



# Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian: Populism, Illiberalism, and Authoritarianism

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## Abstract

*“Democratic regression,” the “retreat of western liberalism,” the “return” or “renaissance” of authoritarianism or the “third wave of autocratization” – these are some of the many labels for diverse phenomena – or problems of authority – that plague societies in the Global North and South. Commonly, such problems of authority are specified as pathological practices of corruption or institutional defects, deviant forms of governance or pathological symptoms of representation and participation. Their semantic specification and interpretive framework are delivered by three camps – with contested, porous borders and considerable intersections and agreements – under the signifier illiberalism, populism or authoritarianism. All of them claim, each camp speaking from its peculiar vantage point, the authority to interpret the phenomena mentioned above. In this article the “properties” – advantages and failures – of the three frameworks are discussed and brought into a conversation with one another.*

Keywords: Populism, Illiberalism, Authoritarianism

“... commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.”<sup>1</sup>

## Problems of Authority

Global or local “democratic regression,” the “retreat of Western liberalism,”<sup>2</sup> the “return” or “renaissance” of authoritarianism, or the “third wave of autocratization”<sup>3</sup>—these are some of the many labels for diverse phenomena that plague societies in the Global North and South alike. These phenomena are internally related to the question of who is entitled to decide with ultimate authority about, primarily, the distribution of freedom, the recognition of identity, and the access to common goods. Commonly, such problems of authority are specified as practices of corruption or institutional defects, deviant forms of governance or pathological symptoms of representation and participation.<sup>4</sup> These pathologies extend over a wide horizon and cover an uneven topography. In short, their semantic specification and interpretive framework can be divided into three camps—with contested, porous borders and considerable intersections and agreements—under the labels of *illiberalism*, *populism*, or *authoritarianism*.<sup>5</sup> All of them claim, with each camp speaking from its peculiar vantage point, the authority to interpret the practices of autocratic regimes, the agendas of right-wing populist parties, and authoritarian attitudes in general.

Depending on the breadth of one’s perspective how apocalyptic one’s outlook is, the death, decay, deficits, or defects of democracy,<sup>6</sup> and the corresponding upsurge of

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1 Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 1, “General Introduction,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay (New York: The New American Library, Inc., [1787] 1961), 35: “History will teach us . . . that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.” In the following I draw on my previous work: *Authoritarianism—Constitutional Perspectives* (E. Elgar, 2020) and the introduction, co-authored with Wilhelm Heitmeyer, to *Treiber des Autoritären—Pfade des Autoritarismus im 21. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Campus, forthcoming 2022). I am indebted to Christopher Ellison’s thoughtful editing of the manuscript.

2 Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-021-00336-0>; Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Abacus, 2017); similarly: Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

3 Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?” in: *Democratization*, 26 (2019), 1095–1113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582020>. See Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, x–xi, 46–52, for further references.

4 See, for example, Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy: After the Crises* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020); Wendy Brown et al., *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*; Milan Vaishnav, “The Decay of the Indian Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 2 (March 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2021-03-18/decay-indian-democracy/>.

5 See, for example, Larry Diamond et al., *Authoritarianism Goes Global* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jasper Kauth and Desmond King, “Illiberalism,” *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 69, No. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>; Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*; Karin Priester, *Populismus: Historische und aktuelle Erscheinungsformen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2007); Sheri Berman, “The Causes of Populism in the West,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102503>; and Anna Lührmann and Sebastian Hellmeier, eds., “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus: Herausforderung für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft,” Heinrich Böll Foundation (February 2020), [https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-03/E-Paper\\_DE\\_2\\_hbs\\_V-Dem\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-03/E-Paper_DE_2_hbs_V-Dem_FINAL.pdf).

6 For variations on the apocalyptic tone, see Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save it* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), [https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5750882/mod\\_resource/content/1/Yasha%20Mounk%202018.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5750882/mod_resource/content/1/Yasha%20Mounk%202018.pdf); Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018); Aziz Huq and Tom Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” *UCLA Law Review* 65 (2018): 78–169. See: [https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=13666&context=journal\\_articles/](https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=13666&context=journal_articles/), and the sober analyses provided by Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here” and Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

authoritarian regimes,<sup>7</sup> are primarily ascribed to “stress fractures” in the structures of national governance, the rule of law, or the welfare state, or to dramatic failures of democracy as both a form of governance and way of life. Other factors that come into view are the downsides of dynamic of capitalism (urbanization, deforestation, privatization of public health, and other economic “takings”), and the negative impact of globalization. Whatever cause is named, it is said to generate a widespread anxiety that matters are out of control and the system or its ruling elites are not able to cope with the problems and guarantee security.<sup>8</sup> Whether theories are narrowly focused on the national context or global in scope, they principally hold *crises* responsible for giving rise to scores of attitudes and practices,<sup>9</sup> aspirations and movements<sup>10</sup> defined as authoritarian, illiberal, or populist. What is more, crises that generate a feeling of insecurity and sense of collective helplessness tend to drive people into the camps of authoritarian movements and parties, provided they promise security.<sup>11</sup>

While this trinity of terms has forcefully accompanied the triumph of the authoritarian, it is neither holy nor exempt from criticism. These concepts call for further clarification and they must pass the test of whether they are not only popular but also “right” and whether they are a “good fit.” Therefore, their profiling will need to respond to the extent to which labels and interpretations such as populist, illiberal, or authoritarian address the global nature of the phenomena and also take account of their contextual specificity: whether they adequately differentiate between ideologies and practices; the attitudes and agendas of authoritarianism; and whether their conceptualization truly reflects the everyday experience of authoritarianism.

## **Populism**

In academia, lively theoretical-methodological debates testify to the focus on and interest in categories or concepts, while handbooks<sup>12</sup> certify the status of a given subject matter as a legitimate field of research. Accordingly, populism has not only troubled the “outside world” but has also occupied a firm position on the research agendas of the social since the end of the Cold War. As a matter of fact, interest in it has soared, making it one of the most frequently researched topics in the social sciences generally and in political science in particular, producing a library of publications that accommodate an overabundance of diverse conceptualizations, definitions, descriptions, and explanations. Nevertheless, the concept of populism has remained

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<sup>7</sup> Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, x-xi.

<sup>8</sup> Wilhelm Heitmeyer, *Autoritäre Versuchungen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018) discusses land grabs and loss of control; Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, discusses democracy’s loss of credibility among a disenfranchised electorate and the rise of far-right parties; Guillermo O’Donnell, “The Perpetual Crisis of Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, (January 18, 2007): 5-11, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0012>, describes a more or less unsatisfactory present and a future of still unfulfilled possibilities; Günter Frankenberg, “The Negative Globality of Fear” (forthcoming in 2022) deals with the loss of control generating individual and collective fears and conspiracy theories.

<sup>9</sup> To provide a random sample of the crisis aspects: voter suppression and manipulation of elections in the United States by new election laws: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/crisis-democracy-us-2022/>; competing logics of democracy and the nation-state (China); restrictions on political freedom: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy>.

<sup>10</sup> On the spawning of far-right and neo-fascist movements in European countries, see Thomas Greven, “The Rise of Right-Wing Movements in Europe and the United States” (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016): [http://dc.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf](http://dc.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Munich Security Conference, *Munich Democracy Index 2022*, February 20, 2022: [https://securityconference.org/assets/02\\_Dokumente/01\\_Publikationen/MunichSecurityIndex2021\\_Appendix.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/MunichSecurityIndex2021_Appendix.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001>; Carlos de la Torre, *The Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); forthcoming: Michael Oswald ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2022).

elusive and intensely contested. Even after many empirical studies<sup>13</sup> of populist movements and parties as well as theoretical explanations of their constituencies, structures, and guiding ideas,<sup>14</sup> the *theoretical* enterprise of populism is left unable to offer a consensual pattern of interpretation. While the conceptual combination of a popular program with an appeal to the imagined, authentic community of the people<sup>15</sup> is prominent as a source of legitimacy, the overall picture—especially of populist attitudes—is dominated by controversial definitional “placemats” and a variety of not always compatible criteria.<sup>16</sup> These frequently delineate a basic political stance that invokes a radical opposition to the ruling elites in politics, economics, culture, and society, though. This worldview or ideology claims for itself the right to recognize and represent the authentic will of the people in a Manichean world populated by the true, virtuous citizens on one side, and the self-serving establishment on the other. Mostly unrecognized, populists thus echo the French revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre’s antagonism of the decent people and corrupt magistrate.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these palpable conceptual obstacles, populism has remained a popular object of research, albeit guided by an indeterminate core notion. Its academic career is promoted in the social sciences by foundations and grants supporting topical projects.<sup>18</sup> In media coverage and political discourses, populism thrives on the disdain of conceptual precision and the habit of routinely repeating what has always already been said or written. However, the evasiveness of populism is not only due to a lack of empirical research or theoretical rigor, but also to its “nature” as a collective singular and to the wide range of phenomena covered by its semantic umbrella: the label of populism can be stretched to cover movements, parties, leaders, and regimes that promote democracy (inclusionary populism) as well as those that undermine it (exclusionary populism). As a global phenomenon,<sup>19</sup> it covers practices and programs on the more right-wing or more left-wing fringes of the conventional

13 See, for example, Donatella Della Porta et al., *Movement Parties against Austerity* (London: Polity Press, 2017); Karin Priester, *Populismus—Historische und aktuelle Erscheinungsformen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2007); Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser/Steven M. Van Hauwaert, “The Populist Citizen: Empirical Evidence from Europe and Latin America,” *European Political Science Review* 12, no. 1 (December 2020): 1-18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000262>; Anne Schulz et al., “Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 30, no. 2 (2018): 316-26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edw037>.

14 From the innumerable publications see only Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), and Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2-16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184>; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:9780190234874.001.0001>; Müller, *What is Populism?*; for further references, see Schäfer and Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression*, 59-88.

15 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Müller, *What is Populism?*

16 See, for example, Bruno Castanho Silva et al., “An Empirical Comparison of Seven Populist Attitude Scales,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 73, no. 2 (2020): 409-424, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919833176>.

17 “Tout institution qui ne suppose pas le peuple bon et le magistrat corruptible est vicieuse.” (“Any institution that does not presume the people to be good and the magistrate to be corruptible is wicked.”) Source: Art. XIX of the *Déclaration* proposed by Robespierre in 1793, <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1758708-maximilien-robspierre-any-institution-which-does-not-suppose-the-people/>.

18 See Hans Jürgen Puhle, “Populism and Democracy in the 21st Century,” SCRIPTS Working Papers, no. 2, SCRIPTS Berlin, 2021, <https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/publications/working-paper-series/Working-Paper-No.-2-2020/index.html>; and Lüthmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus,” with references.

19 See, for example, Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>; Danielle Resnick, “Populist Politics in Africa,” *Politics* (August 28, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:9780190228637.013.699>; Benjamin Moffitt, “Contemporary Populism and ‘The People’ in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 293-316, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt12880g5>.

political coordinate system and may even include the rarer cases of centrist agendas. Demagogues and tyrants as well as racist and ethnocentric, xenophobic, misogynist and homophobic movements, popular and unpopular heads of state and regimes gather under this umbrella. No wonder then that researchers and theoreticians find it difficult to manage the vast and uneven array of data and interpretive aspects, and offer tableaus rather than profiles of populism. Still, it remains a popular, albeit highly indeterminate term.

In the constantly ballooning discourse on populism, one sometimes misses the willingness to adjust the grammar of populism more sharply to the different political levels and contexts of its application. Movements, parties, and regimes should be differentiated first, because it is fair to assume that oppositional life—worlds, party milieus and their organizational constraints—as well as governmental responsibilities shape different forms of populist programming and styles of action.

It might be helpful to reduce complexity by contrasting some of the most prevalent modalities of populism. First and foremost, populism describes a *style* of political mobilization that targets marginalized or disenfranchised groups, such as early Peronism, Chavism, or more recently the new left-wing Podemos political party in Spain. While this style may have democratic connotations even if operates in the name of an imaginary “people” as a strategy to gain or hold onto power,<sup>20</sup> it qualifies merely as raw, updated Machiavellianism, exemplified by the people’s parties in Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland; the right-wing parties Fidesz in Hungary, Rassemblement National in France, Lega in Italy, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain, and the Alternative for Germany (Alternativ für Deutschland)—not to mention former US President Donald Trump’s ruthless election campaigns in 2016 and 2020. These styles and strategies are supported by rhetoric (too often labeled populist) and worldviews, however crude, designed to activate resentment (against elites, “the system,” minorities, asylum seekers, the “*Lügenpresse*,” [“lying press”] etc.) in order to invoke an imaginary collective identity for the phantasm of the authentic people or nation.

It is striking that these diverse populisms, which can be roughly characterized as mostly dangerous to democracy, compared to some positively corrective deviations from normal democratic standards, operate predominantly without a clear concept of constitutionalism. Therefore, they usually call up and claim to represent the “rights” of their followers (the people). Accordingly, populists invoke an imaginary community not based on a social contract or membership but essentially rooted in racial, ethnic, religious, or other identities such as white Americans, Polish Catholic patriots, ethnic Germans, or Hindu nationalists.<sup>21</sup> Such “rights” do not function as defensive rights against unlawful state encroachments, but as expressions of the fantasized sovereign, common will—or nation—that overcomes the authority of politics and policies. By the same token, these “rights” supersede rule-of-law constraints and constitutional principles, particularly in the rhetoric and agenda of right-wing populist movements characterized by a “leader’s charisma, theatrics, and transgression of accepted norms”.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2019); Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 52-63.

21 Regarding the different phantasms of class, race, ethnic, religious, and other communities, see Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 226-233; Dwijendra N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

22 Resnick, “Populist Politics in Africa.”

Right-wing populism, which can only tentatively be classified,<sup>23</sup> has been described quite often as a form of authoritarianism that comes with only a “thin ideology.”<sup>24</sup> The widely-held assumption of a thin ideology can be countered, though, by the fact that populist (more precisely: authoritarian) aspirations are not only characterized by their political style and strategies aimed at gaining power; they also offer a set of ideas, a specific understanding of politics and democracy, or even a basic pattern and frame of reference for interpreting social reality that is not limited to criticism of elites and deficits of the democratic process.<sup>25</sup> Populists may not provide a complete system of ideas, a *Weltanschauung*, like socialism or fascism, or a comprehensive set of cultural beliefs that functions as a well-founded critique of particular social arrangements, like patterns of inequality or unjustified domination. However, dismissing populism because of its inevitable reference to “the people” as being merely a “thin ideology,” or referring to Robespierre’s own thin dichotomy of people and magistrate, is not nearly subtle enough of an approach to be able to come to grips with the diversity of both global and context-specific phenomena. The picture gets more intricate if one combines populist theory and practice, aspirations and descriptions, agendas and attitudes, and if one relates this combination to ideological features of populist movements: in particular, anti-elitism and anti-pluralism, the cult of direct communication between leaders and followers, strands of xenophobic nationalism, and the phantasm of imaginary commonality. This way, the description of populism gets more ambiguous and moves away from its misdirected democratic grassroots orientation. Thus, the diagnosis of “populism” comes close to accepting the interpretive offers from the camp of authoritarianism.

Finally, populism may be misunderstood as operating with a thin ideology because populist leaders and movements tend to have no patience for the present. Instead, they combine an orientation to the future with an orientation to the past. They promise to “bring back” a time of glory they claim has been lost, like England’s freedom from EU tutelage, America’s status as world power no. 1, a Germany or Hungary without an influx of refugees, a neo-Ottoman Turkey leading the Muslim world, etc.<sup>26</sup> And they promise security, progress, wealth, and “to return the scepter of democracy to its rightful owner”—the people.<sup>27</sup> Populist ideology, one might say, is not thin but going through a permanent process of becoming.

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23 Anton Pelinka, “Right-Wing Populism: Concept and Typology,” in *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, ed. Ruth Wodak et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544940.ch-001>.

24 The “thin ideology” thesis is elaborated in the influential articles of Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>; and Ben Stanley, “The Thin Ideology of Populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95-110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822289>. For a different view, see Mark Elchardus and Bram Spruyt, “Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology,” *Government and Opposition* 51, no. 1 (2016): 111-133, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.27>.

25 For a critique of the thin ideology thesis, see Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 54-56 and 85-91; Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism”; and Schäfer and Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression*, 64-73.

26 Yilmaz, Ihsan. (2021). “Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist.” *ECPS Leader Profiles. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*. February 14, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.55271/lp0007>.

27 Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, eds., *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 219, [https://www.pacedifesa.org/public/documents/21century\\_populism.pdf](https://www.pacedifesa.org/public/documents/21century_populism.pdf); see also Serghiu Gherghina et al., *Contemporary Populism: A Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

## Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian

According to a series of surveys and studies that were analyzed in a meta-study by the Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge,<sup>28</sup> a decline in support for democracy was diagnosed in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, in Southern European countries, and in so-called maturing democracies of Latin America. While in some countries people doubted the performance of democracy as a form of government and way of life, it appears that in others the euphoria of the transition years has faded and at the same time the unresolved challenges of corruption, inter-group conflicts, and urban violence have remained unresolved. Only at first glance does it seem paradoxical that the rise of democratic disenchantment has been accompanied, since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, by a populist anticlimax: populist leaders and parties have seen their poll numbers fall and elections lost:

That populism has become discredited at a time of eroding support for democracy may initially seem to present us with a paradox. But in reality, these are two sides of the same coin. It is precisely the inadequacy of elected politicians—including, above all, elected populists—to offer solutions to the pandemic that explains why enthusiasm for democratic government has waned, and why populists have fallen from favour.<sup>29</sup>

### Illiberalism

As compared to the populist crescendo, the neologism *illiberalism* comes along on a quiet footing. Apart from a few exceptions in politics, the debates surrounding this phenomenon have so far remained chiefly academic. This may be due to the fact that illiberalism's conceptual dissemination is more recent and therefore probably still needs to solidify its semantic field and its status as an object of serious research. However, *illiberal* is a qualifier that has come to be more widely used within contemporary political, legal, and philosophical scholarship. For example, authors might speak of illiberal cultures and beliefs, illiberal groups and attitudes, or illiberal states and democracies.<sup>30</sup> Despite its more common usage, few in-depth discussions exist that elaborate exactly what it means for a person or group, a regime or institution, to be illiberal. Nevertheless, the methodologically varying surveys of the world of governance, democracy, and rule of law count about eighty illiberal democracies.<sup>31</sup> Yet the feverish labeling activity of the social sciences may also classify them as “weak democracies,” “autocracies,” “failed democracies,” “backsliding

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28 R. S. Foa et al., “The Great Reset: Public Opinion, Populism and the Pandemic” (Cambridge, UK: Centre for the Future of Democracy, January 2022), [https://luminategroup.com/storage/1443/The\\_Great\\_Reset\\_Public\\_Opinion\\_Populism\\_and\\_the\\_Pandemic.pdf](https://luminategroup.com/storage/1443/The_Great_Reset_Public_Opinion_Populism_and_the_Pandemic.pdf).

29 Centre for the Future of Democracy, “The Great Reset,” 16.

30 Bouke de Vries, “What Does It Mean to Be ‘Illiberal’?”, *Netherlands Journal of Legal Philosophy* vol. 50, no. 1 (2021): 13-21, <https://doi.org/10.5553/NJLP/000102>, with references; Marlène Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

31 Bertelsmann Foundation, ed., *Transformation Index* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 2020); International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021), <https://www.idea.int/gsod/>.

countries,” or “democracies in decay”—depending on their development and, more importantly, on the researchers’ perspective and conceptual preference.<sup>32</sup>

Fareed Zakaria’s article on “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” relying on Freedom House data, is widely regarded as the publication that opened the current debate.<sup>33</sup> It signaled a changed perception of the problems mentioned in the beginning—and distinct from the populist vision—and brought constitutionalism back in to define one of illiberalism’s failings. Zakaria basically argued that some democratically-elected regimes routinely ignore the constitutional limits of their power and deprive the citizenry of their fundamental rights and freedoms.<sup>34</sup> In other works, the emphasis has been placed somewhat more differently on the theory and regional analyses of “embedded” and “defective democracies.”<sup>35</sup> Starting from the normatively demanding concept of an institutionally “embedded democracy,” some authors examine the functional properties and stability conditions of democratic systems (beginning with the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe) in order to identify their defects. Defects in terms of separation of powers, political liberties, and the rule of law generally justify the qualification of “illiberal,” although elections (albeit rigged) take place. Populism’s pivotal and problematic category of “the people” is replaced by “elections” in the illiberalism camp, so it seems.

While populism, well advanced in years, well established in academia, and supported by the media, may calmly weather the storm of ever new categories, illiberalism will yet have to defend its status as a field of research. That Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán, in his 2014 speech in Băile Tușnad (an ethnic Hungarian enclave in the heart of Romania), propagated the agenda of building an “illiberal state” within the European Union is not likely to advance the category’s academic career.<sup>36</sup> With a number of recent publications, notably the weighty *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*<sup>37</sup> and the *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*,<sup>38</sup> the discourse on illiberalism can be expected to gain momentum, but will also have to deal with a dazzling multiplicity of classifications and readings.

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32 See Abraham Diskin et al., “Why Democracies Collapse: The Reasons for Failure and Success,” *International Political Science Review* 26, no. 3 (2005): 291-309, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512105053787>; Nazifa Alizada et al., *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg V-Dem Institute, 2021), [https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr\\_2021.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf); Tom Daly, “Democratic Decay: Conceptualising an Emerging Research Field,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 11 (2019): 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-019-00086-2>; Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); David Andersen, “Comparative Democratization and Democratic Backsliding: The Case for a Historical-Institutional Approach,” *Comparative Politics* 51, no. 4 (2019): 645-663, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26663952>.

33 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no.6 (1997): 22-43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>; see also Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003). Unlike *illiberalism*, the term *illiberal* is not new; see, for instance, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Der Dichter und diese Zeit“ [1906], in: *Gesammelte Werke I*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979: 54.

34 Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” 22.

35 Wolfgang Merkel et al., eds., *Defekte Demokratie. Vol. 1: Theorie* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2003); Wolfgang Merkel et al., eds., *Defekte Demokratie. Bd. 2: Regionalanalysen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2006); Wolfgang Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies,” *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004): 33-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340412331304598>.

36 See Renáta Uitz, “Can You Tell When an Illiberal Democracy Is in the Making?,” *J-COIN* 13, no. 1 (2015): 279-300, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mov012>.

37 András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York/London: Routledge, 2021); Lührmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus”; Kauth and King, “Illiberalism”; Thomas J. Main, *The Rise of Illiberalism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2022).

38 Published by the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University.



The *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* brings together in its more than 60 entries written by an even greater number of contributors a considerable plurality of theoretical perspectives and an impressive collection of diverse, illiberal phenomena: from theocracy to military regimes, from electoral democracies to those based on Bonapartist referendums, and more. Without a doubt, these will present a more multifaceted, if also more confusing, picture of illiberalism, especially since no coherent theoretical outline (which could have been provided by the editors) unites them into a single paradigm. Stephen Holmes, one of the editors of the *Routledge Handbook*, tries to carve out a research space for illiberalism by bringing to the fore the illiberal disdain of “liberal habits of tolerance, dissent, debate and openness” and hostility to liberal individualism and universalism.<sup>39</sup> András Sajó, another editor, focuses on what populist governments actually do once they are in power and activate “the totalitarian potential of democracy.”<sup>40</sup> As it were in the run-up, Sajó also presented at the same time his monograph *Ruling by Cheating*<sup>41</sup>—a committed defense of the use of the term *illiberalism* as a problem signifier with a profound study of governmental practices. There he examines the constitutional structures of illiberal democracies as well as illiberal phenomena in “mature,” and consolidated democracies (a distinction that is not rigorously enforced). He aspires to show that the global trend towards ‘mild despotism’ should not be flagged as authoritarianism, but as an abuse of constitutionalism in violation of rule-of-law principles, and therefore as a form of illiberalism. Clearly, Sajó has in mind the Orbán regime in Hungary; Poland’s government, dominated by Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński and his Law and Justice party (Polish: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, or PiS); and probably also autocrats like President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. Sajó also tries to validate his thesis of a conservative, plebeian, and patriotic constitutional state that includes elements of the rule of law with regard to illiberal democracies in Latin America (especially Chavism in Venezuela and the government of President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil).

The definitional problem for all advocates of the term *illiberalism* as a plausible interpretative category is obvious: they have to ask themselves how to separate the conjoined twins of the liberal and the illiberal, and then disentangle illiberalism as a free-standing object of analysis and critique. One is tempted to recall the unequal brothers Cain and Abel in the biblical creation story, which, as is well known, did not end well for either of them. Cain would be, as it were, the representative of dark illiberalism which, when faced with Abel’s liberal luster of goodness, always casts a gloomy shadow. Thomas J. Main sees illiberalism defined by the fundamental rejection of liberalism due to its repudiation of democratic elections, the rule of law, human rights, and tolerance, which, of course, hardly distinguishes illiberalism from authoritarianism. In addition, Main also calls on the racist Ku Klux Klan and the reactionary movements of the alt-right and so-called Dark Enlightenment as key witnesses advocating illiberalism, although they can hardly be uniformly labeled as false prophets. Rather, they find their unity in the fact that they give in to fascist temptations. A more persuasive solution is presented by Marlène Laruelle, who orders the conceptual field by stressing several ideological components of illiberalism:<sup>42</sup>

39 Stephen Holmes, “The liberal Idea,” in Sajó et al., *Handbook of Illiberalism*, 3, 4-14.

40 Sajó et al., *Handbook of Illiberalism*, xxiii.

41 András Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating: Governance in Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108952996>.

42 Laruelle, “Illiberalism.”

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in particular, updating conservative views (nationalism);<sup>43</sup> drawing from far-right ideologies (the belief in metapolitics); and advancing a critique of, or rather a polemic against, elements of political liberalism (through anti-parliamentarism, critiques of minority rights, etc.). Moreover, Laruelle moves further away from labeling by carving out “distinct semantic spaces” wherein the term *illiberal* is or can be operationalized: “the policy/think tank world, the political sphere, and academic fields.”<sup>44</sup>

One wonders whether illiberalism carries with it more than a problem of definition, though. It seems that both the toxic political ideology and the abusive practices of regimes labeled “illiberal,” in real life lack the very elements that permit one to dignify them as even modestly or residually constitutional democracies, in light of their grave deficiencies. In the absence of non-monitored political freedoms, guaranteed separation of powers, and working/effective rule-of-law institutions and procedures (above all, an independent judiciary), one might rather be tempted to withhold the label *democracy* or, for that matter, of *liberalism*. If this reticence seems plausible, then Orbán-, Putin-, or Bolsonaro-style “illiberal democracies” would not constitute an alternative in the end, but should rather be seen as an oxymoron<sup>45</sup> or false label, an opposition to procedural democratic norms<sup>46</sup> or ideological struggle and distorted echo of Francis Fukuyama’s erroneously anticipated end of history.<sup>47</sup>

Many of the pertinent publications defend the label *illiberalism* to designate a sufficiently independent field of research with borders, albeit contested, over against populism and authoritarianism, and they usually refer to four criteria.<sup>48</sup> First, most authors define the *formalistic reduction of democracy* through elections. Second, they criticize that this reduced type of *electoral* democracy is decoupled from fundamental, *institutional* preconditions, especially from civil liberties, freedom of choice, and judicial review. Third, illiberalism is then further distinguished insofar as it *denigrates* liberal concepts of equal political freedom and civil liberties for their alleged hypertrophic individualism, and *rejects* the protection of minorities and their “decadent” way of life. Fourth, most authors accept the counterfactual self-labeling of illiberal regimes as somehow “democratic” after all.

In academic debates not focused on illiberalism, this combination of factors is convincingly cited as an abuse of democracy. Abuse consists primarily of the fact that rules and regulations, which apply to everyone else, are not observed by the government. Above all, any change of these general rules does not happen according to the rules and procedures intended for this purpose.<sup>49</sup> In illiberal regimes, rules that are intended to ensure a government’s accountability, such as the separation of

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43 In her study of Austrian and Trumpist governmental practices and ideological features, Natascha Strobl calls this “radicalized conservatism,” which does not help to reduce the conceptual confusion. See Natascha Strobl, *Radikalisierte Konservatismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021).

44 Laruelle, “Illiberalism.”

45 Lührmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus.”

46 Kauth and King, “Illiberalism”; and Uitz, “Can You Tell When an Illiberal Democracy Is in the Making?,” in her thoughtful reconstruction of re-constitutionalization in Hungary.

47 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* no. 16 (summer 1989): 3-18, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

48 See above, Laruelle’s similar characterization of ideological components of the illiberalism ideological family (Laruelle, “Illiberalism”).

49 Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating*, with reference to Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

powers and judicial review, do not matter.<sup>50</sup> Recent examples of illiberal democracies, besides those already mentioned of Orbán and Kaczyński, and the governmental practices of Erdoğan (Turkey), would include Alberto Fujimori (Peru), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Bolsonaro (Brazil), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), and Trump (USA). Many authors consider elections, no matter how intensely manipulated, to be the umbilical cord that connects illiberalism with democracy.<sup>51</sup>

These disparate case studies, as well as the various definitions of illiberality, indicate why the concept of illiberal democracy is certainly preferable to vague and/or metaphorical notions such as semi- or pseudo-democracy, truncated or defective or hybrid democracy, soft despotism or soft autocracy,<sup>52</sup> but why it still cannot easily be distinguished from alternative concepts, especially those of populism or authoritarianism. At its heart, the critique of political illiberalism primarily defends the essential rule-of-law elements (informed by Western models) as well as civil liberties and regulations of governmental powers (i.e., laws). According to one of the central arguments, laws are violated by officials and regimes who pretend to follow rules but break or circumvent them in order to gain undeserved advantages.<sup>53</sup> Limited participation and representation, immediate communication, and the administration of the public sphere hardly come into the picture of illiberalism studies. Yet these very studies would be expected to provide some information on the typical features of illiberal governance.

### Authoritarianism

In contrast to illiberalism, the term *authoritarianism* is accommodated by both everyday language and the history of scientific concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*)—the former, admittedly, with meager explications.<sup>54</sup> Being a “contested concept,” it indisputably requires definition and delimitation, but not introduction. It outperforms populism and illiberalism as regards its age and pedigree: the history of the term goes back well before the 21st century and, via the “age of extremes” of the 20th century, dates back to the “long 19th century.” Along the way, authoritarianism has been repeatedly associated with Bonapartism.<sup>55</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Bonapartism has been recently reintroduced by authors to single out the authoritarian core of protagonists described as populist, such as Donald Trump.<sup>56</sup>

Authoritarianism shares, along with populism and illiberalism, the dual nature of being both an empirical and normative concept. As explained above, populism is assigned various attributes and a basic political stance in the academic debates,

50 Adam Przeworski, *Sustainable Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Guillermo O'Donnell, “The Quality of Democracy: Why the Rule of Law Matters,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2004): 32-46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0076>.

51 Some authors argue that this also applies to populism. See Paul Blokker, “Populism and Illiberalism,” in: Sajó et al., *Handbook of Illiberalism*, 261-279.

52 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026>.

53 Sajó, “Cheating: The Legal Secret of Illiberal Democracy,” ch. 8 in *Ruling by Cheating*.

54 The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines authoritarianism as “the belief that people should obey authority and rules, even when these are unfair or even when this means the loss of personal freedom.”

55 See, for example, Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers [1852] 1937); René Rémond, *Les droites en France* (Paris: Éditions Aubier, 1954).

56 Martin Beck and Ingo Stützle, eds., *Die neuen Bonapartisten: Mit Marx den Aufstieg von Trump & Co. verstehen*, (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2018). For a more differentiated analysis of Trumpism, see Corinna Lacatus, “Populism and President Trump's Approach to Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Tweets and Speeches,” *Politics* 41, no. 1 (2021): 31-47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720935380>; and Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021).

which usually remain controversial in the end. Concerning authoritarianism, several levels of analysis can be distinguished, especially individual and collective attitudes, the practices and programs of social groups or movements, and the strategies and agendas of political parties and regimes. But the diverse authoritarian phenomena are categorized and registered by the interested sciences and reappraised according to their specific logic and methodology.

Reducing authoritarian complexity to the dualism of a *form of state*<sup>57</sup> (not based on a specific or developed ideology) and an *educational style* that brings forth the “authoritarian character”<sup>58</sup> would be a reasonable first takeaway from the debates surrounding authoritarianism. However, this move does justice neither to the plurality of approaches in research nor to the spectrum of theoretical perspectives on various drivers of authoritarianism, such as social disintegration, alienation, discrimination, capitalist land grabbing, globalization, migration, and religion. Moreover, the reduction is clearly not up to date with more recent theorizing and does not take into account the results of empirical studies, especially in comparative regime theory and political science.<sup>59</sup> It also fails to take sufficient note of both the analysis of economic processes and political consequences in authoritarian capitalism,<sup>60</sup> and the sociological and socio-psychological research on parent-child relationships that imply the “obsolescence of the authoritarian character,”<sup>61</sup> along with political attitudes and gender-specific attitudes, as well as the studies of authoritarian phenomena in political and media culture.<sup>62</sup>

By the same token, the analysis of authoritarianism cannot be illustrated by a Cain-and-Abel metaphor. While it does not rely on liberalism or any other antagonistic term as its *definiens*, authoritarianism still does not stand completely unchallenged and free as a label in the real world. Analysts must work through a rather formidable, more than conceptual, relationship to authority and power. Authoritarianism refers to a relationship between those in power (government office-holders, bureaucrats, and agents in formally-defined or even informal positions), party leaders, etc. on the one

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57 The classical taxonomy was introduced by Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

58 Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960); Peter E. Gordon, “The Authoritarian Personality Revisited: Reading Adorno in the Age of Trump,” *boundary 2*, June 15, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-3826618>.

59 Notably Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115-144, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>; Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020); Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 33-52; Schäfer and Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression*, 59-127.

60 See, for example, Richard W. Carney, “Authoritarian Capitalism,” in *Authoritarian Capitalism: Sovereign Wealth Funds and State-Owned Enterprises in East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Richard W. Carney (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1640489>; Dorottya Sallai and Gerhard Schnyder, “What Is Authoritarian about Authoritarian Capitalism? The Dual Erosion of the Public-Private Divide in State-Dominated Business Systems”, *Business & Society*, 60, no. 6 (2021): 1312-1348, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319898475>.

61 See, for example, Bob Altemeyer, “The Other ‘Authoritarian Personality,’” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Bob Altemeyer (Academic Press, 1998), 47-91, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(98\)60382-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(98)60382-2); Oliver Decker and Elmar Brähler, eds., *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* (Gießen: PsychoSozial Verlag, 2020), <https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-11/Decker-Braehler-2020-Autoritaere-Dynamiken-Leipziger-Autoritarismus-Studie.pdf>.

62 See, for example, Ezequiel Korin and Paromita Pain, eds., *When Media Succumbs to Rising Authoritarianism* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003105725>; Paula Diehl, “Rechtspopulismus und Massenmedien,” in *Großerzählungen des Extremen*, ed. Armin Flender et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018): 87-96; Eric C. Prichard and Stephen D. Christman, “Authoritarianism, Conspiracy Beliefs, Gender and COVID-19,” *Frontiers of Psychology*, 26, no. 11 (November 26, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.597671>; Lauren E. Duncan et al., “Authoritarianism and Gender Roles: Toward a Psychological Analysis of Hegemonic Relationships,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, no. 1 (January 1997): 41-49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167297231005>.

hand, and those who are subjected to their power (members, followers, supporters) on the other. Depending on the theoretical paradigm, power is traditionally defined as the ability to control people and relations, institutions and events, and to command obedience; it is grounded in will, language, violence, or law.<sup>63</sup> In the social practice through which it is constituted and in which it is enacted, this relationship is always dependent on the authority<sup>64</sup> of the power holder and the reaction of those who enter into a relationship based on power. When authority is freely ascribed or given—out of admiration, respect, reverence, enthusiastic support, or indifferent acquiescence—it relies on recognition. And recognition constitutes a symmetrical relationship between rulers and ruled, leaders and followers, in which (according to Marx) someone is a ruler/leader because others relate to him as subjects/followers and these, conversely, believe themselves to be followers or to be ruled because the former is a ruler/leader: “For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king.”<sup>65</sup> One could object that in terms of power the recognition of authority establishes an asymmetry again. However, it differs from a totalitarian or enforced one in that it is entered into voluntarily. Authority thus comes about without force in the social practice of mutual recognition, which may not necessarily be normatively demanding:

Authority depends on the willingness of others to listen and be persuaded. No governor has any other authority than that which others see in him. He has the very authority he is able to extract from those he wants to lead and which they are willing to award him. Authority enables governors to get others to do for them, but at the same time the governor is at the mercy of those same others for the authority he needs in order to lead. Authority, then, although appearing to belong to the governor, is really a gift from those he wants to exercise authority over.<sup>66</sup>

In authoritarian contexts, recognition fails or is disturbed and the symmetrical relationship between those who govern and those who are governed has never been established nor destroyed. Thus, no liberal or non-authoritarian counter-image is needed to identify authoritarian leaders or regimes, authoritarian programs or attitudes. According to Max Weber, power consists of the “chance to assert one’s own will within a social relationship even in the face of opposition, regardless of what this chance is based on.”<sup>67</sup> Weber’s action-theoretical approach, which he defined more narrowly in relation to domination as “the chance of finding obedience for a command of certain content among tangible persons,” can be connected with the considerations on authority. Authority (*Herrschaft*) morphs into an authoritarian

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63 To illustrate the wide spectrum of definitions and perspectives: Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1970); Michel Foucault, “Afterword: The Subject and Power,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974); and Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1921] 1978).

64 Tom Christiano, “Authority,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authority/>; David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Joseph Raz, ed., *Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 1990).

65 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1867] 1887), vol. 1, 55, n. 22.

66 Stein Ringen, “It’s about Authority, Stupid!: Having Power Is Not Enough to Get Things Done,” *WZB Mitteilungen*, No. 133 (2011), <https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/artikel/2011/f-16675.pdf>.

67 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 28-29, 122.

regime when compliance is imposed, submission is induced by deception,<sup>68</sup> and obedience is compelled by threat or physical force. Authority is then based on the sheer “power to get things done.”<sup>69</sup> In this power to get things done (along with the desire to have such power), the asymmetry of authoritarian relations takes effect and develops a dynamic in which violence may emerge. The power to get things done can originally be legitimized by expertise (technocratic authoritarianism), democratic rhetoric (populist authoritarianism), or ideology (varieties of authoritarian regimes).

Authoritarianism suffers from its damaging kinship with totalitarianism. This suffering can be avoided by conceptual demarcation or theoretical distinction.<sup>70</sup> The conventional view of the intensified techniques of repression in totalitarian systems can be plausibly explained as a necessary condition of such demarcation.<sup>71</sup> Yet, further characteristics must be added if the dividing line is to stand its ground. Hannah Arendt sees the totalitarian intensification of authoritarianism in a hermetic, totalizing ideology and terror:

The essence of totalitarian rule, then, is not that it curtails or eliminates certain freedoms, not that it eradicates the love of freedom from human hearts; but only that it locks people as they are into the iron band of terror with such force that the space of action, and this alone is the reality of freedom, disappears. . . . The iron band of terror constitutes the totalitarian body politic and makes it an incomparable instrument for accelerating the movement of the process of nature or history. . . . Terror wants to bring the processes that are in themselves necessary to a speed . . . that they could never reach without the assistance of humanity organized into one man.<sup>72</sup>

Under a reign of terror, a form and practice of social control that encompasses everyone and everything and strangles every form of systemic criticism and opposition, regimes show their totalitarian face and authoritarianism morphs into the barbarism mandated by a secular religion.<sup>73</sup> A hermetic ideology, executed by terror, functions as the liturgy of this religion. Hence, totalitarian regimes are not adequately defined by their governing technique alone, but have to be recognized as agents and institutions of an “anonymous intentionality”<sup>74</sup> that targets the terrible phantasm of a society that is at one with and transparent to itself, in which diversity—diverging visions of the good life, clashes of interests, political pluralism—has been stamped out. A regime must shield this nightmare, this secret of the totalitarian, at any cost. Apart from institutionalizing and normalizing terror, it must grind down even the slightest questioning of the legitimacy of rule and power and declare those who dare to do so as enemies<sup>75</sup> and deprive them of their livelihoods and, indeed, their lives.

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68 See Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating*.

69 Stein Ringen, *Nation of Devils: Democratic Leadership and the Problem of Obedience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), ch. 1.

70 Incidentally, authors who prefer to use illiberalism or populism as a foil for the interpretation of authoritarian phenomena also make such a distinction (Sajó 2021; Diehl and Cavazza 2012).

71 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.

72 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 714.

73 Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

74 Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique: Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

75 Ulrich Rödel et al., *Die demokratische Frage* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

## **Conclusion**

There is no conclusion that could settle the debate about the preferential use-value of any of the three terms presented here. All of them make sense (if properly applied) and all of them have problems. The phenomena they try to grasp conceptually and prepare for processing in theory and research are obviously as complex as their interpretation is controversial. In consequence, populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism need further clarification, and a semantic or diagnostic consensus is not likely to settle the dispute.

Ideas and their conceptual labels quite often result not from a conscious choice but from a sudden burst of inspiration. For this reason, the charm of contingency may be more productive than a stringent plan and a semantic *passe-partout*.<sup>76</sup> I therefore suggest that more work on the concept is indispensable to help touch up the profiles of authoritarianism, illiberalism, and populism. It would be expedient, however, especially for disciplining media jargon and political parlance, if conceptual preferences, hermeneutic options, and unsolved problems were made explicit and exposed to critique. At the end of the day, the term with the sharpest critical bite will prevail, all being well.

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<sup>76</sup> Suffice it to say that, based on my previous work, I have a preference for the term *authoritarianism*. This does not preclude the conversation, though.