing some neoliberal reforms);
- Culturally, by rejecting multiculturalism and minority rights in favor of a majoritarianism that either advances an essentialist definition of the nation, or accepts multiethnicity but is prone to assimilation policies.

Limits of the Concept and Ways to Address Them

The concept of illiberalism is problematic because it is defined *ex negativo*, as what is not liberal. This means that the concept is intrinsically *relational*, posing itself as an answer to something else. Depending on how this something else is defined, the contents of illiberalism will differ. This places the concept of illiberalism in a subaltern position, preventing us from exploring its deeper ideological and philosophical ramifications. Moreover, it gives liberalism a kind of gravitas in today's political/ideological landscape, making it the center around which all other values orbit.

These limitations can be addressed by:

1. *Acknowledging the issue of the centrality of liberalism.* In the realm of political philosophy, one may challenge the centrality of liberalism, arguing that it is no more legitimate than any other set of moral and political values. In practice, however, liberalism is indeed perceived as the default normative set of values—albeit understood in very different ways—in many societies. To address that limitation, one must first define liberalism (at least in its three main iterations: political, economic, and cultural) and offer a context-based analysis of how it is deployed in the studied society before discussing what illiberalism may mean.
2. *Rejecting the idea that illiberalism is simply a synonym for all forms of non-liberalism.* There are many ways to be non-liberal: classic authoritarian or totalitarian regimes such as China, for instance, are non-liberal without qualifying for the title “illiberal.” To address that limitation, illiberalism must be understood only as a form of postliberalism—that is, as an ideology whose exponents are pushing back against liberalism *after having experienced it*. See John Gray (2014) on the concept of postliberalism and Sheri Berman (2017) on illiberal democracy as a “stage on the road to liberal democracy.” This “post-” aspect allows us to exclude regimes like China and to limit ourselves to countries that have experienced some forms of liberalism.
3. *Dissociating illiberalism from leftist-identitarian ideologies that oppose economic liberalism but are prone to cultural liberalism.* Yet one may also argue that some radical forms of current cultural liberalism, such as “cancel culture,” should be considered illiberalism in the sense that they impose a new moral norm that does not respect political liberalism, as they do not allow for a plurality of perspectives to be expressed.

Gaps and Overlaps with Other Concepts

The concept of illiberalism is easier to operationalize than several of its competitors, as it advances a better articulated and more granular approach to the phenomenon.

Illiberalism and the Far Right

Illiberalism is not synonymous with the far right. Illiberal movements do not want to remain a marginal countercultural position; on the contrary, they hope to become the new mainstream. With that goal in mind, they have recrafted the main far-right theories into “smoother” versions blended with the acceptance of some principles of democratic representation. In Western Europe, they may even present themselves as defenders of values that the old-fashioned far right previously rejected—for instance, secularism (against the supposed Islamization of Europe) and women’s rights (against supposed migrant aggression against women). They may also position themselves as pro-Israeli, despite the far right’s long tradition of antisemitism (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Natrass 2021). Of course, many illiberal parties and their leaderships have direct roots in far-right parties, yet they represent a new “stage of development” that should be dissociated from that background to be better understood.

Illiberalism versus Conservatism

Is illiberalism merely a revamping of conservative ideologies that have existed since at least the end of the 18th century? Conservatism is itself a very loose intellectual concept that is defined in relation to its own ideological opponent—whether “progressivism” or something else. Illiberalism and conservatism share a rejection of the cultural liberalism that emerged in the 1960s.

Conservatism positions itself more ambivalently than illiberalism on the issue of economic liberalism. Historically, many conservative movements, especially in the U.S. context, were economically liberal, favoring a free market over state regulations. Today’s many illiberal movements, while still applying neoliberal reforms, have developed a more “leftist” positioning that favors state intervention and some forms of welfare redistribution.

The key element that dissociates illiberalism from classical forms of conservatism is the relationship to political liberalism: classical conservatives—such as the Christian Democrats in Europe—are fervent supporters of political rights and constitutionalism. However, that distinction is gradually being blurred by the electoral success of illiberal leaders against classic conservative parties. The struggle of the European People’s Party to win concessions from Orbán’s Fidesz or the Polish PiS, as well as the subjugation of the Republican Party by Donald Trump, have revealed how attractive illiberal leaders may be for the more mainstream right. As Mark Plattner (2019) has stated, the future of liberal democracy will largely depend on how successful or unsuccessful the classical right is at resisting illiberalism.

Illiberalism and Populism

Illiberalism is not necessarily a synonym for populism. The concept of populism has long been seen as a political epithet that serves more to stigmatize than to analyze. It has been criticized for being used to describe disparate political projects that supposedly have limited resonance in the society and for being no more than a pathology that appears during crises. Thanks to research by Cas Mudde and Rogers Brubaker, among others, populism is now better defined as a “thin” ideology, compatible with many other ideological components, that sacralizes “the people” against its enemies. The “us versus them” dichotomy can be applied both vertically (against the elite and/or the “parasites” and “deviants” at the bottom) and horizontally (against those external to the group, such as globalized elites and migrants) (Mudde 2016; Brubaker 2017). Populism operationalizes this dichotomy around

an ideology of protectionism and immediacy, and deploys it through direct communication that involves deliberate violations of rules of polite speech and behavior.

Today's populist leaders are often illiberal. Yet this overlap is not absolute: many leftist leaders, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France and Beppe Grillo in Italy, do not qualify as illiberal in the sense proposed here, as they support cultural liberalism and—particularly in the French case—migrants' rights. Conversely, not all illiberal leaders are populist: Russian President Vladimir Putin, for instance, qualifies as illiberal but not as populist, as he does not play the rhetorical card of identifying the elite as external to the nation and believes that it is the state, not the people, that has sovereignty (Robinson and Milne 2017). By focusing on the ideological component, the notion of illiberalism can bring new nuances to our understanding of populism.

Illiberalism and Democratic Backsliding

The notion of a democratic backsliding perceptible since the 2000s has been commented on by several research teams and highlighted in indexes such as the World Justice Project (WJP—2020), the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI—2021), the Varieties of Democracy Index (V-Dem—2021), Freedom House (2021), and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index (2020).

Yet the notion has also been challenged: Levitsky and Way (2015) show that new democracies remain robust and that it is a “flawed understanding of the events of the early 1990s” that explains today's exaggerated pessimism. Nancy Bermeo (2016) states that “executive coups” are now the main mode of democratic backsliding, meaning that backsliding is more easily reversible than in old-fashioned dictatorships. Yet the latest V-Dem index of 2021 as well as Democracy Without Borders now talk about a new wave of autocratization (V-DEM 2021 and Kalberer 2021). There are now 87 democratic states globally compared to 98 a decade ago and major G20 nations are affected by the autocratization trend.

The concept of illiberalism allows for a more granular analysis that confirms that citizens continue to believe in democracy as the best possible political regime while challenging some ways it is currently practiced, or the liberal assumptions that usually accompany it. The rise of illiberalism is a backlash *against* liberalism that is *facilitated by* democratic principles—with illiberal parties able to legitimately win democratic elections.

Obviously, there are some bridges between the two notions. Once in power, illiberal parties tend to develop a style of governance that implies patronal politics and infringements on media freedom and judicial independence—and may therefore weaken democratic practices and institutions. However, this democratic backsliding is a product of their arrival in power, not of the way in which they won it. Illiberalism as an ideology offered to the electorate *precedes* democratic backsliding, which may follow once illiberal parties gain power.

Illiberalism and Authoritarianism Diffusion

The literature on authoritarianism diffusion follows the model of the “third wave of democratization” school (Huntington 1993) by looking at how authoritarian models spread across the world. Yet this literature conflates the *convergence* of narratives and practices of power with *diffusion* and struggles to demonstrate any causation relationship (Ambrosio and Tolstrup 2019). It largely neglects the role of homegrown actors and their interplay with international ones, failing to recognize that illiberalism is above all the product of domestic context.

In searching for *diffusion*, this literature tends to look for an original sinner—in this case, Putin’s Russia—whose ideology can spread to other countries “under influence.” One example of this is when Zakaria (2014) presented Orbán as establishing a Hungarian version of Putinism. That Russia may benefit from a convergence of governance does not automatically mean that it has the ability to diffuse its model abroad. Buzogány (2017) has demonstrated, for instance, that there is “little evidence for an ideologically-motivated diffusion process stemming from Russia or that the Hungarian government was particularly receptive to Russian influence when carrying out its illiberal reforms.”

Moreover, labelling those advancing an agenda sympathetic to Russia as “Putin’s useful idiots” (Milbank 2018) or “Russia’s Trojan Horses” (Polyakova et al. 2016) totally misses the point of shared viewpoints and convergence of visions and pragmatic interests. Illiberal leaders make choices based on a cost-benefit analysis that involves solidarity against democracy promotion (von Soest 2015), but more broadly, they also rely on genuine sociability mechanisms such as emulation, praise, and blame (Costa Buranelli 2020).

The Political Economy of Illiberalism

Neoliberal reforms—in the broad sense of economic liberalization policies and reductions in government spending (Lazaridis et al. 2016)—have impacted the entirety of Europe over the past four decades. Impacted regions range from the UK in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher (Gamble 1988) to continental Europe in the 1990s and 2000s, when variations of such reforms were implemented both in Western European countries and in former socialist countries that had experienced “shock therapy” during the move from a state-controlled economy to a free market (Hancké et al. 2007).

New waves of neoliberal reforms came in the 2010s: the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent debt crises accelerated the impression of Europe’s economic failure (Merler 2015; Lipton 2019) and partly delegitimized the idea that liberalism automatically brings growth. Many governments have explicitly justified austerity measures since then by citing the structural imperatives of globalization and integration into the European Union (Bornschiefer 2010). This has accentuated a widespread sense that markets, not political leaders, are making a state’s economic choices, and therefore that political elites are either illegitimate because they are ineffective public policymakers or are “corrupt” because they work for vested interest groups (Greenhouse 2012; Eichengreen 2018; Picketty 2014).

These transformations of the European political landscape have contributed to “tribalism,” i.e., the rise of niche communities and segmented groups (Kornacki 2018). Political cultures are now offered to small groups of atomized citizens rather than to the citizenry as a whole. This political logic has been inspired by market mechanisms: citizens are primarily considered consumers and are offered political products adapted to their individual or community needs, contributing to the loss of a sense of collectivity (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004). This “tribalism” constitutes the broad context in which illiberal movements can prosper.

Several studies carried out in different European countries have concluded that the decline of the welfare state, the rise of financial capitalism, and their embrace by social-democratic movements have bolstered movements that claim to champion resistance to economic and cultural globalization, giving them the opportunity to win over the working class, which was formerly a core constituency of left-wing parties (Kriesi 2014; Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroeck 2016; Fetzer 2019;

Ponticelli and Voth 2020; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Zakaria 2016; Berman and Snegovaya 2019). Illiberalism can thus be understood as a reaction to globalization that touches both “established” democracies (Enyedi 2016; Buzogány and Varga 2018) and developing countries where state and market have failed to address social injustices (see Diprose, McRae and Hadiz 2019 on the case of Indonesia).

Yet it would be an oversimplification to see illiberalism only as a product for those who have been “left behind” (Kalb and Halmai 2011; Rodrik 2018; Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Eichengreen 2018): it encompasses much more complex phenomena than dispossession and disenfranchisement, including the genuine revival of conservative values by those determined to reject multiculturalism and the gradual erosion of so-called traditional cultural norms.

Agenda for Future Research

Thus far, scholarship has analyzed this illiberal wave through incomplete prisms. It has studied illiberal parties and their charismatic leaders mostly through the lens of electoral politics, and has remained focused on the national level. This opens avenues for further research in several directions:

1. Disentangling the tensions between analyzing illiberalism as an ideology and including structural political regime elements (as practice) into the ideology, as well as between the concept at a political philosophy level and the way it is deployed by governments.
2. The contextual variety of illiberalism: are there different subcategories of illiberalisms depending on what liberalism means in Europe, Asia and the Americas? How this diversity may impact the (im-)possibility of an illiberal international?
3. A better understanding of the grassroots mechanisms underpinning the popular support given to illiberal projects, as well as of the cultural products and social practices that structure illiberal communities and illiberal civil society; and
4. The policy effects of illiberalism, i.e. its impact on foreign policy, welfare, climate, gender issues, academic freedom, etc

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